

Spinoza's Account of Blessedness Explored through an Aristotelian Lens

SANEM SOYARSLAN *NC State University*

ABSTRACT: In this article, I examine whether Spinoza's account of blessedness can be identified with a contemplative ideal in the Aristotelian tradition. I first introduce the main features of the Aristotelian life of contemplation and its difference from the life of practically oriented virtues — a difference that is grounded in Aristotle's distinction between praxis and theoria. In highlighting the commonalities between Spinoza's two kinds of adequate cognition — that is, intuitive knowledge and reason — I show that there is no room for a similar distinction in Spinoza, which will enable us to identify intuitive knowledge and its attendant blessedness exclusively with the theoretical activity.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans cet article, j'examine si la description spinozienne de la béatitude peut être identifiée à un idéal contemplatif dans la tradition aristotélicienne. Je présente d'abord les caractéristiques principales de la vie contemplative telle que définie par Aristote ainsi que sa différence avec la vie des vertus orientées vers la pratique — une différence fondée sur la distinction d'Aristote entre praxis et theoria. En mettant en évidence les points communs entre les deux types de connaissance adéquate de Spinoza — c'est-à-dire la connaissance intuitive et la raison —, je montre qu'il n'y a pas de place pour une distinction similaire chez Spinoza, ce qui permettra d'identifier la connaissance intuitive et la béatitude qui l'accompagne exclusivement avec l'activité théorique.

Keywords: happiness, Spinoza, Aristotle, contemplation, blessedness, virtue, *theoria*, *praxis*

Dialogue 60 (2021), 499–524

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Canadian Philosophical Association/Publié par Cambridge University Press au nom de l'Association canadienne de philosophie

doi:10.1017/S001221732100010X

1. Introduction

I pass now to explaining those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal being — not, indeed, all of them, for we have demonstrated (IP16) that infinitely many things must follow from it in infinitely many modes, but only those that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to *the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness*. (*Ethics*, Preface to Part II, my italics)¹

This is how Spinoza prefaces Part II of the *Ethics*. After having introduced the general features of his metaphysics of God in Part I, Spinoza informs his readers in this brief preface that he is narrowing down his focus to one particular member of those things that follow from the essence of God: the human being. This passage, as Henry Allison (1987, p. 84) puts it, provides a clear indication of the ultimately practical orientation of Spinoza's thought and sets the agenda not only for Part II, but for the rest of the *Ethics*. The remainder of Spinoza's masterwork involves an account of the human mind, human affects, human bondage to passive affects, and a search for the conditions of human freedom and happiness, the culmination of which is blessedness (*beatitudo*). For Spinoza, blessedness is a powerful affective state that arises exclusively from a special kind of adequate cognition: intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), which, by definition "proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (EVP25D). Although Spinoza explicitly considers intuitive knowledge as "the greatest virtue of the mind" (EVP25) and "the greatest human perfection" (EVP27D), he gives a frustratingly limited account of what this cognition and its attendant blessedness consist in. We are thus left to our own devices to interpret what exactly he has in mind.

According to a recent reading, Spinoza's blessedness bears an affinity to the ideal of contemplation in Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. Steven Smith (1997), for instance, has interpreted Spinoza as identifying the highest human happiness "exclusively with the contemplative ideal" (p. 142). John Carriero (2014), in explicitly invoking Aristotle, has stated that in the *Ethics* "alongside with the 'mundane' or 'naturalistic' project, there is also what we might think of as a [*Nicomachean Ethics*], Book X project — that is, a 'visio dei' project"

¹ All translations of Spinoza's writings including the *Treatise on the emendation of the intellect* (TdIE), *Ethics* (E), and the *Short treatise on God, man and his well-being* (KV) are those of Edwin Curley in Spinoza (1985). References to the *Ethics* will be by part (I-V), axiom (A), proposition (P), scholium (S), and corollary (C). 'D' indicates a definition (when immediately following a part number) or a demonstration (when immediately following a proposition number). Quotations from the Latin text of the *Ethics* are from the Gebhart edition *Spinoza opera*, ed. Carl Gebhart (1925), reprinted in Spinoza (1999), a bilingual Latin-French edition presented and translated by Bernard Pautrat.

(p. 22), which Carriero takes to regard blessedness.² These interpretations, however, have thus far amounted to little more than suggestions and they deserve further elaboration and consideration. If correct, they would imply that Spinoza's account of blessedness could be aligned with a long Aristotelian tradition, according to which the highest happiness consists in a theoretically excellent yet practically *useless* contemplative ideal that is beyond human goods. Furthermore, insofar as these interpretations take the *Ethics* to include two distinct projects, they would suggest that there is a break within Spinoza's masterwork.

In this article, I will examine whether Spinoza's account of blessedness can *really* be identified with a contemplative ideal in the Aristotelian tradition. In Section 2, I introduce the main features of the Aristotelian life of contemplation and its difference from the life of practically oriented virtues — a difference that is grounded between Aristotle's distinction between *praxis* and *theoria*. In Section 3, I show that there is no room for a similar distinction in Spinoza, which will enable us to identify intuitive knowledge with the theoretical activity. To this end, I highlight the commonalities between intuitive knowledge and reason, which is the other kind of adequate cognition that Spinoza introduces in the *Ethics*. In Section 4, I turn to the differences between Spinoza's two kinds of adequate cognition, which appear to indicate a discontinuity within the *Ethics*. I argue that, contra this appearance, there is no substantive break between reason and intuitive knowledge insofar as the ethics in the *Ethics* is concerned. Throughout the article, I will assume that the goal of Spinoza's ethics is to discover what human freedom consists in and how we — human beings — can attain it, given the constraints that are due to our finite modal status in the Spinozistic universe.³ As will be clear by the end of my article, I consider this a unified goal that is grounded in a single, continuous project, which cannot be completely appreciated without including Spinoza's theory of blessedness in the picture. Even though my focus here will be on the Aristotelian ideal of contemplation specifically, it is important to note that the contemplative life is an ideal that was developed in both Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies.⁴ As I will propose in Section 5, Spinoza's account of blessedness bears more similarity to Plato's account than it does to Aristotle's.

² Bernard Rousset (2004, p. 4) also identifies Aristotle's work as "the model that determined the scheme of the last two parts of the *Ethics*" by noting that "There is a similar distinction, which is almost a rupture, between a practical good defined by prudence and a contemplative good contained in intelligence."

³ C. D. Broad (1930, pp. 15–16) holds a similar view.

⁴ It is important to note that the ideal of contemplation was considered, criticized, and transformed also by philosophers in the Hellenistic and Early Imperial era. See the edited volume by Thomas Bénatouïl and Maura Bonazzi (2012) for a good collection of essays on this era.

2. Aristotle's Account of Happiness

As is well known, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) presents us with Aristotle's account of the ultimate good for human beings, which he identifies as happiness or *eudaimonia*. There has been a long-standing debate over what some perceive as an ambivalence or inconsistency in Aristotle's conception of happiness. For, after expounding on the morally virtuous life in the first nine books, in Book X, he appears to break with this theme in suggesting that the life of *theoria* or contemplation is the perfect happiness or happiness in the primary degree, while the life of practically oriented virtues is instead merely secondary. In this article, I will not delve into the controversial issue as to whether there really is an inconsistency in Aristotle's account of happiness.⁵ Instead, I will highlight two relatively uncontroversial and interrelated features of Aristotle's thought that ground his account of the superiority of the life of *theoria* over the life of practically oriented virtues.⁶

The first feature has to do with Aristotle's separation between the divine and the human.⁷ In Chapters 7 and 8 of Book X of NE, Aristotle distinguishes between the life of practically oriented virtues and the life of *theoria* by calling them "the life man will live insofar as he is man" and "the life man will live insofar as something divine is present in him," respectively. According to Aristotle, the latter kind of life "would be too high for man" since it is the life according to reason (*nous*) — and *nous*, being the divine element in us, is superior to our composite nature, just as its activity is superior to that which is "the exercise of the other kind of virtue," that is, moral virtue. Since moral virtues are in many ways bound up with the passions and the embodied soul, they belong to our composite nature. Although it is clear that, for Aristotle, the excellence of *nous* is a thing separate from the compound of body and soul (NE1178a24), he unfortunately has little to say about the nature of the activity and excellence of *nous*.⁸

⁵ See W. F. R. Hardie (1965), John Ackrill (1980), Richard Kraut (1991), and Gabriel Richardson Lear (2004) for some of the most influential works on this topic.

