

# Spinoza on Individuals and Individuation: Metaphysics, Morals, and Politics

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SPINOZA ON INDIVIDUALS AND INDIVIDUATION: METAPHYSICS, MORALS,  
AND POLITICS

by

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ABSTRACT  
SPINOZA ON INDIVIDUALS AND INDIVIDUATION: METAPHYSICS,  
MORALS, AND POLITICS

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This dissertation examines Spinoza's position regarding the relationship of the individual to the community and to other individuals in the context of a particular reading of Spinoza's metaphysics as holistic. By the term "holistic metaphysics," I refer to Spinoza's view of reality as a unified whole rather than as a collection of entirely separate parts. The latter I call a "reductionistic metaphysics." If a reductionistic metaphysics tends to see individuals as essentially separate and only secondarily relational, a holistic metaphysics pictures individuals as primarily relational and only by means of their relations capable of any meaningful "separateness" from other individuals. The reading advanced here concludes that Spinoza holds that individuals cannot ultimately be separated from the larger environment and network of relationships of which they are always a part. This dissertation concludes with brief set of reflections on the potential implications of this "relational" understanding of individuals in the realms of morals and politics. How Spinoza might view the issue of "universal health care" in the context of his holistic metaphysics is singled out for specific consideration.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## Works by Spinoza:

CM – *Metaphysical Thoughts*

E – *Ethics* (followed by arabic numeral for part and internal references)

Ep – Letter (followed by arabic numeral)

KV – *Short Treatise (Korte Verhandeling)*

PPC – *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*

TP – *Political Treatise* (TP 1/2 is Chapter 1, Paragraph 2)

TTP – *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP 1/2 is Chapter 1, Paragraph 2)

## Works by Descartes:

CSM – *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Eds. J. G. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Followed by volume and page number with parallels to Adam and Tannery texts)

AT – *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery (provided as parallel texts to CSM)

Internal References for the *Ethics*:

a – Appendix to E4 (followed by a number, e.g. E4a17)

APP – Appendix (with the exception of the appendix to E4)

Ax – Axiom

Cor – Corollary

Def – Definition

Dem – Demonstration

lemma – Lemma

P – Propositions

Pref – Preface

Schol – Scholium

## Note on Translations:

The English translations of Spinoza are those of Samuel Shirley unless specifically stated otherwise. The English translations of Descartes are taken from CSM volumes. Translations of Matheron and Zac are my own.

## Introduction

Spinoza speaks often of individuals. Indeed, the well-being of a particular set of individuals, namely *human* individuals, is the principal focus of his philosophy. Naturally we expect such a systematic philosopher as Spinoza to provide a theory about what, precisely, an individual is. This expectation is bound to be present with regard to any philosopher who stresses the importance of individuals. For Spinoza, however, the problem is particularly acute, for he famously argues that there is only one substance, one self-existent being. If there is only one substance, it seems to follow that there is only one individual. Since substance in the western philosophical tradition is ordinarily restricted to particular individuals, this seems to be a sensible conclusion. It thus appears that Spinoza would conclude that there is only one individual. He does not do this, however. He repeatedly speaks of individuals in the plural, in particular of human individuals and their well-being. It is obvious that Spinoza holds that there are multiple individuals. Since he holds that there are many individuals but only one substance, it follows that most individuals are not substances. This invites the question of what an individual is for Spinoza.

In this study, my principal concern is to answer the question of what Spinoza holds an individual to be. My secondary aim is to argue that Spinoza's conception of an individual has important moral and political consequences regarding the nature of the state and the role of the community in the life of the individual.

I will present my reading of what an individual is for Spinoza and the moral and political implications that follow from his conception of individuals over the course of five chapters. Chapter 1 will argue for and explain my reading of Spinoza's system as a whole. We cannot begin to understand Spinoza's conception of an individual without a firm grasp of the nature of his larger metaphysical system. This means that we must first clarify Spinoza's central metaphysical concepts. These concepts are principally found in *Ethics* 1 and 2. They include the concepts of substance, attributes, and modes, as well as the central ideas which Spinoza offers on the relationship of the mind to the body, and his argument for universal causal determinism. A thorough investigation of Spinoza's conception of the individual requires an adequate comprehension of these concepts.

In my second chapter, I will look closely both at Spinoza's primary texts for his understanding of what an individual is and at the work of leading interpreters on this aspect of his thought. The critical issue that I will examine in chapter 2 is what exactly counts as an individual for Spinoza. Although this issue, for reasons that will be presented, cannot be fully resolved, I will venture some conclusions about the origins of Spinoza's account of individuals and what he considers to be paradigmatic individuals.

Chapter 3 proceeds from the doctrine of individuals in general to a particular application of that doctrine. My focus here will be on whether or not the state (or "civil society") counts as an individual. This question is important because Spinoza claims that the human individual is part of some larger individual, though he never explicitly says what this larger individual is. Since, for Spinoza, to be part of a larger individual is to have one's very nature determined by that individual, it is absolutely critical to determine

what that individual is. In this chapter, therefore, I will carefully examine the work of Alexandre Matheron and his critics, primarily Steve Barbone and Lee Rice. Matheron argues that Spinoza thinks of a civil society as a kind of individual of which human beings are a part. Rice and Barbone argue against Matheron's reading.

In chapter 4, I will shift my analysis to the moral and political implications that follow from Spinoza's understanding of what an individual is. I will argue that Spinoza, contrary to some common readings of him, is not an egoist. Spinoza is not an egoist because his conception of individuals is primarily a relational one; whereas egoism, I will argue, depends upon a non-relational theory of individuals. To demonstrate this contrast between a relational and non-relational understanding of individuals and its role in interpreting Spinoza's position, I will carefully examine the work of feminist scholars who have written extensively on this issue. I will also contrast the work of these thinkers with the contribution of Rice.

Chapter 5 will briefly examine some political implications for Spinoza's theory of the individual. In particular, I will argue that Spinoza's understanding of the individual requires a strong commitment to what is often called "the welfare state." To illustrate his commitment to a strong welfare state, I will argue, on the basis of his general political theory and several key texts, that Spinoza would support universal health care coverage.

## Chapter 1: Outline of Spinoza's Metaphysics

### The Central Metaphysical Concepts

The starting point of Spinoza's system is substance. The term "substance" has a rich philosophical history beginning with Aristotle. For Aristotle—and importantly for his medieval followers—a substance is principally that which is the bearer of properties, but is not itself a property of another thing (*Cat.* 2a11-17). For example, a horse has certain properties, such as being brown and being fast, but a horse is not itself a property of another thing. There is, however, some ambiguity in Aristotle's texts about the definition of substance. In particular, the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics* may not offer compatible versions of what counts as a substance. Nevertheless, Aristotle does offer a definition of substance which the tradition has since come to accept. According to W. K. C. Guthrie, "substance has two meanings: (i) the final subject which is not predicated of anything else; and (ii) that which is individual and separable" (216). These two criteria—(1) being an object of which properties are predicated, but which itself is not predicated of any else, and (2) independent existence—were accepted as the primary meaning of substance in the middle ages and the early modern period.

Turning from Aristotle to Descartes, we find a similar understanding of substance at work:

This term applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to everything by means of which whatever we perceive exists. By 'whatever we perceive' is meant any property, quality, or attribute of which we have a real idea. The only idea we have of a substance itself, in the

strict sense, is that it is the thing in which whatever we perceive (or whatever has objective being in one of our ideas) exists. (CSM II 114: AT VII, 161)<sup>1</sup>

This is Descartes' assertion that substance is the bearer of properties and not itself a property of some other thing. He explains further:

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. (CSM I 210: AT VIII, 24)<sup>2</sup>

For Descartes a substance is that which has independent existence. This criterion is an addition, but it is easy to understand why Descartes (and the Aristotelian tradition before him) made the addition. If a substance is that which bears properties but is not itself a property, then it exists in relative independence from other things; e.g., a horse exists by itself, not as part of some other entity.

Of course strict ontological independence, as Descartes explicitly acknowledges, belongs to God alone. He argues, however, that created substances possess a relative independence. What this means is that although finite substances are not completely independent insofar as they require being created and sustained by God, they are nonetheless independent from other substances. This may sound clearly false, as finite substances obviously depend on other things. For instance, a finite substance such as a

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<sup>1</sup> "Toute chose dans laquelle réside immédiatement comme dans son sujet, ou par laquelle existe quelque chose que nous concevons s'appelle *Substance*. Car nous n'avons point d'autre idée de la substance précisément prise, sinon qu'elle est une chose dans laquelle existe."

<sup>2</sup> "Per *substantiam* nihil aliud intelligere possumus, quam rem quæ ita existit, ut nulla alia re indigeat ad existendum. Et quidem substantia quæ nulla plane re indigeat, unica tantum potest intelligi, nempe Deus. Alias vero omnes, non nisi ope concursus Dei existere posse percipimus."

horse depends upon other horses to create it, food to keep it alive, the environment to sustain it, and so forth. The concept of a horse, however, does not require the concept of anything else in order to be conceived. It is logically possible, according to Descartes, to think of a horse—or any finite substance—as existing by itself. A property like “being red,” for example, cannot be thought of apart from some object that has the property of redness. This differentiates finite substances from properties and allows us to meaningfully consider them as substances even though, strictly speaking, they are not absolutely independent (CSM I 210: AT VIIIA, 24).

Descartes’ addition of independent existence to the concept of substance is extremely important for understanding Spinoza’s argument for substance monism. Spinoza defines substance as “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed” (E1Def3).<sup>3</sup> In other words, substance is both ontologically and conceptually independent. Spinoza takes over this basic understanding of what a substance is from the Cartesian notion. To repeat, Descartes adapted the Aristotelian and medieval notions of a substance as an “independent being.” According to these notions, an independent being is a being which exists in its own right and not as a property or modification of another being. This conception of individual being is crucial for understanding Spinoza’s basic ontology.

Descartes took this independence to mean that substances require only the creative power of God in order to exist and be maintained in existence. Spinoza, as we

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<sup>3</sup> “[Q]uod in se est, et per se concipitur: hoc est id, cujus conceptus non indiget conceptu alterius rei, a quo formari debeat.”

will see, thought that only one substance, God, exists. All other things fail to meet the required ontological and conceptual independence of being a substance. Spinoza's argument makes good sense in a Cartesian framework, within which we examine it here.

To begin with, Spinoza draws a conclusion from the causal and conceptual independence of substance from which Descartes would have recoiled. For Spinoza, if a substance is truly independent, then it must be self-caused. In other words, substance exists necessarily; its nature explains its existence. If substance were created by some other being, substance would not truly be independent. The claim that any possible substance must be *causa sui*, must exist necessarily, is startling. Equally surprising is Spinoza's claim that a substance not only cannot be created, but also cannot be destroyed. The reason Spinoza believes that a substance cannot be destroyed is that he thinks that something can only be destroyed by some other thing external to it (E3P4). But to be destroyed by something external to it substance would have to be in causal relation to it, and being in causal relation to something else is not to exist independently (E1Ax5). It follows that any substance that exists, exists eternally.

Now the most well-known aspect of Spinoza's system is his substance monism. That is, Spinoza holds that there is and can be only one substance. This is already hinted at by Spinoza's demonstration that substance is self-caused and eternal. Spinoza does, however, offer a dense and intricate chain of argumentation to support the claim that there is but one substance. The official argument that there is only one substance is as follows: First, only substances have independent existence; all other things depend on substance for whatever existence they have. Second, no two substances can share an

attribute. Spinoza takes over the term “attribute” from Descartes. What Descartes means by “attribute” or “principal attribute” is the most basic feature of a substance, a description of its essence. Descartes tells us that "each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred" (CSM I 210: AT VIIIA, 25). Take some particular body, say wax, to use

Descartes' example:

Its colour, shape, and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound . . . I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, and the colour changes, the shape is lost . . . But does the same wax still remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it. (CSM II 20: AT VII, 30)<sup>4</sup>

Descartes here claims that none of the perceptible properties of the wax are essential to it.

All the sensible properties of the wax can be altered, and yet the wax remains. It follows that such properties of the wax are not essential. What then is essential to the wax? For Descartes the answer is extension: I can change everything about the wax save for the fact that it is extended. The same is true, Descartes argues, for all physical bodies, since the only thing not subject to change with respect to physical bodies is the fact that they are extended. It follows that extension is a basic feature beyond which we cannot and need not go in our analysis of what a corporeal substance is.

The same thing is true for Descartes' other principal attribute, thought. Let us take an individual thinking thing, a human being, for instance. Every thought that a person has

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<sup>4</sup> “Sumamus, exempli causa, hanc ceram: nuperrime ex favis fuit educta; nondum amisit omnem saporem sui mellis; nonnihil retinet odoris florum ex quibus collecta est; ejus color, figura, magnitudo, manifesta sunt; dura est, frigida est, facile tangitur, ac, si articulo ferias, emittet sonum ... Sed ecce, dum loquor, igni admovetur: saporis reliquiae purgantur, odor expirat, color mutatur, figura tollitur ... Remanetne adhuc eadem cera? Remanere fatendum est; nemo negat.”

can change. The person, however, cannot remain a thinking thing if thought itself is removed. So thought, like extension, is a basic feature of a substance, something without which no other feature is possible and in terms of which the substance is. Edwin Curley explains:

It's an essential feature of bodies that they are extended in three dimensions, but not an essential feature of them that they have the particular size and shape they have. My body will not cease to be my body, even though its size and shape change, but it would cease to be my body, would cease to be *a* body, would cease to exist at all, if it ceased to be extended. Similarly, it is not essential to my mind that it have the particular thoughts it has, but it is essential to it that it have some thoughts or other. So Descartes gives a special status to thought and extension. Thought he calls the principal attribute of minds, because it is the most fundamental property of minds . . . Extension he calls the principal attribute of body, because it is the most fundamental property of bodies. (*Geometrical Method* 7-8)

That Spinoza thinks of attributes in much the same way as Descartes thinks of principal attributes is easily seen by how the former defines them. According to Spinoza, an attribute is that which the intellect perceives to constitute the essence of substance (E1Def4). For Spinoza, just as for Descartes, an attribute expresses the essence of substance, what it is at the most fundamental level. Once we understand what Spinoza means by “attribute” it is not difficult to see why he maintains that no two substances could share an attribute. If two substances shared an attribute, they would have the same essence; but if they had the same essence, they would be the same substance. It follows that there would not be two substances after all, but only one.

There is, of course, a very natural objection to the claim that two substances cannot share an attribute. Against this line of reasoning, Leibniz argued that two substances can share one attribute (A) but differ in that one substance has not only

attribute (A), but also (B), whereas the other substance possesses attributes (A) and (C) (A VI 4b, 1768).

Many Cartesians would argue that a substance can have only one principal attribute on the grounds that a principal attribute is the essence of a substance and that a substance can have only one essence. If this line of reasoning is correct, then Leibniz's objection is not cogent. For on Cartesian grounds, substances cannot have more than one attribute, since they cannot have more than one essence. Two different attributes would be descriptions of two different essences and therefore would belong to two different substances. So this Cartesian response to Leibniz is not an option for Spinoza. As we will see, Spinoza maintains that the one substance has infinite attributes.<sup>5</sup> He is therefore unable to respond to the objection on the grounds that a substance can have only one attribute.

One response open to Spinoza is to argue that any attribute a substance may have expresses the essence of one and the same substance. This requires that a substance can exist so richly and fully that its essence can adequately and truly, though not completely, be described in more than one way.<sup>6</sup> Such a view seems perfectly plausible, particularly if we remember that Spinoza's one substance is reality as a whole. There is nothing inherently implausible in the claim that reality can properly be described in more than

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<sup>5</sup> There is a dispute in the scholarly literature about what "infinite attributes" means. Some argue that Spinoza means that substance has a boundless number of attributes unknown to us. Other scholars maintain that "infinite" just means "all" and that therefore infinite attributes need mean no more than two. As only the attributes of thought and extension play any role in Spinoza's thought, I will not address that dispute in this study.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this way of thinking to Rice who suggested to me such a reading of Spinoza.

one way. Furthermore, it seems that Spinoza thinks along these lines. Otherwise, I cannot explain his claim that the more reality a being has, the greater the number of attributes it has (E1P9). Indeed, Spinoza claims that we know this to be true because an attribute is “that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (E1Def4).<sup>7</sup>

Now if all attributes express the essence of substance, then for two substances to share an attribute, they must have one and the same essence. It follows that it is impossible for these two substances to have some other attribute that might differentiate them, for that would mean that these two substances differ in essence. If the two substances differ in essence, then they cannot share an attribute. In short, to share any attribute, they must share all attributes. Thus we are back with one substance.

What then of the Cartesian claim that no substance can possess more than one attribute? Spinoza nowhere adequately answers this objection. His only attempt to do so is found in his correspondence, in which all he says is that when we call something by two different names, as in the case of referring to the son of Isaac as both Jacob and Israel, we need not be referring to two different objects (Ep9). The problem here is that the names Jacob and Israel refer to the same individual, but they are not descriptions of his most basic features, namely, his essence. Obviously Spinoza’s response is unsatisfactory.

I think, however, we can give Spinoza a better defense than he gives himself. To do so, we must first learn why Spinoza believes there can be only one substance. Once we have established that, we can then defend his claim that the one substance can have

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<sup>7</sup> “Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens.”

more than one attribute. Let us for now proceed on the assumption that it is possible for one substance to have multiple attributes.

Returning to substance itself, we see that Spinoza argues that if there are genuinely differing substances, then they can have no interactions. But since he has already argued that a causal relationship requires interaction (E1Ax4), they cannot causally interact. It may seem patently false that two different substances cannot causally interact. But Spinoza has strong reasons for holding this thesis. It is well known that Spinoza is committed to a particularly strong form of rationalism. In particular, Spinoza holds that (1) everything is, at least in principle, capable of rational explanation, and (2) there is no distinction between causal relations and logical implication. As Michael Della Rocca very clearly observes:

We can see that Spinoza accepts that causation is just conceptual connection by turning to his claim that a substance cannot be caused by another thing. His reason is that in such a case the substance would (contrary to the definition of substance) be conceived through that other thing (1p6c). Thus, for Spinoza, there must be some conceptual connection between two things in order for them to be causally related. Indeed, it is clear from this passage, together with the way he uses 1ax4 in 1p25d, that, for Spinoza, causation is coextensive with conceptual connection. (44)<sup>8</sup>

What Della Rocca means by this is that if two things cannot be explained by something in common, then they simply cannot interact. To say that two such things could interact is to leave that interaction mysterious and unexplainable, which Spinoza's uncompromising rationalism will not allow. Since we have already established that attributes express the essence of substance and that therefore no two substances could possibly share an

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<sup>8</sup> Although the term coextensive need not be used in the sense of "no distinction," Della Rocca intends the term to be understood as precluding distinctions.

attribute, it now follows that if there are two substances or more, then they cannot interact with each other.

We are left with only two options: either reality consists in a vast array of separate substances that cannot interact with each other, or there is one substance and everything is a part of it. Spinoza's argument that the second of these options is the case follows naturally from his definition of God.<sup>9</sup>

Spinoza defines God as "an absolutely infinite being; that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence" (E1Def6).<sup>10</sup> Spinoza offers several proofs for the existence of God, most of which are variants of the ontological argument. Many fail to find these proofs persuasive, and I will not discuss them here.<sup>11</sup> Suffice it to say that Spinoza believes himself to have proved the existence of God. Since God is infinite, and since the number of attributes a being has is determined by the degree of reality it possesses, it follows that the infinite God has infinite attributes. This means not only that God's attributes are unlimited, but also that God has an infinite number of attributes. Once the existence of God as a being with all

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<sup>9</sup> From his own time to today scholars have debated the appropriateness of Spinoza's talk of "God." Some interpreters find Spinoza's God quite an attractive conception of divinity; others argue that Spinoza is in fact really an atheist who uses the word God either insincerely or erroneously. That debate is unimportant from the standpoint of this study, and I will therefore offer no position on it.

<sup>10</sup> "[E]ns absolute infinitum, hoc est, substantiam constantem infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque æternam et infinitam essentiam exprimit."

<sup>11</sup> I will briefly discuss one of Spinoza's proofs for God existence below, but in a very different explanatory context.

possible attributes is granted, if we also grant that no two substances can share an attribute, it follows that God is the one and only substance.

There is some doubt among commentators that Spinoza has made his case for substance monism. Jonathan Bennett, for instance, thinks that the “no shared attributes” argument fails entirely (*Study* 67-8). Bennett’s criticism is worth careful consideration, not because his criticism cannot be answered, but because in the process of articulating his objection, Bennett argues that Spinoza’s official argument for substance monism does not reflect the actual reasons he has for holding it (*Study* 81). Nevertheless, the problems with Spinoza’s argument are beyond the scope of this study, and so we need not consider them here. It is sufficient to note that Spinoza takes himself to have demonstrated the conclusion that there can be only one substance. Since even commentators who do not accept Spinoza’s *argument* for substance monism still find the *position* worthy of consideration on other grounds (Bennett, Della Rocca, Hampshire *et al.*), I will here consider that position at least worthy of consideration. For now, however, I will refrain from considering alternative arguments for that position, saving these for a latter chapter.<sup>12</sup>

Let us grant then that there is only one substance. All individual things, which we once mistakenly believed to be substances, are mere modes of substances—ways in which the one substance is modified. It follows from this that all individual modes of this

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<sup>12</sup> The alternative argument I have in mind is connected with Spinoza’s lemmas on bodies in *Ethics* 2. It seems to me that there is a good argument from the physics of bodies for substance monism. But as this section is directly relevant to the discussion of what makes something an individual, I will postpone the full discussion of that argument until chapter 2.

one substance can be conceived truly and adequately under each and every attribute of substance. Spinoza is committed to a metaphysical parallelism in which any particular mode of substance can be truly described under the attribute of thought and also under the attribute of extension. Two passages suffice to demonstrate Spinoza's position here. First, Spinoza asserts the parallelism between thought and extension: "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E2P7).<sup>13</sup> In other words, the mental and physical realms (thought and extension) are exactly parallel. Spinoza's position, however, is stronger than a mere claim that mind and body are parallel. For Spinoza, mind and body are numerically the same thing. Spinoza explicitly declares this identity: "thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways" (E2P7Schol).<sup>14</sup> In other words, a particular mode is both thinking and extended. It can properly be described in two ways. Thought and extension are not reducible to each other, but they are not separate; rather, they are both aspects of one and the same thing. I will return to this point in the next section.

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<sup>13</sup> "*Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo et connexio rerum.*"

<sup>14</sup> "[S]ubstantia cogitans et substantia extensa una eademque est substantia, quæ jam sub hoc, jam sub illo attributo comprehenditur. Sic etiam modus extensionis et idea illius modi una eademque est res, sed duobus modis expressa."

### Spinoza's Theory of Distinctions

To grasp Spinoza's understanding of what an individual is, we must first understand the kinds of distinctions he thinks hold between objects in reality. This, in turn, requires a careful examination of Spinoza's theory of distinctions. I will examine his theory of distinctions between all kinds of things, and not merely individuals, as we must first understand this theory in general terms if we are to later understand what kind of distinction applies to individuals.

Spinoza's conception of what we ordinarily consider to be finite substances as merely modes of one substance has led some interpreters to read Spinoza as denying the reality of distinctions and individuality. All apparent distinctions, on this view, are simply ways that the mind views things; they do not accurately reflect the nature of reality outside of the mind's perspective. Della Rocca summarizes the central tenet of this view: "How many things are there in the world? Spinoza's answer: one. What might seem to be other things are merely ways in which the one thing exists" (33).

The view that Spinoza thinks individuality is an illusion is not popular among contemporary Spinoza scholars, so I will not spend too much time with it. Suffice it to say that Spinoza's emphasis on the individual throughout the *Ethics*— as illustrated in the attention he gives to the *conatus*, the physics of bodies, and the self-interest of the ethical agent—dispels any notion that he thinks that individuality is unreal.<sup>15</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>15</sup> Each of these concepts will be examined in detail in later chapters.

Spinoza's own assertion about what an individual is leaves us no doubt that he thinks distinctions are quite real and even essential:

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing. (E2P13lemma3Def)<sup>16</sup>

To speak of an individual as composed of several bodies united together, which sets the individual apart from other such bodies, is to assume that there are various bodies distinguished from each other, and various collections of bodies united so as to form "individuals." Such a view is incompatible with the notion that distinctions are unreal. In addition, Curley has argued that Spinoza is committed to the real existence of distinctions and individuals (*Spinoza's Metaphysics* 37). His is an argument that virtually no contemporary commentator on Spinoza disputes. In particular, Curley emphasizes Spinoza's doctrine of *conatus*, the doctrine that "[e]ach thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being" (E3P6).<sup>17</sup> Spinoza's claim that each thing endeavors to remain in existence and to augment its own existence is the basis both of his psychology and his ethics (as will be seen in more detail in later chapters). Such a doctrine is incompatible with any position that entails that individuality is illusory.

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<sup>16</sup> "Cum corpora aliquot ejusdem aut diversæ magnitudinis a reliquis ita coercentur, ut invicem incumbant, vel si eodem aut diversis celeritatis gradibus moventur, ut motus suos invicem certa quadam ratione communicent, illa corpora invicem unita dicemus, et omnia simul unum corpus sive Individuum componere, quod a reliquis per hanc corporum unionem distinguitur."

<sup>17</sup> "*Unaquæque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.*"

Assuming, then, that Spinoza believes that some things in reality can be distinguished from others, we must inquire as to what kinds of distinctions he thinks there are. Descartes argued that there were three kinds of distinctions (CSM I 213: AT VIIIA, 28-29). These three distinctions are: (1) real distinctions, (2) modal distinctions, and (3) distinctions of reason. Alan Donagan nicely sums up these distinctions as follows:

*A distinctio realis*, which may obtain between substances or parts of the same substance, is recognized by the fact that each of the *diversa* can be conceived without the help of the other, and consequently can exist without it. A *distinctio modalis* may obtain either between a substance and one of its modes . . . or between two modes of the same substance . . . although neither can be conceived without the substance, each can be conceived without the other. Finally, a *distinctio rationalis* obtains between two things distinguished intellectually, of which neither can be conceived without the other, as between a substance and its attribute. (“Essence” 167)

Spinoza certainly makes use of these distinctions. For instance, Spinoza tells us that the various parts of space differ “only modally and not really,” that is, the various regions and bodies that “make up” space differ modally, but do not differ in substance.<sup>18</sup>

Although there are distinctions, then, there is no division into separate substances. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that Spinoza simply accepts Cartesian distinctions and applies them to his own system.

This can be seen most clearly with respect to distinctions of reason. As Donagan explains, for Descartes the distinction between a substance and its attribute is a distinction of reason. Descartes, in fact, specifically says this:

*A conceptual distinction* is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is

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<sup>18</sup> I return to this point in more detail below.

recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question. (CSM I 214: AT VIIIA, 30)<sup>19</sup>

Spinoza might seem to hold this position himself, since, as we have already seen, he takes an attribute to be what the intellect perceives to constitute the essence of substance (E1Def4). Furthermore, Spinoza asserts that only substance and its modes exist (E1P23). Spinoza might appear, then, to share the Cartesian view that there is no extra-mental distinction between a substance and its attribute; the distinction is merely the mind's perception of the essence of substance. Indeed, Spinoza has been read as making just this assertion. H. A. Wolfson, for instance, regarded Spinoza as maintaining that the attributes of God only appear to us to be distinct, whereas in reality they are not so (156). Wolfson attributes to Spinoza the position that the attributes of God seem different to the finite human mind, but in reality are one and same thing, namely, the essence of the deity.

Donagan decisively refutes Wolfson's claim that for Spinoza there are no genuine distinctions of the attributes of substance outside of the mind of the perceiver. Donagan's position is that there is an objective and extra-mental distinction between the attributes. His position rests on the following argument: For Spinoza, substance is that which is conceived through itself and not another. Descartes took thought and extension to be distinct finite essences. Spinoza, however, thinks that Descartes was wrong to do this. Thought can only be explained by thought and body by body. There are no higher or more ultimate concepts under which to explain either of these attributes. It follows, for

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<sup>19</sup> “[D]istinctio rationis est inter substantiam et aliquod ejus attributum, sine quo ipsa intelligi non potest, vel inter duo talia attributa ejusdem alicujus substantiæ. Atque agnoscitur ex eo, quod non possimus claram et distinctam ipsius substantiæ ideam formare, si ab ea illud attributum excludamus.”

