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## Truth in the *Emendation*

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### Introduction

More than two-thirds of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* is about truth. Spinoza explains why true ideas are preferable (TIE §§18–29), how to begin forming true ideas (TIE §§30–48), and how to distinguish true ideas from other kinds of ideas (TIE §§50–90). Spinoza’s account of truth is therefore our key to the *Emendation*. It would thus be disheartening if Ed Curley were right that the text is “too mysterious” to interpret Spinoza’s account of truth with any confidence.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Curley’s skepticism, I will propose a new interpretation. I’ll start by listing seven of the features of true ideas that Spinoza mentions in the *Emendation*. I’ll then argue that the three leading interpretations fail to explain why Spinoza mentions these features. In particular, I will criticize the correspondence interpretation (that it is definitive of true ideas to correspond to what they represent), the coherence interpretation (that it is definitive of true ideas that they cohere with other ideas in the mind), and the causal interpretation (that it is definitive of true ideas that they are not caused by something outside the mind). I’ll then propose a new interpretation. Stated roughly, my proposal is that it is definitive of true ideas that they represent essences and are derived in the right kind of way by the intellect from an innate idea of one’s own essence. I will call this the “essentric interpretation,” because of the central role of essences. I will end by sketching why I believe this is also the best interpretation of the *Ethics*.

Given that Spinoza’s account of truth is at the foundation of the *Emendation*, it is natural to wonder why he doesn’t explicitly define it. There are at least two

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<sup>1</sup> Curley, “Spinoza on Truth,” 8.

explanations. First, perhaps he wanted to wait until he listed the conditions on good definitions, and he doesn't list those conditions until shortly before he abandoned the project (TIE §§94–104). Second, defining truth in the first part of the method might have contradicted his other commitments. Spinoza denies that we need another sign, or criterion, to identify true ideas (TIE §36). He also says a single example of a true idea is enough to identify other true ideas (TIE §39). By explicitly stating his definition at the very start he might seem to be giving a criterion for truth, and also to be implying that a single example of a true idea isn't enough. Therefore, given his other commitments, perhaps he didn't want to start with a definition of truth, and the text ends shortly after the start of the second part, TIE §91.

I suspect that Spinoza was on the verge of defining truth when he abandoned the project. In the final paragraphs he's building up to a definition of thought [*cogitatio*] (TIE §§106–110, esp. §110), and in the very last paragraph says we can't learn anything about thought by studying false ideas. It's tempting to think that, as in the *Ethics*, false ideas are just privations of thought, in which case his definition of thought might appear immediately after a definition of truth (E2p37, E2p43s; see also TIE §70). They might even have the same definition, because there's no difference between having a thought and having a true idea; false ideas are privations of thought (see again TIE §110; see also E2p23s).<sup>2</sup> In any case, Spinoza clearly intended to state his definition of truth at some point, and therefore it's worth trying to reconstruct that definition, given the importance of truth to the *Emendation*.

### Seven Features of True Ideas

In the *Emendation*, Spinoza mentions seven features of true ideas.

1. Spinoza writes:<sup>3</sup>

[T]he [true] idea is objectively in the same way as its object is really.  
(TIE §41)

In the *Ethics* he restates this as the claim that true ideas *agree* with their objects:<sup>4</sup>

A true idea must agree with its object (by E1a6), that is (as is known through itself), what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily be in nature. (E1p30d)

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<sup>2</sup> It's also possible that Spinoza intended to wait until a later work, to be titled *Philosophy*. He writes that, "I shall not discuss the essence of each perception, and explain it by its proximate cause, because that pertains to *Philosophy*" (TIE §51; he also mentions *Philosophy* at TIE §§31k, 31l, 36o, 45, 76z, and 83). Perhaps true ideas were among the kinds of perception he intended to discuss in *Philosophy*.

<sup>3</sup> All translations are from Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza*.

<sup>4</sup> See also KV II 15 | G I/78/20.

Let's give this a title:

AGREEMENT

A true idea of  $x$  agrees with its object.

To get a firmer grip on AGREEMENT, let's scrutinize its meaning. First, what does he mean by "idea" [*idea*]? To the modern ear, "idea" might sound like "concept," rather than "belief" or "thought." But, for Spinoza, ideas involve affirmations and negations (TIE §72, E2p49), which doesn't make sense if they're expressible using terms like "Peter" and "existence," rather than sentences like "Peter exists." Thus, for Spinoza, ideas are belief-like.

Second, what does he mean by "object" [*ideatum*]? The straightforward answer is whatever the idea represents. Some scholars have resisted this straightforward answer. But that's only because they've failed to distinguish an object's *ideatum* (what it represents) from its *objectum* (what is parallel to it in other attributes).<sup>5</sup>

Third, what does he mean by "agree" [*convenire*] and "is objectively in the same way" [*eodem modo se habet obiective*]? In the passages above, Spinoza is appealing to a scholastic distinction. Let's introduce it with an example. Peter existed *formally* in Galilee at the start of the first millennium. But Peter exists *objectively* whenever I think about his existence, such as when I think about his surprise when he saw the empty tomb. If Peter's objective existence in my idea (e.g., as surprised) agrees with his formal existence (viz., as surprised), then my idea agrees with its object. Likewise, if Peter's objective essence in my idea (e.g., as an extended thing) agrees with his formal essence (viz., as an extended thing), then my idea agrees with its object. Agreement thus involves a special kind of correspondence that can, at least in principle, involve a thing's existence or essence.