⁶ Whereas I will only focus on Aristotle's own account here, it is important to note that a prominent thread of medieval Aristotelian thought shares many of the features of Aristotle's ideal of contemplation in NE (despite the difference that in its medieval form this ideal has an explicitly otherworldly quality to it insofar as it can only be fully realized in the afterlife). Thomas Aquinas (1947), for instance, holds that the highest human happiness results from our intellect's functioning at its highest level, which, in turn, is brought about by the direct apprehension of the divine in contemplation.

⁷ As Pierre Aubenque (2002, p. 81) puts it "the fundamental intuition of Aristotle is the separation, the incommensurable distance between man and God" (my translation).

⁸ Whether this notion of separability corresponds to that of the account of the separability and immortality of the agent intellect in *De anima*, is a subject of controversy.

What we do know is this: *theoria*, for Aristotle, is the paradigmatic activity of God, whose form is pure and without matter, and in a state of pure actuality.⁹ Aristotle's *Metaphysics* teaches us that the divine intellect is eternally thinking (1075a10), and that contemplation is continuous for God. By contrast, in human beings, contemplative activity is subject to choice, intermittence, and coupling with other activities. Yet it is still the best, most continuous, most pleasant (NE1177a23), and most self-sufficient (NE1176b5, 1177a27, 1177b21) activity in which we can engage. The ideal of contemplation has been taken to refer to a life chiefly (but not necessarily exclusively) devoted to contemplative activity. It is usually taken to be a life of pure thought wherein the contemplator herself is as self-sufficient (*autarkes*) as a human being can be. And the kind of self-sufficiency here is one that enables the contemplator to isolate herself from others and engage in *theoria*. *Theoria* constitutes perfect happiness and surpasses all other activities in blessedness, for it is the most akin to the activity of God in that it involves using what we can call the 'divine' aspect of our rationality.¹⁰ The secondary happiness, by contrast, involves dealing with "things human" (NE1141b8–10) using what we can call the 'human' aspect of our rationality, which brings us to the second related feature of Aristotle's thought: that is, his demarcation between two different kinds of rational activity having two modally different sorts of objects.

In order to explain this second feature, we need to invoke Aristotle's partition of the soul, according to which the soul has rational and non-rational parts. The non-rational part includes appetitive and nutritive parts, which we share with animals and plants respectively. The rational part is further divided into contemplative and deliberative parts (NE1139a1–15). On the one hand, the contemplative rational part corresponds to the divine aspect of our rationality or the

(continued)

See, for instance, Thomas Nagel (1980, p. 8), Timothy Dean Roche (1988), Michael Wedin (1993), and Victor Caston (1999).

⁹ Although Aristotle does not talk about the attributes of the divine intellect in NE, he does so in *Metaphysics* XII.7–9. According to his account, the divine intellect is separated from sensibles (1073a4), impassible and unalterable (1073a11), without matter (1074a33–34), actuality (1072a25–26, b27–28), most honourable (1074a26), the same as its object (1075 a1–5), prior in time to capacity (1072b25), eternal (1072a25, 1073a4), and the necessary condition of everything (1072b13–14).

¹⁰ Given all this, the contemplative life has often been considered a solitary life, one that is relatively divorced from engagement with others. In this article, I will not attempt to address whether Aristotelian life of contemplation is really a solitary life. Nor will I attempt to answer the controversial issue as to how/whether one can combine *theoria* and morally virtuous activities in a good Aristotelian life. What matters for our purpose is to highlight in what sense Aristotelian life of contemplation is superior to the morally virtuous life.

separable *nous* that contemplates the unchanging, necessary principles of the universe. On the other hand, the deliberative rational part is the human aspect that guides our appetites and passions that arise from the non-rational appetitive part. The appetitive part, albeit non-rational, can be deemed rational insofar as it responds to deliberation and choice and this process grounds the formation of moral virtues according to Aristotelian ethics. Importantly, for Aristotle, in addition to moral virtues or virtues of character, there are also intellectual virtues or virtues of thought including theoretical or philosophic wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Whereas theoretical wisdom indicates the excellence of the contemplative rational part, practical wisdom indicates the excellence of the deliberative rational part.

In Aristotle's words, *sophia* is "scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature. This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like them have philosophic but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and why we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but *useless*; viz. because it is not human goods that they seek" (NE1141b3–9, my italics). Unlike theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom is centrally related to human goods in that "it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect ... but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (NE1140a25–30). Practically wise people have a keen perception in that they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for human beings in general. According to Aristotle, practical wisdom comes about as a result of teaching and experience and one cannot be a morally virtuous person — that is, just, courageous, temperate, etc. ... — without practical wisdom or (conversely) practically wise without being morally virtuous.¹¹

Aristotle's aforementioned demarcation between the divine and the human directly bears on his delineation of practical wisdom. In his words, "... it is absurd to think that Political Science or [Practical wisdom] is the loftiest kind of knowledge, inasmuch as man is not the highest thing in the world" (NE1141a2).¹² Theoretical wisdom is the knowledge of the things that are highest by nature. It involves knowledge of necessary, scientific first principles, and what we can deduce from them. Practical wisdom — unlike theoretical wisdom — "is concerned with *things human* and things about which it is possible to

¹¹ This is due to the unity of the moral virtues and the practical wisdom as presented in NE Book VI, 1144b30–32.

¹² As Aubenque (2002, p. 7) notes, in some of his other works including *Metaphysics*, *De coelo*, *Physics*, and *Topics*, Aristotle, in a way that is similar to Plato, uses *phronesis* to designate the knowledge of the highest form of knowledge — that is the science of the unchanging or philosophical knowledge. However, this changes in NE, which is my main focus in this article.

deliberate” (NE1141b8–10, my italics). And, according to Aristotle, we can deliberate *only* about matters that admit of being otherwise, i.e., what is contingent and not what is necessary and invariable. Thus, it is the contingencies and the variable conditions of life that make possible practical wisdom.

In sum, Aristotelian life of contemplation is grounded in *theoria*, which (a) is the distinctive activity of the (most)¹³ divine element in us, that is, *nous*, and (b) exclusively involves the understanding of divine things that are necessary.¹⁴ The morally virtuous life, by contrast, is grounded in *praxis* and practical wisdom, which concerns “things human” — that is, human action in the realm of the contingent.¹⁵ Given this, can we plausibly attribute (a) and (b) to Spinoza’s intuitive knowledge and its attendant blessedness so we can consider it a contemplative ideal in the Aristotelian sense?

3. Is Spinozistic Blessedness an Aristotelian Contemplative Ideal?

In what follows, I will present three reasons that suggest that Spinozistic blessedness cannot be identified with an Aristotelian contemplative ideal. These reasons have to do with how Spinoza conceives of the distinction between the divine and the human, modality in relation to objects of knowledge, and the intellect as “the better part” (EIVPAppendixXXXII) of us. I begin with the first reason.

