

A SPIRITUAL AUTOMATON: SPINOZA, REASON, AND THE LETTERS TO BLYENBERGH

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Abstract. This paper examines a disagreement over epistemic “first principles” that takes place in the correspondence between Spinoza and Blyenbergh. Blyenbergh, following Descartes, states he will doubt that which is clearly and distinctly understood if it conflicts with Scripture. Spinoza, in turn, acquiesces completely to whatever his understanding shows him. Because they have a disagreement over the authority of reason, Spinoza “hardly believes that [their] correspondence can be for [their] mutual instruction.” But their correspondence can serve for our instruction: In his dispute with Blyenbergh, Spinoza gives his clearest account of his commitment to reason. Like Descartes, Spinoza claims that because he experiences absolute certainty when he forms a clear and distinct idea, he completely acquiesces to the testimony of his understanding. Unlike Descartes however, Spinoza is unambiguous that this act of acquiescence is not to be understood as a voluntary act worthy of praise or criticism—but rather as an act of a *spiritual automaton*. I argue that by examining Spinoza’s dispute with Blyenbergh, we gain important insight into the naturalistic epistemic approach that undergirds Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

Keywords: Spinoza, Blyenbergh, first principles, epistemology

Introduction

In his lifetime, Spinoza published only one philosophical work authored under his own name: *Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae* (*Descartes Principles of Philosophy* [PP]). This short work garnered Spinoza significant attention. The work was, for example, noticed by the “Most Serene Highness the Elector Palatine” Karl Ludwig, who, apparently impressed by Spinoza’s ability to succinctly explain Descartes’ thought, had his councilor offer Spinoza a professorial post, a post which Spinoza politely declined.¹

The short work was also noticed by Willem van Blyenbergh, a Dutch merchant and author of the anti-Spinozistic tract, *The Truth of the Christian Religion and the Authority of Holy Scripture Affirmed Against the Arguments of the Impious, or a Refutation of the Blasphemous Book Entitled Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Blyenbergh saw in Spinoza’s *Descartes Principles* what many contemporary readers also see: Throughout the work Spinoza uses the geometric method to explicate part of the Cartesian philosophy, yet

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occasionally Spinoza also hints at his own radical—and to Blyenbergh’s eyes—blasphemous thinking.² Indeed, Spinoza had his close friend Lodewijk Meyer; the editor of *Descartes’ Principles*, explicitly write in the introduction to the work that Spinoza held views that differed from the ones expressed therein:

... [L]et no one think that he [Spinoza] is teaching here either his own opinions, or only those which he approves of. Though he judges that some of the doctrines are true and admits that he has added some of his own, nevertheless there are many that he rejects as false, and concerning which he holds a quite a different opinion.³

In December 1664 Blyenbergh wrote to Spinoza with a general request for “a fuller publication” of Spinoza’s philosophical departures from the philosophy of Descartes.⁴ Given the tenor of Blyenbergh’s later anti-Spinozistic screed, it is likely he made this request with an eye for uncovering further evidence of Spinoza’s suspected blasphemies.⁵

The resultant correspondence between Spinoza and Blyenbergh quickly breaks down over a disagreement of “first principles.”⁶ But despite this disagreement—and Spinoza’s repeated attempts to discontinue the correspondence—these letters are well known for the invaluable insight they offer into Spinoza’s thinking on the nature of good, evil, normativity, and freedom of will. Here however I shall focus only upon the disagreement that derails the correspondence. For, as I shall argue, this disagreement is itself an important and neglected source of insight into the foundations of Spinoza’s epistemology.

Spinoza’s First Principle

Spinoza tries to break off his correspondence with Blyenbergh because they disagree over a “first principle.” Blyenbergh writes that one of his principles is to doubt what is clearly and distinctly understood if it conflicts with Scripture. Spinoza in turn, replies that it is his own first principle to acquiesce completely to what his understanding shows him. For Spinoza, the authority of the understanding is absolute. For Blyenbergh it is not. Because of this disagreement, Spinoza “hardly believes that that [their] correspondence can be for [their] mutual instruction.”⁷

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza never presents *complete acquiescence to the understanding* as a “first principle.”⁸ The *Ethics* simply starts with axioms and definitions that are expected to be clearly and distinctly understood as true.⁹ With these axioms and definitions, the *Ethics* proceeds with demonstrations of propositions that, through the apparatus of the Geometric Method, are also expected to be clearly and distinctly understood as true. Thus in reading the *Ethics*, it is tempting to question Spinoza’s almost religious faith that whatever the understanding reveals as true, ought to be accepted as such—especially given the radical, and sometimes bizarre propositions that Spinoza presents the understanding as leading us towards.

Indeed, historically, it was Spinoza’s confidence in the natural understanding that was perhaps the most criticized feature of his philosophical system. Whereas contemporary philosophers generally look at the *Ethics* doubtful that Spinoza actually

succeeded in constructing a system that contains only that which is clearly and distinctly understood, several (but certainly not all) of Spinoza's critics ceded to Spinoza the eminent rationality of the work. For these critics the failure of Spinoza's philosophy was not a failure in following a clear path of reasoning. Rather, they charged that Spinoza's philosophy failed on account of the impious or unwarranted assumption that the unchecked understanding was the proper guide for philosophizing. For example, Freidrich Heinrich Jacobi, claimed that "the only way to avoid the Spinozistic conclusion" was to "abandon reason in favour of a fideistic commitment to a personal deity."¹⁰ Kant declared that, "Spinozism is the true conclusion of dogmatic metaphysics."¹¹ In contrast to Spinoza's absolute "faith" in the understanding, these critics advised a careful wariness towards our mental faculties.