2. Spinoza says that the definitive features of true ideas are intrinsic. He writes:

So the *form* [*forma*] of the true thought must be placed in the same thought itself without relation to other things [. . .]. (TIE §71, emphasis added)

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<sup>5</sup> In the *Ethics* Spinoza says that an idea and its object [*objectum*] are one and the same thing. This is standardly interpreted as the claim that an idea and its object [*objectum*] are identical. Identity seems sufficient for agreement. Allison (*Benedict de Spinoza*, 99), Bennett (*Learning from Six Philosophers*, 190–193), Mark (*Spinoza's Theory of Truth*, 55), Parkinson (*Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge*, 113; though see Parkinson, "Truth Is Its Own Standard: Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Truth," 40–45, 53 n. 19), and Walker ("Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth," 14) conclude that all ideas are true, even though Spinoza gives many examples of false ideas (e.g., E2p31s). Garrett ("Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination") effectively argues that this line of reasoning conflates the objects represented by an idea (its *ideatis*) with the object identical to the idea (its *objectum*). We're therefore free to stick with the straightforward answer without committing Spinoza to the preposterous view that all ideas are true.

As before, let's scrutinize the meaning of Spinoza's terms. First, what does he mean by "form" [*forma*]? Seventeenth-century authors, including Spinoza, use "form" interchangeably with "essence."<sup>6</sup> Thus, Spinoza is saying that a true idea's relations aren't essential to it; they aren't among its definitive features. Instead, only its intrinsic features—what belongs to the thought *in itself*—are definitive. Presumably, this includes what in the *Ethics* he calls the "intrinsic denominations" of true ideas (E2d4).

Second, when Spinoza says that the form of true ideas doesn't involve relations to "other things," what is he referring to? The full passage is illuminating:

So the form of the true thought must be placed in the same thought itself without relation to other things, nor does it recognize the object as its cause, but must depend on the very power and nature of the intellect. For if we suppose that the intellect had perceived some new being, which has never existed (as some conceive God's intellect, before he created things—for that perception, of course, could not have any object) and from such a perception it deduced others legitimately, all those thoughts would be true, and determined by no external object. (TIE §71)

An idea can be true even if there are no external objects ("before he created things"). Thus, the form of true ideas doesn't involve relations to any *external* objects. Nonetheless, it does involve a relation to the mind containing it, specifically that mind's intellect. Thus, in the above passage, he's not excluding relations to *all* other objects, as some commentators have claimed.<sup>7</sup> He's just excluding relations to external objects.

It's worth considering another passage.

As for what constitutes the form of the true, it is certain that a true thought is distinguished from a false one not only by an extrinsic, but *chiefly* [*maxime*] by an intrinsic denomination. (TIE §69, emphasis added)

What does he mean by *maxime*? Given the context, the claim that true ideas are *maxime* distinguished connotes that they are distinguished in the most fundamental way, a connotation that's lost by Curley's "chiefly." A better translation would have been "above all." Thus, he's saying that while we often can distinguish true ideas from false ideas on the basis of their relations (e.g., that only true ideas agree with their objects), that's not the most fundamental way

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<sup>6</sup> See E1d1 and E2p10. See Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671*, 549f for more on 'form' [*forma*], 'nature' [*natura*], and 'essence' [*essentia*].

<sup>7</sup> See Mark, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth*, 47. My interpretation is confirmed by other passages. Spinoza says that an idea can be true in one mind and false in another (TIE §73). Thus, an idea is true in virtue of its relation to a mind. Spinoza also says that the essence of a thing includes its proximate cause (TIE §96), and the intellect is the cause of our true ideas (TIE §84). Thus, once again, an idea is true in virtue of a relation to a mind, specifically, that mind's intellect.

of distinguishing them; these relations aren't among a true idea's definitive features. This interpretation of *maxime* is supported by its proximity to the previous passage, TIE §71, which is about the essence of true ideas. It is also reinforced by his examples in the sentences that follow. He mentions an idea that's false even though it correctly represents its object ("Peter exists"), and an idea that's true even though it represents something that doesn't yet exist (see also E2p8). These examples imply that a true idea's relations to external objects aren't sufficient or necessary for truth, and therefore aren't definitive of truth.

Let's give this a title:

INTRINSIC

The definitive features of a true idea of  $x$  are intrinsic to the mind in which that idea is true.

As Spinoza conceives of truth, true ideas have definitive, intrinsic features that set them apart from false ideas. Contemporary philosophers conceive of truth differently. As many contemporary philosophers conceive of truth, utterances of the sentence "Peter exists" are true as long as Peter exists and false after. Thus, as many contemporary philosophers conceive of truth, an extrinsic difference is responsible for the truth of one of these utterances, namely its relation to Peter. This is one of the many respects in which it's unclear whether Spinoza and contemporary philosophers are even talking about the same notion. Given the vast differences, one might reasonably conclude that Spinoza is using "true" to pick out an entirely different notion. Rather than get entangled in this subtle debate, let's just focus on reconstructing Spinoza's notion.