For Spinoza, as is well known, God is the only substance; it is “a being absolutely infinite ... consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (1D6). Everything else is in God as a mode or an affection of God. Singular things — for example, human beings, chairs, carrots, and animals — are all finite modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (EIP25C and EIID7). The difference between God and human beings is thus one between an absolutely infinite substance and its finite modes. It is also the difference between a free cause and

¹³ According to Wedin (1993, p. 151), if we qualify and situate *theoria* relative to other activities of man by granting that *nous* is the most divine element in us, this would let us deny that man, insofar as his divine element is concerned, has an unintelligible nature, thereby avoiding a bifocal anthropology in which man has two essences, one a divine one. For the idea that Aristotle espouses a bifocal anthropology, see Dominic Scott (1999).

¹⁴ I should note that given that *theoria* is subject to choice and intermittence in human life, it makes sense to think that whether to engage in *theoria* would be a contingent matter — one that is open to deliberation. This, nonetheless, does not change the indisputable fact that, for Aristotle, the object of contemplation itself is never contingent.

¹⁵ Importantly, Aristotle distinguishes *praxis* from *poiesis* as follows “action and making are different kinds of thing, since making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing, the end cannot be other than the act itself” (1140 b1–5).

its effects. For Spinoza, “God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists only from the necessity of his nature ... and acts from the necessity of his nature ...” (EIP17C2). Everything else, including human beings, follow from and are caused by God (EIP16, EIP16C1).

Importantly, that Spinoza conceives of these differences between God and human beings does not mean that he takes the former to be the transcendent cause of the latter. For him, God is the immanent — not transcendent — cause of everything. In his words, “God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself” (EIP25S). This, as Spinoza explains, follows clearly from the fact that singular things “*express* in a certain and determinate way, *God’s power*, by which God is and acts” (EIIIP6D, my italics).¹⁶ Accordingly, on Spinoza’s view, the power of singular things is that very power by which God is the cause of himself.¹⁷ As Spinoza puts it,

The power by which the singular things (and consequently, [any] man) preserve their being is the power itself of God *or* Nature (by IP24C), not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it is explained through the man’s essence (by IIIP7). The man’s power, therefore, insofar as it is explained through his actual essence, is part of God *or* Nature’s infinite power, that is (by IP34), of its essence. (EIVP4D)

All this shows that, despite the aforementioned differences, the ontological gap between the divine and the human does not exist in Spinoza in the way it does in Aristotle. For Spinoza, from an ontological point of view, human beings are not different in kind from the rest of nature, which he famously identifies with God. Accordingly, human actions and affects are not a separate, inferior *kind* of phenomena that are subject to different, less precise rules than the loftier divine phenomena. On the contrary, they need to be explained by the universal laws and rules of nature, which are the same everywhere. In Spinoza’s words,

... *Nature is always the same*, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, that is, *the laws and rules of Nature*, according to which all things

¹⁶ For a detailed treatment of the role and importance of expression in Spinoza’s metaphysics, see Gilles Deleuze (1992). For an account of how Spinoza’s conception of expression relates to his account of efficient causality, see Martin Lin (2004).

¹⁷ As Lin (2004) notes, Spinoza diverges from the traditional view represented by Aquinas in that — on Spinoza’s account — the power of creatures does not resemble or imitate the power of God. Rather it is that very power, but in a finite form. As Lin insightfully observes, this difference lies in the fact that whereas, for Spinoza, God is the immanent cause of all creatures, the traditional view represented by Aquinas views God as a transcendent cause. On Spinoza’s account of power, see also Valtteri Viljanen (2007) and (2011).

happen, and change from one from to another, *are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature.*

The affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, and the like, considered in themselves, follow with the same necessity and force of Nature as the other singular things ... Therefore, I shall treat the nature and powers of the affects, and the power of the mind over them, by the same method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the mind, and *I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies.* (Preface to EIII, my italics)

Spinoza expresses a similar idea in EIIP7 and its scholium, in which he establishes an important feature of attributes and modes. After stating in EIIP7 that “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” Spinoza explains in the following scholium that “... whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of extension, or under the attribute of thought, or under any attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, that is, that the same things follow one another” (EIIP7S). In Spinoza’s system, then, just as there is no ontological gap between the divine and the human and between the human and the rest of nature, there is also no substantial divide between the extended body and the thinking mind. Since there is only one substance, that is God or nature, and since nature is always the same, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes under any attribute. And, in this order, there is no room for contingency, which brings us to the second reason that suggests that Spinozistic blessedness cannot be identified with an Aristotelian contemplative ideal. This second reason has to do with how Spinoza conceives of modality.

Recall that, according to Aristotle, *theoria* differs from *praxis* in that it exclusively concerns that which is eternal, necessary and unchanging, rather than contingent affairs of human life. The ability to navigate well things human in the realm of contingency indicates a certain kind of knowledge and wisdom — that is, practical wisdom. In order to compare this to Spinoza and appreciate how modality plays out in the Spinozistic epistemology, we need to first introduce his classification of cognition. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of cognition (*cognitio*)¹⁸: opinion or imagination (*opinio vel imaginatio*), cognition of the first kind; reason (*ratio*), cognition of the second kind; and intuitive, cognition of the third kind. In EIIP40S2, Spinoza describes cognition of

¹⁸ Note that the English translation of Spinoza’s term ‘*cognitio*’ as ‘knowledge’ is well established. However, Jonathan Bennett (1984) and Don Garrett (2010) use the cognate term ‘cognition’ instead since Spinoza’s ‘*cognitio*’ includes within its scope ideas that he characterizes as ‘inadequate’ and ‘false.’ In this article, I use ‘cognition’ and ‘knowledge’ interchangeably.

the first kind as arising from two main sources: 1) from a mutilated and confused perception of singular things that have been represented to us through the senses, which Spinoza also calls knowledge from random experience (*experientia vaga*), and 2) from signs (*ex signis*), such as from the fact that we recollect things through our memory or imagination. In the same scholium, he defines reason and intuitive knowledge as follows:

It is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions ... from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of properties of things. This I shall call reason (*rationem*) and the second kind of knowledge. In addition ... there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*). And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the ... essence of things. (EIIP40S2)

For Spinoza, neither memory or imagination, nor sense-perception can provide us with an understanding following the order of the intellect. Instead, imagination or cognition of the first kind is the only cause of falsity (EIIP41) and consists in inadequate and confused ideas on which the passions depend (EIIP3). These confused ideas offer a relative and partial picture of how things presently *seem* to us from a given perspective at a given moment in time.¹⁹ Unlike imagination, reason and intuitive knowledge are both “necessarily true” (EIIP41) and consist in adequate ideas.²⁰ They both consist in regarding things as *sub specie aeternitatis* (EIIP44C2D), i.e., knowing things by conceiving of them under the aspect of eternity or from the point of view of eternity, i.e., without any relation to time. Moreover, they both lead to understanding,²¹ which provides power over the harmful passions.

After this brief introduction, we can now compare Spinoza’s account to that of Aristotle and see how different it is from the latter. According to Spinoza,

¹⁹ This is a picture full of errors, such as imagining that the sun is about 200 feet away from us just because we are “ignorant of its true distance” (EIIP35S). The error here does not lie in how the sun appears to us *per se*. It consists in the privation of knowledge. For Spinoza, “falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve” (EIIP35).

²⁰ Moreover, since only reason and intuition can provide adequate ideas, they alone teach us “to distinguish true from false” (EIIP42). For Spinoza, an adequate idea is one that has all the internal denominations (notably, intellectual clarity and distinctness) of a true idea (EIID4). A true idea is one that fully agrees with what it represents (EIA6).