Spinoza, that thought and extension are in fact not distinct finite essences, but rather eternal and infinite essences; therefore, each of these attributes expresses the essence of substance. As I have already explained, for Spinoza this means that either there are two substances that do not causally interact, or that thought and extension are attributes of one and the same infinite substance. Since we already know on other grounds that there can be but one substance, it follows that these attributes must be attributes of one and the same substance. According to Donagan:

Spinoza took *extensio* and *cogito*, as Descartes had expounded them in his theory of the created universe, and argued that each of them is conceived through itself, and admits neither external limitation nor internal division. Each therefore expresses an external and infinite essence. (“Essence” 172)

That Donagan is correct here can be seen in Spinoza’s own text:

It is in the nature of substance that each of its attributes be conceived through itself, since all the attributes it possesses have always been in it simultaneously, and one could not have been produced by another; but each expresses the reality or being of substance. (E1P10Schol)<sup>20</sup>

Clearly Spinoza believes that the attributes of substance are objectively distinct and not merely distinguished by some perceiver’s mind. Of course the challenge for any objectivist account of the attributes of substance is to offer a convincing explanation of how multiple attributes can be united in, or as, one substance. A number of possibilities have been proposed but few seem satisfactory. There is Martial Gueroult’s view that the attributes of substance are, in effect, genuine substances which would be separate but are held together by the necessary existence of substance (*Spinoza* 232). This view makes

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<sup>20</sup> “[I]d enim est de natura substantiæ, ut unumquodque ejus attributorum per se concipiatur; quandoquidem omnia, quæ habet, attributa simul in ipsa semper fuerunt, nec unum ab alio produci potuit; sed unumquodque realitatem sive esse substantiæ exprimit.”

Spinoza's substance something very close to a Cartesian human being. The difference between the two is that attributes held together in the Cartesian human being are only held together contingently, whereas the attributes of substance are held together necessarily.

Gueroult's view, articulate as it is, is simply incompatible with Spinoza's claim that attributes express the essence of a single substance. For, if Gueroult is correct, the attributes would have to have separate essences, held together as one perhaps, but separate nonetheless. This position requires that substance be made up of its attributes. But no substance can be composed of attributes for Spinoza. To be made up of its attributes, substance would have to depend on those attributes. But substance, as we have seen, is necessarily causally and conceptually independent. It follows that Gueroult is mistaken.

Despite the fact that we cannot embrace the account Gueroult offers of how the attributes are distinct yet one with each other and with substance, it remains clear that Spinoza thinks they are distinct. What is less clear, however, is what kind of distinction Spinoza thinks holds here. The distinction of the attributes cannot be a real distinction, for that would be a distinction between substances. Furthermore, the distinction cannot be modal, for we are dealing with attributes not modes. This would seem to leave only a distinction of reason, but that is precisely the position that has been argued against here. It seems, then, we have a distinction without a type, unless we can find a non-Cartesian distinction that fits Spinoza's text.

In his important book on Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze maintains that “one of the sources of Spinoza’s anti-cartesianism is to be found in the theory of distinctions” (37). The reason for this, Deleuze maintains, is that whereas for Descartes any real distinction requires division, for Spinoza there can be no genuine, objective, extra-mental division whatsoever (38). In fact, Deleuze argues that for Spinoza there is no division anywhere in reality, although reality is full of important distinctions.

The difference between distinctions and divisions, according to Deleuze, is that something can be distinct from some other thing without being separable from it into parts or separate units (38-9). Anything which is or can be divided, on the other hand, is capable of being separated and set apart from other things. Since anything separate and set apart could be conceived in itself, it would follow that the only real divisions could be between substances. On this Descartes and Spinoza would agree, but Spinoza has argued that there is only one substance, and hence there can be no divisions anywhere in reality. Yet, Deleuze maintains—and Donagan’s argument above seems to support him—that there are nevertheless genuine distinctions that are more than distinctions of reason.

There is a type of distinction in the history of philosophy that seems to be precisely the kind of distinction that Spinoza has in mind. Duns Scotus argues that in addition to real distinctions, which hold between objects which are physically separable (at least by divine power), and distinctions of reason, which are merely conceptual distinctions made by the perceiving mind, there are formal objective distinctions (*Ord.* 1.8.1.4 n, 193). For Scotus, a formal objective distinction holds whenever we find two things which the mind is forced to distinguish because they are genuinely different, but

which are not physically separable. For example, Socrates and Plato are physically distinct, and thus a real distinction holds between them. Socrates and the “gadfly of Athens” are merely conceptually distinct, and thus do not refer to any distinct realities. The will and the intellect of Socrates, however, are neither really nor merely intellectually distinct, but formally distinct. This is because, though inseparable, will and intellect are genuinely distinct powers. It is with respect to such distinct powers that a formal objective distinction applies. Importantly, among the many things which are formally distinct, according to Scotus, are the divine attributes. God’s attributes are genuinely different powers. Scotus thinks that the attributes are not merely distinguished by the human intellect, but are genuinely distinguished in God. They are, however, inseparable from the being of God and from each other, and so are formally distinct.<sup>21</sup>

This formal objective distinction between the divine attributes is similar to what Deleuze and Donagan have attributed to Spinoza. Deleuze tells us that Spinoza admits of genuine distinctions that are not divisions, while Donagan argues that Spinoza’s attributes are self-contained and thus genuinely different aspects of one substance. This is precisely what a formal objective distinction is: a distinction which is real—in the sense of being objective and extra-mental—but which precludes any possible or actual separation or division.

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<sup>21</sup> To speak of two items being formally distinct or to speak of a formal objective distinction is to speak of the same thing; it is just a question of wording.

To clarify, I am not claiming that Spinoza consciously adopted Scotus' formal objective distinction. I am quite skeptical that he knew of it.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, given Spinoza's hostility to medieval scholastic thinking, I strongly suspect he would reject the ancestry. However, it seems clear to me that in arguing for a single substance that has genuinely but inseparably distinct attributes, Spinoza is clearly introducing a distinction which is not Cartesian and which does precisely what Scotus says a formal objective distinction does. So despite the fact that he does not use the term, and would probably object to being associated with Scotus, it is clear that in Spinoza's system the infinite attributes of the one substance are distinguished, as Scotus would say, formally.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the distinction of the attributes from each other and from substance, there remain the distinctions between the modes of substance, both from each other and from substance itself. One might be inclined to assume that Spinoza simply follows Descartes here and claims that modes are all distinguished by means of a modal distinction. While this seems obvious and is probably correct, it is not the whole story. The concept of a formal objective distinction not only makes sense of Spinoza's distinction of the attributes of substance from substance itself and each other, but of his distinction between modes and substance as well.

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<sup>22</sup> Spinoza utilized several neoscholastic compendia in preparing his early *Cogita metaphysica* (CM), published as an appendix to the PPC. None of these, however, refer to Scotus or the *distinctio formalis a parte rei*. For further details, see the notes to the CM by Barbone and Rice in the Shirley translation of The PPC.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that in the *Short Treatise* (I, 9) Spinoza places the attributes within *natura naturata*, whereas in the *Ethics* they appear within *natura naturans*. This suggests that he was attempting, even in that early work, to establish a distinction between substance and its attributes which, while not modal, was neither real nor logical.

Let us begin with Descartes. For Descartes, modes are ways in which substances exist; they are states of substance. As Della Rocca puts it, “modes inhere in substance. Thus roundness inheres in the table just in the sense that this is a state in which the table exists” (59). This means that modes are radically dependent realities, since there is no roundness without an object to be round, and for there to be roundness is just for some object to be in the state of being round.

According to the traditional reading of Spinoza, all that we call ordinary things are modes in this Cartesian sense. Steven Nadler sums up this view up nicely:

The things that are supposed to be *in* God or Nature precisely as modes or affections are *in* substance including all of those familiar items that populate our world and that we, in our pre-Spinozistic way of thinking took to be substantial in their own right: physical objects (trees, chairs, human bodies) and minds or souls. ... According to this in interpretation ... things are in God or substance in the sense of being properties or states or qualities of God. They inhere in God as in a subject or substratum. (54)

To argue that what we took to be substances are nothing more than “affections” of substance is to demote those things to the status of properties that substance has. To use an example, if I blush, my blush is an affection of me; it is a property which I have. On Nadler's reading, ordinary objects that we took to be substances have something like the relation to the one substance that my blush has to me. There are no texts in which Spinoza provides a list of which things count or do not count as modes. The traditional reading, however, sees modes as all finite particular things. In other words, dogs, trees, rocks, worms, people, and planets count as modes. This reading has been standard from Leibniz down to Bennett. There is, however, an influential and powerful alternative interpretation.

Curley argues against this dominant reading of Spinoza. For Curley, Spinoza deliberately uses the term “mode” differently from his tradition, and therefore means something different by the term than most of his interpreters have imagined. Spinoza does not think of modes as some quality that substance has, but as independent things in their own right. According to Curley, Spinoza’s modes “are . . . of the wrong logical type to be related to substance in the same way Descartes’ modes are related to substance, for they are particular things and not qualities” (*Spinoza's Metaphysics* 18). Curley argues, in other words, that Spinoza could not have used the term “mode” in the same way as Descartes used it. Curley has an important point. For Descartes, it is obvious that modes are qualities or features of substances. Equally obviously, for Descartes modes are not particular things but instantiations of universals like roundness. Spinoza, on the other hand, thinks of normal everyday objects like rocks, trees, and people as modes.

Now, perhaps it is wrong to read Descartes in this way. Let us leave that question open. Spinoza could accept from Descartes that modes are instantiations of universals, and then proceed further to extend modal status to particular things by arguing that they are not substances after all.

There are strong reasons for thinking that Curley is mistaken to deny that Spinoza thinks of modes as nothing more than properties of substance. First, as Bennett has claimed, 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers understood modes to be properties or affectations of substance (*Study* 54). If Spinoza means otherwise, he does not make it clear, and we would expect him to do so. Furthermore, if Spinoza does not mean to embrace this view, why does he speak in terms of substance and modes? Why such confusion? This gives us

*prima facie* reason to suspect that Curley's reading is incorrect. This objection, however, is not necessarily conclusive.

Curley has argued that there is simply no cogent perspective which might allow us to think of ordinary middle-size objects as properties of substance. He declares that unless we can tell a convincing story about how such objects could possibly be predicates or properties of substance, then we should conclude that Spinoza does not hold so absurd a view.

Bennett takes up Curley's challenge quite successfully. Bennett tells a very plausible story about how Spinoza could hold that modes are properties of a substance through a discussion of what he calls Spinoza's "field metaphysic." Bennett focuses on Spinoza's discussion of why space cannot have parts. According to Spinoza:

Matter is everywhere the same, and there are no distinct parts in it except insofar as we conceive matter as modified in various ways. Then its parts are distinct, not really but only modally. For example, we conceive water to be divisible and to have separate parts insofar as it is water, but not insofar as it is material substance. In this latter respect it is not capable of separation or division. Furthermore, water, qua water, comes into existence and goes out of existence; but qua substance it does not come into existence nor go out of existence. (E1P15Schol)<sup>24</sup>

Before considering how Bennett deals with this argument, it is worth noting that Della Rocca observes in his comment on this passage that Spinoza is here unequivocally

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<sup>24</sup> "[M]ateria ubique eadem est, nec partes in eadem distinguuntur, nisi quatenus materiam diversimode affectam esse concipimus, unde ejus partes modaliter tantum distinguuntur, non autem realiter. Ex. gr. aquam, quatenus aqua est, dividi concipimus, ejusque partes ab invicem separari; at non quatenus substantia est corporea; eatenus enim neque separatur neque dividitur. Porro, aqua, quatenus aqua, generatur et corrumpitur; at, quatenus substantia, nec generatur nec corrumpitur."

arguing that extension is an attribute of God but that there is no separation or division in extension, only various states that extension takes (62-3).

Agreeing with Della Rocca on this point, Bennett goes further by telling a story about how this metaphysical scheme works. Bennett begins his discussion with the following remarks:

This part of Spinoza's metaphysics can be approached through a story of Newton's. God decides to add a mountain to the world, which he does by modifying a certain mountain-shaped and -sized region of space so that it affects everything else just as mountains do: other bodies cannot enter; if they reach the region quickly, sound is emitted and they are bent or shattered; light is reflected and so on. If the job were done right, Newton says, we would have every reason to believe that a mountain had been added to the furniture of our world. . . . For Spinoza [this] points to a way of bringing the concept of substance to bear on the extended world without implying that mountains are, or are made of, substances. It suggests that there is just one substance—namely the whole of space—regions of which get various qualities such as impenetrability, mass, and so on, so that any proposition asserting the existence of a body reduces to one saying something about a region of space. (*Study 89*)

As Bennett goes on to note, this story is not precisely accurate. Spinoza cannot maintain that an individual body is a region of space. To begin with, it is strange to think of regions as changing place. According to Bennett, we should conceive of bodies as a string of a "spatio-temporally continuous set of place times" (*Study 89*). It may sound a little odd to think of bodies in such abstract form. But when we remember that matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed but merely transformed, and that the cells and particles of our bodies are physically both in constant flux and constant interaction with the environment in which we live, it is not so hard to comprehend. It may even be a rather sensible view.

To this point, the discussion is still rather abstract. Thankfully, Bennett provides a helpful example which greatly clarifies the position he is articulating:

When a thaw moves across a countryside, as we say, nothing really moves; there are just progressive changes in which bits of the countryside are frozen and which are melted. Analogously, Spinoza's view is that the movement of things or stuff is, deep down, the passing along of something qualitative - a change in which regions are F and which are not. (*Study* 89-90)

This is a very convincing image of reality. There is much in modern physics to support the contention that individual physical bodies are more like a thaw, at least at the most basic level, than like substance understood in the traditional sense. Furthermore, when we recall Spinoza's parallelism—that thought and extension are two attributes of one and the same substance, such that each mode can be conceived either under the attribute of thought or the attribute of extension, but still remain one and the same mode—we can easily extend the physical model to the attribute of thought, discovering that thoughts and minds are no less adjectival upon substance than bodies are. Given the idea of a field metaphysic, it follows that it is not incoherent to think that bodies could be features or properties of substance.

We must concede, however, that it is not sufficient for Bennett to argue that a field metaphysic allows us to tell a convincing tale about how Spinoza could plausibly maintain that ordinary everyday objects are predicates of substance. We still need further reasons to think Spinoza holds such a metaphysic. Even Curley concedes that a field metaphysic allows us to conceptualize modes as properties of substance.<sup>25</sup> He responds to

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<sup>25</sup> See the articles by Curley and Bennett in response to each other in *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics* (35-59).

this, however, by claiming that Spinoza does not actually hold a field metaphysic.<sup>26</sup> Bennett, on the other hand, claims that there is strong textual evidence that Spinoza does actually hold something very like a field metaphysic. Let us consider the passage above about water. Spinoza tells us that one can divide water insofar as it is water, but not insofar as it is extended substance, for “qua substance it is neither generated nor destroyed.” Bennett claims that this passage “makes perfect sense” (*Study 97*) if Spinoza holds a field metaphysic. Bennett is surely right that a field metaphysic explains this passage remarkably well. Spinoza seems very clearly to be saying that to divide water is to change which regions of extended substance are watery and which are not. One cannot simply destroy water—or rather one can destroy water “as water,” but not as a piece of extension. All that can happen is that there is a change in quality with regard to a region of extension. Bennett concludes that his “account of Spinoza’s metaphysic of extension is strongly confirmed by how well it handles that passage. I know of no rival account that does as well” (*Study 97*).

Bennett is correct in his assessment. A field metaphysic makes very good sense of the passage about water and extended substance. Bennett’s position is given strong support by a passage from Spinoza’s correspondence. Because of the importance of this passage, I quote Bennett at some length:

It is near the end of letter 4, where he says: ‘Men are not created, only generated, and their bodies existed before, although formed in another way.’ Considered as expressing the field metaphysic, that is not very good. It sounds more like a claim about the permanence of particles of matter: my body ‘existed before’ in the sense that its constituent atoms existed in 1929 although they did not then make up a human body. Still, poor as the fit is, I believe Spinoza to be trying to say that

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<sup>26</sup> Curley does not provide his own positive view in this passage.

bodies are not basic and that space is: my body 'existed before' in the sense that my body at this moment is a certain F region of space, and that region existed in 1929 although it was not then F. (*Study 97-8*)

Bennett could easily be attacked here: why suppose that a passage from Spinoza that seems initially to count against a field metaphysics must be interpreted as actually supporting that reading? But Bennett explains further:

We must suppose that this is what Spinoza is getting at if we are to make sense of what follows. He has just said that your beginning was not a true origination, and has implied that your ending will not be true annihilation either. What, for him, would count as a true annihilation of something extended? It would have to be the *annihilation of a region*. But if there is just one complete Euclidean space, that would have to involve the *annihilation of space*: it is nonsense to speak of the destruction of, say, a spherical region while leaving all the rest of space intact. With that by way of preparation, look now at the whole remark:

Men are not created, but only generated, and their bodies existed before, although formed in another way. From this something follows which I willingly accept, namely that if a single part of matter were annihilated the whole of extension would vanish with it.

Although the first sentence might be taken in different ways, the second points uniquely to the field metaphysic. On that metaphysic, the second sentence is exactly right; I can find no other basis on which it is even sane. (*Study 98*)

Though it is not clear to me that other possible readings of this passage from Spinoza are "not sane," I cannot see how they could possibly do this passage justice. In particular, if Curley is right that all Spinoza means to say is that modes are causally dependent on substance, but do not exist as states or properties of substance, then it is difficult to understand why Spinoza claims that to destroy one part of matter is to destroy the whole of extension.

This passage, then, provides especially strong support for Bennett's reading of Spinoza's system as a field metaphysic. Hereafter, this study will assume that Spinoza is committed to a field metaphysic. Importantly, the field metaphysic is a variant of the traditional reading in which Spinoza takes modes to be states of substance. It would seem, then, that Curley's reading is incorrect, and we must read Spinoza as asserting that modes inhere in substance.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Curley has brought up some important points. Spinoza's modes are not precisely the same as Descartes' modes. We might conclude from this that Spinoza's modal distinctions are not quite identical to Descartes' modal distinctions. Let us recall that for Descartes modes are distinguished from one another and from the substance of which they are modes by the fact that a mode can be conceived apart from any other mode, though not apart from the substance of which it is a mode. Spinoza clearly agrees with this. Therefore, when Spinoza says that parts of extension differ modally, but not really, he means that individual bodies differ from each other in that they can be conceived apart from each other, but they cannot be conceived apart from extension as a whole, that is, the substance of which they are modes.

Given the standard Cartesian distinctions, it is difficult to understand how Descartes could maintain that there is a real distinction between a substance and its modes. The modes of a substance cannot exist separately from the substance. In other words, for Descartes the distinction between a substance and all of its modes, just like the

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<sup>27</sup> I note, however, that Curley is not completely incorrect. Modes do not simply inhere in substance, but are caused by substance. Curley has rightly called attention to the importance of the causal relationship between substance and its modes.

distinction between a substance and its attributes, should be distinction of reason only.

Modes are distinguished from one another by a modal distinction, but it is difficult to see how substance can differ modally from its own modes. Descartes does, in fact, claim that modes are distinguished from substances by means of a modal distinction (CSM I 213-14: AT VIIIA, 29). But his argument that we perceive a substance as separate from its modes is far from convincing. There is no solid textual basis for attributing to Descartes a conception of substance as a featureless substrate underlying its modes. On the contrary, since for Descartes a principal attribute expresses the essence of a substance, no substance can be a mere substrate, lacking defining properties. But if Descartes provides no account of how a substance differs from the total collection of its modes, then the claim that it does so differ is incoherent.

A natural objection to this claim is the following: Descartes clearly holds that substance is not simply a collection of modes. This is correct; Descartes does claim that there is a distinction, but it is not at all clear how he can account for such a distinction. Given the types of distinctions Descartes utilizes, what could possibly account for any distinction between substance and the entire set of its modes? Presumably one would be forced to say that over and above the total collection of modes substance is some sort of principle of unity. That is a plausible view, provided there is a theory of distinctions that permits conceiving of such a distinction. Descartes has no such theory of distinctions. Consequently, Descartes holds this view with no legitimate philosophical grounds for doing so.

Spinoza rejects the idea that a modal distinction can account for the difference between substance and the total collection of modes. When he discusses modal distinctions (E2P15Schol), he does not claim that these distinctions hold between substance and the whole collection of its modes. If, therefore, Spinoza thinks that substance is identical with all of its modes, then Spinoza is a reductionist, that is, one who holds that all there is to reality (since there is but one substance) are all the modes, their activities, and their relations. Substance is nothing beyond or above the total collection of modes. On this view, substance and the whole collection of modes are distinguished only by the perceiving mind, which makes the distinction between them a distinction of reason.

But there is good reason to doubt that Spinoza thinks of the distinction between substance and the whole collection of modes as merely a distinction of reason. To begin with, Spinoza asserts that substance is ontologically prior to its modes, and that modes must be explained through substance (E1P8Schol2). If substance were reducible to the whole of its modes, however, substance would exist only because all of the modes exist and together make up the one substance. This reductionist understanding of the relation between substance and its modes must be wrong, given the ontological priority of substance. But there is an even stronger reason for denying that Spinoza holds this view.

As we saw above, Spinoza denies that extended substance can be divided into separate parts. By parity of reasoning, the attribute of thought also has no divisible parts. Although different bodies can be distinguished, there is no genuine division or separation; no “part” of space can be removed from the rest. If Spinoza held a

reductionistic view of the relationship between substance and mode, as he must have held if he had accepted only Descartes' distinctions, his assertion that space is undivided would be nonsensical. The view according to which the whole collection of modes comes together to make substance entails that such modes are principally separate from each other, that is, they are, or at least can be, divided from one another. This does not mean that such modes ever were or will be separated or divided, but only that they would be, at least in principle, separable or capable of being divided from one another. Spinoza explicitly rules out this possibility.

Once again we find ourselves with a distinction which is neither merely conceptual nor admits of any possible separation of things. Modes and substance are objectively and extra-mentally distinct from each other, as modes are from other modes. At the same time, modes and substance are absolutely inseparable, even in principle. We have, then, another example of a formal objective distinction. Although it is probably not the case that all modal distinctions are actually formal objective distinctions, it is clear that at least the distinction between modes and substance is an example of this kind of distinction. If not, then we are left with a reductionism of substance to modes, which is incompatible with Spinoza's basic ontology.

The implications of this are far reaching. If Spinoza were a reductionist, he would have to be read as claiming that the whole collection of modes exhausts the reality of substance. This has the unfortunate result of making Spinoza's talk of substance entirely superfluous. All there really are, on this view, are modes interacting and relating; substance does not really explain anything, as it is just an aggregate of various modes. Of

course, no one asserts that this is Spinoza's position, but it follows from the attribution to him of Descartes' distinctions regarding substance and modes. With only those distinctions, however, Spinoza would be left with a reductionism that assigns to substance no substantial existence.

Ascribing to Spinoza, on the other hand, the view that modes differ formally from substance allows us to maintain that substance and all of its modes are distinct, though inseparable. There are no modes without substance and no substance without modes. Substance, however, comes first. Modes exist only because substance causes them to exist. This is where Curley got it right. The relationship of substance to its modes is not merely one of inherence in a subject, but one of causal dependence. Substance causes, or in Spinoza's terminology, "explains" the existence of modes, in that there is a causal relationship that cannot be explained merely on the inherence model. This view allows substance to have the ontological role that Spinoza clearly thinks it has.

In particular, substance is the cause or explanation of itself and therefore of all its modes. Since substance, for Spinoza, is the whole of reality, we can translate this claim into the following: Reality is not a collection of disparate parts, but a unified entity which is the cause and explanation of itself and is internally self-differentiated into various modes, or ways, of existence that are genuinely distinct but never separated or divided.

### **Spinoza's Metaphysical Holism**

This view of Spinoza's basic ontology sees Spinoza not as a reductionist, but rather as a holist. By the term "holism" I mean an ontology that holds that individual

things should be understood, not as isolated entities, but rather as existing only in a larger structure or whole. On this view, individual things, though diversified, cannot exist separately from the whole. Holism should be directly contrasted with reductionism. By the term “reductionism” I mean the position that there are no wholes over and above the plurality of things that everyday observations (and perhaps scientific analyses) reveal.

Spinoza’s claim that substance must be understood in terms of itself and cannot be understood in terms of anything else is particularly important for my attribution of holism to him. Essential to any ontological reductionism is the claim that the whole just is the sum of its parts added up together (Davies 61). If Spinoza thought of substance as a collection of parts and only that, then substance could only be understood as a name for an aggregate of parts, which would be precisely the opposite of something that must be conceived in itself and cannot be conceived through anything else. If substance were nothing more than the aggregate of individual modes, then modes would have to be regarded as ontologically primary. This is the exact opposite of Spinoza’s understanding of what substance is:

By substance I understand that which is conceived through itself and in itself . . .  
By modification or accident I understand that which is in something else and is conceived through that in which it is. Hence it is clearly established, first that substance is prior in nature to its accidents; for without it these can neither be nor be conceived. (Ep4)<sup>28</sup>

Clearly for Spinoza it is substance which is ontologically primary. Modes are derivative.

In and of itself, this means that we ought not to interpret substance as an aggregate of

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<sup>28</sup> “[P]er Substantiam intelligam id, quod per se et in se concipitur.... Per modificationem autem, sive per Accidens, id quod alio est, et per id, in quo est, concipitur; hinc clare constant, *primo*, quod Substantia sit prior naturata suis Accidentibus. Nam hæc sine illa nec existere nec concipi possunt.”

modes. But the ontological primacy of substance to modes is not sufficient to establish the conclusion that substance must be thought of holistically. Such a claim requires additional support.

There is very strong circumstantial evidence that a 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalist would not have conceived substance as any kind of an aggregate. This evidence has been nicely summarized by Bennett, who offers very strong support for a holistic reading of Spinoza. Bennett reminds us that for Leibniz nothing that is not a true unity can count as a substance (*Study 56-7*). Furthermore, a collection of parts cannot be a substance, since it is not a genuine unity, but an aggregate. Bennett illustrates this with Leibniz's discussion of whether we can count an army as a substance. An army cannot be a substance because it is reducible to relations among individual men and made up of those men. The army is an aggregate, and no aggregate can be a substance (*Study 58*).

Leibniz goes on to argue (according to Bennett at least) that no *physical* object can count as a substance, since any physical object is no less an aggregate than the army. It follows that we must posit non-physical monads as the only true substances. Spinoza, of course, does not share Leibniz's belief in monads or a plurality of substances. It seems clear, however, that Spinoza does share the view that a substance cannot be an aggregate. Bennett claims that "Spinoza also connects substantiality with not having parts: he is at pains to insist that God, the one substance, has no parts, apparently thinking that substantiality requires this" (*Study 60*). Spinoza's solution, unlike Leibniz's, is to claim

that there can be only one substance, reality as a whole, and not that there are a plurality of non-physical substances.<sup>29</sup>

The claim that substance cannot be an aggregate of truly separable parts is bolstered by a careful look at what I call “Spinoza’s cosmological argument.” That argument shows that a substance cannot be the infinite series of modes but must be ontologically prior to its modes, and therefore cannot be reduced to them. This argument can work only if it is conceived in holistic rather than reductionistic terms.

Spinoza’s cosmological argument depends on the claim that infinite existence is a necessary feature of the world. It follows that an account of the world restricted only to finite objects would be incomplete. Indeed, it would leave out the most basic fact about the nature of reality: the primacy of the infinite. As Spinoza puts it:

If what now necessarily exists is nothing but finite entities, then finite entities are more potent than an absolutely infinite Entity—which is absurd, (as is self-evident). Therefore, either nothing exists, or an absolutely infinite Entity exists, too. (E1P11Dem3)<sup>30</sup>

The importance of the above argument is that it draws a clear distinction between finite things and an absolutely infinite entity. The argument implies that finite things are many and the infinite entity is one. Furthermore, if only finite entities exist, then an absolutely infinite entity does not exist, which is self-evidently absurd. If we interpret Spinoza’s one

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<sup>29</sup> That substance must be understood as “reality as a whole” is the basis of Spinoza’s notorious assertion that God and Nature are one, that substance is *Deus Sive Natura* (E4Pref).

<sup>30</sup> “Si itaque id, quod jam necessario existit, non nisi entia finita sunt, sunt ergo entia finita potentiora Ente absolute infinito; atque hoc (*ut per se notum*) absurdum est; ergo vel nihil existit, vel Ens absolute infinitum necessario etiam existit.”

substance as reducible to the infinite series of modes, then the above reasoning does not make any sense.