It is worth noting however, that Spinoza himself does not identify reason or the understanding with a specific faculty. Instead he identifies "reason" as "nought else but our mind, in so far as it clearly and distinctly understands."¹² Unlike many of the other Early Modern philosophical greats, Spinoza does not begin his masterpiece with any explicit presuppositions about the power of reason or its scope.¹³ Spinoza instead identifies "reason" by way of a first-person criterion. For Spinoza, the term "reason" is generally simply used as sort of placeholder for whatever is clear and distinctly perceived.¹⁴

To challenge Spinoza's absolute confidence in reason then is not so much to challenge his confidence in a particular faculty of the mind. Rather it is to question his absolute confidence in that which he clearly and distinctly understands. And this cuts to the core of Spinoza's geometric method—it is a challenge to Spinoza's confidence that his definitions, axioms, and inferences can produce a true philosophy. As Michael Della Rocca puts it, "Unless his [Spinoza's] trust in reason can be justified, Spinoza's entire rationalist project, his way of prosecuting the search for explanations, indeed the purity of his philosophy itself is threatened."¹⁵ Obviously then, Spinoza's dispute with Blyenbergh over his trust in reason has important implications in how we are to understand the foundations of Spinoza's thought.

The Three Steps in Spinoza's Attempt to Terminate the Correspondence

It is likely that Blyenbergh began his correspondence with Spinoza looking to uncover Spinoza's suspected blasphemies. Spinoza however was quite careful with whom he shared his philosophy.¹⁶ In order to draw out the guarded Spinoza, Blyenbergh began their correspondence by taking the guise of a fellow free thinker:

Blyenbergh (Ep. 18.): "But not to keep you too long wondering who it is and how it happens that a stranger should assume the great liberty of writing to you, I will tell you that it is one who, impelled only by desire for pure truth, strives in this brief and transitory life to set his feet on the path to knowledge, so far as our human intelligence permits; one who in his search for truth has no other aim than truth itself; one who seeks to acquire for himself through science neither honours nor riches but truth alone, and the peace of mind that results from truth..."

Spinoza responds warmly:¹⁷

Spinoza (Ep. 19.): For my part, of all things that are not under my control, what I most value is to enter into a bond of friendship with sincere lovers of truth. For I believe that such a loving relationship affords us a serenity surpassing any other boon in the whole wide world. The love that such men bear to one another, grounded as it is in the love that each has for knowledge of truth, is as unshakable as is the acceptance of truth once it has been perceived.

Spinoza proceeds to answer Blyenbergh's specific questions about the nature of evil and sin, and invites Blyenbergh not to hesitate to write again if he has any further questions.

Blyenbergh shows no hesitation. In his next letter, Blyenbergh tells Spinoza that he "would have to agree with a great deal" of Spinoza's explanations if it were Blyenbergh's principle to trust his intellect over the revealed word of God.¹⁸ But as Blyenbergh explains to Spinoza, he has two first principles:

Blyenbergh (Ep. 20): ...[Y]ou should first know that there are two general rules which always govern my endeavours to philosophize. One is the clear and distinct conception of my intellect, the other is the revealed Word, or will, of God. In accordance with the one, I try to be a lover of truth, while in accordance with both I try to be a Christian philosopher. And whenever it happens that after long consideration my natural knowledge seems either to be at variance with this Word or not very easily reconcilable with it, this Word has so much authority with me that I prefer to cast doubt on the conceptions that I imagine to be clear rather than to set these above and in opposition to the truth which I believe I find prescribed to me that book...

Blyenbergh goes on to conclude this letter with a description of his own philosophical aim. The aim he now presents stands in stark contrast to the selfless quest for truth he claimed in his first letter. Now Blyenbergh indicates that is not "knowledge, so far as our human intelligence permits" that he seeks, but instead, his highest wish is simply to be certain—by any means—that his intellect is immortal:

...[T]he only thing I ask of God, and shall continue to ask, with prayers, sighs and earnest supplication (would that I could do more to this end!) that as long as there is breath in my body, it may please him of his goodness to make me so fortunate that, when this body is dissolved, I may still remain an intellectual being able to contemplate that most perfect Deity. And if only I obtain that, it matters not to me what men here believe, and what convictions they urge on one another, and whether or not there is something founded on our natural intellect and can be grasped by it. This, and this alone, is my wish, my desire, and my constant prayer, that God should establish this certainty in

my soul... (and if I have it not, how wretched am I)... If only I attain to that, then have I all the aspiration and desire of my soul.

At this point in the correspondence, Spinoza realizes that he has been misled. Blyenbergh is not “one who in his search for truth has no other aim than truth itself.”¹⁹ Instead, Blyenbergh is one who seeks certainty that his intellect will live beyond his body. To attain this certainty Blyenbergh does not strive for clear and distinct thought, rather, he offers “prayers, sighs, and earnest supplications.” Indeed, Blyenbergh notes that if he were to be granted certainty of his own immortality, he would not care what his natural intellect might show him.