²¹ For Spinoza, the power of the mind is defined by understanding (*intelligentiā*). Since both sorts of adequate knowledge increase the power of the mind, they are coextensive with understanding.

both kinds of adequate cognition — that is, both reason and intuitive knowledge — consist in regarding things “truly . . . , namely, as they are in themselves, that is, not as contingent but as necessary” (EIP44D). Furthermore, for Spinoza — unlike Aristotle — there’s no wisdom or adequate cognition that is associated with contingency. For Aristotle, practical wisdom requires not only a general understanding of happiness, but also deliberating about and choosing the particular means to achieve happiness, which presupposes that we have free will.²² For Spinoza, by contrast, “deliberation of the mind, or free decision” (*consensum vel animi deliberationem seu liberum decretum*) is a fiction (EIP48), for it assumes that we can deliberate about and choose our actions in a free undetermined way.²³ In Spinoza’s metaphysics, there is no realm of contingency or the possibility of an underdetermined will in reality. As he clearly puts it “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way” (EIP29). While he does not deny that we perceive things as contingent, he considers this to be an epistemic flaw: “But a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge” (EIP33S). In other words, “. . . it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future” (EIP44C). So, just as believing that we have free will is an error that depends on imagination, regarding human actions as contingent also depends on imagination and its inadequate ideas.

In sum, then, in the Spinozistic picture, knowledge of necessity and the unchanging nature of things is tracked by both reason and intuitive knowledge, not just by intuitive knowledge. And regarding things as contingent is relegated to a lower state of cognition — that is, imagination, which is inadequate knowledge as it lacks a causal understanding of nature. Whereas Aristotle famously recommends seeking different levels of precision in different sciences, and explains that practical knowledge cannot be and should not be expected to be as exact as theoretical knowledge (NE1094b23–27, see also NE1104a1–7), Spinoza draws no such line.²⁴ Any cognition that lacks precision in this picture, according to Spinoza, would do so because it depends on imagination and involves privation of knowledge or understanding. And, by contrast, any cognition that tracks necessity and precision depends on the intellect, which brings us

²² For Aristotle’s account of voluntary action, see NE Book III, section 1.

²³ EIIIDefaff6Expl: “I say it is a property in the lover, that he wills to join himself to the thing loved, I do not understand by will a consent, or a deliberation of the mind, or free decision (for we have demonstrated that this is a fiction in IIP48).”

²⁴ As it was helpfully noted by an anonymous referee, Spinoza’s view here is similar to that of René Descartes, who also rejects the Aristotelian idea of looking for different levels of precision in different sciences. See especially his first and second rules in his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (1998).

to the third reason that Spinozistic blessedness cannot be identified with an Aristotelian contemplative ideal.

As seen earlier, for Aristotle *theoria* is the activity of the *nous* or the intellect, which he takes to be the (most) divine thing in us. Now, let us see what Spinoza says about the intellect. As he describes the intellect, he calls it the “part of us which is defined by understanding,” “part of the mind that is eternal,” (EVP40C) and “the better part of us” (EIVPAppendixXXXII).²⁵ When Spinoza calls intellect the better part of us, however, he does so by contrasting intellect to imagination — not by contrasting intellect to a different kind of rationality, as Aristotle does. This is because, for Spinoza, intuitive knowledge does not exclusively constitute the intellect, nor do intuitive ideas alone form the part of the mind that is eternal. According to Spinoza, reason and intuitive knowledge both constitute the intellect (EVP40C) — that is, the “part of the mind that is eternal” (EVP40C).

Furthermore, it is important to note that, despite the fact that the word “part” appears here, Spinoza does not really assign parts to the mind in the way Aristotle divides or compartmentalizes the soul. As we have seen before, Aristotle identifies the governing aspect of an individual with the deliberative subset of the rational part, while attributing a divine quality to the contemplative subset of the same. Both of these rational subsets are distinguished from the non-rational part — including the appetitive subset — that we share with animals. In the Spinozistic picture, by contrast, the mind is not constituted of different natures or parts, such as divine, human, and animal; it is simply formed of ideas, in which our mental power resides. For Spinoza, as Michael Della Rocca (2008, p. 125) puts it, ideas constitute the only source of our volitions²⁶ at the mental level.²⁷ More specifically, our mental power to believe something, to reach a judgement, or to act on a judgement does not reside in a separate faculty (*facultas*) that can be called “the will” — a notion that he takes to be a fiction (EIIP48S).²⁸ Since there is no will over and above ideas, we do just

²⁵ As Justin Steinberg (2018, p. 191) rightly notes, for Spinoza, the intellect and the imagination are not faculties.

²⁶ Importantly, in denying separate acts of the will, Spinoza does not deny that there are volitions. He merely holds that “singular volitions” — which he equates with affirmations (or denials) (EIIP48S and EIIP49) — “and ideas are one and the same” (EIIP49CD).

²⁷ See also Michael Della Rocca (2003) for the view that, for Spinoza, all mental states are of a single kind and that the affects of the mind are all ideas (or, are to be explained solely in terms of ideas). See also Lin (2006, p. 402).

²⁸ For Spinoza, there is no such thing as an absolute faculty that can be called “the will,” any more than there is some absolute faculty that can be called “the understanding” (EIIP48S). Such faculties distinct from any actual idea or particular act of the mind

as our ideas determine us to do.²⁹ Consequently, whenever two opposing ideas exert power at the same time, we end up doing what the more powerful one determines us to do, not what a separate governing part dictates over an inferior animalistic part. In Spinoza's system, then, the Aristotelian distinction between a governing practical part and contemplative theoretical part does not exist. Nor does the corresponding distinction between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom or, even more fundamentally, the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues.

For Spinoza, whereas the better part of us or the intellect is constituted by adequate ideas, this does not mean that we have a *worse* part in us. Unlike Aristotle, who takes passions as arising from the non-rational or animalistic appetitive part of the soul, Spinoza does not think that we have a lower, non-rational, inferior part *in* us that houses the passions. For Spinoza, passions are just inadequate ideas that are caused in part by external things, which he contrasts with adequate ideas that are caused from within. So, in lieu of innate inferior tendencies or appetites in the Aristotelian picture, we have an ineliminable externality in the Spinozistic one.³⁰ For Spinoza, we all have inadequate ideas and we are all subject to passions (albeit to different degrees), simply because we are all finite modes that are externally determined by other finite modes.

These three reasons suggest that, for Spinoza, intuitive knowledge does not enjoy a distinctive privilege over reason in constituting the intellect alone or exclusively involving the understanding of divine things that are necessary, rather than human things that are contingent. Since the relatively clear distinction that Aristotle draws between theoretical and practical rationality does not exist in the Spinozistic picture, it does not appear that we can plausibly identify Spinoza's blessedness with a contemplative ideal in the Aristotelian sense. The reasons I have presented in this section — especially the second and third reasons — highlight the commonalities between reason and intuitive knowledge. Whereas it is crucial not to overlook what is common to these two kinds of

(continued)

“are either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings or universals which we are used to forming from particulars . . .” (EIIIP48S).

²⁹ Spinoza does not consider ideas as being akin to “mute pictures on a panel” (EIIIP49S2) passively waiting for the will to bring them to life.

³⁰ In Spinoza's words, “As all things whereof man is the efficient cause are necessarily good, no evil can befall man except through external causes . . .” (EIVApp, cap6). As Lin (2006) puts it aptly, “Instead of identifying the rational and governing aspect of an individual with some subset of its parts, [Spinoza] holds that all innate tendencies are rational. Only desires that are alien — i.e., those whose existence is owed in part to an external cause — are irrational, and require domination” (p. 414). Sam Newlands (2018) also notes that “the deepest cause of interpersonal conflict is externality, of which being torn by passions is an unhappy consequence” (p. 208).

adequate cognition, there are also differences between them that may turn out to be problematic for my reading in suggesting a discontinuity in Spinoza's account. Therefore, before we can reach a final verdict, we need to consider some of these differences, which bring us to the fourth section.