That substance is no mere aggregate of parts is also supported by an analysis of Spinoza's conception of extended substance as opposed to a collection of bodies. Spinoza argues that there is a sharp distinction between that which is absolutely infinite and an aggregate or multitude of finite things. In fact, he claims that the two categories are mutually exclusive. He explains that it "is just as absurd to assert that corporeal substance is composed of bodies or parts as to assert that a body is composed of surfaces, surfaces of lines, and lines of points"<sup>31</sup> What is clear from this assertion and example is that Spinoza starkly contrasts extended substance with a multitude of bodies; the former is not the same thing as the latter.

Spinoza illustrates his position with another example. He offers the analogy of a tiny worm living in our blood stream:

Imagine, if you please, a tiny worm living in the blood . . . That worm would be living in the blood as we are living in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not a part, and it could have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood.  
(Ep32)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Et profecto non minus absurdum est ponere, quod substantia corporea ex corporibus sive partibus componatur, quam quod corpus ex superficiebus, superficies ex lineis, lineae denique ex punctis componatur."

<sup>32</sup> "Fingamus jam, si placet, vermiculum in sanguine vivere.... Ille quidem in hoc sanguine, ut nos in hac parte universi, viveret, et unamquamque sanguinis particulam ut totum, non vero ut partem consideraret, nec scire posset, quomodo partes omnes ab universali natura sanguinis moderantur."

In relation to reality as a whole, we are in the position of the worm. The key here is that the interrelation of the parts of the blood is determined by the overall nature of the whole. When we extend this thinking to reality as a whole, we see that all things are dependent on and understood through and in their place in that whole. That this is precisely what Spinoza means to indicate by his analogy is obvious when we consider his physics. As Spinoza explains:

Now hitherto we have conceived an individual thing composed solely of bodies distinguished from one another only by motion-and-rest and speed of movement; that is, an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies. If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many other ways while still preserving its nature. ... Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual things composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in form. If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts—that is, all the constituent bodies—vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole. (E2P13lemma7Schol)<sup>33</sup>

In other words, all individuals, just like the worm, are part of a larger system or whole which completely determines their behavior and essence.

Two implications follow from this. First, because parts of larger wholes must, for Spinoza, be determined and controlled entirely by the laws of the larger whole of which they are a part (E1P29), he must accept a strict causal determinism. Spinoza embraces

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<sup>33</sup> “Atque hucusque Individuum concepimus, quod non, nisi ex corporibus, quæ solo motu et quiete, celeritate et tarditate inter se distinguuntur, hoc est, quod ex corporibus simplicissimis componitur. Quod si jam aliud concipiamus ex pluribus diversæ naturæ Individuis compositum, idem pluribus aliis modis posse affici reperiemus, ipsius nihilominus natura servata.... Quod si præterea tertium Individuorum genus ex his secundis compositum, concipiamus, idem multis aliis modis affici posse reperiemus absque ulla eius formæ mutatione. Et si sic porro in infinitum pergamus, facile concipimus, totam Naturam unum esse Individuum, cujus partes, hoc est, omnia corpora infinitis modis variant, absque ulla totius Individui mutatione.”

such determinism without hesitation. Since the activity and being of all things follow from the nature and activity of the larger whole of which they are a part, there is no freedom to violate causal laws, no genuine spontaneity anywhere in reality.

Secondly, and more crucially for my immediate purpose, Spinoza's commitment to holism is quite clear. As we have seen, all modes are causally dependent on substance, which is both causally independent and ontologically prior to its modes. Furthermore, as Donagan argues, "since finite modes are not self-caused, their totality cannot be self-caused either" (*Spinoza* 90). In other words, substance cannot be reduced to the totality of its modes. Admittedly, Donagan's argument is vulnerable to possible criticism. It seems clear that even if no individual thing is self-caused, the totality of all individual things could be. To assert otherwise is to be guilty of the fallacy of composition, claiming that the whole must have a property that each part has. Without further argumentation to support his contention, Donagan does seem to be guilty of committing the fallacy of composition. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the theory of distinctions I have attributed to Spinoza provides Donagan's basic argument with additional elements needed to avoid the fallacy.

Let us recall that a formal objective distinction, though it is not between physically separable objects, is a genuine extra-mental distinction that the mind is forced to make. A formal distinction is not merely conceptual. Given this theory of distinctions, if we find that there is in Spinoza's thought a real (extra-mental) distinction between substance and its modes, then we will have grounds for attributing the formal distinction to him. Obviously, then, the totality of modes as causally dependent would not be

identical to substance, which is causally independent. Finite modes are divisible into parts, capable of coming into being and passing away, of being created and destroyed. Substance is not divisible or vulnerable in these ways. On a field metaphysic reading of Spinoza, which I have argued is the correct reading, substance cannot be changed *as substance*. Extension remains essentially and eternally the same. What can change are the various modes of extension, but not extension itself. This fits quite well with Spinoza's claim that nature undergoes infinite internal changes with respect to its parts (regions) but cannot change insofar as it is one individual (E2P13lemma7Schol). What follows from this, however, is that the mind is forced to distinguish between the total collection of the modes of extension and extension itself. It follows that we have a formal distinction between substance and the total collection of modes. Donagan is correct to claim that the latter itself cannot be infinite in the same sense (or order of infinity) as that of substance. The alternative is that Spinoza views extension as a collection of regions or parts, but this position cannot plausibly be upheld as Spinoza emphatically insists that space has no parts.

If this analysis is true of extension, then it must be true of thought, given Spinoza's commitment to a strict parallelism of attributes. But what exactly does this entail? What precisely does this holistic reading mean? I find Errol Harris' account of Spinoza's holism to be helpful here.

According to Harris, "Spinoza's substance is to be conceived as an infinite process of differentiation of a primal principle of structure, each differentiation (or mode) expressed in an infinite diversity of ways, corresponding to the infinite attributes" (32).

For Harris, substance is a single, undivided individual unity, which expresses itself in and through an infinite series of finite modes. On this view, substance expresses itself as modes and laws of nature, but is not only the modes and the laws of nature. This captures the essence of a holistic reading of Spinoza. What exists is substance diversified, not modes collected together.

It is of central importance to a holistic metaphysic that a whole cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, that the whole is greater than its parts, or has properties its parts do not have. As the physicist Paul Davies explains, holism entails that some things must be understood as wholes which cannot be thought of as mere collections of parts. For example, a jigsaw puzzle cannot be completely understood in terms of its parts but only as a unity; the unity cannot be contained in the parts nor in their mere collection, but exist only as a unified whole. “The picture on a jigsaw, like the speckled newspaper image of a face, can only be perceived at a higher level of structure than the individual piece—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Davies 61).

Spinoza thinks holistically with respect to substance and its modes. Substance, according to Spinoza, is not made up of parts. It follows that substance cannot be reduced to the infinite series of finite modes. In one sense at least, substance is transcendent. Substance transcends its modes simply by the fact that the infinite series of finite modes does not exhaust the reality of substance. Substance is not to be understood as a collection of finite “parts,” but rather as the infinity through which those parts are to be understood. Nevertheless, it is not the case that substance transcends its modes by

existing apart from them or by existing in some supernatural realm “out there.” Rather, substance is more than the sum of its modes.

I conclude that this holistic reading of Spinoza, supported by the attribution to him of a field metaphysic and a theory of distinctions not unlike the formal distinctions of Duns Scotus, is the proper understanding of Spinoza’s basic ontology, and therefore the bedrock of his later conclusions about individuals and individuation. At this point, however, various questions remain. What can it mean to speak of individuals that are in some sense “part” of a larger whole? How can we speak meaningfully of individuals which are embedded in a larger causal structure from which they are not separate and which causally determines their every act and even their essence? How can political and moral insight be gained from such a system? These are questions for subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 2 : Spinoza's Individuals and Problems with His Account

In order to understand what Spinoza thinks an individual is, it is necessary first to understand his physics, in particular his account of bodies. The reason why Spinoza's "physics of bodies" is a necessary starting point is that Spinoza explicitly derives his principle of individuation from the principle of inertia, as that principle is applied to his physics of bodies. Furthermore, Spinoza's understanding of individuals begins with the body. As explained in the first chapter, Spinoza held to a mind/body parallelism: the mind and body, though distinct, are not separate; they are two aspects of one individual. Despite this seeming parity of mind and body as dual aspects of one entity, Spinoza consistently gives a kind of primacy to the body. Spinoza's usual procedure is to establish some claim about bodies first and then simply extend that to minds (E2P13Schol). It follows that to understand Spinoza's conception of an individual we must begin with his conception of individual bodies. Spinoza did not come to his understanding of bodies in a void. When he writes of bodies, he assumes Cartesian physics. As we will see below, there are major differences between Spinozistic and Cartesian physics. Spinoza does, however, assume that the general principles of Cartesian physics are substantially accurate, at least in broad outline. It follows, therefore, that we must begin our discussion with Descartes' account of bodies and their individuation.

### Cartesian Physics<sup>34</sup>

Descartes' physics was very influential in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Negatively, Cartesian physics rejects substantial forms and the teleology of the Aristotelian and scholastic traditions. It also rejects alternatives to this tradition, such as atomism (CSM II 231-2: AT VIII A, 51-2). Descartes' official arguments against the scholastic/Aristotelian physics are rather short. Essentially, Descartes argues that he can fully and accurately explain change in physical objects solely in terms of the mechanical motions of their parts (CSM I 94: AT X, 39-41). It follows that we need not posit anything other than such motions to account for bodies and their changes. In short, he thinks we should not multiply entities beyond necessity.<sup>35</sup> Given this "principle of parsimony," we do well to abandon occult qualities and look to explain bodies in terms of mechanical properties alone.

A body in scholastic thought was understood as a parcel of matter which is set apart from other parcels of matter by means of a substantial form. In scholastic physics all change is explained as the taking on of different forms by an underlying "prime matter." Since Descartes rejects substantial forms as unnecessary occult qualities, it follows that he must explain what a body is quite differently than scholastic philosophers do. Descartes' position is that the properties of bodies are primarily properties of extension itself; that is, a body is nothing more than its most basic geometrical properties, such as length, breadth, and depth (CSM II 124: AT VII, 176). Descartes appears to hold

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<sup>34</sup> Spinoza's most complete discussion of Descartes' physics is in PPC part 2. See especially Propositions 1-8.

<sup>35</sup> Descartes has deeper reasons for his rejection of the tradition. These objections rest on his full account of what a body is. This will be explained below.

this thesis for two primary reasons, the first of which is his understanding of a principal attribute. He considers a principal attribute to be the essence of a thing. As we have seen, for Descartes the difference between a substance and its principal attribute is merely conceptual; in reality, a substance just is its principal attribute. The most basic property, the essential feature of physical objects, is extension itself. This is because, Descartes argues, there is no concept more basic for explaining what a physical thing is than the fact that it is extended (CSM II 124: AT VII, 175-6). Put somewhat differently, I can intellectually abstract all qualities from some physical object, say a piece of wax, without thereby annihilating the object itself. Extension, however, cannot be abstracted from the object without removing the object itself. It follows that extension is the essence of physical bodies. This is the logic behind the famous wax example in the *Meditations*, in which Descartes concludes that the only thing he cannot abstract from his idea of the wax is the fact that it is extended.

Descartes' second reason for holding that extension is the essence of physical objects is a little more complicated. It rests upon the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Descartes claims that secondary qualities, e.g., taste, color, smell, are not to be found in physical objects, but rather in the way that physical objects come to appear to the perceiver's mind. When we experience such secondary qualities as the color red, for example, what we are experiencing is actually a mental representation derived from how our senses are affected by the minute physical particles of the physical object. Primary qualities, on the other hand, are those geometric properties that an object really has, independently of a mind's perception of it.

Descartes has several arguments for the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The most important of these rests upon a distinction—shared by all the rationalists—between imagination and intellect. Descartes makes this distinction quite clear and explicit:

But we have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation we have a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is extended in length, breadth and depth, and has various differently shaped and variously moving parts which give rise to our various sensations of colours, smells, pain and so on. (CSM I 223: AT VIII A, 40)<sup>36</sup>

The importance of this passage is that it clearly separates the geometric properties of physical objects from their secondary properties. Colors, sounds, smells, and tastes are a matter of “imagination” or sense perception. Geometrical features, on the other hand, are understood by the intellect, and therefore accurately understood without confusion. In other words, secondary qualities are a product of our imagination, and are not features of bodies themselves. Only primary qualities are actual properties of bodies. It follows that bodies only have geometrical properties.

Given that extension is the essence of physical objects, one may ask how many physical objects there are. Descartes could—although it is not clear that he does—maintain that there is only one physical object, extension itself. On this view, all that would exist would be extension, and all physical objects would simply be various ways that the parts of extension are configured. As we have seen, this is the view which Spinoza adopts, and he is operating in accordance with Cartesian physics when he adopts

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<sup>36</sup> “Sed quia sentimus, sive potius a sensu impulsus clare ac distincte percipimus, materiam quandam extensam in longum, latum et profundum, cujus variæ partes variis figuris præditæ sunt, ac variis motibus cientur, ac etiam efficiunt ut varios sensus habeamus colorum, odorum, doloris, etc.”

it. Descartes, of course, often speaks as if there were numerous different physical objects, and he, no less than Spinoza, believes that there are many individuals. Since Descartes holds that there are many individuals, we would expect to find an explanation for how different physical objects are individuated. Descartes does not disappoint. He provides an account of individuation, expressly declaring that objects are individuated by motion.

Descartes' argument for motion as the principle of individuation for bodies is that since the only mind-independent qualities of bodies are primary qualities, only those qualities can individuate bodies. The only quality that can really distinguish bodies cannot be shape, breadth or depth, as multiple bodies can be identical in this regard. It follows that one body can differ from another only in respect to its movement.

Descartes also identifies matter with extension, which precludes the possibility of a vacuum or empty space. The problem is to explain how physical objects can move if there is no empty space in which they can move. The solution is to conceive of the movement of matter as circular only "with a pushing of b out of its place, b pushing c and so on, until z moves into the place vacated by A" (Kenny 170-71). Nor, for Descartes, are there any atoms. Because all matter is extended, all matter is divisible, and there can be no unsplittable atoms. This is his basic picture of the physical realm: constant circular movement, but no empty space; basic particles, but no indivisible atoms. There are only physical objects reduced to their primary qualities. Spinoza shares this picture. The only major difference between Descartes and Spinoza regarding basic physics is that of the origin of motion. In Descartes' system, physical objects are reduced to their geometrical features only. It follows that these objects do not have an intrinsic principle of motion.

This means that in order to account for motion, Descartes must posit that an external force initiates and continues to sustain motion in the system (CSM I 240: AT VIII A, 61-2). Spinoza, who has no such external agent, holds that the physical system of bodies is intrinsically in motion. The system for Descartes is intrinsically static; for him, the physical world is jumpstarted by an outside force. For Spinoza, however, the physical world is dynamic, containing the origin of motion within itself.

Finally, it is not clear whether Descartes thinks that the whole of extension counts as one single substance or that each physical body is a separate substance. The problem is not merely that Descartes makes inconsistent claims; rather, Descartes simply does not provide an answer to the question. The logic of his position is quite clear, however. For Descartes, a substance must be conceptually independent. No physical bodies are conceptually independent; they all are moved by other bodies and dependent on an elaborate physical system. It follows that physical bodies cannot be substances; only extension as a whole can be a substance. Descartes, of course, is officially a pluralist about substances. For him, each individual human mind is a non-physical substance. This is not a view that Spinoza shares.

### **Spinoza on Minds and Bodies**

In order to understand Spinoza's physics and the role it plays in his theory of individuation, we must first grasp the context in which his physics appears. Spinoza explicitly tells us that he is not writing a theory of physics as such; in his correspondence we are told that he wished to write a full theory of physics, but had not done so (Ep3). He

did not live to write this full account. We have, therefore, only a sketch of a physical system. Even this sketch is qualified by the fact that Spinoza's purpose in E2 is not to present a theory of physics, but to explain the nature of the relationship of mind to body. In fact, this must be qualified even further, for Spinoza informs us that he will there deal only with matters that will lead to the well-being of human beings (E2Pref).

Descartes argued that mind and body are distinct substances that nevertheless causally interact. Critics have wondered ever since how a non-extended mind and an extended physical body can causally interact. It is extremely difficult even to imagine a plausible answer. Spinoza, like many post-Cartesian philosophers, seeks to provide a more satisfactory account of the relationship between mind and body. Spinoza's account follows quite generally from his basic ontology. Since there is but one substance, and all attributes are in fact attributes of this one substance, thought and extension are two attributes of one and the same substance, separate but not divisible. Furthermore, since all modes are various configurations of the one substance, each mode will also share in these multiple attributes. Hence, any given mode can be properly understood under the attribute of thought and under the attribute of extension.

Spinoza's claim that thought and extension are two equal attributes of the one substance can be fully grasped by first understanding his argument for considering thought an attribute of substance, and then proceeding from there to his view of the relationship between mind and body.

Spinoza provides the following argument for the position that thought is an attribute of substance:

Individual thoughts, or this and that thought, are modes expressing the nature of God in a definite and determinate way (Cor. Pr. 25, I). Therefore, there belongs to God (Def. 5, I) an attribute the conception of which is involved in all individual thoughts, and through which they are conceived. Thought, therefore, is one of God's attributes. (E2P1Dem)<sup>37</sup>

In other words, since there is but one substance and that one substance has all attributes, and thoughts clearly exist in the world (for we know through introspection that at least some beings think), it must be that all particular thoughts are expressions of the one substance under the attribute of thought. As I have already explained, for Spinoza there can be only one substance, with all individual things nothing more than modes of substance. Since modes of substance are simply ways in which substance exists, their principal attribute, the essence of what they are, cannot be anything not possessed by substance. If a mode were to possess an essence not shared by substance, then, given Cartesian assumptions (which Spinoza shares), that mode would not be a mode of substance. In Spinoza's ontology this would mean that there would have to be two substances, which, of course, he does not think is possible. Spinoza applies the same reasoning that leads him to claim that thought is an attribute of substance to prove that extension is equally an attribute of substance. He says that extension is an attribute of God and that this “is proved in the same way” as in the argument that thought is an attribute of God (E2P2). What he must mean by this is that just as thoughts are modes expressing the nature of God in a definite and determinate way, bodies are modes

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<sup>37</sup> “Singulares cogitationes, sive hæc et illa cogitatio, modi sunt, qui Dei naturam certo et determinato modo exprimunt (*per Coroll. Prop. 25, p. I*) Competit ergo Deo (*per Defin. 5, p. I*) attributum, cujus conceptum singulares omnes cogitationes involvunt, per quod etiam concipiuntur.”

expressing the nature of God in a definite and determinate way as well. In fact, Spinoza's position is even stronger than this. He tells us:

Thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways . . . [S]o whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of Extension or under the attribute of Thought or under any other attribute, we find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, that is, the same things following one another. (E2P7Schol)<sup>38</sup>

To understand the equivalence of thought and extension in Spinoza's thought, let us consider a particular mode, a human being. Like all modes, a human being is a finite expression of infinite substance, a particular configuration of the reality that is substance. Furthermore, since all modes can be properly described—and really exist—under all of substance's attributes, a human being is properly described both as thinking and extended, as a mind and a body. Spinoza explains the specifics of the relationship between the attributes as follows: “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension and nothing else” (E2P13).<sup>39</sup> Since all modes have the same basic attributes, which are the attributes of substance itself, we find a reality in which there are physical objects and an awareness of those objects. This is precisely what Spinoza says:

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<sup>38</sup> “[S]ubstantia cogitans et substantia extensa una eademque est substantia, quæ jam sub hoc, jam sub illo attributo comprehenditur. Sic etiam modus extensionis et idea illius modi una eademque est res ... et ideo sive Naturam sub attributo Extensionis, sive sub attributo Cogitationis, sive sub alio quocunque concipiamus, unum eundemque ordinem, sive unam eademque causarum connexionem, hoc est easdem res, invicem sequi reperiemus.”

<sup>39</sup> “*Objectum ideæ humanam Mentem constituentis est Corpus, sive certus extensionis modus actu existens, et nihil aliud.*”

From the above we understand not only that the human Mind is united to the Body but also what is to be understood by the union of Mind and Body. But nobody can understand this union adequately or distinctly unless he first gains adequate knowledge of the nature of our body. For what we have so far demonstrated is of quite general application, and applies to men no more than to other individuals, which are all animate, albeit in different degrees . . . But . . . in proportion as a body is more apt than other bodies to act or be acted upon simultaneously in many ways, so is its mind more apt than other minds to perceive many things simultaneously. (E2P13Schol)<sup>40</sup>

Spinoza thinks of ideas as representations. Thoughts represent physical things.

Since this is so, to understand thoughts, we must first understand the bodies they represent. In the case of all individuals with minds, their thoughts are directly of their own bodies, and only indirectly of external bodies insofar as those bodies affect their bodies (E2P16Cor2). It follows from this that to understand the mind we must first understand the body. Spinoza's procedure is first to state facts about the body, and then to derive facts about the mind from facts about the body. I must be very cautious here. As we have seen, Spinoza argues that physical events cannot cause mental events, nor can mental events cause physical events. The attributes are parallel and not causally interactive. Since, however, thoughts are ideas or representations of bodies, there is a sense in which Spinoza is an explanatory materialist, in that for him body comes first.

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<sup>40</sup> "Ex his non tantum intelligimus, Mentem humanam unitam esse Corpori, sed etiam quid per mentis et Corporis unionem intelligendum sit. Verum ipsam adæquate, sive distincte, intelligere nemo poterit, nisi prius nostri Corporis naturam adæquate cognoscat. Nam ea, quæ hucusque ostendimus, admodum communia sunt, nec magis ad homines, quam ad reliqua Individua pertinent, quæ omnia, quamvis diversis gradibus, animata tamen sunt.... Hoc . . . quo Corpus aliquod reliquis aptius est ad plura simul agendum vel patiendum, eo ejus Mens reliquis aptior est ad plura simul percipiendum."

### Spinoza's Physics

Spinoza begins his physics with several basic concepts, all of which are components of standard Cartesian physics. We are told that “All bodies are either at motion or at rest” (E2P13Ax1), that bodies move at various speeds, and, importantly, that “bodies are distinguished from each other in respect of motion-and-rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance” (E2P13lemma1).<sup>41</sup> In other words, bodies are not different substances, but simply different configurations of the one substance, which are distinguished from one another only by means of their motion-and-rest. Spinoza, like Descartes, locates the principle of individuation for bodies in motion. Unlike Descartes, however, he does not vacillate on whether extension is one substance or a collection of many. Individual bodies are not substances. For Spinoza this must be the case, as individual bodies do not have the ontological independence to be a substance. Rather, bodies are individual things which are distinguished from one another in respect of motion-and-rest, and so each body must have been determined to motion or rest by another individual thing, namely another body which is also in motion or rest. In short, all finite bodies are dependent on other finite bodies; none of them are causally self-sufficient.

With the exception of the simplest bodies, all bodies are made up of smaller bodies:

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<sup>41</sup> “*Corpora ratione motus et quietis, celeritatis, et tarditatis, et non ratione substantiæ ab invicem distinguuntur.*”

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing, which is distinguished from other things through this union of bodies. (E2P13lemma3Def)<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore,

If from a body, or an individual thing composed of a number of bodies, certain bodies are separated, and at the same time a number of other bodies of the same nature take their place, the individual will retain its nature, without any change of form. (E2P13lemma4)<sup>43</sup>

While this passage is articulated in the jargon of 17<sup>th</sup> century physics and may therefore strike the reader as unclear, the concepts involved are really quite simple. Let us take a particular body, say, my own. Over the course of my life I have grown taller and gained weight. My physical characteristics have changed dramatically. Science tells me that every cell in my body and every particle of my physical being has been replaced several times throughout my lifespan. Despite all this, however, I remain the same body today as I was at birth. This is because, though all my physical parts have been replaced, a particular unity of those parts which brings about my continued survival as this body has remained constant.

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<sup>42</sup> “*Cum corpora aliquot ejusdem aut diversæ magnitudinis a reliquis ita coercentur, ut invicem incumbant, vel si eodem aut diversis celeritatis gradibus moventur, ut motus suos invicem certa quadam ratione communicent, illa corpora invicem unita dicemus, et omnia simul unum corpus, sive Individuum componere, quod a reliquis per hanc corporum unionem distinguitur.*”

<sup>43</sup> “*Si corporis, sive Individui, quod ex pluribus corporibus componitur, quædam corpora segregentur, et simul totidem alia ejusdem naturæ eorum loco succedant, retinebit Individuum, suam naturam, uti antea, absque ulla ejus formæ mutatione.*”

Some may find this account of bodily identity over time less than satisfactory. It seems to leave the boundaries of individual bodies fuzzy, since it is not always clear where one body starts and the next ends. Worse, it is not always clear when a particular body begins to exist and ceases to exist. Many seem to feel a need for individual bodies to be more precisely defined. Some philosophers might not like “fuzziness” when it comes to individual objects. Despite their concerns, it is not clear that this need for precise individuation has any rational basis. If reason forces us to conclude that finite physical bodies are not substances, then we must simply embrace this conclusion.

From the fact that the boundaries of individual bodies are fuzzy and the fact that all bodies, except the simplest bodies, are composed of other, smaller bodies, Spinoza comes to an unusual, but necessary conclusion:

We thus see how a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature. Now previously we have conceived an individual thing composed solely of bodies distinguished from one another only by motion-and-rest and speed of movement; that is, an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies. If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many ways while still preserving its nature. For since each of its parts is composed of several bodies, each single part can therefore (preceding Lemma) without any change of its nature, move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed. Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual thing composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in form. If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of nature as one individual whose parts—that is, all the constituent bodies—vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole.  
(E2P13lemma7Schol)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “His itaque videmus, qua ratione Individuum compositum possit multis modis affici, ejus nihilominus natura servata. Atque hucusque Individuum concepimus, quod non, nisi ex corporibus, quæ solo motu et quiete, celeritate et tarditate inter se distinguuntur, hoc

This passage is crucial for several reasons. First, by conceiving of extension as an interconnected system of bodies, Spinoza sees a system of individual bodies composed of smaller individual bodies. At one end of the spectrum we have the simplest bodies, which Spinoza claims are distinguished from each other only by motion-and-rest (E2P13lemma3Ax2); at the other end, we have the whole of extension conceived as an infinite individual composed of the total collection of constantly changing finite individuals. Put in contemporary parlance, we may say that Spinoza views physical reality as a unified system. This system expresses itself in an infinite variety of finite modes, each of which is a particular configuration of the total system as a whole. Every part of this system is constantly changing, but the system as a whole undergoes no change in that the constant changes of the various aspects, rather than destroying the system, are what keep the system in being as the very system that it is.

An important advantage in Spinoza's physics of bodies is that it provides another argument in support of his monism. The very nature of physics compels us to understand the physical universe as a single unified individual, and all finite bodies as expressions or configurations or ways (*modi*) in which that individual is expressed and articulated. This

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est, quod ex corporibus simplicissimis componitur. Quod si jam aliud concipiamus, ex pluribus diversæ naturæ Individuis compositum, idem pluribus aliis modis posse affici reperiemus, ipsius nihilominus natura servata. Nam quandoquidem ejus unaquæque pars ex pluribus corporibus est composita, poterit ergo (*per Lem. præced.*) unaquæque pars, absque ulla ipsius naturæ mutatione iam tardius, jam celerius moveri, et consequenter motus suos citius vel tardius reliquis communicare. Quod si præterea tertium Individuorum genus, ex his secundis compositum, concipiamus, idem multis aliis modis affici posse reperiemus absque ulla eius formæ mutatione. Et si sic porro in infinitum pergamus, facile concipiemus, totam Naturam unum esse Individuum, cujus partes, hoc est omnia corpora, infinitis modis variant absque ulla totius Individui mutatione.”

type of argument is far more likely to gain a hearing from contemporary readers than Spinoza's official argument for substance monism in part one of the *Ethics*, which is marred by the rationalist attempt to demonstrate claims based on pure reason alone, without recourse to empirical data or physical science.

John Carrierro argues for this particular reading of Spinoza's monism. In his short paper "Monism in Spinoza," Carrierro takes his fellow Spinoza commentators to task for what he sees as their fundamental mistake in interpreting Spinoza's monism and his reason for holding it. Most commentators have interpreted Spinoza as arguing for substance monism based on the concept of substance. Carrierro argues that this is a fundamental and far reaching mistake. He suggests "instead that Spinoza's monism . . . is best understood as a response to revisions in the concept of matter wrought by Descartes's science" (38). This is an interesting reading of Spinoza's monism, which is completely in line with the reading of the lemmas in E2 that I have just discussed.