Once Spinoza grasps the manner of man he is dealing with, he tries to break off the correspondence. This proceeds in three steps. First, Spinoza tries to break off the correspondence with Blyenbergh by politely noting that their disagreement over first principles prevents them from having a useful correspondence:

Spinoza (Ep. 21.): When I read your first letter, I had the impression that our views were nearly in agreement. From your second letter, however ... I realize that this is far from being so, and I see that we disagree not only in the conclusions to be drawn from a chain of reasoning from first principles, but in those very first principles, so that I hardly believe that our correspondence can be for our mutual instruction. For I see that no proof, however firmly established according to the rules of logic, has any validity with you unless it agrees with the explanation which you, or other theologians of your acquaintance, assign to Holy Scripture.

Spinoza makes it clear that it is not just a disagreement over any first principle that prevents them from having a useful dialogue. The key obstacle is their specific disagreement over the supremacy reason. Spinoza sees that Blyenbergh will reject a valid proof if its conclusion disagrees with his preferred interpretation of Scripture. And because Blyenbergh holds that the authority of Scripture can trump the authority of a logical proof, Spinoza sees no point in exchanging arguments that concern any of the theological questions that Blyenbergh has pressed.

Spinoza does not go into further detail, but his reasoning here is plain. Blyenbergh had indicated to him that:

If I were to pass judgment on your letter solely under the guidance of my first rule [i.e. following what is shown through the understanding], excluding the second rule [i.e. following the teaching of Scripture] as if I did not have it or as if it did not exist, I should have to agree with a great deal of it...and admire your subtle conceptions; but my second rule causes me to differ more widely from you.²⁰

Blyenbergh admits to Spinoza that the explanations he had provided were, according to the understanding, convincing. Yet, Blyenbergh still continues to reject Spinoza’s teachings. And Spinoza notes that if Blyenbergh can reject proofs even

while acknowledging them as valid, then further arguments and explanations will be without effect. Spinoza, quite rightfully, sees no point in continuing their dialogue.

Second, Spinoza attempts to break off their correspondence by explaining why he does not accept Blyenbergh's subjection of the understanding to the revealed word of god. And in doing so, Spinoza also explains why his own first principle is to completely trust in his understanding:

If it is your conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through the light of the natural understanding which he has also granted us and maintains strong and uncorrupted through his divine wisdom, you have good reason to adapt your understanding to the opinions which you ascribe to Holy Scripture. Indeed I myself could do no other. For my part, I plainly and unambiguously avow that I do not understand Holy Scripture, although I devoted quite a number of years to its study. And since I am conscious that when an indisputable proof is presented to me, I find it impossible to entertain thoughts that cast doubt upon it, I entirely acquiesce in what my intellect shows me without any suspicion that I am deceived therein...²¹

With this short passage Spinoza explains why he grants the natural understanding supremacy over religious authority. Spinoza claims he accepts the authority of an "indisputable proof" over interpretations of Scripture, because when Spinoza understands such a proof, he finds that he cannot doubt its conclusion. And despite his extensive study of Scripture, Spinoza notes that he does not find the content of written Scripture to be expressed in such an effectual manner.

Contrary to Jonathan Bennett's insistence that "No philosopher was less inclined than Spinoza to make any theoretical use of the notion of the first person singular,"²² Spinoza defends his commitment to reason by appealing to the first person certainty he is aware of when he understands a proof. Spinoza claims he is capable of doubting whether or not what is expressed in written Scripture is true. But Spinoza claims, in regard to understanding "he cannot cast doubt upon it." Thus, Spinoza rejects Scripture as a source of certain truth, and entirely acquiesces to what his understanding shows him.

Although Spinoza's confidence in reason is often interpreted as "a religious...trust in the rational nature of reality,"²³ Spinoza's dispute with Blyenbergh puts Spinoza's trust in reason in a far more naturalistic light: Spinoza has an absolute trust in what his intellect shows him because he finds it impossible to do otherwise. He is aware that he cannot doubt that which he clearly and distinctly understands.

Third, Spinoza finishes his attempt to terminate his correspondence with Blyenbergh by contrasting the fruits of his own unqualified commitment to reason with the fruits of Blyenbergh's subjection of reason to the judgment of Scripture. Blyenbergh, in his reply to Spinoza, painted himself as a tragic figure: He is "wretched" without the certainty of his own immortality, and spends his days offering supplications to God for "this, and only this." Spinoza contrasts Blyenbergh's misery

with the happiness Spinoza has himself attained by trusting only in his natural understanding:

Even if I were once to find untrue the fruits which I have gathered from my natural understanding, they would still make me happy; for I enjoy them, and seek to pass my life not in sorrowing and sighing, but in peace, joy, and cheerfulness, and so I ascend a step higher.²⁴

The happiness Spinoza has attained through the natural understanding is no accident. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that peace, joy, and cheerfulness are *necessarily* produced by the activity of the natural understanding.²⁵ The *Ethics* offers sophisticated metaphysical arguments to support this claim,²⁶ but here it is sufficient to note that throughout his developed work, Spinoza connects the positive emotions (like joy, peace, and cheerfulness) with the attainment of certainty. Spinoza claims that insofar as we are certain our thoughts do not waver between assent and dissent, and we do not find ourselves torn between conflicting affects or desires: “[I]nsofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor be absolutely satisfied with anything except what is true.”²⁷

The contrast that Spinoza draws between the success of his own method and the failure of Blyenbergh’s emphasizes that while Spinoza seeks the happiness experienced in the act of understanding, Blyenbergh only seeks confidence in his own cherished beliefs. It is notable that in the demonstration of Proposition 23 of Part 5 of the *Ethics* Spinoza argues that “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains of it something which is eternal.” Yet instead of telling Blyenbergh that certainty in our own immortality is attainable through the natural understanding, Spinoza indicates that happiness can be found simply in the joy brought about by the act of understanding.²⁸ Indeed, Spinoza would still be happy if (*per impossibile*) the fruits of his understanding turned out to be false.²⁹

The Interpretive Significance of the Three Steps

Spinoza is guarded in his letters to Blyenbergh. And Blyenbergh was not a correspondent who was aware of Spinoza’s developed views. So some care is needed before drawing broad interpretive conclusions from the letters that they exchanged. However, each of the three steps I have discussed in Spinoza’s attempt to terminate their correspondence offers significant insight into larger interpretive questions concerning Spinoza’s thought.