4. Spinoza's Distinction between Reason and Intuitive Knowledge

As seen earlier, reason by its definition, constitutes a way by which we can "perceive many things and form *universal* notions" (EIP40S2, my italics) based on our apprehension of common notions and adequate ideas of properties of things.³¹ Common notions, which Spinoza calls elsewhere "the foundations of our reasoning" (EIP40S1), are adequate ideas that represent permanent and pervasive features of nature such as common properties of bodies including "extension" and "motion and rest" (EII2D).³² They express an *objective universality* rather than an illusionary and fictional universality, in that they represent real agreements in nature, which are expressions of God's power and his eternal and infinite nature.³³ When we understand things through common notions, we attain a causal understanding of things and obtain a detached and objective viewpoint from which we can rise above our imaginative knowledge of things (including ourselves), and thereby, remove our errors.

Despite the aforementioned qualities that reason shares with intuitive knowledge, there are significant differences between these two kinds of adequate

³¹ For an account of many uses of reason, see Michael LeBuffe (2018).

³² This, nonetheless, does not mean that there are only common notions concerning bodies. Following the famous EIP7 guaranteeing the parallelism of things and ideas, we can, presumably, conclude that, just as there are common notions concerning bodies, there are also common notions concerning ideas or minds. For an account of common notions concerning minds, see Christian Lazzeri (1998).

³³ Martial Gueroult (1974, p. 387). Common notions, for Spinoza, are not abstract and fictitious ideas, such as transcendentals and universals (EIP40S1). According to him, an abstract idea such as "rational animal" arises when our capacity of being affected is exceeded and we are content with imagining instead of comprehending. To the extent that an abstraction consists in explaining things by means of images, it presupposes fiction. It is important to note, however, that, for Spinoza, not all abstractions are fictions. "Being of reason" (*entia rationis*), for instance, "are in our intellect and not in Nature; so these are only our work, and they help us to understand things distinctly" (KV1, X). Beings of reason, such as the idea of a perfect man, are thus abstract and ideal constructs whose function is to aid in our reasoning. Unlike fictitious abstractions, which are fictitious and subjective, beings of reason are objective and legitimate abstractions. This is because, unlike fictitious abstractions, they are the product of our reason. Even though Spinoza does not give an account of "beings of reason" in the *Ethics*, he does make use of ideals, including, most importantly, "the free man" in Part IV.

cognition, which together explain why Spinoza considers intuitive knowledge more powerful than reason. With respect to its method, intuitive knowledge is a more direct and immediate form of cognition than reason. Whereas reason deduces its conclusions from common notions, intuition grasps the truth in an immediate and direct manner, “in one glance” (EIP40S2), without having to appeal to any such mediation. Furthermore, intuitive knowledge differs from reason both in terms of its foundation and its representative content.³⁴ Recall that intuitive knowledge, by definition starts “from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God” (EVP25D), which is nothing but an adequate knowledge of the essence of God itself.³⁵ According to Spinoza, the foundation of intuitive knowledge is “the knowledge of God” (EVP20S), namely, adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence. Intuitive knowledge consists in inferring from this foundation adequate knowledge of the essence of things.³⁶ Whereas intuitive knowledge thus reaches adequate knowledge of the essences of things, reason can afford us with only a limited understanding of singular things, including ourselves, through their common properties. And common properties of things, for Spinoza, “do not constitute the essence of any singular thing” (EIIP37). Notably, whereas Spinoza describes reason as a “universal” knowledge, he describes intuitive knowledge as the “knowledge of singular things” (EVP36S). As I see it, this is because intuitive knowledge relates to the essences of singular things, which are not really distinguished from singular things themselves (EIID2). As seen earlier, for Spinoza, every singular thing is a certain and determinate expression of God’s essence or power. The essence of a singular thing is its actual essence, which Spinoza identifies as the power or “striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being” (EIIP7). It is a partial expression of God’s infinite and eternal essence or God’s very power manifested in a finite form (EIVP4D). Attaining intuitive knowledge of singular things is

³⁴ Note that, due to Spinoza’s limited treatment of the distinction between reason and intuitive knowledge in the *Ethics*, the nature of the superiority of intuitive knowledge has been the subject of some controversy among commentators such as Spencer Carr (1978), Henry Allison (1987), Ronald Sandler (2005), Steven Nadler (2006), Garrett (2010), and Kristin Primus (2017). For the purposes of this article, rather than delving into the details of this scholarly controversy, I present an overview of my own account of this subject, which I defend in detail in Sanem Soyarslan (2016).

³⁵ In Spinoza’s metaphysics, attributes are fundamentally different expressions of God’s eternal existence and reality, and they constitute God’s essence (EID4).

³⁶ The inferential character of intuition is explicit in EIIP47S, EVP36S, as well as the very definition of intuitive knowledge in EIP40S2. Thus as Garrett (2010, pp. 109–110) notes, although the term “intuitiva” suggests a style of cognition that is direct and immediate, we can distinguish between discrete cognitive steps in Spinoza’s intuitive knowledge, which might be taken instantaneously in a sufficiently powerful mind.

thus just our intuitive, “in one glance” (*uno intuitu*) (EIIP40S2) grasp or *seeing* of the relation of God’s essence to their essences, which gives rise to our highest happiness, that is, blessedness.

Having given this brief account of intuitive knowledge and its difference from reason, I will further elaborate on the respective foundations of these two kinds of adequate cognition: that is, knowledge of God and common notions. In EIIP47, Spinoza states that “the human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence,” which means that the foundation of intuitive knowledge is already available to us. In the scholium that follows Spinoza explains why, despite the availability of this foundation, most people do not have true knowledge of God. In his words,

But that men do not have so clear a knowledge of God as they do of the common notions comes from the fact that they cannot imagine God, as they can bodies, and that they have conjoined the name God to the images of things which they are used to seeing. Men can hardly avoid this, because they are continually affected by external bodies. (EIIP47S, my italics)

As seen in this passage, the fact that we can imagine bodies helps to enhance the clarity of our knowledge of common notions. Common notions represent properties of actually existing *bodies*, which we not only adequately cognize but also can vividly imagine. Hence, imagination can sometimes facilitate rather than obstruct common notions by adding to their intellectual evidence some sensible evidence. Unlike common notions, “the knowledge of God,” which comprehends the essence of God, cannot be imagined in any way.³⁷ By thus distinguishing the knowledge of God from common notions, Spinoza makes use of a distinction between those things that can be imagined, like the bodies, and those that can never be imagined, like God. In a famous letter to Lodewijk Meyer (Letter XII), Spinoza makes a similar distinction as he warns against the failure to distinguish between “that which we can apprehend *only* by the intellect and not by the imagination,” and “that which can *also* be apprehended by imagination” (Letter XII, my italics). As Spinoza states, “... there are many things which we cannot at all grasp by the imagination, but only by the intellect (such as Substance, God, Eternity, etc.)” (Letter XII). Once we use Spinoza’s distinction in Letter XII to make sense of Spinoza’s point in EIIP47S, we see that, whereas the essence of God can be apprehended only by the intellect, common properties that are represented by common notions can be apprehended by not only intellect, but also by imagination.

The connection between reason and imagination can also be seen once we examine some of the ethical functions that Spinoza attributes to reason in Part

³⁷ R. J. Delahunty (1985, p. 75) invokes this passage in order to support his view that there is an empirical element in common notions.