3. Spinoza believes that a true idea of  $x$  is an idea of  $x$ 's essence. The most direct evidence is from TIE §§34–36. Here are the most important snippets:

[A] true idea of Peter is an objective essence of Peter [ . . . ]

[T]o have the objective essences of things, or, what is the same, [true] ideas [ . . . ]

[T]ruth itself, or the objective essences of things, or the ideas (all those signify the same) [ . . . ]

Let's build on the scholastic background introduced above. An objective existence of Peter is just an idea that represents his existence. Likewise, an objective essence of Peter is just an idea that represents his essence. Thus, when Spinoza says that true ideas are objective essences, he's saying that true ideas represent essences. Other passages support this interpretation. He claims that ideas acquired from report or random experience do not allow us to "perceive any essence of a thing" and are therefore false (TIE §26; see also Ep. 10). Also, he says that a true idea must "agree completely with its formal essence" (TIE §42). As an example of a true idea that represents a non-existing thing, he mentions an architect's idea of a building that he might never build (TIE §69). Unlike,

say, a businessman's idea of the same building, the architect's idea represents the building's essence, because the architect's idea represents how the building's parts would be arranged and how it could be built (TIE §96). The architect's idea can be true even if the building isn't erected, because it is an idea of the building's essence. Finally, Spinoza says that true ideas agree with what they represent (see AGREEMENT) and in the *Emendation* he uses conjugations of "agrees" [*convenire*] to describe only a relation between true ideas and essences (TIE §§41–42).

Thus, Spinoza accepts:

ESSENCE

A true idea of  $x$  represents  $x$ 's essence.

From a contemporary point of view, ESSENCE has some surprising implications. Consider the idea we might express with the sentence "Peter is 150 pounds." Even if this idea correctly describes Peter, it's false, because it doesn't represent his essence. He'd still be Peter if he gained weight. Likewise, consider the idea we might express with "Peter exists." Even if Peter actually exists, it's false, because it doesn't represent his essence. Peter can exist at some times even if he doesn't exist at all times. In contrast, consider the idea we might express using "My mind is united to a body." This is an idea of our own essence (TIE §22), and therefore might be true.

ESSENCE is part of a long tradition of linking truth and essence, a tradition that stretches as far back as Plato.<sup>8</sup> Here is Descartes' variant, repeated verbatim in Spinoza's reconstruction of the *Principles* (see DPP1d9 | G I/150/37):

When we say that something is contained in the nature or concept of a thing that is the same as if we said that it is true of that thing [ . . . ].  
(Descartes, *Second Replies*, CSM II 114 | AT VII 162)

Likewise, Descartes' meditator is unsure if he has a true idea of coldness because he's unsure if coldness has an essence (Meditation Three, CSM II 30 | AT VII 44). According to both Descartes and Spinoza, it is definitive of a true idea of  $x$  that it is an idea of  $x$ 's essence.

There's a reason that philosophers in this tradition link together truth and essence. In their tradition, "true" has an evaluative dimension. If you have a true idea of your body, you have the best idea of your body, and that's an idea of its essence (see, e.g., E2p43s). Sensory ideas are always false, not because they always misrepresent external bodies, but because they don't give us the best kind of understanding of those bodies—they don't represent their essences.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 6.508d and 6.513b for two influential passages. It's debatable whether philosophers in this tradition correctly interpreted Plato.

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, to say that Spinoza's notion of truth is continuous with the Platonic tradition is not to say that he's merely rephrasing what others said. Inspired by the Gospel of John,

ESSENCE says that a true idea of  $x$  must represent  $x$ 's essence. It doesn't say that this is *all* that a true idea of  $x$  can represent. According to Spinoza, a true idea of  $x$  can also represent  $x$ 's properties [*propria*], which for Spinoza are the features of  $x$  that follow from its essence. This additional feature of true ideas is evident in many passages. To start, he says we can't understand the properties of things *until* we understand their essences (TIE §27). This suggests that we can understand the properties of things *after* we understand their essences, presumably by deducing those properties. For example, he says the essence of a circle is that it was constructed by holding one end of a line in place while rotating the other end (TIE §96). He says that we can understand, that is, form true ideas about, a circle's properties by deducing them from this essence, including the property of having points equidistant from the center (TIE §§95–97). For a more dramatic example, consider God's true idea of his own essence. This idea can represent Peter's weight and existence, because Peter's weight and existence follow from God's essence, and therefore are properties of God, and God's intellect is powerful enough to infer these consequences (TIE §§54, 99, E1p16). Other passages further corroborate this interpretation (e.g. TIE §95, 107, 108[3]; see also E1p16, E2p40s2).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, through deduction, an idea of  $x$ 's essence can also represent  $x$ 's properties. From a contemporary point of view, this might seem odd, because when someone deduces a conclusion from a premise, we usually say she's transitioning from one mental state to another. We talk in this way because we individuate

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Augustine, and Anselm, many in this tradition claim that something is true to the extent that it exists. These philosophers describe God, bodies, and actions as more or less true. Plato says that philosophers are "lovers of true being" (*Republic*, 6). The author of the *Gospel of John* says that "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6). Augustine says that "the truth is that which is" (*Soliloquies*, II, 5). Anselm says that "whatever is, is truly" (*On Truth*, 4, 5, and 7). Like Descartes, Spinoza just describes ideas as true.