The First Step

Because Spinoza and Blyenbergh disagreed over the authority of the natural understanding Spinoza thought their further correspondence would be unhelpful. Indeed, in his letters to Blyenbergh, Spinoza treats confidence in the natural understanding as a prerequisite for philosophical dialogue and for properly engaging with his Geometric Method. Spinoza suggests the same in another correspondence, where he chides Henry Oldenburg for failing to accept his proof for the existence of God. There, Spinoza remarks, “A philosopher is supposed to know what is the

difference between fiction and a clear and distinct conception, and also to know the truth of this axiom, to wit, that every definition or clear and distinct idea, is true."³⁰

If this is Spinoza's considered position, then it is likely that Spinoza thought the ideal reader of the *Ethics* should have an unqualified confidence in the authority of reason *before* they engaged with the work. And this position presents a challenge to the many accounts of Spinoza's epistemology that focus only upon the metaphysics of the *Ethics*.³¹ It is clear, in these letters at least, that Spinoza treats confidence in the natural understanding as a first principle—and not as something to be argued to by way of metaphysics.

And this makes sense. A reader of the *Ethics* who questioned the authority of reason would hardly be convinced by Spinoza's use of reason to justify reason's authority. Yet many interpretations of Spinoza's epistemology read the second part of the *Ethics* as engaging in just such a project.³² The temptation of such readings is understandable. In Part II of the *Ethics* Spinoza explains how it is that we possess ideas that necessarily correspond with their object. And this looks like a defense of the adequacy of reason. But Spinoza's explanations here rely upon our taking his clearly and distinctly understood axioms, definitions, and inferences, as true, or at least as convincing. Thus, if Part II of the *Ethics* is to be read as a defense of trusting in the natural intellect, it will read as a poor circular, one.

Although I will not press the point here, I believe Part II of the *Ethics* is properly understood as a metaphysical explanation *of the fact* that our clear and distinct ideas necessarily correspond with their object. It is not intended as providing the grounds for *our belief* in this fact.³³ Whether or not one accepts this assessment, Spinoza's response to Blyenbergh at least points us to a Spinozistic defense of reason that is not grounded in metaphysics, and which, is arguably alluded to throughout the *Ethics*.³⁴

The "first principle" that Spinoza identifies in his letters to Blyenbergh also gives reason to doubt several popular interpretations of the justificatory structure of the *Ethics*. Jonathon Bennett and Edwin Curley present the justificatory structure of the *Ethics* as being hypothetico-deductive.³⁵ On this view, it is the over-all explanatory power of the propositions derived from Spinoza's axioms that provides the justification for these axioms. Other commentators have proposed that Spinoza's *Ethics* relies upon a form of coherentism.³⁶ On this view, it is the overall consistency of Spinoza's system that is supposed to justify its acceptance. But, as we've seen, when Spinoza defends his manner of philosophizing against Blyenbergh, Spinoza makes no mention of the vast explanatory success of his method, nor does he appeal to the overall consistency of his thought. In his letters to Blyenbergh, Spinoza claims it is the certainty experienced in our understanding that precludes us from doubting its testimony.

The Second Step

In the second step of Spinoza's attempt to discontinue his correspondence with Blyenbergh, Spinoza explains why he grants the natural intellect complete authority in his philosophy. In his explanation, Spinoza makes an explicit appeal to the certainty he experiences when he understands a valid proof. Because Spinoza

experiences this certainty, he rejects Blyenbergh's principle of trusting Scripture over that which is clearly and distinctly understood.

The rejected principle of Blyenbergh's is quite similar to a principle found in Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*. There, Descartes writes:

Divine Authority must be put before our own perception; but, that aside, the philosopher should give his assent only to what he has perceived.

...Although the light of reason may, with the utmost clarity and evidence, appear to suggest something different, we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgment.³⁷

Spinoza's rejection of Blyenbergh's principle is thus a noteworthy rejection of a significant principle in Cartesian thought.³⁸ Just *how significant* this principle really is to Descartes thinking is, of course, debatable. Descartes' admonition to trust "divine authority" over the intellect might have been offered only to appease traditionalists in the Church.³⁹ Be that as it may, Spinoza's explanation of *why* he rejects this Cartesian principle shows that Spinoza rejects *another* feature of Descartes' thinking, a feature that *is* indisputably significant: In his rejection of Blyenbergh's principle, Spinoza rejects the voluntarism upon which the Cartesian account of epistemic normativity depends.