IV and the beginning of Part V. This segment of the *Ethics* includes his view of reason as the ground of collaborative morality among human beings and his account of reason's remedies for the harmful passions. To begin with the former, according to Spinoza's account of collaborative morality, i.e., sustained mutually beneficial cooperation among human beings, rational understanding of ourselves and one another through our shared aspects leads to the comprehension that for a human being there is nothing more valuable than another human being, who lives according to the guidance of reason (EIVP35C1). Notably, as we saw earlier, even though from an ontological point of view "things human" do not carve out a special domain grounded in reality, Spinoza bases his whole doctrine of collaborative morality on the species-bound notion of human nature. For instance, in order to explain why there is nothing more useful to a man than another man, he says the following: "insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things which are good for *human nature*, and hence, for each man, that is (by 31C), those things which agree with the nature of each man" (EIVP35D, my italics; see also EIIIP57S and EIVP37S1). As I read Spinoza, human nature indicates the adequately cognizable affinities and commonalities among human beings, including most particularly the capacity to reason or to be determined by adequate ideas.³⁸ Human nature is thus not a concept of imagination; it does not correspond to a partial and subjective perception of the likeness between ourselves and others through imagination. Such a partial and subjective perception is related to Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of the affects, which is designed to explain how we can feel compassion for others, feel their joys and sorrows, even when we have not experienced any prior affect for them, simply because they are "like us."³⁹ Even though Spinoza does not present "likeness" as something to be adequately cognized in this context, it is plausible to suggest that our perceptual/imaginative grasp of the likeness between ourselves and others and the resultant fellow-feeling can sometimes facilitate our rational cognition of the commonalities and affinities that we share with our fellow humans and allow us to reach agreement on ends.

To turn to reason's second ethical function, knowledge of the affects is one of the chief remedies for the passions that Spinoza introduces in the first half of Part

³⁸ See Genevieve Lloyd (1994, p. 160) for a similar idea. For an excellent treatment of what Spinoza understands by "human nature" in connection with his account of our *summum bonum*, see Karolina Hübner (2014). As Hübner notes, Spinoza's disproportionate focus on human beings to the neglect of other kinds of things follows from his conviction that the highest degree of resemblance is found among human beings — the only things that have reason for their essence.

³⁹ As Spinoza says "If we imagine a thing *like us*, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with the same affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect" (EIIIP27, my italics). Regarding the importance of using imagination and passions to achieve cooperation, see Susan James (2011) and Steinberg (2018).

V of the *Ethics*.⁴⁰ For him “an affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it” (EVP3). In other words, when we manage “to approach [ourselves and our emotions] from the outside” (Yovel, 1992, p. 164) through the mediation of common notions and attain knowledge of our affects through these notions, we can turn these passions into active affects, according to Spinoza.⁴¹ In this remedy, reason engages with imagination in that passions that are supposed to be adequately known and, thereby, turned into active affects are inadequate ideas of imagination. To the extent that passions are inadequate ideas of imagination, they involve “privation of knowledge” (EIIIP35) — that is, they are errors. Once we form a clear and distinct idea of an affect, which is a passion, it “ceases to be a passion” (EVP3). This is because the error that the passion involves is removed and replaced by adequate ideas, thereby integrating the affect into a new and entirely internal causal chain.⁴² Imagination comes into play in a more active role when perfect knowledge of our affects is unavailable to us. In Spinoza’s words,

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or* sure maxims of life, to commit them to *memory*, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our *imagination* will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready. For example, we have laid it down as a maxim of life (see IVP46 and P46S) that hate is to be conquered by love, *or* nobility, not by repaying it with hate in return ... (EVP10S, my italics).

On my reading of Spinoza, to the extent that these maxims are grounded in the laws of nature, which, as we have seen, are always and everywhere the same,

⁴⁰ For Spinoza’s list of all the remedies, see EVP20S. For the purposes of this article, I will not address the remaining remedies in the list, nor will I delve into the scholarly debates regarding them. Nevertheless, it is useful to note that forming clear and distinct ideas of affects (or knowledge of the affects, which is the second remedy in the list) and the first remedy in the list — i.e., separating the affects from the thought of an external cause (which we imagine confusedly) and joining them to true thoughts are, in fact, just different expressions of the same mechanism: re-ordering our ideas according to the order of the intellect, and thereby rightly ordering and connecting the affections of the body. For a treatment of these two remedies together, see Colin Marshall (2012).

⁴¹ For him, since “there is no affection of the body, whereof we cannot form some clear and distinct conception” (EVP4), there is no affect of which we cannot form a clear and distinct idea (EVP4C).

⁴² I will not delve into the apparently paradoxical nature of Spinoza’s demonstration of EVP3. See Margaret Wilson (1990) and Jean Marie Beysade (1990) for an interesting debate on this.

they do not carve out a specific domain that exclusively applies to contingent and changing human actions. However, as this passage suggests, even though these maxims of life are grounded in reason to the extent that they are rules of reason, they may need to be applied to particular cases with the help of imagination.⁴³

This brief analysis of the connection between reason and imagination and what I earlier stated about the un-imaginability of the knowledge of God may suggest that there is a break between reason and intuitive knowledge insofar as their relation to imagination is concerned. While I do not deny that there is a significant difference between reason and intuitive knowledge in this regard, I do not consider this difference to indicate a problematic break in the *Ethics*. On the contrary, I think that reason and intuitive knowledge are on a continuum insofar as the ethics of the *Ethics* is concerned, which brings me to the final section.

5. Spinoza's Blessedness as a Useful Ideal of Contemplation

Spinoza's ethical project provides an account of "the mind's power over the affects and its freedom" (EVP42S). For Spinoza, our highest freedom or blessedness consists in "perfecting the intellect," which is "nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature" (EIVApp4). However, unlike Aristotle's theoretically excellent yet practically "useless" ideal of contemplation, Spinozistic blessedness is described as something "especially useful" (EIVApp4). After introducing the definition of intuitive knowledge in Part II of the *Ethics*, Spinoza promises that he will speak of the "excellence and utility" (EII47S) of this superior kind of cognition in Part V. He keeps his promise and provides an account of the excellence and utility of intuitive knowledge in the second half of Part V. In this admittedly and frustratingly concise account, what we learn is that blessedness "is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself" (EVP42) and that it not only consists in

⁴³ For an excellent account of Spinoza's dictates of reason and how they relate to imagination, see Steinberg (2014). For an insightful analysis of Spinoza's dictates of reason and his account of the right way of living through the lens of Aristotelian practical wisdom, see Frédéric Manzini (2009, pp. 43–54). As I read Spinoza, it follows from our preceding discussion that, for him, there is no robust distinction between, say, purely theoretical principles, which only regard unchanging, necessary laws of nature, and practical principles of reason. In holding this, I follow Donald Rutherford (2008, p. 499), who argues that the dictates of reason, for Spinoza, are at once normative and theoretical principles. As Rutherford notes, in this respect, Spinoza diverges from the traditional construal of dictates of reason *qua* practical principles, which only carry normative authority for an agent insofar as they express what an agent ought to do. For an elaborate treatment of this interesting issue, see Rutherford (2008). See also Lloyd (1994) for her account of how Spinoza differs from Descartes in his implied refutation of the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge.

perfecting the intellect but also, at the same time, is centrally connected to the practical quest of moderating and restraining the passions. In Spinoza's words, "the more the mind enjoys blessedness, the more it understands ... that is, the greater the power it has over the affects, and ... the less it is acted on by evil affects" (EVP42D). At the very end of the *Ethics*, after discussing the affective power of blessedness, Spinoza states: "with this I have finished all the things I wished to show concerning the mind's power over the affects and its freedom" (EVP42S). This suggests that he sees his ethical project in the *Ethics* as a continuous one that is complete only once he finishes presenting his account of the intuitive knowledge in the second half of Part V.