Carrierro begins by noting that commentators of no less stature than Curley and Donagan argue that Spinoza's reasons for embracing substance monism are found in E1P4 and E1P5 (39). In those texts, Spinoza argues that it is impossible to individuate two substances of the same nature, since substances cannot be individuated either by their attributes or their modes. Curley takes this to mean that Spinoza charges Descartes with being incapable of accounting for individuation, as two substances sharing an attribute would have to be distinguished solely by accidental properties, which cannot account for individuation. But Carrierro thinks that this move is entirely misleading: "Spinoza's own views on the individuation of body are not clearly different from Descartes's" (41).

Since, as we have already seen, for Spinoza bodies and minds are coextensive, so that the order of one must be identical to the order of the other, what holds for body must hold equally for mind. If that is so, Spinoza cannot be read as arguing that Descartes cannot account for individuation.

Another common position among scholars is that Spinoza arrived at substance monism by drawing out implications from the concept of substance that went previously unnoticed. On this view, Spinoza has simply realized that if substance is truly independent, then there can be only one substance. Both Donagan and Wolfson, Carriero argues, hold views that amount to this (43-6). Spinoza's argument for substance monism is developed in just this way. As we have seen in chapter one, Spinoza makes a great deal of the fact that substance must be totally and absolutely independent. Despite appearances, however, Carriero rejects the claim that Spinoza developed his substance monism on these grounds.

Carriero argues that attributing substance monism to Spinoza on such grounds is to imagine Spinoza relating to the tradition of western philosophy in very bizarre ways. He states that:

Interpretations that rest exclusively on Spinoza's conception of substance relate his thought to the tradition in disappointing ways. On Donagan's interpretation Spinoza can push Descartes toward monism only by exploiting what seems idiosyncratic, if not arbitrary, in his conception of substance. On Wolfson's interpretation, Spinoza is able to make progress toward monism vis-à-vis a medieval Aristotelian tradition only by giving that tradition short shrift (46).

In other words, such interpretations make Spinoza seem far less deep a thinker than he clearly was.

Without further clarification and development, Carriero's argument would not be satisfactory. Spinoza so clearly makes use of independence and individuation in his arguments for substance monism that we cannot easily rid ourselves of the line of reasoning that commentators have usually attributed to him. This is unsettling. As Bennett notes, the argument is a dismal failure because "the existence of a concrete object . . . never follows from a . . . description of a concept" (*Study 70*). But Bennett informs us that the argument in E1 is merely Spinoza's "official argument" for substance monism and that it is neither his actual reason for holding the doctrine, nor an explanation of how he came to hold it (*Study 71*). This claim is plausible if a convincing tale can be told regarding Spinoza's real reason for holding substance monism. It is just such a tale that Carriero offers us.

Having asked us to put aside the idea that Spinoza arrived at his substance monism from a consideration of the concept of substance, Carriero informs us that there is a much more plausible reason why Spinoza holds to that position:

Why does Spinoza hold that finite things, especially finite bodies, are not substances? [Many scholars'] interpretations share a focus on the nature of substance as opposed to the nature of body. Yet the category of substance has been around for quite some time without its exponents feeling pressed to deny the substantiality of body; the seventeenth century conception of body, in contrast, had undergone conspicuous and dramatic changes. (47)

Carriero offers textual support for this contention in the form of the correspondence between Spinoza and Henry Oldenburg. In Ep3 Oldenburg has asked Spinoza why two individual men cannot count as two substances. Spinoza's reply to Oldenburg is extremely instructive. In Aristotelian science, an individual is composed of matter and

form, and any individual change in the world involves these two elements. With this in mind, Carriero tells us:

Thus any generation is, in some way, composed of matter and form. Now, as medieval Aristotelians distinguished sharply between two sorts of generation, qualified and unqualified, they recognized two sorts of composition of matter and form. When qualified generation takes place, for example the production of knowledge of grammar in Socrates—an accidental perfection comes to exist . . . Unqualified generation, by way of contrast, is a process by which a new substance is brought into existence . . . This last point is important. Why did the medieval Aristotelians hold that when unqualified generation occurs something comes to exist? . . . When Socrates is generated from sperm and menstrual blood (to use the biology of the time), why think of this as a new fundamental being's entering the universe rather than as the already existing sperm and menstrual blood coming to exist in a certain manner? (48)

The answer that the medievals gave was that prime matter was constant through change, first shaped by one form, now by another. For Spinoza there can be no reason to adopt this view of substantial generation. There is no such thing as form or prime matter. These are merely occult qualities. The correct account of bodies, Spinoza believes, is “locating that entity in a mechanistic system of matter and motion, and showing how, in accordance with the laws of motion governing that system, the entity in question arose” (Carriero 49). This is why Spinoza asks Oldenburg to consider that “men are not created, but only generated, and that their bodies already existed before, though formed differently” (Ep4). Spinoza thinks that to explain the origin of individuals in any other way fails to consider their proper ontological status. It is thus the new physics, not anything new in the concept of substance, that leads Spinoza to embrace substance monism.

Carriero's arguments are persuasive. They make sense not only of Spinoza's correspondence with Oldenburg—it may be the only reading that does make sense of that correspondence—but also of E1P15Schol, in which Spinoza argues that space cannot be divided into separable parts. Furthermore, Carriero's position has the benefit of removing Spinoza's monism from the flawed argument offered in E1. Finally, Carriero's argument that bodies really are individuated and thus that individuality is real, though no substantial separability is possible, is completely in line with the ontological holism I attributed to Spinoza in chapter 1. Therefore, I will follow Carriero in taking the conception of body found in Cartesian physics as the ground of Spinoza's substance monism.

### **Organism and Teleonomy**

To conceive of bodies as individuals which are individuated from one another solely by degrees of motion-and-rest is a helpful step forward in understanding Spinoza's theory of individuals and individuation. It does not, however, tell us enough. Presumably not every physical particle counts as an individual. For instance, my hand is not an individual in any meaningful sense. Granted, it is an individual hand, but what we are after is an individual in a more robust ontological sense. As we have already seen, Spinoza's basic definition of an individual is a composite of bodies which together form a unity, that is, a "one thing." As Thomas Cook explains, "the composite body's remaining the body that it is is *nothing other than* its parts maintaining this constancy of 'ratio of motion and rest' as they interact with each other and as the whole body interacts in

various ways with the environment” (59). In other words, what makes a composite of bodies an individual is that it maintains a certain unity and equilibrium of its parts. It is unclear how strong this unity must be. Does a sports team or a flock of sheep count as an individual for Spinoza? What about an ecosystem or a civil society? I will discuss this issue in later chapters.

Interestingly, in a very influential article “Spinoza and the Theory of Organism,” Hans Jonas claims that Spinoza thinks of individuals not only in terms *consistent* with the nature of organisms, but in terms virtually *inconsistent* with their being anything else. Jonas argues that Spinozistic individuals must be organisms rather than merely mechanical bodies, because like organisms, they strive for their “own existence and fulfillment” (261). Machines exhibit no such striving (*conatus*) and thus Spinozistic individuals must be organisms.

Since Spinoza does maintain that “all things are alive” (E2P13Schol), and that there are no sudden breaks in nature, but rather continuity throughout; and since Spinoza speaks of individuals in terms that appear to evoke organisms, insofar as he speaks of individuals as striving to preserve themselves (E3P6), it appears that Jonas is correct to view the paradigm for Spinozistic individuals (including perhaps the ultimate individual that is nature itself) as organisms. I am not convinced, however, that Spinoza limits individuals to organisms. We have already seen that Spinoza builds his principle of individualization on a plenum theory of bodies that he derives from Descartes. This would seem to allow that there are individuals that are not organisms but merely physical bodies. One could argue that Spinoza uses a different sense of the term “individual” in

the lemmas on bodies than he does elsewhere, or that he thinks of all physical bodies as like organisms, but there is no clear textual support for such a reading. I will therefore agree with Jonas that when Spinoza talks about individuals, he primarily has organisms in mind. But I will remain uncommitted (for now) as to whether, for Spinoza, there can be individuals that are not organisms.

But Jonas sees Spinoza as a “philosopher of organism.” For Jonas, Spinoza’s worldview is as follows:

The essence of organic being is seen, not in the closed system, but in the sustained sequence of a unified plurality, with only the form of its union remaining as the parts come and go. Substantial identity is thus replaced by formal identity, and the relation of parts to whole, so crucial for the nature of organism, is the converse of what it is in the mechanistic view. There, the finished product, the complete animal machine, is the sum of component parts . . . Conversely, identity in Spinoza’s theory of individuality is the identity of a whole that is so little the mere sum of its parts that it remains the same even when the parts continually change.  
(269)

In other words, mechanical bodies are simply the sum of their parts. Organisms, on the other hand, can never be reduced to the sum of their parts. Presumably Jonas means something like the following: if I build a mechanical device, say a clock, I simply put together various parts, and they act and relate to each other in certain ways. The clock is nothing more than its parts, their activities and their relations, operating in accordance with physical laws alone. An organism, on the other hand, is different. An organism is not the sum of its parts and activities. Rather, the organism itself is the structure of the parts in a whole; it is the form or blueprint that causes them to develop as they do. For example, the reason that my organs work the way they do is because they are formed and

operate within the context or structure that is the whole organism which is me. It is not the case that organisms are put together out of a collection of separate parts. On the contrary, all the parts of an organism are programmed, by the organism as a whole, to be what they are and act as they do. An organism, as Jonas says, is holistic.<sup>45</sup>

It follows from all of this, as Jonas notes, that the world must be thought of as a collection of “individualities, or wholes, of increasing inclusiveness culminating in the most inclusive one, the totality of nature” (269). This conclusion fits very well with my reading of Spinoza as a holist.

Let us assume, then, that Spinoza thinks of individuals (including nature as a whole) primarily as organisms. Nevertheless, I have yet to explain how, for Spinoza, there can be a plurality of individuals. Spinoza does explicitly discuss the cause of individuation. He claims that “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (E3P6).<sup>46</sup> He calls this striving to persevere the thing’s *conatus*, which is a thing’s very essence (E3P7). He says, in other words, that a thing’s *conatus* makes it the very individual thing that it is. This is deeply problematic, however, because it appears to be a circular explanation of individuality.<sup>47</sup> How can a thing’s striving to maintain itself as the thing that it is make it that very thing?

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<sup>45</sup> The reader may be concerned that the organic account of individuals seems heavily teleological. Since teleology is specifically rejected by Spinoza in the Appendix to book 1 of the *Ethics*, and is also ruled out by the Cartesian account of bodies upon which Spinoza relies for his physics, this might appear problematic. I address this issue of teleology more fully below.

<sup>46</sup> “*Unaquæque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.*”

<sup>47</sup> I return to the problem of circularity in Spinoza’s definition of an individual in latter chapters.

Although certain forms of teleology could explain this understanding of individuation in a non-circular way, this route is not open to Spinoza. In the appendix to E1, Spinoza launches into one of the most well known and uncompromising attacks upon teleology in the history of western philosophy. He argues that God, being perfect, cannot possibly act with an end in view, as this would mean God was striving for something that God lacked, which is incompatible with divine perfection. He further rejects any natural teleology by pointing out that final causes reverse the order of cause and effect by explaining events according to backward causation. In case we are left in any doubt that he regards teleology as nothing more than a human fiction, Spinoza explains the origin of teleological beliefs as a mistake of the human race's assuming that all things in nature are like humans and act with some end or goal in view.

Spinoza's emphatic rejection of teleology strikes me as essentially correct. Unfortunately, this rejection leaves us with no explanation for the existence of all the various individuals in the world striving to persevere in their individuality. Furthermore, as I have argued above, the paradigms for Spinozistic individuals are organisms. But organisms are usually thought of in teleological terms. In fact, it is highly unclear that organisms can be described without speaking of their purpose and design. How can Spinoza avoid problems here? In addition, the failure to provide an explanation of the fact of individuation would mean that the existence of different individuals is a brute fact. As we saw in chapter 1, however, Della Rocca has provided strong reasons to believe that Spinoza's rationalism is incompatible with the existence of brute facts. It follows that we

must either find something in Spinoza's thought that accounts for individuals or deem his system incoherent.

Harris offers a solution to these problems. He agrees with most commentators that Spinoza rejects traditional teleology: "Teleological explanation, therefore, in terms of purposes (whether God's, man's, or Nature's) are confused attempts at explanation" (70). But Harris insists that Spinoza has something that does the work in his system that teleology does in other systems:

Spinoza himself speaks of an order of nature, and the whole account of his philosophy . . . testifies to his conception of an order, rational and coherent, from beginning to end: Substance, from which infinite modes follow of necessity, modes which are ordering principles in infinite series of finite modes. If belief in order and explanation of its elements in terms of the ordering principle is teleological thinking, then Spinoza's own thought is teleological throughout. (70)

Perhaps some clarification of the term "teleological" can help clarify matters. As Harris' distinction makes clear, some think that teleology simply refers to an overarching order and explanation for the existence and activity of things in the world. Of course, if that is what teleology means, then Spinoza does not reject teleology; in fact, he strongly embraces it. This is not, however, the only possible understanding of teleology. Some consider teleology to refer to divine intention and/or something like Aristotelian final causes. I have already explained that Spinoza clearly rejects final causes and divine intention in the appendix to E1. But he nowhere suggests that there is not an overarching order or explanation for the way things are. So whether Spinoza rejects teleology (a term foreign to Spinoza, by the way) depends very much on what we mean by that term.

Because of the different possible understandings of teleology, Harris realizes that the term may not be preferable for describing Spinoza's position. He therefore suggests that we speak of Spinoza's system as "teleonomic" (73), meaning that all finite individuals are ordered according to the ordering principles of the whole, with the whole being perfect and infinite substance. As we have seen, this is precisely how Spinoza describes the relationship between substance and modes. It seems that Spinoza's system is properly described as "teleonomic."

In the end, however, whether we use the term "teleology," "teleonomy" or neither, there is good reason to believe that Harris is correct. In explaining the order of the *conatus*, the striving that makes individuals the very individuals that they are, Spinoza says that:

Particular things are modes whereby the attributes of God are expressed in a definite and a determinate way (Cor Pr. 25, I), that is (Pr. 34, I), they are things which express in a definite and determinate way the power of God whereby he is and acts." (E3P6)<sup>48</sup>

In other words, just as Harris suggests, the modes of God must be explained "in terms of the ordering principle." In short, the striving of each individual thing to exist and perfect itself (*conatus*) is nothing less than the power of God expressed and actualized in and as that finite individual. Although Spinoza does not ascribe to God a divine plan, or anything like human intentionality, God's perfection explains the order of the world and the existence of each individual in it.

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<sup>48</sup> "Res enim singulares modi sunt, quibus Dei attributa certo et determinato modo exprimuntur (*per coroll. Prop. 25. P. I*), hoc est (*per prop. 34. P. I*) res, quae Dei potentiam qua Deus est et agit."

If it is objected that Spinoza has not accounted for the existence of finite things from the infinite, the correct response is that substance and modes are not two things, but one and the same thing. Substance must express itself as finite modes. As Harris puts it, “an infinite being, having infinite reality, must be infinitely diversified” (31). God is the absolutely infinite reality and must exist in every possible way. This is how Spinoza accounts for the existence of finite things.

Individuation, then, is due to the power of God as manifested in finite expressions of infinite power, as those expressions strive to maintain and perfect their own being. This account of individuation fits quite nicely with the holism attributed to Spinoza in chapter 1. What remains unclear, however, is what actual entities count as individuals. I am an individual, as is my pet cat, and we are both organisms. The matter is not so simple, though, when one considers other types of entities. How “tight” does a collection of bodies have to be in order to count as an individual? Is a community an individual? A state? A sports team? Spinoza says that collections of individuals that are closely united together form one individual. How closely united must these individuals be? I will explore this question in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3: Individual and Community

Having placed Spinoza's basic understanding of what an individual is in the context of his broader metaphysical vision, I will now be more specific in examining the exact nature of Spinoza's individuals. The most important contribution to this topic comes from Alexandre Matheron's *Individu et Communauté Chez Spinoza*. The very title of the book hits at the heart of the matter that interests me. Matheron argues that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from other individuals: we are all part of a community. Interestingly, Matheron argues that the community of individuals (or the state) is itself an individual. Thus he adds to the discussion of Spinoza's individuals in two ways. First, he argues for a distinctive reading of what precisely makes an entity an individual for Spinoza. Second, he argues that a community, in particular a state, is itself an individual. In this chapter, I will argue that Matheron is largely correct about what a Spinozistic individual is. His assertion that the state is an individual, however, is far more problematic. To demonstrate that Matheron errs in claiming that the state is an individual, I will use the work of Barbone. Barbone provides very strong arguments for denying that Spinoza thinks the state is an individual. In fact, he claims that Spinoza explicitly denies that the state is an individual. After looking at the work of Matheron and Barbone, I will conclude with a discussion of Rice's response to Matheron. Rice also rejects the claim that the state is an individual. He further adds to the discussion by arguing that humans are indeed part of a larger individual, but that this individual is best understood as the ecosystem rather than the state.

### **Matheron's Contribution**

Matheron's analysis of Spinoza's individuals begins by building on a methodological procedure frequently employed by Spinoza scholars. He utilizes a "physical model" in following Spinoza. This means that we can best understand Spinoza as first articulating a theory of individuals under the attribute of extension, a theory which can then be extended to the attribute of thought. This move is very sensible. As I explained in earlier chapters, Spinoza does give a certain explanatory priority to the physical and for that reason may be called a physicalist. Of course, Spinoza is a physicalist neither in the sense of reducing the mental to the physical, nor in the sense of denying the existence of the mental. But Spinoza does generally begin with a discussion of bodies and extends what he discovers there to his discussion of minds. There is no reason to believe that he departs from this general procedure here. In fact, there is very good reason to believe that Spinoza's physicalism is indeed operative here. Thought for Spinoza is always about something. What thought is about is body. As I explained in chapter 2, mind is best understood as a representation of the body. This, of course, gives body at least an explanatory priority in Spinoza's thought.

Spinoza first defines and describes individuals in the lemmas following E2P13. This section is Spinoza's broad outline of his physics. All that is said here about individual bodies is carried over into the discussion of individuals under the attribute of thought. So Matheron is correct to insist that we should begin our analysis of Spinoza's

individuals here. This is not a unique claim. Many scholars have focused on the lemmas, to which most would agree we must first look for Spinoza's theory of individuals and individuation.<sup>49</sup> Matheron's analysis itself decisively impacts the nature of this discussion.

Matheron's first distinctive contribution to Spinoza's theory of individuation is found in his analysis of these crucial passages. He argues that Spinoza defines an individual as nothing other than the unique global pattern of motion and rest of that individual (38). But his explanation of this point is not very helpful. He appears to mean that there is some kind of controlling internal principle that accounts for a fixed portion of motion and rest, despite the constant change of the "parts" of the individual. But this is still somewhat vague. Commenting on Matheron's assertion, Barbone explains:

It is very important to notice that this global pattern is *not* to be understood as the relation of movement and of rest among the component parts of the individual. There is, then, only one pattern which defines, "genetically," the singular nature (or "essence") of each individual. (24)<sup>50</sup>

This explanation is very helpful. It is not simply the movement or rest of the various parts of an individual that matter, but a unique controlling "blueprint" which determines the motion-and-rest of those parts so as to form a unity. Without this unity, we cannot have a genuine individual. This ensures that not just any collection of various items could count as an individual. Genuine individuals contain a strong and unique overarching pattern which determines the motion-and-rest of their parts. The parts are united in such a way

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<sup>49</sup> Chapter 4 will focus on the work of Rice and his use of these passages.

<sup>50</sup> Barbone's interpretation and analysis of Matheron is extremely illuminating, and I am very influenced by it. I am indebted to his reading of Matheron throughout.

that we think of them as parts of one individual. An individual, therefore, unlike a mere collection of things, is held together by an internal principle of unity, which Spinoza designates as its “essence.”

As stated above, this theory of individuals remains far from clear, but it is a start. We know now that although all individuals are made up of parts, it is not just any mere collection of parts that count as an individual. There must be some “singular nature” which controls the movements of all the parts so as to form one individual. To improve our understanding of what this might mean, Matheron breaks down the principle of individuation into two principles. An individual must be explained according to both of these principles in order to be counted as an individual. Matheron explains:

Each individual is genetically defined by its proximate cause. But this [cause] includes two elements, which are a little analogous to the “species” and the “difference” of the traditional definition. In the case of the definition of a circle, for example, there is, on the one hand, the line segment from which that figure will be built, and there is, on the other hand, the particular combination of movement and rest that applies to this line segment, which expresses the formula: By which one extremity is fixed and the other moving. The definition itself also of a physical individual would therefore be composed of both elements, the one material and the other formal. (38)<sup>51</sup>

What Matheron calls the “the material element” refers to the physical parts of the individual. These parts are not essential to the individual. Not only can the physical parts of an individual be replaced; they usually are. But this does not change the individual as a

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<sup>51</sup> “Tout individu se définit génétiquement par sa cause prochaine. Mais celle-ci comporte deux éléments, qui sont un peu analogues au « genre » et à la « différence » de la définition traditionnelle. Dans le cas de la définition du cercle, par exemple, il y a, d’une part, le segment de droite à partir duquel cette figure s’édifiera; et il y a, d’autre part, la combinaison particulière de mouvement et de repos qui s’applique à ce segment de droite, et qu’exprime la formula: « Dont un extrémité est fixe et l’autre mobile. » La définition de l’individu physique comportera donc, elle aussi, deux éléments: l’un matériel, l’autre formel.”

whole. This is fairly easy to understand. We are constantly changing our physical parts in the normal daily process of growing, aging, consuming food, and producing waste. But such changes do not transform us into different individuals. Likewise, the loss of some of my hair or a fingernail does not change me into another individual. Even more radically, I could lose a limb or even an organ and have it replaced with a mechanical substitute, and yet I remain the unique individual that I was before the change.

What Matheron calls “the formal element,” on the other hand, is essential to the continued existence of an individual as that particular individual. The formal element is what differentiates a mere collection of things from a genuine individual. A mere collection of things is something like a pile of stones. The parts of this pile of stones are indeed a kind of unity, with each of the parts maintaining particular relations of motion and rest to the each other and the pile as a whole. But it would be clearly false to speak of the pile of stones as an individual. The reason is that there is no intrinsic principle of unity which accounts for the existence of the pile of stones. Some external force is responsible for the existence and nature of the pile. This is not the case with a genuine individual. For a real individual, as opposed to an aggregate, the principle of unity is primary and internal. It is this internal and primary principle of unity that accounts for an entity being an individual. To clarify this distinction further, let us consider a typical case of a Spinozistic individual, a biological organism. As explained previously, the essential feature of a biological organism is a striving to preserve its being, a feature which Spinoza calls a *conatus*. As one entity, a biological organism moves about, searches for food, flees from predators, etc. A pile of stones has nothing like this unity and therefore

cannot operate as one thing. A pile of stones thus does not operate as an individual because it lacks the unity and therefore the *conatus* to function as one.<sup>52</sup>

According to Matheron:

The Formal element itself is the structure that gives to a composition its unity and its uniqueness: a unity rather than a mere aggregate; its uniqueness in contradistinction to other individuals that could be formed from the same elements. As there is in Extension only motion-and-rest, such a structure can consist only of a certain relationship that is established between these two terms. (39)<sup>53</sup>

It seems clear enough that some such principle of “unity” and “unicity” is required if an individual is to be clearly differentiated from “a mere aggregate.” What is not so clear, however, is the nature of such a principle. Fortunately, Spinoza offers an explanation not only of what such a principle looks like, but also why it exists.

In E3 Spinoza explains that each individual maintains itself in existence as the particular individual it is through the exercise of what he calls its *conatus*. In other words, the parts of an individual are held together not by some external force or

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<sup>52</sup> Of course, as I have explained in earlier chapters, Spinoza does not restrict individuality to biological organisms. He nowhere, however, clearly indicates how widely he is willing to extend the category of individuality. Despite this, it is quite clear that something which is a mere aggregate (such as a mere collection of separate stones in a pile), lacks the necessary unity to count as individual. Whether something like a swarm of bees or a school of fish would count as an individual for Spinoza remains unclear. These latter collections operate in such a fashion that they are clearly more unified than a pile of stones, but Spinoza does not specifically discuss them.

<sup>53</sup> “L’élément formel, lui, est la structure qui donne au composé son unité et son unicité: son unité, par opposition à un simple agrégat; son unicité, par opposition aux autres individus qui pourraient se former à partir des mêmes éléments. Comme il n’y a dans l’Étendue que du mouvement et du repos, une telle structure ne peut consister qu’en une certaine relation qui s’instaure entre ces deux termes.”

happenstance, but by the internal drive of that individual to maintain and improve itself as the individual that it is.

The *conatus* is not merely a principle of unity, but actually is the very power by which the individual acts and affects the world. In fact, Spinoza's claim is stronger. He says that "the *conatus* with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself" (E3P7).<sup>54</sup> In other words, an individual simply is its *conatus*. All of us are simply beings whose very essence is to maintain and enhance our existence; our striving to be, grow, and enhance is what we are.

Some might find this understanding of individuation circular. How can an individual just be the very drive that makes it an individual? This understanding of individuation would indeed be circular if Spinoza were not a metaphysical holist. In holism the primary reality is not isolated parts which come together; rather the primary realities are undivided wholes, the parts of which are determined to be and to act by the nature or essence of the whole of which they are parts. This means that it is already built into Spinoza's system that various physical parts must be understood in terms of the whole, just as the each particle of blood is determined by the nature of the blood as a whole. It follows that this principle of individuation, far from being circular, is simply Spinoza's basic metaphysical tenet—holism—applied to a theory of individuals. To clarify, everything that exists is part of some larger whole. It is not always clear which particular whole Spinoza thinks any given thing is a "part" of. But that he is committed to holism in this sense follows clearly from my arguments in earlier chapters.

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<sup>54</sup> "*Conatus, quo unaquæque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est præter ipsius rei actualem essentiam.*"

Matheron himself does not argue in the preceding manner. He does not speak of Spinoza in the terms of the metaphysical holism that I have described. But he does note that it is by means of the *conatus* that an individual maintains its unity as a whole, despite the constant change of parts that an individual undergoes. Interpreting Matheron's view, Barbone adds:

It is this formal element that manifests itself as the required pattern of motion and rest of all the parts taken in their totality; an individual, then, because of its formal constitution, is a precise and organized system of movement. (Barbone 99)

In other words, an individual is an organized whole which determines the nature of its parts and their relations to the individual itself and each other. Though the language of holism is not explicitly present in Matheron's analysis, the logic of holism is very much there.

Matheron's position on the nature of Spinozistic individuals, at least broadly construed, should not be controversial. His basic argument is that an individual should be understood in terms of certain formal laws that hold the material parts of an individual together:

We can make this even more precise. The Spinozistic definition of individuality, in effect, includes two terms: on the one hand, the number and the nature of the composite elements, and, on the other hand, the law according to which they communicate their movements to one another. (347)<sup>55</sup>

Matheron is arguing that, according to Spinoza, whenever there are a variety of parts held together by certain fundamental laws, an individual exists. When various parts are

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<sup>55</sup> “Nous pouvons même préciser davantage. La définition spinoziste de l'individualité, en effet, comporte deux termes: d'une part, le nombre et la nature des éléments composants; d'autre part, la loi selon laquelle ils se communiquent mutuellement leurs mouvements.”

held together in some other way, however, there is an aggregate and not an individual. The laws in question are the laws of motion-and-rest. If an individual maintains its proportion of motion-and-rest, it remains an individual. Spinoza argues that the force which holds an individual together in the proper unity is the *conatus*, the striving of an individual to keep itself in existence. This “striving” is the fundamental law of individuals and individuation. An individual, then, is held together as an individual by the fundamental laws of its nature, and these laws determine how the movements of its parts are determined to be and to act.

This is a crucial step in Matheron’s argument. If he is right, then we have a very basic instrument for discerning which entities in the world are individuals and which are not. If the motion-and-rest of a particular entity are lawfully maintained at a constant ratio, then we have an individual; if not, then we do not. Discerning when the laws of individuation are operative is no easy task, but Spinoza does provide an instrument for doing so. I will return to this point below.