<sup>10</sup> Spinoza's favorite example involves proportions (TIE §23–24, E2p40s2). While this example isn't straightforward, it nonetheless further confirms the link between true ideas and essences. Spinoza says there are two ways we can know that  $n = 6$  in the missing proportion  $2/4 = 3/n$ . First, we can know  $n = 6$  in virtue of knowing the essence of proportions in general. In particular, from the essence of proportions in general we can deduce a property of all proportions, namely that if then  $xm = yn$  (see Euclid, *Elements*, Book VII, Proposition 19.) We can then deduce that if  $2/4 = 3/n$  then  $n = 6$ . Thus, through deduction, our idea of the essence of proportions in general can include knowledge that  $n = 6$ , just as, through deduction, our idea of a circle's essence can include knowledge of all its properties. Second, we can know  $n = 6$  in virtue of knowing the essence of  $2/4 = 3/n$ . From that essence we can immediately deduce that  $n = 6$ . Thus, our idea of the essence of  $2/2 = 3/n$  can include knowledge that  $n = 6$ . We don't need to deduce  $n = 6$  from a property shared by all proportions. We can know it "intuitively, without going through any procedure" (TIE §24). See Garrett, "Spinoza's Theory of *Scientia Intuitiva*," 106–109, for helpful analysis of these two different ways of knowing that  $n = 6$ .

Regardless of how we know  $n = 6$ , that knowledge is included in an idea representing an essence, whether it's the essence of proportions in general, or the essence of  $2/4 = 3/n$  in particular. This reinforces the link between true ideas and essences.

mental states by their representational content, and conclusions usually have representational contents that differ from the premises. We also talk in this way because we think of deduction as a psychological process that takes us from one mental state to another. But Spinoza conceives of ideas and deductions differently. As he conceives of them, deduction allows the same idea to represent both premises and conclusions, which is why the same idea can represent both a thing's essence and its properties.

In light of the following, we can clarify ESSENCE:

ESSENCE

A true idea of  $x$  represents  $x$ 's essence and perhaps also  $x$ 's properties.

ESSENCE might be too weak. When Spinoza writes that, "[A] true idea of Peter is an objective essence of Peter [. . .]" I take him to be giving a partial definition; it is definitive of a true idea of Peter that it is an idea that represents his essence. He's not just listing another feature of that idea. Nonetheless, let's not build this into essence, just to be cautious.

ESSENCE might be too weak in another respect. There's evidence that a true idea of  $x$  can't represent anything besides  $x$ 's essence and properties. Consider again an idea of a circle's essence. It can't also represent the number of circles existing in reality (TIE §108[5], E1p8s2), or a circle as moving (TIE §72), because these facts don't follow from the essence of the circle. These passages suggest that a true idea of the circle can represent only the circle's essence and properties.

4. Suppose you have a true idea of God as existing; that is, you truly believe that God exists. What, if anything, can you do to become *certain* that God exists?

Descartes says that you can become certain that God exists by attending to the clarity and distinctness of your idea. In particular, you can use the clarity and distinctness of your idea as a *sign* of its truth, and by attending to that sign, you can become certain (see, e.g., *Meditation Three*, CSM II 2:25 | AT VII 36). Spinoza rejects this explanation. He insists that we don't need another feature of an idea to indicate its truth. He writes:

For the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea. (TIE §35)

He later reformulates this as the claim that

[T]ruth makes itself manifest. (TIE §44)

In these passages Spinoza denies that we need another sign, like clarity and distinctness, to become certain our idea is true.

On the basis of these passages, some interpret Spinoza as claiming that nothing is required for certainty beyond the mere having of the true idea. According



to this interpretation: if *S* has a true idea that *x* is *F*, then *S* is certain that *x* is *F*.<sup>11</sup> But that's at odds with the text, because Spinoza says we can doubt that *x* is *F* even if we have a true idea that *x* is *F* (TIE §§50, 79). For example, we can doubt that the soul is unextended even if we have a true idea of the soul, because we can fail to distinguish our true idea of the soul from our false, sensory ideas of the soul (TIE §74). Thus, it's not enough to merely have a true idea of the soul. At a minimum, we have to distinguish that idea from our other ideas of the soul.

Garrett proposes a better interpretation. According to his interpretation, we don't need another sign of truth, because we can attend directly to the features in virtue of which an idea is true.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation explains why we're sometimes uncertain despite having a true idea. It also explains why we don't need to attend to the clarity and distinctness of an idea to become certain. Let's give this a title:

CERTAINTY

If *S* has a true idea that *x* is *F*, then *S* can become certain that *x* is *F* by becoming aware of the features in virtue of which that idea is true.