Descartes distinguishes between the intellect and the will. According to Descartes, the intellect presents to us mental content, while the will judges the veracity this content.⁴⁰ There are two strands in Descartes thought concerning the will's power to judge intellectual content. In one strand, the power is absolute; in the other it is qualified. Descartes often asserts that we, through our will, have the absolute power to grant or withhold assent from ideas of even the utmost clarity and distinctness.⁴¹ Descartes most explicit statement of this absolute power of the will is found in his letter to Father Denis Mesland:

For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing. (CSMKIII 245)

Descartes and Blyenbergh's principle that we *ought to* assent to the claims of Scripture over the clearest ideas of our intellect hangs upon this strand in Cartesian thought. For if "ought implies can" it would be foolish to recommend that one ought to hold back assent from that which is clearly and distinctly understood if only absolute assent is possible.

There is however, the other strand in Descartes thought. Often, Descartes appears to claim that it is straightforwardly *impossible* to doubt a clear and distinct idea:

I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will...⁴²

...the nature of my mind is such that I cannot but assent to these things, as least so long as I clearly perceive them.⁴³

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true.⁴⁴

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true...that is, we can never doubt them.⁴⁵

So long as we attend to a truth which we perceive very clearly, we cannot doubt it.⁴⁶

...Our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands.⁴⁷

...the minds of all of us have so moulded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth.⁴⁸

In this second strand of Descartes' thinking, the voluntarism that Descartes ascribes to the will—the ability of the will to grant or withhold assent—appears to break down in the face of a clear and distinct idea.

Scholars often debate whether these two strands in Descartes thought can be united in a coherent manner.⁴⁹ In the *Ethics*, Spinoza denies altogether the Cartesian distinction between the intellect and the will,⁵⁰ and so, strictly speaking, has no stake in this debate. But it is clear that Spinoza embraces the central tenant of the second strand of Descartes thinking: Spinoza holds that clear and distinct ideas are indubitable.

In Blyenbergh and Spinoza's dispute over first principles then, both appeal to apparently contradictory aspects of Cartesian epistemology. Blyenbergh, in keeping with Descartes voluntarism, believes that if a conflict were ever to come up between our understanding and Scripture, one can, and ought to, *choose* to accept written Scripture over what one understands. Spinoza, in keeping with the Cartesian claims of indubitability, responds, that it is in fact, impossible to make such a choice: One cannot withhold assent from that which is clearly and distinctly understood. While much more should be said about how the notions of assent and dissent become transformed when moving between Descartes and Spinoza's thought, it is worth focusing here upon Spinoza's rejection of voluntarism in regard to our clear and distinct ideas, and how it reveals Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian picture of epistemic normativity.

Descartes explicitly links voluntarism with epistemic normativity:

We do not praise automatons for accurately producing all the movements they were designed to perform, because the production of these movements occurs necessarily.... By the same principle, when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise.⁵¹

Whether or not Cartesian *freedom* always entails the ability to do otherwise—a point often disputed in the literature⁵²—Descartes plainly holds that there is nothing epistemically praiseworthy about believing what one must.⁵³

Descartes concern with praiseworthiness is pervasive throughout the general Cartesian epistemological project. Descartes is concerned with demonstrating to a will that is free to choose whether or not to grant assent to its clear and distinct ideas that it *should* have confidence in these ideas, that it *ought* to accept that which is clearly and distinctly understood, and that it is *praiseworthy* when it wholly accepts that which the intellect clearly and distinctly conveys⁵⁴—at least in regard to non-theological matters.

Spinoza, however, denies that we have the ability to withhold our assent to a clear and distinct idea. And with this denial, Spinoza abandons the Cartesian interest in the praiseworthiness of this assent. Spinoza places the first principle of his epistemology *outside* of what a Cartesian would recognize as a normative context. In his response to Blyenbergh, Spinoza does not assert that his principle of absolute acquiescence in the face of a clear and distinct idea is justified or praiseworthy. Instead, Spinoza defends absolute acquiescence as a direct consequence of apprehending a clear and distinct idea.

By Cartesian standards, the foundation of Spinoza's epistemology is decidedly non-normative. Descartes claims that without the freedom to grant or withhold assent our epistemic behavior would be that of an "automaton"—unworthy of praise or blame. But Spinoza uses the term "automaton" to describe what he takes to be unique feature of his own epistemology. Spinoza claims in his *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* that he, unlike any among the ancients, treats the soul [the intellect/will] "*as acting according to certain laws, like a spiritual automaton.*"⁵⁵

As I argue below, there is conceptual room for normativity within Spinoza's epistemology. But Spinoza's defense of his first principle against Blyenbergh makes clear that the key starting point of Spinoza's epistemology is not the claim that we ought to affirm our clear and distinct ideas. The key point is that we necessarily do so.⁵⁶

The Third Step

The final step of Spinoza's attempt to break off the correspondence with Blyenbergh involved a comparison between the fruits of Spinoza's and Blyenbergh's first principles: Spinoza passes his life in "peace, joy, and cheerfulness" whereas Blyenbergh spends his time "sighing" in misery.

Spinoza's comparison includes two counterfactuals. The first counterfactual is as follows:

...if it is your conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through the light of the natural understanding ... you have good reason to adapt your understanding to the opinions which you ascribe to Holy Scripture. Indeed I myself could do no other.⁵⁷

There are two interesting points here. First, there is the counter-factual itself. Spinoza claims that if Scripture spoke more clearly and effectually than the natural understanding, Spinoza would accept the authority of Scripture. Indeed, he “could do no other.” This counterfactual emphasizes once again that Spinoza’s fundamental commitment to the intellect rests upon the effectiveness of the intellect in forming ideas that are beyond doubt. As Spinoza here notes, if this kind of effectiveness were to be found in the words of Scripture (or for that matter, anywhere else) Spinoza would restructure his entire system of thought. Second, there is the introduction of a normative expression. Spinoza claims that Blyenbergh would have “good reason” to adjust his understanding to the testimony of Holy Scripture if it was his “conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture.” It is only in Spinoza’s second counterfactual that we begin to see what Spinoza means by “good reason.”