Now that Matheron’s understanding of the two principles of individuation are in place, we must discover which things count as individuals. Since there are mere aggregates of things, so that not everything is part of some individual, Spinoza’s principles of individuation, if they are sound, must allow us to distinguish between such aggregates and genuine individuals.

In order to understand how a genuine individual differs from an aggregate of things, let us return to Spinoza’s famous passage about individuals in the lemmas on bodies. As already explained, Spinoza defines an individual as follows:

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing, which is distinguished from other things through this union of bodies. (E2P13lemma3Def)

To this he adds:

If from a body, or an individual thing composed of a number of bodies, certain bodies are separated, and at the same time a number of other bodies of the same nature take their place, the individual will retain its nature, without any change of form. (E2P13lemma4)

As these passages make clear, Spinoza thinks that many things besides organisms count as individuals. As explained in chapter 2, however, he thinks of organisms as the paradigmatic individuals. The reason that he thinks this is that organisms change their parts regularly through consumption, waste, growth, and age, but they remain the same individual over time because the same “blueprint” or “law” maintains the same ordering and structuring of their parts. Arguing that organisms are individuals is fairly uncontroversial, and few Spinoza scholars would deny that Spinoza thinks of organisms as individuals. The issue concerns what else Spinoza is willing to count as an individual.

Since individuals are chiefly defined by a law-like structure or blueprint that maintains a certain harmony of their parts, we cannot attribute individuality to anything that does not have this structure. It is not clear to me what, besides organisms, is complicated enough to have this structure. Nor is there anything in any of Spinoza’s texts which clarifies the matter. Given the lack of textual evidence and the broad nature of his conception of an individual, it must remain unclear in a number of cases whether an object counts as an individual for Spinoza or not. I have already argued that we know

he did not think of a pile of stones as an individual. I will later consider arguments that neither the state nor organizations like sports teams are individuals. But it is not clear to me what Spinoza would or should conclude as to whether an organ, such as a heart, or a collection of organisms, such as a school of fish, count as individuals or not.

We do know, however, that Spinoza did not think that only biological organisms count as individuals. As explained in chapter 2, he holds that individuals are part of “larger” individuals, which in turn are part of “larger” individuals, until we get to the universe as a whole, which is also an individual.<sup>56</sup> The question naturally arises: what are the individuals at the next level up from biological organisms? Spinoza nowhere answers this question. Fortunately, we may not need him to do so. If Matheron is correct, then Spinoza has given us a means of distinguishing individuals from non-individuals. If the correct law-like structure is present, then an individual is present. All we have to do, therefore, is to find a structure “larger” than a biological organism that behaves in the law-like way that organisms do. Matheron argues that Spinoza’s understanding of the state qualifies it as an individual.

### **Spinoza’s Theory of the State**

Before Matheron’s argument that the state is an individual can be properly grasped, Spinoza’s explicit descriptions of what the state is and how the state arises must be explained. The nature of the state is absolutely essential to Matheron’s argument. If

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<sup>56</sup> The term “larger” is unfortunate. Spinoza is not thinking in terms of physical size but in terms of complexity; less complex individuals somehow “make up” more complex individuals.

the state is an individual, then the state must be natural. In other words, the state must be as natural an organization of biological individuals as biological individuals are natural organizations of the bones, organs, and cells. If we find that Spinoza's state is not natural in this sense, but something more artificial, then we shall have strong evidence for rejecting Matheron's attribution of individuality to it.

The principal text for Spinoza's theory of the state is usually held to be the *Tractatus-Theologico Politicus* (hereafter TTP). In chapter sixteen, he appears to offer a version of social contract theory.<sup>57</sup> His description of human nature here owes something to Hobbes. Apart from a civil society, there is no such thing as right or wrong action. Human beings simply act on what they desire. Most people are not led by reason but by the whims and appetites of the moment. In a state of nature there is nothing to praise or blame about in this. This is simply a description of how human beings are. People do what they want, and their right to do so depends on their power to do it.

As Hobbes had argued before him, Spinoza in the TTP claims that such a state of affairs is very unpleasant and highly undesirable. Because of this, human beings find it much more secure and advantageous to join together and form a civil society for the utility and mutual advantage of all. This sounds like straightforward social contract theory. Spinoza sees the state with its authority, laws and powers, to be nothing more than an "agreement [which] rests on its utility, without which the agreement becomes null and void" (TTP 16/3). Such a comment does not lend itself well to a conception of the state being as natural as a biological organism. This claim is so strongly worded that it

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<sup>57</sup> There is some reason to doubt Spinoza actually holds a social contract theory of the origins of the state. More on this below.

might seem that a position which considers the state to be a natural entity is a non-starter. This is not so. A case can be made that Spinoza's language here does not preclude the possibility that the state is natural rather than artificial.

Matheron argues that Spinoza is not a social contract theorist. The basis for this argument is that the language of social contract theory is found neither in the unfinished *Political Treatise* (hereafter TP) nor in the political sections of the *Ethics*. Spinoza does use some social contract language in the TTP but only sparingly. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that Spinoza never intended this language literally. If Matheron is correct, the state, for Spinoza, is not an artificial entity but is somehow a natural reality.

There is strong support for Matheron's claim that Spinoza, despite initial impressions, does not subscribe to social contract theory. Rice and Barbone have argued persuasively that Spinoza, despite initial appearances, should not be read as a social contract theorist.<sup>58</sup> In their view, Spinoza "roots political organization . . . in the human metaphysical condition that finds that humans are everywhere and always in a civil state" (Barbone/Rice, "TP introduction and notes" 9). This claim lends plausibility to the assertion that the state is a natural entity and not an artificial construction. If this is true, then Matheron's claim that the state is an individual is clearly on stronger ground. Barbone and Rice agree with Matheron that the state is a natural occurrence resulting from natural processes, but they claim that the state itself is not a natural entity.

The key to this argument is found in the shorter and unfinished TP rather than the better known TTP. The former is the more accurate and mature presentation of Spinoza's

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<sup>58</sup> This point is extremely important. Matheron makes a strong case that Spinoza is not a social contract theorist, and he finds it crucial to his analysis that Spinoza is not.

conception of the state. The simple reason for this is that the TTP is not primarily a theory of the state but rather an attempt to counter the impact of certain religious and political biases on society. The TP, on the other hand, was meant to be Spinoza's definitive theory of the state. Though left unfinished, the insights contained in this brief work are essential to a proper reading of what the Spinozistic state is.

Spinoza begins the TP with a call to practical politics. Human beings, he tells us, must be understood as they are, not as the philosophers would like them to be. Statesmen are on firmer ground than philosophers, since they realize that people are governed by their passions and not their reason. Spinoza is clear about how greatly our passions control us:

Men are necessarily subject to passions, and are so constituted that they pity the unfortunate, envy the fortunate, and are more inclined to vengeance than to compassion. Furthermore, each man wants others to live according to his way of thinking, approving what he approves and rejecting what he rejects. Consequently, since all men are equally desirous of preeminence, they fall to quarreling and strive their utmost to best one another. (TP 1/5)<sup>59</sup>

This sounds similar to Hobbes' state of nature in which all war against all. The appearance is somewhat misleading, however. Contrary to Hobbes, Spinoza insists that "human nature is such that men cannot live without some common code of law" (TP 1/3). Of course, Hobbes could agree with this statement, but Spinoza would interpret it very differently than Hobbes. For Spinoza, the state is the natural product of our passions,

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<sup>59</sup> "Homines necessario affectibus esse obnoxios, et ita constitutos esse, ut eorum, quibus male est, misereantur, et quibus bene est, invideant, et ut ad vindictam magis, quam ad misericordiam sint proni, et praeterea unumquemque appetere, ut reliqui ex ipsius ingenio vivant, et ut probent, quod ipse probat, et quod ipse repudiat, repudient unde fit, ut cum omnes pariter appetant primi esse, in contentiones veniant, et, quantum possunt, nitantur se invicem."

arising naturally “from the nature and condition of men in general” (TP 1/7). This conception of the state allows Spinoza to maintain that human beings are always both in a state of nature and a civil society. Far from a contract arranged to get us out of a state of nature, civil society is an outgrowth of our natural state. We are always in a state of nature, we are always natural beings, and civil society is a natural product of this permanent condition.

Spinoza defends his position with a discussion of natural rights. To understand this properly, we must remind ourselves of Spinoza’s central metaphysics. All things are modes of God and so “it follows that the power of natural things by which they exist, and consequently by which they act, can be no other than the eternal power of God” (TP 2/2).<sup>60</sup> Now since God has absolute right over everything, and God’s right is the same as God’s power, it follows that every natural entity, being a finite expression of the infinite power of God, has the same right over itself. In other words, whatever a natural entity has the power to do, it has the right to do. In Spinoza’s words:

By the right of Nature, then, I understand the laws or rules of nature in accordance with which all things come to be; that is, the very power of Nature. So the natural right of nature as a whole, and consequently the natural right of every individual, is coextensive with its power. Consequently, whatever each man does from the laws of his own nature, he does by the sovereign right of Nature, and he has as much right over nature as his power extends. (TP 2/4)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “Ex quo sequitur, rerum naturalium potentiam, qua existunt, et consequenter qua operantur, nullam aliam esse posse, quam ipsam Dei aeternam potentiam.”

<sup>61</sup> “Per Jus itaque naturae intelligo ipsas naturae leges, seu regulas, secundum quas omnia fiunt, hoc est, ipsam naturae potentiam atque adeo totius naturae, et consequenter uniuscujusque individui naturale Jus eo usque se extendit, quo ejus potentia; et consequenter quicquid unusquisque homo ex legibus suae naturae agit, id summo naturae jure agit, tantumque in naturam habet juris, quantum potentia valet.”

By concluding that the parts of nature have the same right/power as nature as a whole, Spinoza can plausibly be accused of committing the fallacy of division—ascribing to the parts a property of the whole. He can avoid this problem, however. For Spinoza, there are not two separate realities, God and natural entities. On the contrary, natural realities are modifications of God, so their power is a modification of God’s power. Therefore, the power of each entity is an expression or instantiation of the power of God. Spinoza does not commit the fallacy of division. The parts do not have the power of the whole; rather the parts have their own limited power, which is not separate from the power of the whole. Since right is coextensive with power, everything has the right that its power gives it. This is true of God, of us, and of everything else. To repeat, Spinoza does not claim that because God’s right extends as far as God’s power, therefore the right of natural entities extends as far as their power, as if the latter simply follows from the former without explanation. We must always remember that, for Spinoza, God and things in nature are distinguished but not separate. What Spinoza argues is that all things, being “parts” of God, have in their limited and fragmented way the right that their power gives them. This is because they are part of God, who has the right over all things, insofar as God has power over all things. The final inseparability of God from all things and all things from God is the premise by which Spinoza avoids committing a fallacy of division.

This passage, however, does raise another concern for my holistic reading of Spinoza's ontology. It certainly seems that Spinoza here equates God/nature with the sum

total of things. As we have seen above, he claims that the very power of natural things is identical to the “very power of God.” (TP 2/3). I have argued, however, that Spinoza holds to a distinction between substance and modes. Although substance cannot be reduced to the sum total of modes, this passage seems to indicate that substance/God and its modes are one and the same, without any distinction. The passage need not, however, mean that there is no distinction between substance and all of its modes. All that Spinoza seems to mean here is that modes and their powers are not separable from substance and its powers. It does not follow that there is no distinction at all, and it certainly in no way follows that substance is completely reducible to its modes.

The preceding concerns aside, it is important to note that for Spinoza right is coextensive with power, that what a being has the power to do, it has the right to do. This is not a “might makes right” political theory, at least not in a crude sense.<sup>62</sup> Though Spinoza equates right with power, his conception of the nature of power is particularly rich and subtle. Since our focus is human beings, let us confine ourselves to his discussion of human power.

Human beings, like all individuals, strive to preserve and enhance their being. Everything we do is explained by this desire, this *conatus*. Since everything we do is to preserve our being, and since what we have the power to do we also have the right to do, it follows that whatever we attempt to do and whatever we succeed in doing, we do by “the sovereign right of nature” (TP 1/8). What prevents Spinoza’s theory from being a

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<sup>62</sup> The question of Spinoza’s egoism will be treated at length in later chapters. I here mention only that several commentators, most notably Bennett, have argued that Spinoza is committed—perhaps despite his intentions—to a strong form of ethical egoism.

simple matter of might makes right is his explanation of what human power is. Human beings are very limited in their power. We can only do so much against the forces of other people and of the environment and nature. By ourselves we are quite weak and vulnerable to the forces of nature. We cannot survive, at least not well or for long, as isolated individuals.

Spinoza seems to hold that human beings cannot preserve their existence apart from a civil society. We are so constituted that we simply cannot survive without each other. The claim, in fact, is stronger than this. We cannot survive without a complex set of laws and relations that require the existence of the state. Furthermore, even though most human beings are irrational most of the time, they usually feel a need for the state. Few if any human beings would prefer to be without it.

Spinoza expresses the necessarily social nature of human beings very clearly and powerfully:

The natural right specific to human beings can scarcely be conceived except where men have their rights in common and can together successfully defend the territories which they can inhabit and cultivate, protect themselves, repel all force, and live in accordance with the judgment of the entire community. For . . . the greater the number of men who thus unite in one body, the more right they will all collectively possess. And if it is on these grounds—that men in a state of Nature can scarcely be in control of their own right—that the Schoolmen want to call man a social animal, I have nothing to say against them. (TP 2/15)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “Concludimus Jus naturae, quod humani generis proprium est, vix posse concipi, nisi ubi homines jura habent communia, qui simul terras, quas habitare, et colere possunt, sibi vindicare, seseque munire, vimque omnem repellere, et ex communi omnium sententia vivere possunt. Nam ... quo plures in unum sic conveniunt, eo omnes simul plus juris habent; et si Scholastici hac de causa, quod scilicet homines in statu naturali vix sui juris esse possunt, velint hominem animal sociale dicere, nihil habeo, quod ipsis contradicam.”

The contrast with Hobbes is clear and sharp. For Hobbes, human beings give up some of their rights—namely, their rights to whatever they desire to have—in order to gain the security that the state can provide them by protecting them from other individuals. Spinoza, on the other hand, holds that human beings only have their full rights in a civil society. To live apart from a civil society is to be lacking certain fundamental rights. Spinoza himself pointed out this difference: “the difference between Hobbes and myself . . . is this, that I always preserve the natural right in its entirety” (Ep50). In other words, human beings never leave the state of nature. We remain the beings we were before entering civil society. In fact, for Spinoza, human beings are always in both a state of nature and a civil society at the same time. As we will see, this makes it very hard to interpret Spinoza as a social contract theorist.

Importantly, Spinoza believes that as long as there have been human beings, they have been social creatures, dependent upon the state and each other in order to exist. The state is a natural product of human passions, not an artificial construction of human reason. Matheron is therefore justified in rejecting social contract theory as an appropriate lens for reading Spinoza’s political theory. Matheron is further justified in regarding life in the state as natural for human beings. Of course, it does not automatically follow that the state is an individual. Matheron is aware of this, and so offers a very sophisticated set of arguments to demonstrate that not only is the state natural, but also that it counts as a Spinozistic individual.

### The State as an Individual

Let us recall that in the lemmas following E2P13, Spinoza is clear that “we can construct higher and higher orders of individuals, each individuated by fixed and internal relations among the individuals which are its components” (Rice, “Individual and Community” 271-2). According to Matheron, we know that individuals form a hierarchy and that that hierarchy reaches up to the ultimate individual, the universe as a whole (43). What remains to be discerned is what comes at the next level of the hierarchy above human individuals. For Matheron, the next stage of the hierarchy of individuals is the state.

The conclusion of Matheron's argument is that the state fits Spinoza's definition of an individual completely. He explains:

The Spinozistic conception of the structure of the state appears in full clarity. The state is a system of moving parts, functioning in a closed cycle, producing and reproducing itself constantly. The individual parts distributed over the territory, armed or unarmed, experience desires, whose orientation and limits are determined by the rule of property. (346)<sup>64</sup>

This is a plausible reading of the Spinozistic state. The state is made up of individuals who constantly change, and yet it maintains its identity as the same entity. It makes plans, acquires territories, fights wars, administers and enforces laws. The state acts as a single entity with a purpose. Furthermore, the state appears to have a *conatus*. That is, it acts to

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<sup>64</sup> “La conception spinoziste de la structure de l'Etat apparaît ainsi en toute clarté. L'Etat est un système de mouvements qui, fonctionnant en cycle fermé, se produit et se reproduit lui-même en permanence. Les individus répartis sur le territoire, armés ou désarmés, éprouvent des désirs dont l'orientation et les limites sont déterminées par le régime de la propriété.”

preserve and enhance its own being, defending itself against perceived threats to its own well-being and existence. The state does indeed appear to possess many, if not all, of the qualities that Spinoza says individuals have.

Matheron's position has been very influential and often affirmed by other commentators. Bennett considers it possible that Spinoza thought of the state as something like an individual (*Study* 49-51). Sylvain Zac explicitly states that "society is an association of *conatus*" (225).<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, regarding the state as an individual helps to remove the social contract theory as a lens for reading Spinoza, which we have already seen to be problematic. Finally, this reading helps us to take Spinoza beyond mere egoism. Rather than egoists in constant conflict, humans can be seen as mutually complementary parts of a larger individual, the state. Thus what some commentators have termed a "collaborative morality" can be attributed to Spinoza.<sup>66</sup>

But there remains a major objection to the position that the Spinozistic state is an individual. If Matheron were correct that human individuals were part of the state, then the well-being of human beings would be subservient to the well-being of the state. Furthermore, human nature itself would be determined by the nature of the state, since human beings are a part of that larger whole. The problem, however, is that Spinoza thinks the relationship between human beings and the state is precisely the opposite of

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<sup>65</sup> "La société est une association de *conatus*."

<sup>66</sup> Bennett argues that there is no place for genuine cooperation and collaborative morality in Spinoza's thought (*Study* 301). This issue is a major part of chapter 4, so I will not

this situation. For him, the nature of the state is determined by the nature of the human individuals who form it. It is therefore subservient to their nature and their desires.

Spinoza discusses the purpose and nature of the state at length in chapter 6 of the TP. There Spinoza explains exactly why the state is essential to human well-being and why therefore we always find ourselves in a civil society:

Since men, as we have said, are led more by passion than by reason, it naturally follows that a people will be united and content to be guided as if by one mind not at reason's prompting but through some common emotion . . . Now since fear of isolation is innate in all men inasmuch as in isolation no one has the strength to defend himself and acquire the necessities of life, it follows that men by nature strive for civil order, and it is impossible that men should ever utterly dissolve this order. (TP 6/1)<sup>67</sup>

In other words, civil society exists because it is to the advantage of individuals to come together and act *as if* they were of one mind through law and order. The state is a creation of individual utility. As such, it cannot be an individual in its own right, but merely an aggregate of individuals. The state is nothing more than a tool that individuals create and utilize in order to achieve their most important goals, peace and security (TP 5/4-6). This does not mean that human beings ever existed apart from the state. In fact, Spinoza is quite clear that we cannot ever fully dissolve the civil state. We are naturally members of a civil society.

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<sup>67</sup> “Quia homines, uti diximus, magis affectu, quam ratione ducuntur, sequitur multitudinem non ex rationis ductu, sed ex communi aliquo affectu naturaliter convenire.... Cum autem solitudinis metus omnibus hominibus insit, quia nemo in solitudine vires habet, ut sese defendere, et quae ad vitam necessaria sunt, comparare possit, sequitur statum civilem homines natura appetere, nec fieri posse, ut homines eundem unquam penitus dissolvant.”

It does not follow from the mere fact that because the state serves the utility of the individuals that form it that it cannot be considered an individual. It could be the case that, as parts of a larger individual, it is to our advantage and utility that this individual be preserved. In fact, if we are parts of such a larger individual, then this must be the case, for only if the parts of an individual are in good working order can the whole individual come to flourish. Spinoza's description of the origin of the state is far stronger than a claim that the state serves the utility of the individuals that make it up; he claims that the state exists for the sole purpose of serving this utility. Since Spinozistic individuals exist solely for the sake of their own preservation and well-being, and the state exists solely for the utility of the individuals who come together to form the state (the state having no internal drive or *conatus* that motivates it to preserve its being), it inevitably follows that the state cannot be an individual.

This would seem to be the end of the discussion, but the matter is not quite so simple. There are a number of passages in which it truly does seem that the state acts as an individual. Furthermore, Spinoza's definition of "individual" is perhaps broad enough to include the state. As Matheron correctly notes, the state acts as a unified being with a single purpose. The state does, after all, attempt to preserve and enhance its being. These considerations lend credibility to the claim that Spinoza considers the state an individual. Despite this, there are strong considerations against such a reading. Claiming that the state is not an individual, those who argue against Matheron maintain that the passages in question should be read metaphorically. They argue that the state is not an individual, but can be spoken of in metaphors *as if* it were one.

### **The State as a Metaphorical Individual**

Before commencing a discussion of the metaphorical reading, it is important to consider the strongest argument against Matheron's interpretation. To this end, I begin this section by recounting an important critique of Matheron's view by Barbone. After discussing Barbone's critique, I will then turn my attention to the metaphorical reading of the state as an individual. In "What counts as an individual for Spinoza?" Barbone argues directly against Matheron's contention that the state is an individual. Once Barbone's arguments are fully explained, the framework for the metaphorical reading of the state will be in place.

Barbone begins with a careful analysis of the notion of an individual in general. He notes that although Spinoza typically uses the term "individual" non-systematically and even casually, he does use it systematically as well. Spinoza employs the systematic use of the term "individual" most consistently at E2P13 and the lemmas following. Barbone explains that an individual is a body "composed of various bodies (of varying or the same sizes) that maintain an unvarying relationship with each other" (91). In other words, Barbone agrees with Matheron that an individual is a union of bodies, united according to a blueprint so as to maintain the same fixed portion of motion and rest that maintain it as that individual. But Barbone goes further than this. He reminds us that by grounding individuation in the proportion of motion and rest, Spinoza provides "a theory of individuals which accounts for metabolic change, growth and diminution, change of posture, and locomotion" (91) and presumably whatever other changes an individual

undergoes. Spinoza, in short, not only explains what makes something an individual, but also how an individual can undergo changes.

There is nothing here that Matheron would disagree with; in fact, Barbone specifically credits Matheron as providing a good reading of this aspect of Spinoza's theory of individuals (99). Barbone also builds upon Matheron's distinction between the material and formal elements of individuation. Noting that Matheron's distinction is groundbreaking, Barbone points out that this distinction extends the definition of an individual to include a much broader range of objects than it ordinarily would. On the one hand, this is a benefit. Spinoza thinks of the whole universe as an individual; therefore, he clearly does not restrict what counts as an individual only to human or biological individuals. On the other hand, this definition may be too broad. Matheron speaks of things as various as a Cartesian vortex, the solar system, and a cyclone as individuals. Given Spinoza's focus on the *conatus* as the essence of an individual, classifying a stone or a vortex (both of which seem quite clearly to lack a *conatus*) as an individual strikes an odd note.

Barbone seeks to narrow the range of what can properly count as an individual:

Only entities that both exist and operate by a principle that functions as a *conatus* can be understood to be individuals. A pile of stones is not an individual, since there is nothing essential to it, nothing internal to it to function as a formal element to make it the pile of stones it is. No unifying force can be found within it which cannot be explained by forces that form it. The same is true of the "individual" composed of the Eiffel Tower, the Chargers, and the orange; such a collection of things has no special *conatus* by which it itself strives to maintain its own existence and operation as that defined collection. (100)

To clarify his point, Barbone asks us to think of school of fish. A school of fish is not an individual, but a collection of individuals. A fish joins a school to increase its chances of survival, but “it does this so that it might better exist and operate as the particular fish it is, not at all so that the school as group might better exist and operate” (100). In other words, a school of fish, a tower, or a sports team is entirely a construction of external factors, the individuals that compose it. Such constructions do not have a *conatus*. The only *conatus* found in, say, a school of fish, is that of each member of the group.

There remain, however, those troubling texts in which Spinoza speaks of the state in language that seems to indicate that the state is, in fact, an individual. One of strongest texts of this kind is the following:

Nothing is more advantageous to man than man. Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were [*quasi*], one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that all together they should aim at the common advantage of all. (E4P18Schol)<sup>68</sup>

Barbone remarks that the *quasi* language here is very important. Furthermore, the Latin word for “composed” is in the subjunctive mood. Spinoza even further qualifies his statement by adding the clause “as best they can.” In other words, individuals do not literally form one mind and body, but merely come together to approximate as closely as possible to acting as a unity. Individuals may not approximate this well, but it is the goal

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<sup>68</sup>“Homini igitur nihil homine utilius; nihil, inquam, homines præstantius ad suum esse conservandum, optare possunt, quam quod omnes in omnibus ita convenient, ut omnium Mentis et Corpora unam quasi Mentem unumque Corpus componant, et omnes simul, quantum possunt, suum esse conservare conentur, omnesque simul omnium commune utile sibi quærant.”

of forming a state, and the only way that human individuals can achieve whatever limited unity of which they are capable.

Importantly, Barbone stresses that Spinoza could speak of the state as a “thing” without thereby considering it an individual in the proper sense. Let us take one of Barbone’s own examples, the San Diego Chargers. The Chargers are a single “thing.” We can speak quite properly of the Chargers winning or losing a game. We also properly speak of the 1984 San Diego Chargers and the 2009 San Diego Chargers as the same team, even though all of the individual players and staff are different. No one would think, however, that the San Diego Chargers count as an individual. This is because, as already stressed above, the thing called the San Diego Chargers does not have an internal principle or *conatus* striving to preserve its being. The San Diego Chargers remain as the same thing over time only to the extent that people recognize the San Diego Chargers as such. The existence of the thing called the San Diego Chargers depends entirely upon external factors; the Chargers have no internal drive to maintain existence. I grant that various individuals that make up the Chargers have a common interest in winning, but they hold that common interest for individual reasons—some to make more money, some for glory, and so on. In the case of the San Diego Chargers, there is no interest over and above the interests of the individuals who make up the team.

Barbone argues that what is true of the thing known as the Chargers is also true of the thing known as the state. The state is no more an individual than the Chargers are. We have already seen one reason to agree with this assertion: the state is entirely dependent for its existence on the *conatus* of each individual who together make up the

state. There are other reasons as well. Spinozistic individuals are modes of substance. As such, individuals must properly be understood under both the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension. In more common parlance, an individual—because it is a genuine unity and not a mere aggregate—must possess a body and a mind. Barbone, noting this, asks the obvious question: does Spinoza ever speak of the mind of the state? Barbone claims that the correct answer to this question is no. There are, however, some passages in which Spinoza might seem to answer yes. Barbone examines several of the most relevant ones, concluding that Spinoza typically uses the subjunctive mood and in nearly every case “signals counterfactuality with either *veluti* or *quasi*” (105).<sup>69</sup> Barbone argues that the constant presence of counterfactuals in those passages in which Spinoza speaks of the mind of the state can leave us with no doubt that a civil society cannot have a mind. Acknowledging that there are a few passages where Spinoza speaks of the state without counterfactuals (TP 3/2, TP 7/3), Barbone nevertheless argues that they claim that “the body and mind of the *imperium* . . . are only the same “body” and “mind” that the multitude possesses *as if* this multitude comprised a real body and had a real mind” (106).

It is clear from Barbone’s analysis of Spinoza’s language regarding the mind of the state that Spinoza does not think the state has a mind. It is, therefore, also clear that Spinoza does not think that the state is an individual. Matheron need not argue that Spinoza actually holds this position himself, however. All Matheron needs to establish is that Spinoza’s system commits him to the claim that the state is an individual. This is, in

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<sup>69</sup> The texts Barbone examines are: TP 2/21, TP 3/5, TP, 4/1, TP 8/19, and E4P18Schol.

fact, Matheron's considered position. But it is difficult to see how even this position is accurate. As we have seen, the state has no *conatus*; it is a construction of utility for the individuals who compose it. Since we have seen furthermore that the Spinozistic state does not possess a mind, we have even more reason to deny the state the status of individuality. It seems, then, that Barbone is right that the state cannot be an individual in Spinoza's thought.