Two terminological clarifications are needed: first, what is the meaning of “*S* can”? Because Spinoza insists that we can achieve certainty if we follow his method (TIE §35), the phrase “*S* can” in the antecedent should be understood to mean something like “it's within *S*'s actual power to.” Second, what does Spinoza mean by “certain”? He says that doubt is the suspension of affirmation (TIE §78). Presumably, then, certainty is complete affirmation.

If you're thinking of truth as a kind of correspondence, CERTAINTY might seem strange. But suppose you start thinking about truth as a kind of coherence, so that an idea is true in virtue of its coherence with other ideas in the same mind. In that case, you might not think we need another sign of truth, because you might think we can attend directly to an idea's coherence with our other ideas. Thus, if we stop thinking of truth as a kind of correspondence, CERTAINTY might not seem as strange. I'll later propose a third way of thinking about truth, distinct from both correspondence and coherence.

5. As mentioned in the introduction, Spinoza thinks that the way a thing is formed is definitive of that thing. How are true ideas formed? Throughout the *Emendation* he stresses that true ideas are formed through the power of the intellect. For example:

So the form of the true thought [. . .] must depend *on the very power* and nature of *the intellect*. (TIE §71, emphasis added)

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<sup>11</sup> See Mark, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth*, 37–38, 64; Della Rocca, “Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Scepticism,” 863; and Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 10. They might be influenced by 2P43S, but Garrett (“Truth and Ideas of Imagination in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*,” 74–75) explains why 2p43s doesn't have this implication.

<sup>12</sup> See Garrett, “Truth and Ideas of Imagination in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*,” 68–69, 72, and “Truth, Method and Correspondence in Spinoza and Leibniz,” 15–21.

He's presumably referring back to this passage when he later says that true ideas are formed through the power of the mind:<sup>13</sup>

In this way, then, we have distinguished between a true idea and other perceptions, and shown that the fictitious, the false, and the other ideas have their origin in the imagination, i.e., in certain sensations that are fortuitous, and (as it were) disconnected, since they do not arise from *the very power of the mind*, but from external causes [. . .]. (TIE §84, emphasis added)

Spinoza also insists that whatever follows from sense perception and testimony is not formed through the power of the intellect:

There is the perception we have from random experience, that is, from experience that is not *determined* by the intellect. (TIE §19, emphasis added)

He later concludes that ideas formed through these channels are false (see again TIE §84). In another passage he says that clear and distinct ideas are also formed through our power:

The clear and distinct ideas that we form seem to follow so from the necessity of our nature alone that they seem to depend absolutely on *our power alone*. But with confused ideas it is quite the contrary—they are often formed against our will. (TIE §108, emphasis added)

Following Descartes, Spinoza thinks that all clear and distinct ideas are true (TIE §§64, 68). So in this passage he's saying that true ideas seem to be formed through our power, which is presumably a reference back to his claim in TIE §71 that true ideas are formed through the power of our intellect.

What is the power of the intellect? He says that complex ideas are *deduced*:

For the ideas of things that are conceived clearly and distinctly, are either most simple, or composed of most simple ideas, i.e., *deduced* from most simple ideas. (TIE §68, emphasis mine)

Likewise, in the *Ethics* he says that we can deduce true ideas from cognition of God (E2p47s) and that false ideas are like conclusions without premises, implying that they weren't deduced (E2p28d), and so deduction is presumably one of the powers, if not *the* power, of the intellect.

Let's give this datum a title:

#### DEDUCTION

If an idea of *x* is true but not inborn then it was formed through the power of the intellect (e.g., deduction). It was not formed through sense perception or testimony.

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<sup>13</sup> In the *Ethics* he equates the power of the intellect with the power of the mind (E5pref).

DEDUCTION might seem to have an implausible implication. Suppose you read a proof of Pascal's Theorem. DEDUCTION might seem to imply that your idea of that proof is false, just because it's the result of reading. Importantly, DEDUCTION doesn't have that implication. Suppose a friend gives you directions to Cincinnati. If you follow her directions you'll still get there through your own locomotive power. Likewise, suppose a friend gives you a recipe for shepherd's pie. If you follow her recipe you'll still cook it through your own culinary power. Continuing this pattern, if you read a proof of Pascal's Theorem, following each step, then the idea is formed through your own intellectual power. The textbook just gave you directions.<sup>14</sup>