Before I conclude, some clarification on the usefulness of blessedness is in order. According to my reading of Spinoza, as I show in detail in Soyarslan (2014), blessedness provides such an effective power in the face of the passions because it constitutes the culmination of human freedom, a transformative ascent consisting of three stages. In the initial stage of this ascent, which is the imaginative stage, we are in bondage to the harmful passions and we are prone to errors, such as thinking that we have free will due to our ignorance of the universe and our place in it. In this "ordinary life" (TdIE, [3]), we are in a fluctuating state of mind, since we are mostly affected by ordinary love, the objects of which are external and transient goods like honour, sensual pleasure, and wealth. In the second stage, which I call the 'rational stage,' we are more powerful, connected, and active than we are in the imaginative stage. For we are now able to understand things, including ourselves and our emotions, as they are, remove the errors of imagination *via* common notions, and form relatively stable connections with our fellow humans by adequately cognizing our similarities *qua* human. Despite the significance of these achievements and the fact that reason constitutes a way of understanding things according to the order of the intellect, however, the rational stage does not constitute the peak of the ascent. The ascent culminates in the intuitive stage, wherein we gain a new self-awareness or insight, which, in turn, is brought about by the realization of how we relate to God. This insight is not just beyond the pursuit of the aforementioned external goods. It is also beyond an objective and detached knowledge of nature and our place in it and beyond an identification with humanity, which are both achievements of the rational stage. This is an insight into our very metaphysical existence and our eternity as modes of God.

For Spinoza, "the more each of us is able to achieve in this kind of knowledge, the more he is conscious of himself and of God that is, the more perfect and blessed [we are] ..." (EVP31S).⁴⁴ Being conscious of ourselves and of God

⁴⁴ I think, here, it is clear from the context that self-consciousness implies adequate self-knowledge. Note, however, that there are passages such as EVP34S where consciousness does not imply adequate knowledge. Whether Spinoza has a consistent and developed account of consciousness is a disputed issue. See Nadler (2008) and

means seeing or grasping in one glance the relation between God's essence and our essence. It consists in inferring from the foundation of intuitive knowledge — that is, knowledge of God — the adequate knowledge of our essence or our power. When I intuitively grasp my power as a manifestation of God's power, I achieve a deep causal understanding, which is marked by an experienced character. This is not a random, sense-perception-based experience, but an intellectual experience of being in God, of our eternity. Our "blessedness, *or* freedom" consists "in a constant and eternal love of God" (EVP36S), which Spinoza calls intellectual love of God. While ordinary love is directed to transient things and fluctuates because of this, the intellectual love of God does not fluctuate easily as its object, God, is an eternal and unchanging being. When the mind is affected by this love and blessedness, it reaches a peaceful state that does not easily fluctuate. Notably, blessedness, for Spinoza, is not only a state of perfect joy, it is also one of peace of mind. The blessed or wise person is one who is "conscious of himself, and of God, and of things ... never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind" (EVP42S).

This state of true peace of mind, however, is not one that carries us beyond good and evil. The very fact that blessedness is the highest good for us suggests that it is not a transcendent state that is beyond good and evil; it is a state of perfection that is relative to us. In attaining blessedness we do not/cannot thereby achieve complete freedom or self-determination and move beyond good and evil. Relatedly, that the foundation of intuitive knowledge cannot be imagined does not mean that imagination is out of the picture when we attain intuitive knowledge and blessedness. This is because, as I mentioned earlier, as finite modes determined by other finite modes, we are always externally determined to a certain extent, which means that in each human mind some ideas are necessarily mutilated and confused ideas of imagination and insofar as the mind has these ideas, we are ineliminably acted on — that is, subject to passions. The mind of an intuitive knower is no exception to this. Given Spinoza's doctrine of power of ideas, no ideas — not even the intuitive ones — can provide boundless power in the face of passions, even though the imaginative part constitutes the smallest part of the mind.

On my reading, even though the transformative ascent does not culminate in a change in our ontological status *qua* finite modes, it does bring about a significant change in perspective: we are able to focus on the right objects of desire in accordance with the order of the intellect as we also come to terms with the implications of our ineliminable weakness *qua* finite modes.⁴⁵ The new insight

(continued)

LeBuffe (2010) for two interesting assessments of consciousness in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

⁴⁵ For the view that Spinoza never loses sight of our ineliminable weakness as finite modes and how it relates to his conception of wisdom, see Soyarslan (2018).

that is brought about by the intuitive stage thus helps reorder our desires in the most effective way as it involves the greatest power of the human mind, i.e., blessedness. Moving from love and pursuit of transient objects in ordinary life to the pursuit of the perfection of the intellect and intellectual love of God is almost like accomplishing the very Socratic mission of turning around of the soul towards the right objects of desire.

In the *Republic*, Socrates tells Adeimantus that “someone whose mind is truly directed to things that are has not the leisure to look down at human affairs and be filled with malice and hatred as a result of their disputes. Instead, as he looks at and contemplates things that are orderly and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it being all in a rational order, he *imitates* them and tries to *become* as like them as he can” (Plato, 2004, 500c, my italics). I think that if we are to liken Spinozistic blessedness to a contemplative ideal, perhaps it should be to the Platonic one rather than the Aristotelian ideal. Recall that, according to Aristotle, the life of contemplation is perfect happiness, since it is directed at the knowledge of divine things and thus consists in a disinterested pursuit of truth. For Plato, by contrast, contemplating the forms or “things that are” (Plato, 2004, 500c) is not just a theoretical, but also a practical endeavour insofar as it involves their imitation as well. Even though Plato is similar to Aristotle in distinguishing different parts or aspects of the soul, including the rational part, he does not make a further distinction between practical and theoretical aspects of rationality and wisdom, as Aristotle does.⁴⁶ The rational part of the soul, according to Plato, desires knowledge or truth *tout court* and the virtue that is associated with the rational part is wisdom (*sophia*). *Sophia* consists in knowledge of the forms and the imitation of their order in acting and ruling.

Plato’s philosopher king is the epitome of wisdom — the person who has achieved the dialectical ascent and understands the reality as it is, without the

⁴⁶ To be sure, there are many more important differences between Plato and Spinoza. To name a few, for Plato, not everyone can be a philosopher king; only those who have the best nature that is suited to undertake this task can. For Spinoza, having access to knowledge, even the highest kind of knowledge — that is, intuitive knowledge, is not exclusive to one group of people. As Spinoza says, the foundation of intuitive knowledge — that is, “knowledge of God” — is something that we all have, even though only very few of us will ultimately achieve this knowledge. In Spinoza’s metaphysical system, given his parallelism doctrine, there is no room for a soul/body dualism or a doctrine of the immortality of the soul in a Platonic fashion. Finally, even though Spinoza appears to make a distinction between two kinds of existence — that is, eternal and durational existence — he never assigns a transcendental reality to the former.

involvement of images; that is, the philosopher king is someone whose mind is truly directed to “things that are.” Notably, in order to illustrate his idea of dialectical ascent in the *Republic*, Plato offers his analogy of the divided line, where he makes a distinction between two modes of cognition — that is, *dianoia* and *noesis* (Plato, 2004, 510b). We learn there that the former makes use of unproven hypotheses and images, whereas the latter does not. This appears to be strikingly similar to what Spinoza suggests in EIP47S, as we have seen earlier, about how reason and intuitive knowledge relate to imagination in terms of their foundations. While a detailed analysis of this similarity is beyond the scope of this article, intuitive knowledge seems to be similar to *noesis* in that it does not make use of any images, as it does not have an object that is imaginable. It is grounded in the highest thing we can know — that is, the knowledge of God — that can reasonably be considered a first principle in Spinoza’s epistemology. As it descends from this first principle to the knowledge of essences of things including ourselves, intuitive knowledge brings about the most powerful affective and cognitive state any finite mode can attain: the peace of mind and the perfect joy of the wise person.⁴⁷ Even though Spinoza’s wise person is not a philosopher king, she is someone who has achieved something “excellent yet so rare to attain” (EVP42S): namely, a very “useful” kind of wisdom, which, once achieved, will complete her transformative journey by changing the way she thinks, acts, and desires at once.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was read at a departmental colloquium at the Pennsylvania State University Philosophy Department, the North American Spinoza Society Session at the APA Central Division Meeting in Denver, and a departmental work-in-progress session at NC State University. I would like to thank the audiences for their helpful commentary. I am also indebted to three anonymous referees at this journal for commenting on earlier versions of this article. I would like to thank the editor and the editorial assistants of this journal for their guidance, consideration, and understanding. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my beautiful son, Alex Teo, for making everything better, and to my family for their constant support and love.