Although many commentators appear to favor something like the view articulated by Matheron, several prominent ones agree with Barbone that the state is not an individual. But these generally see a positive value in the passages where Spinoza speaks of the state as if it were something like an individual. This is what Rice has called "the metaphorical interpretation" of the individuality of the state. Rice has argued that Spinoza must be read as a proponent of "radical individualism" or "nominalism" ("Individual and Community" 274), a view shared by other commentators such as Douglas Den Uyl. Den Uyl argues that the state cannot be an individual on the grounds that Spinoza insists that the state of nature is "omnipresent":

Institutions are not emergent individuals—that is, super-individuals which have arisen out of the larger mass of individuals in society. To claim that there are such super-individuals is to advocate something which contradicts the thesis of the omnipresence of the state of nature, since such individuals would also have to be found, at least theoretically, in the state of nature. (70)

For Den Uyl, however, it is often quite sensible to speak of the state and other institutions as if they were individuals. Let us consider again the example of the San Diego Chargers. I argued above that it is quite reasonable to regard the Chargers as a

single “thing.” We often speak of a team or organization as if it had a mind and were an individual. So we speak of the Chargers “hoping” to win a championship, or “planning” to improve their offensive line. The same is true for the state. To accomplish the task of acquiring peace and security, human beings join together to form a state. The state is a single thing, though it is not an individual. Nevertheless, it is frequently quite sensible to speak of the state as if it were an individual, with a mind, plans, hopes, goals, and purposes. This talk is all metaphorical, and those who, like Matheron, take it literally are simply misunderstanding the language. But if the state is not an individual, then what is the larger individual of which human beings are a part? It is quite clear in the lemmas on bodies that human beings are part of a larger individual. Furthermore, it will not suffice to say that the universe as a whole is that individual, since Spinoza makes it clear that there are individuals “below” the universe that are composed of human individuals.

### **Rice’s Contribution**

Rice argues that the key to understanding the hierarchy of individuals is a passage already examined: the worm in the bloodstream. The worm is an individual, as are the particles of blood with which the worm interacts. The key point is that the worm “is also . . . constitutive of a higher order individual (the bloodstream itself), which in turn is constitutive of yet a higher individual (the organism)” (Rice, “Individual and Community” 276-7). According to Rice:

The key concept here is that of a scientific law, or rather a hierarchy of laws which are related deductively so as to produce reduction schemata for the objects which fall under these laws . . . A complex may be said to

be 'more than the sum of its parts,' and thus an individual from an ontological perspective, if and only if the laws governing those parts are a subset of the implication class of the laws always governing the complex whole. ("Individual and Community" 277)

In other words, an individual is part of a higher individual if the laws which govern the behavior of the lower individuals are in fact a "subset" of the laws which govern that larger individual as a whole. Rice points out that no such understanding of law is applied by Spinoza to the political sphere. Spinoza nowhere argues that laws governing human behavior can be read as a subset of laws governing the state as whole. In fact, Rice asserts that it is difficult even to imagine what such laws would look like. There are no political laws in this sense. To fail to distinguish between these two senses of law, positive and physical law, (which Matheron explicitly does) is to be guilty of the fallacy of equivocation. Thus, according to Rice, we should look to the physical laws to find the individual immediately above us on the hierarchy of individuals.

Rice proposes that the individual next higher up on the hierarchy "can be met by the contemporary criteria of an ecosystem" ("Individual and Community" 280). There are two requirements, according to Rice, for something to count as the next individual up on the hierarchy. First, this individual, like all Spinozistic individuals, must be made up of various "lesser individuals" of diverse natures. Second, the laws which describe this "super-individual" must be necessary. Furthermore, the laws must include those of human psychology as a subset. Rice argues that the "ecosystem" appears to meet these requirements because:

Such ecosystems . . . are partially closed systems . . . The requirement of heterogeneity of subindividuals is quite clearly and elegantly met by the diversity

of ecological substrata (some organic, many purely inorganic) within an ecosystem. The need for further super-individuals in the hierarchy is also met. The collection of ecosystems themselves form a larger system which we could call the “planetary system,” and which is again relatively independent for the purpose of establishing causal laws . . . The planetary system itself figures as one type of component in a larger super-individual of diverse components; so the general spinozistic requirement of diversity and integration is also met. (“Individual and Community” 280)

Rice’s argument fits in very nicely with Spinoza’s discussion of the hierarchy of individuals in the lemmas on bodies. In addition, it has the further advantage of avoiding the charge of the fallacy of equivocation. In Rice’s model, only physical systems count as individuals, and so only physical laws come into play. Furthermore, like Matheron’s, Rice’s position allows Spinoza to transcend a merely egoist conception of human beings. This is perhaps difficult to harmonize with Rice’s fierce insistence that Spinoza is a “radical individualist,” but it is an attractive position nonetheless.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, one might object that an ecosystem has no more right to be called an individual than a state does. For that matter, why should Spinoza hold that the whole universe counts as an individual but a state does not? Both an ecosystem and the whole universe seem no less an aggregate of their parts than the state does. If the state has no internal *conatus* but exists solely because its members have come together in order to increase their peace and security, how is an ecosystem any different? In an ecosystem various species come together and use the environment in a variety of ways in order to preserve their being. A full discussion of whether an ecosystem is an individual is beyond the scope of this study. What is important here is that Barbone and Rice establish that the state is not an individual, and if we are to learn precisely which things in the world are

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<sup>70</sup> I will discuss this possible conflict in Rice’s position at length in Chapter 4.

individuals, we must stay in the realm of the physical and natural. We cannot bestow individuality on things like sports teams and civil societies, but we can count organisms and the universe as a whole as individuals, and perhaps ecosystems and planetary systems as well.

#### Chapter 4: Egoism in the Context of Relation and Autonomy

Both Matheron and Rice suggest ways to read Spinoza which fully account for the stress he lays on interpersonal, or collaborative, morality. Yet regardless of which view we find more persuasive, it is tempting to see Spinoza as an unqualified egoist. Indeed, despite his emphasis on Spinozistic individuals as inseparable from their larger environment and his argument that Spinoza offers us an “ecoethic,” some argue that Rice still sees Spinoza as grounding morals and politics in radical individualism and egoism.<sup>71</sup> James Rachels notes a distinction between two types of egoism, ethical and psychological. An ethical egoist holds that “each person *ought* to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively,” whereas a psychological egoist claims that “each person does in fact pursue his or her own self-interest alone” (63-4). In other words, ethical egoism is a prescriptive claim about what people should do, but psychological egoism is a descriptive argument about what, ultimately, motivates the way people do act.

In this chapter, I will discuss Spinoza's alleged egoism. Some scholars read him straightforwardly as both a psychological and ethical egoist.<sup>72</sup> This, however, requires reading Spinoza as committed to a particular notion of human individuals which is hard

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<sup>71</sup> Both Ravven and Armstrong (each discussed below) place Rice in the egoist camp, though Ravven does so with some qualification. I am not, however, persuaded that Rice reads Spinoza as an egoist. Rice draws an explicit distinction between what he calls “radical individualism” and egoism.

<sup>72</sup> Scholars who read Spinoza as an egoist generally read him as both a psychological and an ethical egoist. These scholars typically read Hobbes as committed to both types of egoism as well. For the sake of brevity I will sometimes speak of Spinoza or (Hobbes) as an egoist, without mentioning the terms “psychological” or “ethical.” When I do this, both psychological and ethical egoism are implied unless I specifically state otherwise.

to reconcile with the texts. The bulk of this chapter, therefore, will discuss Spinoza's particular conception of the human individual, especially as individuals relate to each other and their broader environment. I argue that Spinoza is neither a psychological nor an ethical egoist. Whether we read Spinoza as an egoist or not has important implications for his political theory, so these arguments are crucial to the concluding chapters of this study.

I will first examine the claim that Spinoza is a psychological egoist. The reason for reading him as a psychological egoist is that despite the importance of a collaborative morality to his moral project, Spinoza justifies this collaboration exclusively in terms of the individual's own interests (E4P22Cor).<sup>73</sup> This follows automatically from his conception of what an individual is. For Spinoza, any individual, as I have argued at length, is something that preserves its existence and identity against external forces that would annihilate it. This clearly means that Spinoza believes an individual must preserve its being over and against an environment which is, to some extent, hostile to that individual.

Spinoza, in fact, argues that this striving to preserve itself in existence is the very essence of every individual. Such a conception of individuals may suggest a vision of a "dog eat dog" world in which individuals fight it out in the battle for survival. Furthermore, as explained in chapter 3, this picture of a struggle for existence is explicitly affirmed by Spinoza (TP 1/5). Human beings, Spinoza asserts, are by and large greedy, self-seeking and uncooperative. It is hard to read this view of human nature as

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<sup>73</sup> "Conatus sese conservandi primum et unicum virtutis est fundamentum."

anything other than egoistic. Spinoza, some argue, is quite clearly a psychological egoist. According to others, he is also an ethical egoist.

The argument that Spinoza is an ethical egoist depends on two points. First, as stated above, Spinoza argues that the sole foundation of morality is the individual's desire to preserve his or her own essence. This means that self-interest is not merely a matter of what we desire, but of how we should act. At least on the face of it, it is extremely difficult to deny that a moral vision which derives virtue from the striving to preserve one's own essence is anything but a version of ethical egoism. Yet this is only one stage in the argument.

The second point concerns Spinoza's explanation of why individuals come together to form a collaborative morality in the first place. Returning to chapter 16 of the TTP, we find Spinoza arguing for the justification of the state's power and the force of morality in terms reminiscent of Hobbes. Explaining the justification for the state he says:

There is nobody who does not desire to live in safety free from fear, as far as is possible. But this cannot come about as long as every individual is permitted to do just as he pleases, and reason can claim no more right than hatred and anger. For there is no one whose life is free from anxiety in the midst of feuds, hatred, anger and deceit . . . And if we also reflect that the life of men without mutual assistance must necessarily be most wretched and must lack the cultivation of reason . . . it will become quite clear to us that, in order to achieve a secure and good life, men had necessarily to unite in one body. (TTP 16/3) <sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "Præterea nullus est, qui non cupiat secure extra metum, quoad fieri potest, vivere; quod tamen minime potest contingere, quamdiu unicuique ad libitum omnia facere licet, nec plus juris rationi, quam odio et iræ conceditur; nam nullus est, qui inter inimicitias, odia, iram . . . Quod si etiam consideremus homines absque mutuo auxilio miserrime, et absque rationis cultu necessario vivere . . . clarissime videbimus homines ad secure, et optime vivendum necessario in unum conspirare debuisse."

A plausible reading of this passage is that human beings form societies and states in order to be forced into cooperation with one another. Absent such coercion, human beings are simply too selfish and greedy to cooperate. This seems to make law and morality merely a matter of “enlightened self-interest,” and we find that Spinoza does think that “the validity of an agreement rests on its utility” (TTP 16/3). Once again, Spinoza can be understood to be arguing that our self-interest is the basis both for what we will do and, therefore, what we should do as well.

The matter, however, is not so straightforward. As I explained in chapter 3, Matheron and others have offered very compelling arguments against the social contract theory in Spinoza. The TTP, they argue, may sound like Hobbes, but it is in crucial ways very different. Furthermore, in his later works Spinoza does not use the language of social contract, so that his moral theory appears less obviously grounded in ethical egoism. I find these arguments persuasive. Spinoza is probably not a social contract theorist, but the question of ethical egoism cannot be resolved simply by rejecting the social contract interpretation of his thought.

In the TTP Spinoza explains not only the justification of the power of the state, but the very ground of morality itself as well. His description of morality here is consistent with egoism:

Thus the natural right of every man is determined not by sound reason, but by his desire and his power . . . Thus whatever every man, when he is considered as solely under the dominion of Nature, believes to be to his advantage, he may by sovereign natural right seek and get for himself by any means, by force, deceit,

entreaty or in any other way he best can, and he may consequently regard as his enemy anyone who tries to hinder him from getting what he wants. (TTP 16/3)<sup>75</sup>

In this passage, Spinoza clearly affirms that “solely under the dominion of Nature” we may do whatever we want to do and that this is our natural right. This certainly sounds like a commitment to ethical egoism, at least on the surface. Ethical egoism, then, may seem to be at the heart to Spinoza’s ethical project. It might appear that he interprets human behavior as egoistic. It appears also that he maintains that human beings ought to act exclusively in their own self-interest.

This egoist reading of Spinoza is fairly common. Not only do general text books on ethics and standard histories of early modern philosophy classify Spinoza as an ethical and psychological egoist, but many prominent Spinoza scholars argue for the egoist reading also. Most notably, Curley and Bennett argue that Spinoza is a full-blown egoist. I will first examine Curley’s arguments.

### **Curley’s Case for Spinoza as Egoist**

Curley situates Spinoza’s moral and political philosophy in the context of Hobbes’ thought. Only by understanding the basis of Hobbes’ moral and political theories can we truly comprehend Spinoza’s response to and emendation of them.

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<sup>75</sup> “Jus itaque Naturale uniuscujusque hominis non sana Ratione, sed cupiditate et potentia determinatur . . . Quicquid itaque unusquisque, qui sub solo Naturæ imperio consideratur, sibi utile, vel ductu sanæ Rationis vel ex Affectuum impetu, judicat, id summo Naturæ Jure appetere, et quacunque ratione, sive vi, sive precibus, sive quocunque demum modo facilius poterit, ipsi capere licet; et consequenter pro hoste habere eum, qui impedire vult, quominus animum expleat suum.”

Hobbes has often been read as an uncompromising egoist. Curley notes that this may not be entirely accurate, but the following at least is clear about Hobbes:

Disinterested love of our fellows has a smaller role to play in the explanation of human behavior than does love of ourselves, and that if there should be a conflict between self-interest and the interests of others, most people most of the time would give preference to their own interests. (*Geometrical Method* 102)<sup>76</sup>

In other words, the chief motivation of most people is nearly always self-interest. If this conception of human nature is granted, it is enough to justify Hobbes' understanding of human beings as naturally hostile toward and separate from one another.

More importantly, insofar as his relation to Spinoza's thought is concerned, Hobbes sees politics as grounded in, and perhaps entirely reducible to, mutual utility. Hobbes' social contract is not best understood as supposedly arising out of his historical situation but rather as an attempt to explain "why it is rational for men to obey and support existing governments" (Curley, *Geometrical Method* 104). The basic outline of the social contract theory is well known. I will not, therefore, explain Hobbes' political theory in detail here. Suffice it to say the following: Hobbes asks us to consider what life would be like *if* humans lived in a situation lacking any lawful authority and any force powerful enough to enforce such authority. Given the greed and selfishness of human beings, life would be miserable. People would find themselves in a situation of all out war and chaos. Surely, Hobbes thinks, such a state of affairs is worse than any other that could be imagined.

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<sup>76</sup> It is unclear what, exactly, Curley's qualifications are meant to establish. This version of Hobbes' "egoism" is so far from what is normally meant by the doctrine that it is not obvious that Hobbes can still be called an egoist if it is accepted. Furthermore, it is far from certain whether Curley means to read Hobbes as an egoist or not.

It follows from the abysmal condition of life in a “state of nature” that civil society is highly beneficial to us. By agreeing to a social contract which invests authority in the sovereign, we can live in a society of rules and laws that make life vastly more secure and prosperous than anything that can be imagined in a state of nature. It follows that law and moral behavior are justified by the fact that they are in our rational self-interest. This sounds very similar to the positions on utility, law and moral behavior we have already seen articulated by Spinoza. This may provide strong reason to see Spinoza as an egoist. If Hobbes is an egoist and Spinoza shares his view (and even some of his language) concerning the origin of the state and morality, then Spinoza is an egoist also.

Curley claims that Spinoza does have much in common with Hobbes. For Curley, Spinoza essentially shares Hobbes' view of human motivation. Hobbes, however, has an insufficient understanding of human psychology and motivation. Spinoza, therefore, must “construct an alternative theory free of these defects, a theory which would recognize that man was a part of nature, as subject to laws as any other part of nature” (*Geometrical Method* 106-7). In other words, Curley argues that Spinoza’s project is essentially to offer a better metaphysical and psychological foundation for Hobbes' basic understanding of the state and morals.<sup>77</sup>

For Curley, the connection between Hobbes and Spinoza is best exemplified in the doctrine of the *conatus*. As I previously explained, the *conatus* is the desire of each

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<sup>77</sup> To clarify: Spinoza and Hobbes differ dramatically on the kind of state they prefer. Hobbes argues for absolute monarchy, whereas Spinoza favors democracy. There are, in addition, other major differences between the two. Curley is aware of this. All he means to establish is that Spinoza and Hobbes agree, broadly, on the purpose of the state and the justification for its existence.

individual being to preserve and perfect its own being. It is, for Spinoza, the essence of every individual thing. The term “*conatus*” was actually used by Hobbes before it was by Spinoza. The former also connected it with the individual's drive for self-preservation. Spinoza's use of this term can be read as a strong commitment to egoism. At least several prominent scholars have read the term this way, as I will consider below. Though it is possible of course that self-preservation is merely one good among many, scholars who would read Spinoza as an egoist find support for this interpretation when this possibility is ruled out. Spinoza clearly thinks that the individual's self-interest is and should be its only good: “The *conatus* to preserve oneself is the primary and sole basis of virtue” (E4P22Cor). In other words, we strive to preserve ourselves, which is precisely what we should do. But Spinoza relates *conatus* to a far wider range of things than Hobbes does, and gives the concept a far more solid metaphysical foundation.

Reminding us that Spinoza accepts a model of explanation that “requires deduction of general laws from even more fundamental principles” (*Geometrical Method* 116), Curley proceeds to explain how both Spinoza's account of value judgments and his account of the effects are derived from the concept of *conatus* in a way quite impossible for Hobbes. Let us take, for example, the terms “good” and “evil.” For Spinoza, these terms have no objective foundation in reality outside of the effect on a subjective agent who deems something “good” and “evil.” Each person shall call “good” that which he or she perceives to enhance his or her being and “bad” that which he or she perceives to threaten it. Curley evokes Spinoza's famous lines:

We neither strive for, nor will, neither want nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it. (E3P9Schol)<sup>78</sup>

This passage, together with Spinoza's claim that the drive for self-preservation is the only basis for virtue, provides support for an egoist reading of Spinoza. Spinoza appears to claim that “good” and “bad” are so merely because we deem something “good” or “bad” solely in relation to their contribution (or lack thereof) toward our own self-preservation. Curley argues, with solid textual support (see E3P21, E3P25, and especially E3P27), that even our moral and affective considerations of others must be explained in terms of this fundamental egoism.

Spinoza grounds collaborative morality in *conatus*, that is, in the individual's desire for self-preservation. In fact, the interest we have in others is dependent upon how much they are like us. The whole of Spinoza's moral philosophy begins with the realization that “we can feel compassion for others, feel their joys and sorrows, even when we have not had any prior affect for them, *simply because they are like us*” (*Geometrical Method* 118; emphasis mine). Since Spinoza claims that that which is similar to us is to that extent always good for us (E4P31), and therefore advantageous to us (E4P31Cor), it seems reasonable (though not necessarily correct) to interpret Spinoza as claiming that our concern for others derives solely from our concern for our own self-interest. According to Curley, there is no question of a morality arising from any source other than that we perceive another to be “like us.” This can be taken to mean that the

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<sup>78</sup> “[N]ihil nos conari, velle, appetere, neque cupere, quia id bonum esse judicamus; sed contra, nos propterea aliquid bonum esse judicare, quia id conamur, volumus, appetimus, atque cupimus.”

only concern we have for others is entirely dependent upon our pursuit of our own interests first. A legitimate case, then, can be made that Spinoza is both a psychological and ethical egoist.

Curley takes Spinoza's egoism as firmly established when he turns to Spinoza's political theory. His most important work on Spinoza as a political egoist is found in his article "Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan," which he contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. Taking as his starting point an interview Henry Kissinger gave in 1972, in which Kissinger named Spinoza as one of his political influences, Curley proceeds to paint a picture of Spinoza as a Machiavellian egoist.

The starting point for a clear understanding of Spinoza's political theory is his thesis that right is coextensive with power: we have a right to do whatever we have the power to do. The argument for this is simple: God's right is coextensive with God's power. Because God and nature are one, all things are "parts" of God. For each individual, therefore, right is also coextensive with power.<sup>79</sup> Curley stresses that Spinoza does not hold that right and power are, strictly speaking, identical, but rather that right extends no more and no less as far as power does. Curley finds this a "disturbing thesis" ("Kissinger, Spinoza, Khan" 318). At least upon initial inspection, I suspect that is how it affects most of us.

Curley suggest that the best way to understand what Spinoza means here is to think of his account of "right" in the context of his commitment to a thoroughgoing naturalism. Spinoza denies that there is any transcendent value to our notions of justice or

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<sup>79</sup> This argument seems to be a textbook case of the fallacy of division, which consists in believing that because the whole has property X, the parts all have property X as well.

injustice, right or wrong. In like manner, Spinoza cannot accept any thesis of natural or God-given rights, at least not as understood as intrinsic moral properties that we or anything else possess by nature. The position that right is coextensive with power is a descriptive naturalistic reading of what “right” means. Spinoza is attempting to explain the concept in naturalistic terms. We must remember, however, that though Spinoza starts with purely descriptive notions of right and power, he intends to derive normative conclusions from them—normative conclusions that will not simply say that “might is right” as that phrase is usually understood.

Curley nevertheless argues that the connection of right and power is derived from Spinoza's moral and psychological egoism. Spinoza does in fact declare that no one will agree to obey the state unless he or she perceives that it is in his or her interest to do so. For this reason, the “social contract” can rest on nothing but utility, which, if removed, nullifies the contract (“Kissinger, Spinoza, Khan” 323). In other words, obedience to a civil society is derived entirely from one’s egoistic desire to preserve what is good for oneself.

On such a view, the sole purpose of the state is to provide security. As Curley notes, this seems to allow no room to condemn despotic states (“Kissinger, Spinoza, Khan” 334). In fact, Spinoza does condemn such states. But Curley wonders if anything in his political philosophy allows him to do so. If the reason we join and obey a civil society is to gain security and peace, what could justify our rebelling against a tyrant who nonetheless provides security? Curley sees this as a very troubling problem for Spinoza’s political theory.

But I cannot see how Curley is justified in claiming that Spinoza has no conceptual resources for rejecting tyranny. In a passage Curley himself cites, Spinoza (with characteristic Eurocentric bias) speaks of the Turkish Empire as a long-lasting tyrannical despotism, contrasting its stability with the instability of democratic states:

For no state has stood so long without any notable change as that of the Turks, and, conversely, none have proved so short-lived as popular or democratic states, nor have any been so liable to frequent rebellion. But if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, there can be nothing more wretched for mankind than peace . . . Peace, as we have already said, consists not in the absence of war, but in a union or harmony of minds. (TP 6/4)<sup>80</sup>

To live under the rule of a despotic regime is to live in a state of constant anxiety and insecurity, but we have already seen that the reason for living in a civil society is peace and security. One need only consider the typical behavior of tyrants. The biblical King Herod the Great, having grown paranoid in old age, murdered most of his family. Henry VIII famously beheaded his wives and his trusted advisers when they displeased him. In more recent history, Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler murdered and tortured millions. Spinoza surely has the resources to condemn tyranny. Peace, stability, and security cannot exist for many, if indeed for anyone at all, within the borders of a despotic regime.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “Nam nullum imperium tamdiu absque ulla notabili mutatione stetit, quam Turcarum, et contra nulla minus diuturna, quam popularia, seu Democratica fuerunt, nec ulla, ubi tot seditiones moverentur. Sed si servitium, barbaries et solitudo pax appellanda sit, nihil hominibus pace miserius . . . nam pax, ut jam diximus, non in belli privatione, sed in animorum unione, sive concordia consistit.”

<sup>81</sup> Perhaps Curley means that we should find tyranny and despotism reprehensible for reasons other than instability and insecurity, as somehow intrinsically wrong. I wonder, however, what makes a government tyrannical (using the term in its modern sense) other than causing such insecurity and harm to its subjects? If such harm was not present would

The issue of Spinoza's egoism is not yet resolved. Someone who writes that the goal of civil life is a "union or harmony of minds" does not sound like an egoist. I will continue, however, to consider the arguments that Spinoza is nevertheless an egoist. This case is stated perhaps most forcefully by Bennett.

### **Bennett on Spinoza's Egoism**

At least in the argument provided here, Curley neither endorses nor rejects the egoism that he attributes to Spinoza. Nor does Curley resolve the issue of whether such committed egoism could actually yield a genuinely collaborative morality. How could completely self-interested individuals ever do anything solely for the sake of others? Bennett also reads Spinoza as both a psychological and ethical egoist, but concludes that his egoism is irreconcilable with any genuine moral concern directed toward others.

Focusing on the same texts used by Curley, Bennett informs us that "Spinoza's only moral premise is individual egoism" (*Study* 299), and that concern for others, for Spinoza, is inseparable from and wholly derived from this sole premise. "The thoughtful egoist will be led by his own egoism to care as much for the welfare of others as for his own" (*Study* 299). Like Curley, Bennett rightly points out that the "interpersonal morality" Spinoza wishes to establish is derived not simply from an individual's self-interest, but also from that self-interest combined with the recognition that other human beings are "like me" in some essential and significant respect. He specifically points to propositions 30 and 31 of E4. In these propositions Spinoza claims that "nothing can be

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it really be a tyranny?

bad through what it has in common with our nature; but insofar as it is bad for us, it is contrary to us,” and “[i]nsofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good.”<sup>82</sup>

Bennett and Curley are correct to point to the combination of egoism and “being like us” as the criterion of Spinoza’s ethics. Bennett, however, goes beyond Curley by arguing that “like” or “unlike” us is far too vague a criterion to support so hefty a project as collaborative morality. Bennett is surely right here. Without precise explanations of what the terms “like” or “unlike” mean, Spinoza’s position cannot serve as the foundation for moral obligation. In other words, Bennett’s first objection is that without a narrowly construed notion of similarity, which is lacking in Spinoza’s texts, the claim that human beings are alike cannot be of any use in grounding a collaborative ethics.

Bennett offers a second objection to Spinoza’s “similarity criterion.” Something like me can, and often is, far more harmful to me than something that is different from me. Bennett explains:

One small point brings Spinoza’s collaborative edifice tumbling down. Suppose that you and I are alike, that X could harm either of us, and that to avoid the harm what is needed is to keep at a distance from X; and suppose that we cannot both do this—the floodwaters are rising in the mine and there is room for only one in the elevator which is starting up for the last time. Here the similarity between us is no help at all. And it can contribute to conflict, as when we compete for limited food: the rivalry would vanish if we didn’t need the same kinds of food. (*Study* 301)

Since Bennett’s second objection turns on a particular understanding of “similarity,” perhaps Spinoza could evade the consequences of this scenario by specifying the relevant sense of “like” and “unlike”—but, of course, Bennett has already argued that Spinoza

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<sup>82</sup> “*Res nulla per id, quod cum nostra natura commune habet, potest esse mala, sed quatenus nobis mala est, eatenus est nobis contraria.*” “*Quatenus res aliqua cum nostra natura convenit, eatenus necessario bona est.*”

has not properly explained his sense of these terms. Furthermore, Spinoza could clarify those terms only by using them in a manner quite foreign to their ordinary usage. In addition, it seems obvious that there are many cases in which the danger to me is greater when it comes from one who is more like me than not. For instance, it is obvious that human beings cause one another far more death and destruction than any animal has. Moreover, some animals, unlike our fellow human beings, are completely harmless to us.<sup>83</sup>

Of course, Bennett (and perhaps Curley) could be misreading Spinoza here. Perhaps what Spinoza means by “like” and “unlike” really is something quite different than their ordinary English meanings. After all, Spinoza wrote in Latin. Curley and Bennett use the Latin. Even in the English translations cited above, Spinoza does not actually speak of individuals that are “like” and “unlike.” This is interpretation, not translation. Spinoza speaks rather of individuals that “agree in nature” (*natura commune habet*) or are contrary in nature (*contraria*). Of course, it is quite possible to interpret these phrases to mean “like” and “unlike.” But this particular rendering (at least in Bennett and Curley) is perhaps influenced by the assumption that Spinoza is committed to egoism, an assumption which, in turn, affects the understanding of his terminology.

The argument that because others are “like us,” they are good for us and that therefore we must be good to them out of nothing but self-interest certainly sounds like egoism. But it is possible that such a line of reasoning might be offered on non-egoist

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<sup>83</sup> Spinoza's understanding of something being “like” or “unlike” another thing is complicated. In my opinion, Bennett deals with it somewhat superficially. For a more thoughtful analysis, see Curley's discussion of this topic (*Geometrical Method* 107-23).

terms. Importantly, egoism requires a conception of individuals as circumscribed in rather tight boundaries of independent selfhood. If Spinoza's individuals cannot be so radically separated from each other and from the larger environment of which they are a part, then it may well be that Spinoza is not really a psychological or ethical egoist after all.