DEDUCTION isn't just another feature of true ideas. Spinoza insists that the way a thing is formed is part of its definition (TIE §§92, 96). Therefore, the way a true idea is formed must be part of its definition, that is, it must be a definitive feature of truth (see TIE §51). Why does Spinoza include this requirement on all definitions? Spinoza believes that the way a thing is formed explains many of its necessary differences and similarities with other things (TIE §96). Spinoza also believes that a thing's definition must include the explanation of those differences and similarities (e.g., TIE §25). Thus, the way a thing is formed must be part of its definition. For example, the way we form circles explains why circles, unlike other geometrical figures, don't have right angles, and thus must be included in the definition of circle. Likewise, the way we form true ideas explains why, unlike false ideas, they involve understanding, and thus must be included in the definition of truth. Why does the way we form true ideas, specifically that we form them through the power of the intellect (e.g., deduction), explain why they involve understanding? If you construct a geometrical figure, you understand its simplest elements and how they're assembled. If you prove a theorem, you understand the foundational axioms and why they entail that theorem. If you design a house or an eye-like organ, you understand the kinds of materials from which it could be generated, how those materials would interact, and how those materials would be arranged. True ideas involve greater understanding because they are formed in these kinds of ways. In contrast, if you accept something entirely on the basis of testimony, you won't have this kind of understanding, at least according to Spinoza. In the modern idiom, you'd know *that p* without knowing *why p*. An important corollary is that we can't form *the same* idea through either testimony or deduction. Testimony and deduction generate different kinds of ideas.

In light of DEDUCTION and ESSENCE, we can better understand the connection between truth and the scientific method, a connection that has troubled some commentators. These commentators worry that DEDUCTION undermines

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<sup>14</sup> Burge ("Frege on Apriority," 17) makes a similar claim about Frege.

any method that emphasizes observation.<sup>15</sup> But DEDUCTION is compatible with the scientific method's emphasis on observation. Suppose you use the scientific method to investigate the human eye, perhaps by autopsying cadavers. Much of what you learn won't constitute a *true* idea of the eye, because it won't concern the eye's *essence*. That's not to say that it's not worth learning, or that it doesn't correspond to the state of the eye. As he emphasizes, sensation and testimony are sources of useful information, such as the ability of water to put out fires (TIE §20). It's just that, given ESSENCE, true ideas must represent essences, and these ideas don't. Of course, some of what you learn will involve the eye's essence, as when you learn how the eye functions, and how the eye is created. But in those cases, you can use the autopsied eye like a textbook, deducing an idea of its essence from your ideas of line, motion, part, and so on, just as you can form an idea of a circle from some of these same ideas. Your idea of the eye's essence would then be formed entirely through the power of your intellect. Importantly, this true idea wouldn't imply that any eyes actually exist. This further claim depends on observation, rather than the intellect, and therefore isn't included in any of our true ideas, in part because anything learned through the senses is uncertain. Nonetheless, this shows that DEDUCTION is compatible with the scientific method's emphasis on observation.

6. The next datum is about how we form true ideas. He says that "there will be no Method unless there is first an idea" (TIE §38) and later that "before all else there must be a true idea in us, an inborn tool" (TIE §39; see also TIE §§33, 43, 49, 70). Let's give this a title:

FOUNDATION

We must use a certain inborn true idea to form all our other true ideas.

Frustratingly, Spinoza doesn't tell us which idea plays this role. He tells us only that it's an idea of a certain thing's essence (TIE §34n). Given his commitment to ESSENCE, that's unsurprising. But, which thing? He doesn't say, claiming that it belongs instead to "the investigation of nature," presumably a reference to his future work *Philosophy*.

I'll later argue that we must use an inborn true idea of our own essence. I won't argue for that conclusion here, because the textual evidence is too indirect to treat it as a datum.

But there's an alternative I want to quickly disprove. Throughout the *Emendation* Spinoza emphasizes that a true idea of God is the most useful (e.g. TIE §§38–39). It might be tempting to assume that this is the foundation of all our other true ideas. But Spinoza denies that this is our starting point, writing that we "must take the greatest care to arrive at knowledge of such a Being as quickly as possible" (TIE §49; see also §75). He also calls this idea the "pinnacle

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<sup>15</sup> See especially Curley, "Experience in Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," 48–49.

of wisdom” and says it must be formed using preexisting tools (TIE §31). So an idea of God’s essence can’t be our inborn tool.

Before moving on to the next feature, let’s clarify the meaning of “inborn tool.” Spinoza never defines this term. But he does define “inborn power”: “By inborn power I understand what is not caused in us by external causes” (TIE §31k). This definition is potentially misleading.<sup>16</sup> In the accompanying text he says we can use our inborn powers to acquire additional powers. These additional powers are internally caused. Thus, there has to be more to being an inborn power than lacking an external cause, because there’s no point in calling some of our powers inborn if these additional powers also count as inborn. Presumably, an inborn power also must be in our mind from the mind’s creation, as suggested by the label “inborn” [*nativus*]. Assuming this is the correct definition of an inborn power, an idea is inborn if it was in our mind from the mind’s creation and was not externally caused.

Combined, ESSENCE, DEDUCTION, and FOUNDATION help us situate Spinoza’s account of truth in its historical context. Influenced by Plato, some of his predecessors claim that our ideas of essences are often, if not always, formed through “divine illumination.” While there was little consensus about the nature of divine illumination, most agreed that it involved supernatural acts by God (see Pasnau, “Divine Illumination”). Influenced by Aristotle, other predecessors claim that ideas of essences are often, if not always, formed through sensory abstraction, as when I abstract the essence of horse from my sensory perception of a particular horse (see, e.g., Aquinas, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Question 85, Article 1). Spinoza is offering a novel account of how true ideas are formed. According to Spinoza, they are formed entirely through the intellect’s power, without any supernatural assistance from God, and using only an inborn idea, rather than any of our sensory perceptions.