Spinoza’s second counterfactual:

[E]ven if I were once to find untrue the fruits which I have gathered from my natural understanding, they would still make me happy; for I enjoy them, and seek to pass my life not in sorrowing and sighing, but in peace, joy, and cheerfulness.⁵⁸

The claim here is astounding. In his first counterfactual, Spinoza had just indicated to Blyenbergh that he would have to restructure his entire thought if Scripture spoke more effectively than the natural understanding. But in this counterfactual, Spinoza claims that he *would not* restructure his thought if the natural understanding turned out on occasion to be wrong. While it would be hasty to view Spinoza here, as devaluing truth, the importance that Spinoza places here on certainty cannot be overstated: It is not truth, but certainty, and the benefits that go along with its possession—peace, joy and cheerfulness—that provide the “good reason” for accepting our strongest and most effectual ideas.

Spinoza’s two counterfactuals suggest a surprising position that once again can be found back in Descartes. Spinoza *appears* to grant the possibility that his epistemic principle can lead to error, while simultaneously emphasizing that the value of his principle lies in its promise of certainty. This may seem like a strange and contradictory position, but it is similar to a position that Descartes takes in his reply to the objections of Mersenne.

In his objections to Descartes *Meditations*, Mersenne challenges Descartes certainty that he had removed any doubt that our intellect could be deceived. Mersenne asks, “Why should it not be in your nature to be subject to constant –or at least very frequent—deception? How can you establish with certainty that you are not

deceived, or capable of being deceived, in matters which you think you know clearly and distinctly?"⁵⁹ Descartes' response is as follows:

Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: We have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty."⁶⁰

Here Descartes argues that even if his methodology does not succeed as an absolute guarantor of truth, it still succeeds as an absolute guarantor of certainty. Moreover, he claims that its success as a guarantor of certainty is more important than its success or lack of success as a guarantee of absolute truth.

In this reply to Mersenne, Descartes places heavy importance upon our *own* ability to evaluate our thoughts. And this is consistent with Descartes' general approach to epistemology. The Cartesian method of doubt is an internalist method of self-evaluation.⁶¹ On Descartes' method we are to reject any idea or belief that *we* are capable of doubting:

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain...⁶²

The result of the Cartesian method of doubt is either that we have indubitable thoughts—thoughts that remain indubitable even after our consideration of Mersenne's skeptical possibility—as, for example, the *cogito* is thought by Descartes to be, or we do not. If we have indubitable ideas we have everything we could epistemically want—we have indubitable ideas that can never be shaken. Mersenne could challenge Descartes by insisting that we do not have indubitable ideas, but Mersenne's skeptical possibility rests upon the supposition that we have clear and distinct ideas—ideas that *for us* are absolutely certain—yet do not meet some externalist standard of correspondence. Descartes' point is that Mersenne's externalist standard is irrelevant to his interests. To the extent that Descartes "wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last,"⁶³ a worry like Mersenne's is no worry at all.

So how then can we make sense of the epistemic approach Spinoza describes in his letters to Blyenbergh? Unlike Descartes, Spinoza's primary concern is not stability within the sciences. Spinoza's primary goal is to "to pass ... life ... in peace, joy, and cheerfulness." But, as Spinoza argues in his letters to Blyenbergh and throughout the *Ethics*, "peace, joy and cheerfulness" are best attained through the formation of

indubitable ideas, that is, through the act of understanding.⁶⁴ Thus, Spinoza can offer “good reasons” to structure his beliefs around his indubitable ideas, even if, contrary to our certitude—and the indubitable metaphysics revealed by our certain ideas—these ideas could somehow turn out to be false.

Conclusion

I have framed Spinoza’s and Blyenbergh’s dispute over epistemic first principles as a dispute over conflicting aspects of Cartesian epistemology. I have argued that the foundation of Spinoza’s epistemology is the first-person experience of certainty. But, although I have proposed that Spinoza embraces this decidedly Cartesian foundation, I have also argued that unlike Descartes, Spinoza understands this foundation as non-normative: For Spinoza, it is not the case that it is praiseworthy to assent to our clear and distinct ideas, but it is the case, that given our desire for peace, joy and cheerfulness, we ought to try to discover such ideas. None of this of course, touches upon Spinoza radically non-Cartesian explanation of *why it is metaphysically* that our certain ideas are necessarily true. But as the Spinoza-Blyenbergh correspondence reveals, Spinoza’s appropriation of select parts of Cartesian epistemology yields a unique, naturalistic, internalist approach to epistemology that avoids many of the paradoxes associated with the Cartesian project.