To argue that Spinoza is not an egoist requires showing that he understands individuals as somehow interconnected, not as isolated selves. It is just such a reading of Spinoza's conception of individuals and their relations to each other that has been articulated and defended by scholars who read Spinoza through feminist lenses. I will now consider their case.

### **Feminist Readings of Spinoza's Individuals**

Heidi Ravven's article "Spinoza's Individualism Reconsidered" is one of the clearest examples of the school of thought that asks us to reconsider the interpretation according to which Spinoza is an egoist. Ravven begins by noting that most scholars read Spinoza as an egoist, which has long been the dominant reading. She claims that "Spinoza is generally considered to be an egoist whose starting point, like that of Hobbes, is the atomic individual pursuing his or her own interests in competition with other such individuals" (265). Ravven is quite aware that Spinoza is read as an egoist for precisely the reasons that Bennett and Curley provide. Ravven also briefly discusses positions taken by other scholars, most notably Stuart Hampshire, who argues that Spinoza's ethical project ultimately aims for the individual to burst his or her status as an individual

(266-7). This latter interpretation is very hard to defend in light of the texts we have already examined. If the choice is between atomic egoism and mysticism, there can be little doubt that we must read Spinoza as an egoist.

Ravven's argument is that there is a third option for interpreting Spinoza's moral theory. To claim that we must choose either a mystical reading or an egoist reading is a false dilemma. To be caught on the horns of this dilemma results from understanding Spinoza in atomistic terms. Ravven argues that this understanding is mistaken. Taking a lead provided by Andrew Collier, Ravven argues that for Spinoza, "the bounds of the individual person . . . are *never* atomic. The individual is never the Hobbesian atomic individual but always is *in practice* wider both in body and in mind than the bounds of a person's skin, so to speak" (269). Ravven means that an individual is intimately connected with other people and the world of which she is a part. The reason she advances this bold assertion is that an individual's nature is not radically separable from the world he or she inhabits. Our bodies and minds both affect and are affected by the external world and other individuals in essential ways. Because of this interaction, the very essence of an individual is dependent on the world it inhabits and on other individuals who share that world. Without necessarily endorsing Collier's particular interpretation of how Spinozistic individuals are interdependent and inseparable from their world, Ravven argues that his conclusion, considered broadly, is fundamentally correct.

Ravven also argues that Spinoza, contrary to the views of Rice and others, is not speaking merely metaphorically of the mind of the state or a group mind (272-3). On the

other hand, she is equally clear that Matheron goes too far when he takes the state to be an individual. I am not certain what she means when she speaks of the state as a non-individual, yet as somehow having a mind. Rice's and Barbone's arguments establish that passages about the "mind" of the state are no more to be taken literally than talk of the San Diego Chargers aspiring to win a Super Bowl. It appears, then, that both Ravven and Matheron are guilty of the same kind of literal interpretation of Spinoza. If it is on this that Ravven's rejection of egoism is founded, then her case is built on sand. But Ravven believes that the *Short Treatise* (hereafter KV) offers strong support for her reading. Before looking at the evidence, however, I must discuss the value of the KV for understanding Spinoza's thought.

The KV is an early, non-geometric version of Spinoza's *Ethics*. The work was abandoned by Spinoza, neither published during his lifetime nor with his *Opera* upon his death. Spinoza himself never refers to this work in his extant correspondence, and so it is safe to assume that he regarded it as superseded by the more mature *Ethics*. To further complicate matters, there are two Dutch manuscripts which are quite different from each other. It is unclear how close either of these manuscripts are to what Spinoza actually wrote.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, some scholars have looked to the KV to bolster their interpretations of Spinoza. It is tempting to do so because this work has ideas that differ from those in the *Ethics*, and sometimes offers details or fresh approaches to arguments

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<sup>84</sup> Further problems with the KV are that Spinoza was not in the habit of writing in Dutch, and, therefore, usually asked others to translate his Latin into Dutch for him. For a detailed account of the problems with the KV see Filippo Mignini's *Dio, l'uomo, la libertà: Studi sul Breve Trattato di Spinoza*.

and positions articulated in the latter work. Consulting the KV can be a legitimate exercise of scholarship. Given the nature of the text, however, one must always proceed with caution. Determining the value of an argument based on the KV depends entirely on the specific case. In each case it seems reasonable to require the scholar who makes use of the document to demonstrate that the idea or argument found in it is consistent with Spinoza's more mature work. Thus we will have to use special care in assessing Ravven's argument.

Ravven builds her case on one section in particular. In the preface to part two, Spinoza lists fifteen points which he thinks are all that we can know about the human person, considered as both a mind and a body. Importantly, his first item on the list is that our soul is not itself a substance.<sup>85</sup> Spinoza goes on to claim that the body must be regarded equally as a non-substance, since it is nothing more than a temporary modification of the basic matter of the universe, distinguished by motion-and-rest (Ravven 274).

So far this position does not differ greatly from the position of the mature Spinoza. But Ravven goes on to claim that in the KV:

The human soul or mind is first of all a case of (ongoing) cognitive activity, reflective and expressive of its own body but only as that body encounters others which affect it and change it—i.e., impinge on it, on the one hand, but also contribute to its ongoing survival, on the other. It is not, as it is for Descartes, an immaterial substance, a self that thinks. Spinoza is, first of all, defining the person as identical to her body's constitution by its interactions with the world plus her moment-by-moment awareness of that interactive process. Ultimately, however, the person is identical to her

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<sup>85</sup> That Spinoza frequently employs the term "soul" in this passage casts some doubt on the helpfulness of using the KV to interpret his mature thought. There is nothing like a concept of the soul in any conventional sense in Spinoza's later system.

body as it is caused by the extensional order and known as such in her expanded and corrected causal understanding of it . . . The subject, that which is the object of ethical concern and transformation . . . includes her bodily exchanges with the world and her awareness of them. (276-7)

In other words, Descartes (and probably Hobbes) are quite mistaken to envision the individual in atomistic terms. To think of individuals according to that paradigm is to imagine that they somehow exist apart from the external world. Spinoza denies this very possibility by claiming that the individual, both body and mind, cannot be a substance but merely a mode.

It is clear that Ravven is correct about this. It surely follows that in denying the status of a separate substance to individuals, Spinoza is denying atomism. In fact, it seems clear that Spinoza himself was aware of this implication. I can find no other plausible way of understanding his remark in the preface to E3 that most previous philosophers have “gone so far as to conceive man in Nature as a kingdom within a kingdom.”<sup>86</sup> The implication is that human beings must instead be conceived as fully subject to the causal laws of nature, necessarily inseparable from the larger environment of which they form a part. It follows that Ravven has correctly read Spinoza as rejecting atomism. Furthermore, her use of the KV fits well with Spinoza’s mature thought. But it is not clear at this point why she needs the KV at all. Spinoza’s comments in the preface to E3, together with his account of cognition in E2, suffice to justify this reading of his thought.

The remainder of Ravven's article is an exegesis of the KV. Her argument does not persuade me that anything of value can be gleaned from the KV on this issue. In

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<sup>86</sup>“*Imo hominem in Natura veluti imperium in imperio concipere videntur.*”

particular, I can find nothing which offers any support for her assertion that the state is an individual in anything more than a metaphorical sense. Presumably, she thinks of the state as an individual because it is connected to other individuals in a causally reciprocal manner. She seems to hold that this means a community of individuals must be “one” in a sense far greater than mere metaphor allows. At least this is the only way I can find to make sense of her position regarding the individuality of the state. I don't see how such a position follows from what Ravven has argued. It may be true that there is a way in which individuals come together to form “one mind and one body” in a more than metaphorical sense, but it does not follow that this means the state does. Her contention that we must reconsider Spinoza's individualism, however, is quite clearly correct. It is well established on the basis of multiple texts that Spinoza rejects atomism. It follows from this that to understand his theory of individuals and whether or not he is an egoist we must look to a non-atomistic conception of the self. This, in short, is Ravven's thesis. I take it as firmly established.

### **Armstrong's Contribution**

Aurelia Armstrong provides a relatively full conception of Spinoza's theory of the individual. Hers is a fully non-atomistic (indeed an *anti*-atomistic) understanding of individuality. Her arguments respond powerfully to Ravven's call for a new understanding of Spinozistic individuals. In a thoughtful article “Autonomy and the Relational Individual: Spinoza and Feminism,” Armstrong contends that Spinoza's understanding of individuals is relational. Building on the worm in the bloodstream

analogy, Armstrong argues that we should think of Spinoza's basic ontology as concerned with the relationship between part and whole. She says that “we are, like the worm, prone to imagining ourselves as self-contained wholes interacting with other clearly bounded wholes” (50). In other words, from our finite and partial perspective we think in terms of atomism. We tend to view ourselves and others as separate and self-contained entities who relate to each other fundamentally in terms of conflict. Armstrong elaborates:

Since I define myself in opposition to others, on the basis of perceived differences, I will tend to cling to those differences rather than seek out commonalities and grounds for agreement and cooperation. And because I imagine other individuals as atomized egoists bent on self-interest, I am more likely to regard them as a threat to my integrity and autonomy and thus, to adopt an embattled stance toward them. (51)

This is an apt description of Spinoza's position. I have already examined several texts which clearly show that Spinoza took most human beings to be irrational. These texts also demonstrate that he thinks the irrationality of the masses leads to strife; precisely because we are irrational, we differ from each other and are prone to conflict. Indeed, the irrational person sees herself or himself, as well as others, in atomistic terms.

Her position is supported by Spinoza's explanation of why human beings erroneously believe that they have free will. Spinoza argues that we are conscious of our appetites and desires, but not conscious of the external forces that cause those very appetites and desires (E2P35Schol). Because of our lack of awareness of the larger environment's impact on us, we come to believe that we freely choose what we desire and crave. According to Armstrong, “this misunderstanding of our identity and agency . . . is

not simply false. Rather, it is limited, or in Spinoza's terminology, 'inadequate.' It is . . . a partial and fragmented grasp of reality" (51). According to Armstrong, then, Spinoza's explanation of our false belief in free will results from our understanding ourselves as radically independent "atoms." We are largely ignorant of our relations to the larger causal structures of which we are a part.

Armstrong's reading on this point is accurate. Spinoza does argue that all errors in thinking are due to taking only a partial view of reality. We err because we look at the part without considering the larger whole. Free will is no exception to this account of error. But it is one thing to say that error is due to taking a partial view, and another to say that we are mistaken about something because we see ourselves as radically separate and atomistic. To support identifying the two, Armstrong appeals to Spinoza's worm in the blood analogy. Indeed, she quotes the passage in which Spinoza states his position quite clearly:

By the coherence of the parts I mean simply this, that the laws or nature of one part adapts itself to the laws or nature of another part in such wise that there is the least possible opposition between them. On the question of whole and parts, I consider things as parts of a whole to the extent that their natures adapt themselves to one another so that they are in the closest possible agreement. In so far as they are different from one another, to that extent each one forms in our mind a separate idea and is therefore considered as a whole and not a part. (Ep32)<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> "Per partium igitur cohærentiam nihil aliud intelligo, quam quod leges sive natura unius partis ita sese accommodat legibus sive naturæ alterius, ut quam minime sibi contrariantur. Circa totum, et partes considero res eatenus, ut partes alicujus totius, quatenus earum natura invicem se accommodat, ut, quoad fieri potest, inter se consentiant, quatenus vero inter se discrepant, eatenus unaquæque ideam ab aliis distinctam in nostrâ Mente format, ac proinde ut totum, non ut pars, consideratur."

This passage is a crucial passage for those who argue that Spinoza's conception of the individual is a relational one. Spinoza claims that “things” are parts of a whole to the extent that they are in harmony not only with the whole, but also with other parts of the whole. The most reasonable understanding of this claim is that individuals are not only part of a larger reality from which they cannot be separated, but also that they cannot be separated from, and are therefore in perpetual relation to, other individuals who are part of that same larger reality. This is precisely the position that I argued for in chapter 2. We have strong evidence that Spinoza thought of the individual in these relational terms.

To this point Armstrong's argument is hardly contentious. Many, perhaps even most, Spinoza scholars agree with the basic claim that his theory of individuals requires thinking of them and their very natures as inseparable from the larger environment. Most would agree that individuals must also be thought of as constantly interacting with other individuals who are parts of that larger environment. But Armstrong disagrees with Curley and Bennett. She describes the ramifications of their positions in some detail:

According to one influential strand of scholarship, which emphasizes the concept of *conatus* . . . Spinoza's position should be interpreted as radically individualist in orientation. This reading downplays the significance of Spinoza's metaphysical position . . . and interprets the restatement of this position in Spinoza's account of social relations as purely metaphorical. Thus when Spinoza tells us that “if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another they compose one individual twice as powerful as each one.” . . . he should be understood as saying that prudential egoism recommends cooperation with others as a means to the self-preservation of each individual. (53)

This is exactly the position that Curley and Bennett take. We have seen their reasons for holding it.<sup>88</sup> But there is another way to read such passages, which is far more plausible and makes better sense of the text.

Rejecting, as Ravven did, any “mystical” reading of Spinoza, Armstrong suggests a third possibility. Reminding us of Spinoza's “psychophysical parallelism,” she points out that, for Spinoza, mind is “perspectival awareness; it is a series of ideas corresponding to the series of states of its body object” (54). Furthermore, the mind's awareness of other bodies is limited to its awareness of how those bodies affect the body of which it is the idea. According to Armstrong, this is why Spinoza argues that “one of the defining features of more complex and powerful bodies is a capacity for being acted on in many ways at once” (54). The upshot is that Spinoza is able to maintain the existence of real and robust individuals without embracing atomism. Armstrong further points out that the *conatus* theory tells us that the individual must “maintain identity in and through . . . exchanges with its environment” (55). This means that individuals are not only real, but also exist to some extent over and against both their environment and other individuals. On the other hand, “it makes no sense for Spinoza to think of the individual in isolation from its world—what it affects and is affected by” (Armstrong 55).

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<sup>88</sup> Given that some of the language she uses to describe this position is very similar to Rice's, and furthermore, that she mentions Rice in a footnote near the end of the paragraph from which this passage is taken, it is clear that Armstrong sees this as his position also.

Armstrong correctly asserts that Spinoza's individuals are deeply interconnected with their environment. It is difficult to read his claim that a powerful body (and therefore presumably a powerful mind) is one that can be affected by a great many things *while remaining one and the same individual* in other than a relational sense. This can only mean that a body which is defined by its relationships to other bodies in such a way that its identity, at least in part, is defined by those relationships. Such a reading preserves both relationality and individuality. If we think about it, this is actually how most of us experience life. Let us take as examples mentally sound and competent human adults, who are clearly individuals in Spinoza's sense. They are able to do a great many things by and for themselves (e.g., wash, feed, and dress themselves). They can even sit alone in a stove-heated room and think by themselves, as Descartes did. But such persons simply cannot exist in isolation. These persons have to be taught to speak, to think, to read, to cook, and to interact with others and the world. Moreover, all of us know that our values, goals, hopes, and personalities are deeply impacted by those we have known, including lovers, friends, family, teachers, etc. We are who we are because of them. This is what is meant by a relational self. No reasonable person would deny it. Atomism, however, implies the denial of these obvious truths.

I am not arguing that atomists, in practice, deny the reality of personal relationships. Nor would they deny that we had to be taught to walk and talk. In theory, however, they are committed (whether they intend it or not) to a

conception of individuals as primarily self-oriented and therefore, in some respects, as partially cut off from each other. To the extent that this flies in the face of human relations (and even of relations with our pets) as we actually experience them, atomism is deeply problematic. This is not, however, Armstrong's argument (though she would agree with it). She explains:

Spinoza explicitly links the development of autonomy with the establishment of harmonious social relations in his claim that, if an individual “lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged” and thus, that it is “especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds apt to make one people of them, and absolutely to do those things which serve to strengthen friendship.” (E, IV, Appen VII and XII).<sup>89</sup> It is because Spinoza's individual is constitutively rather than merely incidentally social that individual striving for self-empowerment and autonomy must be conceived as a social process, that is, as an effort to build and maintain mutual, reciprocal relationships with others that support and foster this striving for all concerned. (61)

Armstrong is correct that Spinoza thinks of human individuals as more than “merely incidentally social.” She also is surely right to stress the need for mutual support and a community of people working together for self-empowerment. This is, without a doubt, Spinoza's view, and we have seen numerous texts which articulate it. It is also clear that Spinoza's individuals cannot be thought of atomistically. But Armstrong seems to equate atomism with egoism, taking for granted that refuting the former also refutes the latter. Surely Curley or Bennett can agree that we must have “mutual, reciprocal relationships with others,” but maintain that the reason for this is nothing other than rational self-interest. If I cannot ever be fully separate from others and must interact with them, then it

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<sup>89</sup> Armstrong uses this unusual manner of citing the text of the *Ethics* throughout her article.

is a matter of simple prudence that I and they, to the extent that we are both rational, will want to work together. We would gain nothing by refusing to do so if we are inescapably social creatures.

To argue that Spinoza is not an egoist, one must look at what he thinks about the nature of the relationships which we form with others. I have already discussed Spinoza's assertion that the best thing for human individuals is to come together so as to form "one mind and one body." That claim could be read egoistically as a call to unite for mutual self-preservation, but it is not the most natural reading of his words, which so strongly call for unity and harmony.

### **Spinoza on Friendship and Love**

For those who seek to read Spinoza as a non-egoist, his initial definition of love is not encouraging. Spinoza defines love as "nothing other than pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (E3P13Schol).<sup>90</sup> This definition makes love sound like

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<sup>90</sup> "Nempe *amor nihil aliud est quam lætitia comcomitante idea causæ externæ.*" I have modified Shirley's translation in the English text above. Shirley translates *traslates* "Nempe *amor nihil*" as "love is merely." I have chosen to translate it as "nothing other than," as this better captures Spinoza's meaning.

nothing more than a feeling we have that we relate to something which we believe (either correctly or incorrectly) to cause that pleasure. As is usual with Spinoza, however, matters are not so simple. Immediately after defining love and hate, Spinoza tells us that “we see that he who loves necessarily endeavors to have present and to preserve the thing that he loves” (E3P13Schol).<sup>91</sup> Of course, he could mean that we strive to preserve the things we love solely because they give us pleasure and not for its own sakes. But this view is weakened by the implication of the second statement, which could be read as a claim that we endeavor to preserve what we love because we, in loving it, come to find that it has a great value for its own sake. This is shown clearly by those who will risk or even sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of a loved one. To argue in favor of this latter interpretation of Spinoza's text, I will look more closely at Spinoza's account of love.

As Spinoza develops his theory of love, we find him claiming that we love things that are similar to something which (already) affects us with pleasure or pain (E3P16).<sup>92</sup> Presumably, we love an object because of the properties we think it possesses, not necessarily because of how it affects us. Furthermore, Spinoza says that we will be pained if we imagine that what we love is being destroyed and pleased if we think it is

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<sup>91</sup> “Videmus deinde, quod ille, qui amat, necessario conatur rem, quam amat præsentem habere et conservare.”

<sup>92</sup> “*Ex eo solo, quod rem aliquam aliquid habere imaginamur simile objecto, quod Mentem Lætitia vel Tristitia afficere solet, quamvis id, in quo res objecto est similis, non sit horum affectuum efficiens causa, eam tamen amabimus vel odio habebimus.*”

being preserved (E3P19).<sup>93</sup> It is quite clear from the preceding that Spinoza thinks I will be pleased to hear that what I love is being preserved even if that is no use to me. In other words, the mere fact that I think good things are happening to that which I love will affect me with pleasure, regardless of my own fate.

Spinoza thinks of loving other persons in exactly the same way as he thinks of loving some “thing.”<sup>94</sup> We love another person when the idea of them is accompanied by pleasure. And, just as with things that we love, we will rejoice to learn that good things are happening to people that we love and be pained to know that bad things are happening to them. Psychological egoists could, of course, argue that my pleasure at the thought of the well-being of others is my reward. And ethical egoists, furthermore, could use this claim to argue that, because I should do what gives me pleasure, that it is right to care for others in this manner. This, however, presents psychological egoism with a serious problem. If I am never interested in anything but my own well-being, how could I ever come to care for others (for their own sake) if it offers me no practical good? In particular, how could I be happy with sacrificing myself for the good of others? From where could such a desire originate, given the initial premise of psychological egoism? Since ethical egoism would have to rely on psychological egoism in this case, it too is saddled with this problem. One could, of course, argue that Spinoza is an egoist who

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<sup>93</sup> “*Qui id, quod amat, destrui imaginatur, constrictabitur; si autem conservari, lætabitur.*”

<sup>94</sup> I am bypassing here the means by which Spinoza makes the transition from love of things to love of persons, since it lies largely outside the scope of my inquiry.

simply does not recognize this problem. But when one looks more closely at his texts on love, it becomes clear that that Spinoza simply does not think the way an egoist would.

The strongest evidence that Spinoza's account of love is not egoistic is found two propositions later. There he asserts that anyone “who imagines that what he loves is affected with pleasure or pain will likewise be affected with pleasure or pain” (E3P21).<sup>95</sup> This claim remains unclear, unless we assume that Spinoza believes that when we love something we feel to some extent its pleasure or pain as our own. If the one I love is genuinely pained, then I will feel that pain as my own, and if the one I love experiences real pleasure, I will feel that same pleasure myself. Our loved one's joys and concerns are our joys and concerns.

An egoist cannot allow relationships to be based on anything other than self-interest. Any (genuine) bond with another person must be reduced to mere prudence or utility or selfish pleasure. Anyone who has ever read Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* is familiar with the attempt of committed egoists to reduce all apparent altruism and genuine care for others to nothing more than thoughtful or disguised self-interest. But if my interpretation of Spinoza's account of love is correct, Spinoza does not hold that love is nothing more than disguised self-interest and mutual utility. Rather, he sees it as a genuine union in which the pleasures and pains of our loved ones become one with our own. This has nothing to do with prudence or utility.

Only by realizing that Spinoza is not an egoist can we make sense of his remark that “between friends all things, and particularly things of the spirit, should be shared”

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<sup>95</sup> “*Qui id, quod amat, Lætitia vel Tristitia affectum imaginatur, Lætitia etiam vel Tristitia afficietur.*”

(Ep2). Spinoza holds that close relationships with others result in a genuine bond in which we really do compose something like a new individual who is twice as powerful. Friendship is a good illustration of this aspect of Spinoza's thought. Friends share all things because, in a real sense, they are one. They are bound by the fact that their joys and concerns have become fused and inseparable. As long as others are my friends, I cannot but wish them well, for their well being is now part of my own. At least with regard to close relationships, Spinoza holds a relational theory of individuals.

One could accept my position and still argue that for the most part Spinoza remains an ethical and psychological egoist. When Spinoza discusses human relationships, he usually does not speak of close personal relations, but of individuals living together in a civil society. I neither love nor am friends with most of the people I interact with in the broader society. One may argue, then, that I interact morally with most people merely on grounds of prudence and utility.

Though Spinoza admittedly does not hold that we love all of our fellow human beings or even all of our fellow citizens, he does claim that we do best living in civil society with them for much the same reason that we love our friends: they are similar to us. Human beings, to the extent that they act rationally, share a bond. We share a common striving for excellence, joy, and lasting peace of mind. This is why Spinoza holds that there is nothing more useful to human beings than other human beings, and why he thinks that in a civil society we form something like one mind and one body. A society of true egoists could never really bond, never really be as one mind and body. Such a group of people would be essentially self-serving and self-promoting. Their

contact with others might help them work together, but it would be reluctantly. Real friendships and genuine affection could not develop. Spinoza does maintain that human beings usually are selfish and usually do conflict with each other, but he does not hold that this situation is universal (TP 1/5). Those who are rational can escape this egoism and genuinely bond with their fellows, at least to a degree (E4P36Schol). Since he thinks the purpose of a civil society is to make people act more rationally, or at least to act as if they were rational to a certain extent, Spinoza's political theory cannot be grounded in egoism.

If, as I have argued, Spinoza is not an egoist, then how can it be that he is so often read in egoist terms? What becomes of all the talk of Spinoza's radical individualism if we accept that he thinks of the individual as essentially relational? Armstrong argues that Spinoza preserves individuality and autonomy without losing relation. Armstrong groups Rice with those who see Spinoza as an egoist, but ironically it is Rice's work that offers the strongest foundation for the conclusion she draws.

### **Rice on Spinoza's Radical Individualism**

Rice understands Spinoza as an exponent of “radical individualism.” Rice uses this term to express his rejection of Matheron's position that the state is an individual and citizens are parts of that higher-order individual. In other words, what he emphasizes is the priority of human beings over civil society, of which human beings are parts. Rice does not claim that we are separate from the larger environment or from other people. He is fully aware of and committed to the thesis that, for Spinoza, all individuals—save for

the infinite individual who is the whole of reality—are part of a larger individual.

Moreover, he suggests that we see ourselves as part of an ecosystem or something very like it. Rice thus does not ignore the impact that the wider world has on Spinozistic individuals. His point is simple but very important: for Spinoza individuals matter more than states and nations, and only insofar as states serve to promote peace and security for its citizens can their existence be justified.

This means that Rice is not necessarily arguing that Spinoza thinks of individuals as radically separate and self-contained in the atomistic sense. On the contrary, Rice explicitly distinguishes radical individualism from egoism (“Individual and Community” 274). Nevertheless, he does argue that Spinoza's political philosophy is “a precursor of contemporary libertarianism” (“Individual and Community” 274). In everyday discourse “libertarianism” can refer to the view that individuals are fundamentally concerned with their own well-being over against the well-being of others.<sup>96</sup> This often forms the basis of an economic position which calls for few or no government controls of economic markets and business practices, counting on the invisible hand of rational self-interest to work to everyone's advantage.

If Rice sees Spinoza as a precursor to libertarianism in this sense, then he does read Spinoza as an egoist. There is another understanding of the term “libertarian,” however. A civil libertarian is one who places supreme value on individual freedoms and value. A civil libertarian is not necessarily committed to economic libertarianism, but to the claim that the individual matters far more than the state, and that it is to individuals

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<sup>96</sup> My understanding of Libertarianism as an economic philosophy is deeply indebted to Paul Krugman's *The Conscience of a Liberal*.

that the state is primarily responsible. This brand of libertarianism is compatible with a relational conception of the self and a non-egoist psychology, ethics, and political theory. Since there is nothing in Rice's work to suggest that he thinks Spinoza is an economic libertarian; and since, on the other hand, he explicitly rejects both atomism (with his appeal to ecosystems) and egoism, it is far more likely that he sees Spinoza as a precursor of that brand of libertarianism which places the value and freedoms of the individual above the good of the state. Given that Rice formulates these positions in response to Matheron's argument that the state is not only an individual, but also a higher-order individual than humans, this interpretation of his view seems better founded.

Rice's reading of Spinoza, then, preserves the autonomy of the individual in a very strong sense, while at the same time rejecting atomism and egoism. At this point, it is not clear that Rice's work does justice to Spinoza's emphasis on relations. In his later work, Rice more clearly articulates the importance of relation. Commenting on the difference between Leibniz (who is an atomist) and Spinoza on the nature of individuals, Rice explains:

For Spinoza a mode [which an individual would be] is a *finite* determination of a larger whole. Modes exist and operate in interaction with other modes, by which they are determined to exist and to act and they in turn determine to exist and to act. Modes by their very nature . . . operate in a temporal order that is interactive. This is the basis of Bennett's talk of a Spinozistic 'field metaphysics.' Such a metaphysics makes particular extended individuals adjectival on regions of space, and reduce talk about regions of space to talk about the features of space . . . Each individual is, of course, constituted by and constitutive of a particular region of space, which in turn is an individual of a still higher order. ("Individuation" 29)

Rice quite clearly understands that Spinoza's individuals are “interactive” with their larger environment and other individuals. In fact, he goes much further. He argues that individuals are “adjectival” on substance and therefore not fully independent at all. Though he argues that Spinoza's moral thought places individuals above nations, races, and groups, Rice does not think the individual can be understood apart from his or her relationships with others. His interpretation preserves individuality without sacrificing relation. Rice provides the conclusion that Armstrong seeks.