7. The final datum is from one of the *Emendation*’s most obscure passages:<sup>17</sup>

But if it is—as it seems at first—of the nature of the thinking being to form true, or adequate, thoughts, it is certain that inadequate ideas arise in us only from the fact that we are part of the thinking being, of which some thoughts wholly constitute our mind, while others do so only in part. (TIE §73)

This passage indicates Spinoza’s openness to two claims. First, our mind is part of another mind (“we are part of a thinking being”), and every idea in our mind is also in that other mind (“of which some thoughts wholly constitute our

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<sup>16</sup> On the basis of this passage, E. Marshall (“Adequacy and Innateness in Spinoza,” 84–85) says that an idea is inborn if and only if it wasn’t externally caused.

<sup>17</sup> I’m modifying Curley’s translation by replacing “a thinking being” with “the thinking being.” Because Spinoza says that we have false ideas, and we’re thinking beings, he must be talking about a specific thinking being rather than all thinking beings.

mind”). Second, some of our ideas are false (“inadequate ideas arise in us”), but it’s the nature of that other mind to form true ideas (“it is [ . . . ] of the nature of a thinking being to form true [ . . . ] thoughts”), so all of its ideas must be true. Conjoined, these two claims entail:

MIND-RELATIVITY

The numerically same idea can be true in one mind and false in another mind.

Because both claims are embedded in a conditional, Spinoza isn’t committed to them, and therefore isn’t committed to MIND-RELATIVITY. Nonetheless, because he’s open to MIND-RELATIVITY, his account of truth shouldn’t rule it out; it should be possible for the numerically same idea to be true in one mind and false in another mind.

Spinoza endorses MIND-RELATIVITY in the *Ethics*. He says that all the ideas that are false in our mind are true in God’s mind (E2p11c, E2p32, and E2p24). It’s possible he was already drawn to MIND-RELATIVITY when writing the *Emendation*, but didn’t think it was the appropriate venue to defend and develop this view, or maybe he planned to address it in a later section.

### Alternative Interpretations

The three leading interpretations of Spinoza’s account of truth are the correspondence interpretation, the coherence interpretation, and the causal interpretation.<sup>18</sup> In this section I’ll argue that they’re unable to explain most if not all of the features of true ideas that Spinoza mentions, i.e., the textual data. While one might revise these interpretations so that they accommodate more of the data, and perhaps even all of the data, that would just transform them into the interpretation I’ll propose in the next section. Here again is the data:

AGREEMENT

A true idea of  $x$  agrees with its object.

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<sup>18</sup> These aren’t the only alternatives. While Joachim (*Spinoza’s Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 92–93, 154–155) is sometimes said to accept a coherence interpretation (see Mark, *Spinoza’s Theory of Truth*, 46 n. 5), that’s misleading. What’s important to Joachim is the coherence of an idea’s internal parts, not its external relation to other ideas in the same mind, and therefore it doesn’t fall into any of these categories. However, as stated, Joachim’s interpretation doesn’t explain AGREEMENT, MIND-RELATIVITY, or FOUNDATION, though it could be developed into the essentric interpretation, which I’ll later argue explains all these data points.

Parkinson (“‘Truth Is Its Own Standard’: Aspects of Spinoza’s Theory of Truth,” 40f) says that true ideas are “complete,” where completeness is defined disjunctively, each disjunct corresponding to one of the best kinds of knowledge mentioned in the *Ethics* (E2p40s2). Parkinson’s interpretation contradicts FOUNDATION and fails to explain INTRINSIC and ESSENCE.

## INTRINSIC

The definitive features of a true idea of  $x$  are intrinsic to the mind in which that idea is true.

## ESSENCE

True ideas represent essences.

## CERTAINTY

If  $S$  has a true idea that  $x$  is  $F$  then  $S$  can become certain that  $x$  is  $F$  by becoming aware of the features in virtue of which that idea is true.

## DEDUCTION

If an idea of  $x$  is true but not inborn then it was formed through the power of the intellect (e.g., deduction). It was not formed through sense perception or testimony.

## FOUNDATION

We use a certain inborn true idea to form all our other true ideas.

## MIND-RELATIVITY

The numerically same idea can be true in one mind and false in another mind.

As I said in the introduction, one of the goals of the *Emendation* is to teach us to distinguish true ideas from false ideas. There are often many ways to distinguish things: we might distinguish people by their location or by their lineage; fruits by their color or by their taste. But Spinoza doesn't just want to distinguish true ideas from other ideas on the basis of any of their features. He wants to distinguish them on the basis of their essences. Spinoza says he wants to understand "what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions; by investigating its nature [. . .]" (TIE §37). He later says that knowledge of the "form of truth" is foundational to his method (TIE §105, E2p42d). Therefore, when evaluating each proposal, keep in mind that it isn't enough for them to describe features that merely allow us to distinguish true from false ideas. This will be especially important when evaluating the causal interpretation.