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References

- ¹ Ep. 48.
- ² For example, in the *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) (appended to the PP) Spinoza writes: “The whole of *natura naturata* is only one being. From this it follows that man is a part of nature.” See Curley E., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 333. With the exception of passages taken from Spinoza’s letters, all English translations of Spinoza writings are taken from this work. Quoted passages from his letters are taken from Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995).
- ³ PP I/131 30; Curley, E., (1985), 229.
- ⁴ Ep. 18.
- ⁵ Gilles Deleuze has quite a bit to say about Blyenbergh’s psychology and intent. See Deleuze, G., “The Letters on Evil (correspondence with Blyenbergh)” in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988).
- ⁶ Ep. 21.
- ⁷ Ep. 21.
- ⁸ However, it is important to note that this doctrine is implicit throughout the *Ethics*. See for example E2P43 and its demonstration.
- ⁹ For a discussion on the importance of clarity and distinctness in definitions, and on the sense in which a definition can be true see Ep. 9., and *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* [TdEI] 96-98; Curley, E., (1985), 39-41.

¹⁰ Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus, Ein Gespräch* (Breslau: Loewe, 1787). See Chignell, A., “Kant, real possibility, and the threat of Spinoza”, *Mind* 121(July 2012): 635. Note that Jacobi recommended the fideistic option.

¹¹ “Dogmatic metaphysics” meaning for Kant a speculative inquiry that fails to restrict the authority of reason within its proper bounds. Kant, I., *Reflexion* 6050, from *Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 volumes (Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, now Walter de Gruyter), vol. 18, 436. See again, Chignell, A., (2012).

¹² E4P26dem.

¹³ Spinoza’s approach may be contrasted with Hume’s, who begins his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (hereafter *A.T.H.N.*) with a book entitled *Of the UNDERSTANDING*, or with Kant’s, who early on in his *Critique of Pure Reason* lists the “heads” and “movements” of the understanding. See Hume, D., *A.T.H.N.*, 1.1.4-1.1.5, and Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), B94-96, respectively.

¹⁴ Some care is need here. While Spinoza often speaks of “reason” as a general placeholder for whatever is clearly and distinctly understood, he does, when it becomes necessary, distinguish between intuition and discursive reason, and between the intellect and the imagination.

¹⁵ Della Rocca, M., *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

¹⁶ Spinoza, for example, shows hesitancy in having his work passed along to Leibniz. See Ep.72.

¹⁷ His reply evokes the discussion of friendship found in E4P35-37.

¹⁸ Ep. 20.

¹⁹ Ep. 19.

²⁰ Ep. 20.

²¹ Ep. 21.

²² Bennett, J., *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indiana: Hackett, 1984), 348.

²³ Einstein, Letter to Slovine. See Clark, R.W., *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), 502.

²⁴ Ep. 21.

²⁵ See for example E3P58dem: “When the mind conceives itself and its power of acting, it rejoices (by E3P53). But the mind necessarily considers itself when it conceives a true, or adequate idea (by E2P40S2). Therefore, it also rejoices insofar as it conceives adequate ideas, i.e. (by E3P1), insofar as it acts.” The terminology here is in terms of adequacy and not clarity and distinctness, but note that Spinoza equates adequate ideas with clear and distinct ideas in E1P8s2, E2P36, E2P43p (and scholia). See also E3P59.

²⁶ This argument runs through Parts 3-5 of the *Ethics*.

²⁷ E4App.

²⁸ See also E5P41 where Spinoza indicates that even without the immortality of the mind, happiness is at hand.

²⁹ The point here is not that Spinoza believes a clear and distinct idea could ever be false, the point is that Spinoza is not seeking confirmation for cherished beliefs. For Spinoza happiness lies in the formation of clear and distinct or adequate ideas—not in stubbornly holding that a desired wish holds true. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me see this.

³⁰ Ep. 4.

³¹ Thus although I am sympathetic much of Dominik Perler’s approach to Spinoza’s epistemology I wish to resist claims such as his that “Spinoza’s entire discussion of epistemological questions is rooted in a particular conception of the mind-world relation and his theory rises and falls with this conception.” Dominik Perler,

“Verstümmelte und verworrene Ideen Sinneswahrnehmung und Erkenntnis bei Spinoza,” *Seben und Begreifen. Wahrnehmungstheorien in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. D. Perler and M. Wild (n.p.: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 179. (I want to thank Naftali Weinberger for the translation)

³² See for example Perler, D., (2008); Perler, D., “Spinoza on Skepticism” (forthcoming); Della Rocca, M., “Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Scepticism,” *Mind* 116 (Nov. 2007): 851-874; Wilson, M. D., “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. D. Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89-142 (esp. 91); Hampshire, S., *Spinoza and Spinozism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59-60.

³³ Elhanan Yakira argues for a similar claim in chapter 3 of his forthcoming book, *The Body and its Necessity in the Ethics of Spinoza*.

³⁴ See for example E2P43s: “For no one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty.”

³⁵ Bennett, J., (1984), 20-25; Curley, E., (1985), 403.

³⁶ See for example Stuart Hampshire, S., (2005), 17; Steinberg, D., “Spinoza, Method, and Doubt”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (July 1993): 211-24; Walker, R., “Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth”, *Mind* (Jan. 1985): 1-18.

³⁷ Principles 76; (CSM I, 221) Descartes, R., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2 vols., (hereafter CSM), with a third volume on Descartes’ correspondence, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (1991), (hereafter CSMK). This principle also appears in Descartes’ *Rules for Direction of the Mind*: “So far as our powers of understanding are concerned, we should admit no more than these and should reject all others as suspect and liable to error. This does not preclude our believing that what has been revealed by God is more certain than any knowledge, since faith in these matters, as in anything obscure, is an act of the will rather than the understanding (CSM I, 15).