There is an added benefit of Rice's position. Armstrong and Ravven both hold that the state cannot be considered merely an arrangement for utility; there must be more than “mere metaphor” to Spinoza's talking of it as if it were an individual. Neither of these scholars offers much support for this position, other than pointing out that Spinoza is neither an atomist nor an egoist. But Rice's position allows us to maintain that the state is not an individual and that it is subordinate to the individuals that it exists to protect and serve. At the same time, we are never really separate from other people and the larger reality of which we are a part. According to Rice:

The status of individuals . . . which exist in a larger hierarchical whole is real and not illusory: the individual is not somehow ‘swallowed up in the whole,’ but equally . . . all finite individuals are constitutive of a higher order individual . . . which in turn is constitutive of yet a higher individual. (“Individuation” 277-8)

By preserving a relational conception of individuals, while at the same time stressing the importance of the individual over the state, Rice enables us to understand Spinoza's political theory as one which is both true to the text and itself plausible. The state only exists because most human beings are not rational, at least not usually. In order

to reap the benefits of peace and stability, which are the fruits of living rationally, people must live in a civil society governed by law, a society that makes them act, to an extent, as though they were rational. This means that the sole justification for the existence and power of the state is the good of the individuals for which it exists. But that invites the question of what a state must provide for its citizens and what powers it is entitled to have. This will be the question of the next and final chapter.

### **Chapter 5: Some Closing Notes on The Political and Moral Implications of Spinoza's Theory of Individuals**

I have explained how Spinoza's understanding of the nature of individuals shapes his political and moral philosophy. Aware that they are often selfish and irrational, he nonetheless argues that human beings are naturally social and that cooperation and interconnection are ideals for them. According to Spinoza, only very few human beings are capable of living their lives according to the principles of reason; therefore, very few people have the power to live cooperatively with others without external pressure. For this reason, civil society, with its laws, courts, police, and morality is necessary; most human beings can be made to act as if they are rational, at least to a limited degree, by means of social and legal pressure exerted on them.<sup>97</sup>

I have explained Spinoza's arguments for the justification of the existence and power of the state in chapters 3 and 4, and will not repeat what I said there here. I will, however, explain his understanding of the nature of the state. In this regard, I will discuss what powers it may justly hold over its citizens, as well as what goods, services and protections it must provide them.

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<sup>97</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms “state,” “civil society,” and “commonwealth” interchangeably.

I will begin with the nature of the Spinozistic state. I will then describe how a Spinozistic state would respond to one particular issue, the distribution of and access to health care coverage. I have chosen to examine how a Spinozist's theory of the state would deal with the issues of health care coverage, because it is here, I believe, that Spinoza's political theory differs most clearly from those that are most influential today. Afterward, I will show how Spinoza's theory of individuality requires us to reject those political theories. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the value and importance of Spinoza's political theory for us today.

In the previous chapter, I explained Spinoza's justification for the existence and power of the state. It is for the good of human beings that we live together under a common code of law. Without living together in a community with laws and codes to foster and enforce virtuous behavior, most people would be unable to act rationally and live peacefully. Spinoza describes people living in a civil society as both citizens and subjects. According to Spinoza, “We call men citizens in so far as they enjoy all the advantages of the commonwealth by civil right; we call them subjects in so far as they are bound to obey the ordinances or laws of the commonwealth” (TP 3/1).<sup>98</sup> People are citizens of a state or commonwealth to the extent that they are the recipients of certain “advantages” of civil society. This is presumably why Spinoza thinks that it is seldom, if ever, rational to reject a civil society in favor of living in a solitary state of nature: the benefit of civil society almost always outweighs the cost. Persons are subjects, on the other hand, insofar as they must obey the laws of the state. These are inseparable

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<sup>98</sup> “Deinde homines, quatenus ex jure civili omnibus Civitatis commodis gaudent, cives appellamus, et subditos, quatenus civitatis institutis, seu legibus parere tenentur.”

categories. To live as a member of a civil society, one must always be both subject and citizen; the one requires the other.

Spinoza's basic notions here are not innovative. He uses the terms “subject” and “citizen” in senses fairly common in political discourse both in his time and our own. In some ways Spinoza's theory might seem to contemporary readers to be an authoritarian account of power. Spinoza seems to require absolute obedience to the laws of the state, even if those laws are not in our interest and to no one's good. For instance, he claims that “the individual citizen is not in control of his own right, but is subject to the right of the commonwealth, whose every command he is bound to carry out, and he does not have any right to decide what is fair or unfair” (TP 3/5).<sup>99</sup> One could read this as reflecting a particularly depressing view of human nature. Spinoza seemingly believes that though states are prone to enact corrupt and harmful laws, human beings are so prone to violence and selfishness that it is always better to have the benefit of being protected from others by the state, even when the state might sometimes be dangerous as well. To be fair, Spinoza does hold that most human beings are naturally opposed to each other and prone to conflict (TP 2/14-15). He even goes as far as to say that “the teaching of reason is wholly directed to seeking peace, but peace cannot be achieved unless the common laws of the commonwealth are kept inviolate” (TP 3/6).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> “[U]numquemque civem non sui, sed Civitatis juris esse, cujus omnia mandata tenetur exequi, nec ullum habere jus decernendi, quid æquum, quid iniquum, quid pium, quidve impium sit.”

<sup>100</sup> “[Q]uod ratio omnino docet pacem quærere, quæ quidem obtineri nequit, nisi communia Civitatis jura inviolata serventur.”

But the initial impression of a philosopher's position can be misleading. In chapter 4, I argued that Spinoza initially appears to be an egoist, but that, upon further analysis, it turns out that he is not. Spinoza in particular is easy to misread. He often appears to say X and deny Y. But in fact he actually rejects X understood one way, but accepts it in another. Likewise, he seems to reject Y stated in one manner, but accepts it stated in another. One need only look to his changing uses of the words “good” and “evil,” or to his rejection and acceptance of such a thing as “human nature.” In E3, for example, he rejects human nature only to reason from it (and even to argue for its existence) in E4 and E5. It is, therefore, hermeneutically unsound to attribute a position to Spinoza until everything he has said on that position is taken into account and plausible attempts to harmonize his remarks have been considered.<sup>101</sup>

Almost as soon as he makes his claim about our need to obey all of the state's commands, Spinoza extensively qualifies the claim:

Subjects are not in control of their own right and are subject to the commonwealth's right only to the extent that they fear its power or its threats . . . All such things as no one can be induced to do by reward or threat do not fall within the rights of the commonwealth [over its subjects]. For example, no one can surrender his faculty of judgment . . . Likewise, what reward or threats can induce a man to love one whom he hates, or to hate one whom he loves? And in this category must also be included those things so abhorrent to human nature that it regards them as the worst of all evils, such that a man should bear witness against himself, should torture himself, should kill his own parents . . . and the like. (TP 3/8)<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> This is, of course, a good rule for reading any texts by any thinker. It is, however, especially important given Spinoza's frequent tendency to use words with multiple meanings. His positions are usually highly nuanced and very subtly developed.

<sup>102</sup> “Secundo venit etiam considerandum, quod subditi eatenus non sui, sed civitatis iuris sint, quatenus eius potentiam seu minas metuunt . . . quod ea omnia, ad quae agenda nemo praemiis aut minis induci potest, ad iura civitatis non pertineant. Ex. gr. iudicandi

On the surface, this passage is problematic. Tyrants have commanded subjects to act in just the ways Spinoza here considers. Furthermore, surely he knows that some governments have successfully had subjects torture themselves, kill their parents, and so forth. Yet despite all this, he seems to argue that the reason a commonwealth cannot issue to its subjects such commands is that they cannot really carry such acts out. Undoubtedly Spinoza means that though some can do, and have done, such horrific acts at the command of a sovereign power, the acts have not been committed in accord with the nature of the people who have done them, but have been constrained by the external threat of the sovereign. In other words, though such commands can be physically carried out, they are so against the constitution of most people that they cannot be expected to be rationally carried out. Therefore, people are not obligated to obey them. It is well known that Spinoza makes this sort of external/internal distinction in examining motivations and actions. Furthermore, Spinoza says that if we think the commonwealth has a right to demand such extreme obedience, it can only be “in the sense in which it might be said that a man has a right to be mad or to rave. For what else but lunacy would such a right be when no one can be bound by it” (TP 3/8).<sup>103</sup>

The most plausible interpretation of Spinoza's position is that a commonwealth has absolute authority over its subjects to the extent that it provides them with the

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*facultate nemo cedere potest . . . Sic etiam quibus praemiis aut minis induci potest homo, ut amet, quem odit, vel ut odio habeat, quem amat? Atque huc etiam illa referenda sunt, a quibus humana natura ita abhorret, ut ipsa omni malo peiora habeat, ut quod homo testem contra se agat, ut se cruciet, ut parentes interficiat suos . . . et similia.”*

<sup>103</sup> “Poterimus concipere, nisi quo quis diceret, hominem jure posse insanire, et delirare: quid enim aliud nisi delirium jus illud esset, cui nemo adstrictus esse potest?”

advantages of being a citizen. In short, the power of the state is present only insofar as it is rational to obey; and it is rational to obey only if the state will bring us peace, security, freedom, and cultivation of our reason and judgment. When a state or commonwealth fails to provide these advantages, it loses authority over its subjects. Spinoza, in fact, states precisely this position:

If . . . I say that I have the right to do whatever I want with this table, I am hardly likely to mean that I have the right to make this table eat grass. Similarly, although we say that men are not in control of their own right but are subject to the right of the commonwealth, we do not mean that men lose their human nature and assume another nature . . . No, what we mean is this, that there are certain conditions that, if operative, entail that subjects will respect and fear their commonwealth, while the absence of these conditions entails the annulment of that fear and respect together with this, the destruction of the commonwealth. (TP 4/4)<sup>104</sup>

People will obey out of fear, but only to an extent. There are certain things most people, or at least most rational people, will not do, no matter how great their fear. Moreover, people can lose respect if the ruler goes about “drunk or naked with harlots in the streets . . . openly violates or holds in contempt those laws that he himself has enacted” (TP 4/4). Spinoza's position is that it is rational and useful for us to live as subjects who obey the laws of our commonwealth insofar as it agrees with our nature to do so. When the laws of our commonwealth cease to agree with our nature, it is no longer rational and useful for

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<sup>104</sup> “Si . . . dico, me iure posse de hac mensa, quicquid velim, facere, non hercle intelligo, quod ius habeam efficiendi, ut haec mensa herbam comedit. Sic etiam, tametsi dicimus homines non sui, sed civitati iuris esse, non intelligimus, quod homines naturam humanam amittant et aliam induant . . . sed quod quaedam circumstantiae occurrant, quibus positus ponitur subditorum erga civitatem reverentia et metus, et quibus sublatis metus et reverentia et cum his civitas una tollitur.”

us to obey. Our obligation ceases and, as Spinoza puts it, the commonwealth is destroyed.<sup>105</sup>

Aware of the tendency of kings and oligarchies toward tyranny (TP 11/2), Spinoza favors democracy as the best form of government. For him, a democracy is a state run by law, in which elected representatives are chosen to rule the land. A commonwealth should be a democracy rather than an aristocracy when:

It depends solely on the will and the free choice of the supreme council that any particular person be made a patrician . . . [But in a democracy] all who are born of citizen parents, or on native soil, or have done service to the commonwealth . . . can lawfully demand for themselves the right to vote in the supreme council and to undertake offices of state. (TP 11/1)<sup>106</sup>

Spinoza prefers democracy on the grounds that “it is practically impossible for the majority of a single assembly, if it is of some size, to agree on the same piece of folly” (TTP 16/4). Though the practice of contemporary democratic assemblies might seem to disprove this claim, prior to the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century, it was not an unreasonable view to hold. More persuasively, Spinoza favors democracy on the grounds that this form of government puts the community, that is, all the citizens, in charge of their commonwealth, rather than a single sovereign or a group of aristocrats with narrowly restricted interests (TP 11/1-2). Contemporary readers are highly likely to share Spinoza's preference for democratic government, and so I will not spend more time

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<sup>105</sup> The reader should remember, as I explained in chapter 4, that at TTP 16/3 Spinoza claims that “the validity of an agreement rests on its utility, without which the agreement automatically becomes null and void.”

<sup>106</sup> “[I]n eo a sola supremi Concilii voluntate, et libera Electione pendeat, ut hic, aut ille Patricius creetur.... Nam omnes, qui ex parentibus civibus, vel qui in patrio illo solo nati, vel qui de Republica bene meriti sunt ...omnes jus suffragii in supremo Concilio, muneraque imperii subeunda jure sibi poscunt.”

elaborating his defense of it. What I wish to stress is that Spinoza favors democracy because, in his eyes, it is the most rational form of government insofar as in it people are most likely to benefit from the advantages of citizenship in return for their obedience as subjects. In other words, a democratic government is the most likely to make people free and rational. For this reason, it is to be preferred to other forms of a commonwealth.

Returning to the advantages of citizenship, we must ask in what precisely Spinoza thinks they consist? We already know that among the advantages of being a citizen of a commonwealth is protection from physical violence and theft. This is why, Spinoza argues, it is rational to choose to live in a commonwealth; it protects us from the violence and greed of our fellows. Do the advantages of citizenship extend further than this? To leave aside Spinoza for a moment, many “radical libertarians” (hereafter “libertarians”) argue that the role of a government in providing advantages (we might prefer to say “benefits”) to its citizens must be limited to so-called “negative rights.”<sup>107</sup> On this view, if I am a citizen of a commonwealth, and I have a right to life, this means that no one may kill me without facing punishment at the hands of the law. But it does not mean that my government has a duty to make sure I get enough food or medicine to stay alive. Similarly, the government does not have a duty to provide me with land or even shelter, or anything else. According to another position, which I will here refer to as “social liberalism,” people have both negative and positive rights. Positive rights are perhaps best understood as entitlement rights. Social liberals often argue that citizens of a

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<sup>107</sup> I should clarify that I am treating only one version of Libertarianism here. Other versions of Libertarianism are often understood rather differently from my exposition of the theory here.

commonwealth have the right to be provided with certain goods that are necessary for them to live fulfilled lives. Public education, Medicare, public parks, roads, and libraries, are all the results of adherence to this principle.

The distinction between positive and negative rights—indeed, the entire disagreement between social liberals and libertarians—is the result of a series of political and historical events that postdates Spinoza. It would be anachronistic, therefore, to classify him in either group. It is legitimate, however, to explore Spinoza's thought to see which notion of rights he would likely adopt and to which school of thought he is closer.

To understand on which side of political divide Spinoza might fall, we must first look to his understanding of political rights and political freedoms. If one believes that citizens in a commonwealth have only negative rights, one cannot believe they are guaranteed any positive rights. If I have a positive right, then I am entitled to something. For instance, if I have a positive right to be educated, I am entitled to an education, regardless of whether I have the money to buy one. On the libertarian view, I can only have a negative right to be educated; no one can stop me from getting an education if I can pay for it or if some generous person chooses to give me one as an act of charity. No one, however, is required to provide me one.

Spinoza quite clearly thinks of civil rights (a term we have seen that he uses) in both negative and positive terms. His primary understanding of political rights is positive. He also understands political freedom both in positive and negative terms. Since political rights and political freedoms are closely related—that is, if I am free to do X, I have a

right to do X—we are justified both in speaking of Spinoza's endorsement of positive freedom and his acceptance of positive rights.

To understand Spinoza's political concept of freedom, we must return briefly to his use of the concept of freedom in his political works. In the TTP, for example, he claims that in a commonwealth citizens are more free than in any other possible circumstances. And, of course, freedom is living according to the guidance of reason. Even more positively, Spinoza argues that because a subject acts for the common good, she also acts for her own good at the same time. We have seen throughout this study that Spinoza thinks that the point of a civil society is to make people live as if they were rational (insofar as this is possible), and thereby to reap the advantages of peace and security, in which true freedom consists. This is an understanding of civil society and freedom strongly at odds with the standard uses of these terms in libertarian theory generally.

By understanding freedom as both living under the guidance of reason and aiming to fulfill the common good, Spinoza certainly seems to be thinking of freedom in positive and not merely negative terms. It could be argued, however, that all Spinoza means is that the common good is a situation in which everyone respects the interests of each other, i.e., leaves each other alone, and that doing this is what a life under the guidance of reason teaches. For two reasons, however, this reading of Spinoza cannot work. First, libertarianism is committed to an atomistic conception of individuals, because the view that government and the broader society should “leave us alone” to “do our own thing” requires us to think of individuals as fundamentally separate from each other. I am not, or

at least the state is not, responsible for providing others with a basic standard of living. It is required only to avoid actively harming individuals by violating their rights, understood negatively. But as I argued in chapter 4, it is not possible to read Spinoza as an atomist.

It is, of course, possible to argue that Spinoza accepts something like the political view of libertarianism while at the same time rejecting the standard ontology of individuals upon which the theory is based. But it is less likely that his relational ontology of individuals lends itself to a libertarian political theory. Let us recall that Spinoza thinks that we must live in a civil society because it is rational and useful for us to do so. As I argued in chapters 3 and 4, we live together in a civil society largely because we are relational. A society of relational beings is very different from a collection of social atoms who are primarily supposed to leave each other be.

In addition to these considerations, there is good textual evidence that Spinoza expects the state to ensure positive freedoms, and therefore positive rights, for its citizens. In the appendix to E4, Spinoza explains what he takes himself to have established as the proper way to live and the proper way to govern society. In considering the role of “the poor” in society, he argues the following:

Again, men are won over by generosity, especially those who do not have the wherewithal to produce what is necessary to support life. Yet is far beyond the power and resources of a private person to come to the assistance of everyone in need. For the wealth of a private person is quite unequal to such a demand. It is also a practical impossibility for one man to establish friendship with all. Therefore, the care of the poor devolves upon society as a whole and looks only to the common good (E4a17).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “Vincuntur præterea homines etiam largitate, præcipue is, qui non habent, unde comparare possint illa, quæ ad vitam sustentandam necessaria sunt. Attamen unicuique

The most plausible interpretation of this passage is that the commonwealth is obligated to care for “the poor,” meaning all those who cannot produce “what is necessary to support life.” The reason is that private charity does not have the means to help all those in need. If Spinoza were a libertarian, if he thought of rights and freedoms only in negative terms, then he would not make any such claims. It is clear that, for him, the advantages of being a citizen include the right to a basic standard of living. At a minimum this would have to include, food, shelter, and probably adequate access to medical care. For, if it did not include these things, it would be—to put it mildly—difficult to understand how the necessities of life could be met.

Spinoza thinks of freedoms and rights in positive and not merely negative terms. This means that to acquire peace of mind, security, and other advantages of being a citizen, individuals living in a commonwealth have the right to expect from the state not merely protection from violence, but the means and resources to meet the basic necessities for living. Due to the limitations of space, I cannot examine each of the possible necessities for living that the state might be obligated to provide. I will restrict myself, therefore, to one case. It is clear that among the basic necessities required to live at any decent standard is access to affordable medical care. To me it is clear that Spinoza, were he writing today, would be among the defenders of the position that citizens of a

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*indigenti auxilium ferre, vires et utilitatem viri privati longe superat. Divitiæ namque viri privati longe impares sunt ad id suppeditandum. Unius præterea viri facultas limitatior est, quam ut omnes sibi possit amicitia jungere; quare pauperum cura integræ societati incumbit, et ad communem tantum utilitatem spectat.”*

commonwealth have a right to universal and affordable health care coverage. This will be the topic of my next section.

### **Spinoza and Health Care Coverage**

The Obama Administration enacted a large and controversial health care reform bill. Health care reform has been a topic of heated debate in the United States for several generations now. With some on the right arguing that the Obama reform is a socialist takeover which must be repealed, and others on the left arguing that the bill is far too weak to accomplish much genuine health care reform, this debate is unlikely to cease in the near future. The debate over health care reform is complicated and involves many issues, not least among which is the fact that a great deal of misinformation from all sides permeates the discussions of health care in the United States. Matters, however, are greatly simplified when we reduce the debate to its most important questions. The health care debate revolves around two questions. First, do people have a right to affordable health care? In other words, as a citizen of a state, do I have a right to expect my government to enact and enforce laws that guarantee that I get health care coverage for all my basic health care needs at a cost I can afford? And second, who provides more efficient health care coverage, private insurance companies or government organizations (whether state or federal)? The first question is metaphysical and requires a conception of the nature of individuals and the state; the second question is pragmatic. Though I will briefly address the second question, my discussion here is primarily about the first. The reason is simple: the most common arguments that we do not have the right to affordable

health care depend upon and appeal to theories of the individual and the state that, according to the positions Spinoza holds, must be false.

First, let us rid ourselves of a troubling logical fallacy. In the United States both proponents and opponents of universal health care coverage often state the debate in terms of a false dilemma: either we provide health care coverage through private, for-profit, insurance companies, or we have “socialized medicine” in which there are no private insurance companies and only a single-payer government-funded and government-run system. When the debate is framed in these terms, one of these two options is vehemently rejected, an entire legion of horror stories shared, and we are left with the conclusion that we must choose the other, less horrific, option. But there is no simple “either/or” here. There are several different ways to provide universal and affordable health care of high quality.

In an important book on health care systems, *The Healing of America: A Global Quest For Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care*, T. R. Reid explains that “most national health care systems are not 'socialized . . . !' Many . . . countries provide universal health care of high quality at a reasonable cost using private doctors, private hospitals, and private insurance plans” (11-12). Reid goes on to explain that there are at least three or four basic models for providing health care to all (17-20). Which model we choose to adopt is a practical matter, upon which there can and should be much debate and some compromise.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> It is important to note that, outside of the United States, many countries that use private health insurance providers require these providers to be non-profit (Reid 225).

The popular press is full of arguments against the claim that individuals have a right to health care coverage. The most common one is that such a right would be an entitlement right, and the role of government is merely to protect negative rights. On this libertarian view, the only legitimate powers of government are those that prevent others from infringing on my rights, or at least punish them once they have done so.

Presumably, those who offer this argument fear that allowing government a role in providing entitlements to people gives it too much power, threatening our individual liberties. There may be other fears as well.<sup>110</sup> If we look at the academic literature, rather than the popular press, we find many of the same arguments. The majority of proponents of this argument make the claim that ensuring citizens a legal right to health care gives the state too much power over the individual. For example, Allen Buchanan, against the grain of most work in bioethics,<sup>111</sup> claims that “to say that a person has a right to something, X, is first of all to say that X is entitled to X, that X is due to him or her” (526). This is only one of two features rights must possess. Buchanan also asserts that to say one has a right means that rights must be enforced by the state. In other words, active steps must be taken to ensure that a right is upheld and protected. Buchanan appears to think it is obvious that health care is not a right that must be enforced by state power:

It is crucial to observe that the claim that there is a right to a decent minimum [of health care coverage] is much stronger than the claim that everyone *ought* to have access to such a minimum, or that if they did it

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<sup>110</sup> One, held by many, is that providing health care for all would entitle people who are too “lazy” to work and thus are “mooching” off of the rest of society.

<sup>111</sup> For representative examples of the more commonly held position in the literature on health care coverage, see Kai Nielson: “Autonomy, Equality, and a Just Health Care System.”

would be a good thing, or that any society which is capable without great sacrifice, or providing a decent minimum but fails to do so is deeply morally defective. None of the latter assertions implies the existence of a right, if this is to be understood as a moral entitlement. (526)

In short, simply because it is morally good, or even preferable, to provide all people with a minimum decent standard of health care, it is not a right, and the state is not obligated to provide it to citizens by the authorization of government force. Buchanan does think it is morally preferable for society to provide health care coverage to most people and argues this view in the rest of his article. But he cannot allow health care to be a right. It is difficult to see why Buchanan thinks this. He simply asserts that health care is obviously something that government does not have the right to use force to guarantee to its citizens. The most Buchanan says is that government coercion should be minimal to allow maximum freedom to individuals (528). This is a standard libertarian position.

Views like Buchanan's are rare in the literature on bioethics. But they are found commonly in the popular press, and it is in the latter that these positions are stated far more boldly and often more clearly. For example, Iain Murray and Roger Abbot in the *Washington Examiner* argue:

A right, in both a legal and practical sense, is simply an entitlement due to an individual that other people are obliged to respect, with a failure to comply typically resulting in some sort of sanction. Because rights entail claims on other people, they are necessarily negative in their construction and limited in their definition. Constitutional rights such as freedom of speech and religion and the right to property can be clearly defined in accordance with John Stuart Mill's harm principle—act as you will so long as you do not directly harm others. In contrast, the expansive “rights” demanded by liberals—like the right to “affordable health care” or to a “decent standard of living”—are not rights but positive demands that require others to hand over some of the property to the claimant.

This argument assumes that if health care is a right, then someone has a duty to provide everyone with health care. Presumably, Murray and Abbot mean that if, say, an unemployed person has a right to health care, then some other person who can afford it must pay for that person's health care. Furthermore, if this right must be enforced by law, then the government must ensure (most likely through taxation) that this taking money from one to give health care to another happens. Since they speak of this kind of action as “expansive rights” that “make positive demands” on people to “hand over” their property to those who need it, they clearly believe that this kind of right is a violation of personal freedom.

With his emphasis on the common good, his claim that the individual surrenders his or her power to the whole community, and his insistence that a commonwealth must provide for those in need, Spinoza simply would not accept this libertarian line of argument. Nor, for that matter, would Spinoza be sensitive to concerns about the taxation of citizens to pay for those in need. This is a right to which Spinoza clearly thinks the state is entitled (TP 4/2). The root of the problem from a Spinozistic perspective is much deeper.

Those who claim that health care is not a right specifically argue that it is not fair to tax citizens so that other citizens can have health care coverage. In other words, in a community each person must pay for herself. Of course, the libertarian may applaud private charity and think that we should help those in need, but she does not think we are required to do so simply by virtue of the fact that we are subjects and citizens. To Spinoza, such a view seriously misunderstands citizenship and the nature of a

community. As I have argued, Spinoza claims that a political community does not exist merely to offer us protection from wild beasts and people with criminal impulses, but to help us live as rationally, peacefully, fully, and securely as it is possible for human beings to live. From his perspective, the atomistic conception of the self, and the libertarian theory of the state which derives from it, quite simply fail to grasp the essentially communal nature of human existence, as well as the advantages due to citizens by virtue of their citizenship. As Spinoza puts it, “the right of a commonwealth is determined by the power of a people that is guided as though by a single mind. But this union of minds could in no way be conceived unless the chief aim of the commonwealth is identical with that which sound reason teaches us is for the good of all men” (TP 3/7).<sup>112</sup>

In his analysis, Reid asks if we consider health care a right or a commodity (212-13). He answers that it is a right (214). Spinoza would agree. Peace of mind, security, the advantages of citizenship, the necessities for living, however one phrases it, are crucial for citizenship. The state and its laws only have power over me to the degree that it is rational and useful for me to be a subject of the state. Should a state not provide the basic requirements to help me live well and rationally, then it is not longer useful to me. I cease to reap the advantages of citizenship, and so am freed from the obligation to obey as a subject. Of course, this is not what Spinoza says, but it follows from his argument.

Health care is only one issue among many. It serves as an example, however, to establish a basic principle of the Spinozistic state. The Spinozistic state is not merely a

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<sup>112</sup> “*Nam Civitatis Jus potentia multitudinis, quæ una veluti mente ducitur, determinatur. At hæc animorum unio concipi nulla ratione posset, nisi Civitas id ipsum maxime intendat, quod sana ratio omnibus hominibus utile esse docet.*”

Hobbesian contract in which human beings who are essentially social atoms agree not to kill or rob each other without being arrested, tried and sentenced. The state or commonwealth is rather a community of relational beings who come together to help each other to flourish, to prosper, and to grow as rational, as virtuous, and as secure as it is possible for human beings to become.

In the United States of today, our dominant social thinking is contrary to Spinoza's. Many people in America want government and each other "out of their lives." If Spinoza is correct, if society is obligated to "care for the poor," to ensure a basic standard of living, to provide for those who need, then our society is deeply unjust. In fact, it is worse than that. For Spinoza, our society has ceased to be a commonwealth. Since we are not providing the advantages of citizenship, our state has lost the power and force of authority. The goal of civil society, for Spinoza, is to provide security and a basic standard of living to all citizens. That is why it is preferable to live in society. The contemporary United States is not providing that basic standard of living to a great many. With millions remaining without health care coverage, homeless, hungry, shackled with debt, we are failing to provide the proper advantages of being a citizen.<sup>113</sup> As Spinoza puts it: "there are certain conditions that, if operative, entail that subjects will respect and fear their commonwealth, while the absence of these conditions entails the annulment of that fear and respect together with this the destruction of the commonwealth" (TP 4/4).

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<sup>113</sup> For a full account of economic disparity and radical poverty in the United States, see Robert Reich, *Supercapitalism* (102-116).



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