⁴⁷ As it does so, it does not need aids such as abstract and ideal constructs either. As mentioned in footnote 33, reason uses abstract and ideal constructs such as beings of reason as aids.

References

- Ackrill, J. L. (1980). Aristotle on *eudaimonia*. In A. O. Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (pp. 15–33). University of California Press.
- Allison, H. (1987). *Benedict de Spinoza: An introduction*. Yale University Press.
- Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa theologiae* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Benziger Brothers.
- Aristotle. (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (J. Barnes, Ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Aubenque, P. (2002). *La prudence chez Aristote*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bénatouïl, T., & Bonazzi, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Theoria, praxis, and the contemplative life after Plato and Aristotle*. Brill.
- Bennett, J. (1984). *A study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Beysade, J. M. (1990). De l'émotion intérieure chez Descartes à l'affect actif spinoziste. In E. Curley, & P. F. Moreau (Eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and directions, the proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza conference* (pp. 176–190). Brill.
- Broad, C. D. (1930). *Five types of ethical theory*. Routledge.
- Carr, S. (1978). Spinoza's distinction between rational and intuitive knowledge. *Philosophical Review*, 87(2), 241–252.
- Carriero, J. (2014). The ethics in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In M. J. Kisner & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's ethical theory* (pp. 20–41). Oxford University Press.
- Caston, V. (1999). Aristotle's two intellects: A modest proposal. *Phronesis*, 44(3), 199–227.
- Curley, E. (1988). *Behind the geometrical method: A reading of Spinoza's Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- Delahunty, R. J. (1985). *Spinoza*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). *Expressionism in Spinoza* (M. Joughin, Ed. & Trans.). MIT Press.
- Della Rocca, M. (2003). The power of an idea: Spinoza's critique of pure will. *Nous*, 37(2), 200–231.
- Della Rocca, M. (2008). *Spinoza*. Routledge.
- Descartes, R. (1998). *Regulae ad directionem ingenii = Rules for the direction of the natural intelligence: A bilingual edition of the Cartesian treatise on method* (G. Heffernan, Ed. & Trans.). Editions Rodopi.
- Garrett, D. (2010). Spinoza's theory of *scientia intuitiva*. In T. Sorell, G. E. Rogers, & J. Kraye (Eds.), *Scientia in early modern philosophy: Seventeenth century thinkers on demonstrative knowledge from first principles* (pp. 99–115). Springer.
- Gueroult, M. (1974). *Spinoza: l'âme (Ethique 2)*. Aubier.
- Hardie, W. F. R. (1965). The final good in Aristotle's *Ethics*. *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, 40(154), 277–295.
- Hübner, K. (2014). Spinoza on being perfectly human. In M. J. Kisner, & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's ethical theory* (pp. 124–143). Oxford University Press.
- James, S. (2011). Creating rational understanding: Spinoza as a social epistemologist. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 85*, 181–199.
- Kraut, R. (1991). *Aristotle on the human good*. Princeton University Press.

- Lazerri, C. (1998). Peut-on se former des notions communes de l'esprit? *Philosophique*, 1, 37–52.
- LeBuffe, M. (2010). Theories about consciousness in Spinoza's *Ethics*. *Philosophical Review*, 119(4), 531–563.
- LeBuffe, M. (2018). *Spinoza on reason*. Oxford University Press.
- Lin, M. (2006). Spinoza's account of akrasia. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44(3), 395–414.
- Lloyd, G. (1994). *Part of nature: Self-knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics*. Cornell University Press.
- Manzini, F. (2009). *Spinoza: une lecture d'Aristote*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Marshall, C. (2012). Spinoza on destroying passions with reason. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 85(1), 139–160.
- Nadler, S. (2006). *Spinoza's Ethics: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nadler, S. (2008). Spinoza and consciousness. *Mind*, 117(467), 575–601.
- Nagel, T. (1980). Aristotle on *eudaimonia*. In A. O. Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (pp. 7–14). University of California Press.
- Newlands, S. (2018). *Reconceiving Spinoza*. Oxford University Press.
- Plato. (2004). *Republic* (C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company.
- Primus, K. (2017). Scientia intuitiva in the *Ethics*. In Y. Melamed (Ed.), *Spinoza's Ethics: A critical guide* (pp. 169–186). Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson Lear, G. (2004). *Happy lives and the highest good*. Princeton University Press.
- Roche, T. D. (1988). *Ergon* and *eudaimonia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* I: Reconsidering the intellectualist interpretation. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26(2), 175–194.
- Rousset, B. (2004). Recta Ratio. In Y. Yovel, & Gideon Segal (Eds.), *Ethica IV: Spinoza on reason and the "free man": Papers presented at the fourth Jerusalem conference* (pp. 1–14). Little Room Press.
- Rutherford, D. (2008). Spinoza and the dictates of reason. *Inquiry*, 51(5), 485–511.
- Sandler, R. (2005). *Intuitus* and *ratio* in Spinoza's ethical thought. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 13(1), 73–90.
- Scott, D. (1999). Aristotle on well-being and intellectual contemplation: Primary and secondary "eudaimonia." *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 73, 225–242.
- Smith, S. (1997). *Spinoza, liberalism and the question of Jewish identity*. Yale University Press.
- Soyarslan, S. (2014). From ordinary life to blessedness: The power of intuitive knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In M. J. Kisner, & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's ethical theory* (pp. 236–257). Oxford University Press.
- Soyarslan, S. (2016). The distinction between reason and intuitive knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24(1), 27–54.
- Soyarslan, S. (2018). Spinoza's critique of humility in the *Ethics*. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 56(3), 342–364.
- Spinoza, B. (1985). *The collected works of Spinoza* (E. Curley, Ed. & Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Spinoza, B. (1999). *Éthique* (B. Pautrat, Ed. & Trans.). Éditions du Seuil.

- Steinberg, J. (2014). Following a *recta ratio vivendi*: The practical utility of Spinoza's dictates of reason. In M. J. Kisner, & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's ethical theory* (pp. 178–196). Oxford University Press.
- Steinberg, J. (2018). *Spinoza's political psychology: The taming of fortune and fear*. Cambridge University Press.
- Viljanen, V. (2007). Field metaphysics, power, and individuation in Spinoza. *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 37(3), 393–418.
- Viljanen, V. (2011). *Spinoza's geometry of power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wedin, M. (1993). Tracking Aristotle's nous. In M. Durrant (Ed.), *Aristotle's De anima in focus*, (pp. 167–198). Routledge.
- Wilson, M. D. (1990). Comments on J. M. Beyssade: “De l'émotion intérieure chez Descartes à l'affect actif spinoziste.” In E. Curley, & P. F. Moreau (Eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and directions, the proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference* (pp. 191–195). Brill.
- Yovel, Y. (1992). *Spinoza and other heretics: The adventures of immanence*. Princeton University Press.