³⁸ An anonymous referee resists my claim by noting that Spinoza repeats in his Letter 21 to Blyenbergh the phrase “Truth cannot contradict truth”, which Spinoza also states in *Met Thoughts* 2, 8. The referee suggests that this shows Spinoza does not clearly reject Descartes or Blyenbergh’s position regarding the authority of Scripture. But Spinoza is clear in *Met Thoughts* 2, 8, and his letters to Blyenbergh that this mean for Spinoza that Scripture has a superior or even equal standing with reason. Spinoza writes in *Met Thoughts*, “It suffices that we demonstrate those things clearly for us to know that Sacred Scripture must also teach the same things. For the truth does not contradict truth, nor can Scripture teach such nonsense as is commonly supposed.” And again in Ep. 21, “...I do not ascribe to Scripture the sort of truth that you believe to be contained in it.” While Spinoza’s approach to Scripture is too complicated to adequately explain here, it is clear that for Spinoza, Reason cannot be bent to Scripture, and that he rejects the caveats of Descartes and Blyenbergh.

³⁹ Peirre-Daniel Huet was one such traditionalist. Along with other criticisms against Descartes philosophy, he attacked Descartes specifically for failing to follow this principle. See Huet, P.D., *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* 1690 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1971), 172-73. While I am generally skeptical of claims of a “hidden philosophy,” in the case of Descartes I am bit more open to this possibility. The initial inscription on Descartes’ grave read, “Bene qui latuit, bene vixit”—“he who hid well, lived well,” and Descartes was very aware of the dangers of being branded a heretic. For a discussion of the general milieu that may have affected Descartes willingness to openly express his views see Jolley, N., “The Reception of Descartes’ Philosophy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ Descartes PP 34. (CSM I, 204).

⁴¹ See Descartes PP 32-37. (CSM I, 204-5). Indeed there are several interpretations in which this position is argued to be his considered view. See Alqui, F., *La Decouverte Metaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1966); and Moyal, G.J.D., "The Unity of Descartes Conception of Freedom", *International Studies in Philosophy* 19 (1987): 33-51; Moyal, G.J.D., "Magicians, Doubters, and Perverts", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 50 (1996): 73-107; Alanen, L., "Descartes on the Will and the Power to Do Otherwise", in *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, ed. H. Lagerlund and M. Yrjonsuuri (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 279-98.

⁴² Fourth Meditation (CSM II, 41)

⁴³ Fifth Meditation (CSM II, 45)

⁴⁴ Fifth Meditation (CSM II, 48)

⁴⁵ Second Replies (CSM II, 104)

⁴⁶ Seventh Replies (CSM II, 309)

⁴⁷ Letter to Regius (CSMK, 147)

⁴⁸ Descartes PP 43. (CSM I, 207)

⁴⁹ See for example, Ragland, C.P., "Is Descartes a Libertarian", *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* vol. III. eds. D. Garber and S. Nadler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57-90.

⁵⁰ E2P49c: "Will and intellect are one and the same thing."

⁵¹ Descartes PP 37. (CSM I, 205); See also Descartes PP 31-38.

⁵² See Kenny, A., "Descartes on the Will", *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972); and Petrik, J., *Descartes' Theory of the Will* (Durango: Hollowbrook, 1992) for arguments the Descartes was a compatibilist about human freedom.

⁵³ Descartes position here relies on the principle that "ought" not only implies "can," but that "ought" also implies "can refrain from." This is not an uncommon position, and it is often defended in contemporary thought: See Haji, I., "Doing the best one can and the principle of alternative possibilities", *Southwest Philosophy Review* 10 (1994): 113-127, esp. pp.120-21; Stocker, M., "'Ought' and 'can'", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1971): 303-316, esp. pp. 304-05; Zimmerman, M., J., "Obligation, responsibility and alternate possibilities", *Analysis* 53 (1993): 51-53.

⁵⁴ There is recent debate over the exact nature of the epistemic normativity Descartes endorses. Naaman-Zauderer interprets Cartesian epistemic normativity as deontic in nature. She claims that Descartes holds we have duty to assent to our clear and distinct ideas. Andrea Mihali argues that Descartes is more of a rule consequentialist. She claims that Descartes argues that as a rule, trusting in our clear and distinct ideas maximizes our chances of attaining reliable conclusions. See Naaman-Zauderer, N., *Descartes' Deontological Turn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Mihali, A., "Toward a Cartesian Epistemic Rule Consequentialism" (unpublished) 2012.

⁵⁵ TdEI II/32.

⁵⁶ Spinoza does of course provide a unique and important non-Cartesian explanation for why it is that our clear and distinct ideas must be true. But if what I have argued above is correct, the reason Spinoza believes we will trust his explanation is because he believes clear and distinct ideas are indubitable. It is certainty undergirds his metaphysics, and not the other way around.

⁵⁷ Ep. 21.

⁵⁸ Ep. 21.

⁵⁹ Mersenne Objections (CSM II, 90)

⁶⁰ Reply to Mersenne. (CSM II, 103)

⁶¹ This at least is how Descartes's method is generally described in contemporary epistemology. See for example, Bergmann, M., "Externalism and Skepticism", *The Philosophical Review* 109 (2000): 159-94 (esp. 170); and Sosa, E., "Philosophical Skepticism and Epistemic Circularity",

Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader, ed. K. Derose and T. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93-114.

⁶² Meditation 2.24 (CSM II, 16)

⁶³ Meditation 1.5 (CSM II, 12)

⁶⁴ See E5P25-42.