## CORRESPONDENCE INTERPRETATION

Let's start with the correspondence interpretation:<sup>19</sup>

An idea of  $x$  is true if and only if it agrees with  $x$ .

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<sup>19</sup> Mark (*Spinoza's Theory of Truth*, 69) endorses this interpretation, drawing no distinction between Spinoza's views in the *Emendation* and in the *Ethics*. As noted earlier, Mark also claims that all ideas are true, and that an idea is also adequate when we grasp its identity with the thing

The correspondence interpretation straightforwardly explains AGREEMENT, because it requires true ideas to agree with their objects. But it doesn't explain most of the other data.

The correspondence interpretation contradicts INTRINSIC, because agreement is an extrinsic feature of true ideas. Spinoza is explicit in the *Ethics*, writing at the end of a definition that "I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, viz. the agreement of the idea with its object" (E2d4).

In addition, the correspondence interpretation doesn't explain CERTAINTY, DEDUCTION, or FOUNDATION. It doesn't explain CERTAINTY, because the idea we express with "Peter is 150 pounds" is true according to this interpretation, but we can't become certain it's true by becoming aware of its agreement with Peter. The problem is that we can become aware of Peter only through the use of our senses, and therefore we can become aware of a correspondence between our idea and Peter only through the use of our senses. But our sensations can deceive us. Perhaps Peter isn't as he appears, because we're dreaming or because we're victims of an elaborate deception. This introduces doubt, precluding certainty that our idea is true. We thus can't become certain that Peter is 150 pounds by becoming aware of our relation to Peter. The correspondence interpretation also doesn't explain DEDUCTION, because, for example, an idea of a circle's essence can correspond with that circle even if it is based entirely on testimony (e.g., listening to one's geometry teacher) or sense perception (e.g., reading it in a book). One doesn't need to understand why Pascal's Theorem is true for one's idea to correspond to that theorem. Finally, the correspondence interpretation doesn't explain FOUNDATION, because whether an idea corresponds to its object is independent of the tools we first used to form it.

That leaves ESSENCE and MIND-RELATIVITY. At best, the correspondence interpretation has trouble explaining this data. It has trouble explaining ESSENCE, because, for example, the idea we express with "Peter is 150 pounds" corresponds to Peter, even though it is not an idea about his essence. It also has trouble explaining MIND-RELATIVITY. If an idea represents the same object in all minds, it's unclear how it could agree with that object insofar as it is in one mind but not another. While by the *Ethics* Spinoza believes that the same idea can represent something different in different minds (see Della Roca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Chapter 3), that's not a view he considers or accepts in the *Emendation*.

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represented. Thus, Mark's interpretation is more elaborate than a straightforward correspondence interpretation, which is why he calls it an ontological interpretation. Allison (*Benedict de Spinoza*, 97) follows Mark. Nadler (*Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*, 161) and Curley (*Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*, 122–126) both endorse the correspondence interpretation for the *Ethics*. Bennett (*Learning from Six Philosophers*, 190f) seems to take the correspondence interpretation for granted. Wolfson (*The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 99) endorses a correspondence interpretation of some passages, and a coherence interpretation of other passages.



Notably, Spinoza explicitly rejects this account of truth in the *Ethics*. He says that if agreement were the only definitive feature of true ideas, then, contrary to fact, true ideas wouldn't contain more reality than false ideas (E2p43s).

#### COHERENCE INTERPRETATION

Let's now turn to the coherence interpretation:<sup>20</sup>

An idea of  $x$  is true in a mind if and only if it coheres with the other ideas in that mind.

What is it for ideas to *cohere*? Presumably, mutual logical consistency and logical entailment are together sufficient for coherence. Besides that, we don't need to be more specific, because the coherence interpretation has trouble explaining most of the data regardless of how coherence is more specifically understood. Let's again go through the data one by one.

The coherence interpretation explains INTRINSIC and MIND-RELATIVITY. It explains INTRINSIC, because an idea is true in virtue of its relations to other ideas in the mind containing it, rather than something external. It explains MIND-RELATIVITY, because the same idea might be contained in several minds and might cohere better with the ideas in some minds than other minds.

The coherence interpretation would explain CERTAINTY if we could become aware of all of a true idea's relations to other ideas in our mind. But it's unclear whether we can become aware of all our ideas, let alone their relations. At least in the *Ethics*, he says we have ideas of all the parts of our body, including our spleen, but we're not fully aware of those ideas (E2p15).

The coherence interpretation does not seem to explain AGREEMENT. A dream of walking down a hallway might be perfectly coherent, even though we're sound asleep in bed. Likewise, consider any collection of ideas with the logical

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<sup>20</sup> This interpretation is endorsed by Hampshire, *Spinoza*, 87–91; MacIntyre, *Spinoza*, 532; Walker, "Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth," 9–11; and Roth, *Spinoza*, 27 (though later in *Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides*, 112, Roth emphasizes that true ideas are clear and distinct ideas of essences). Curley ("Spinoza on Truth," 8–10) also says that it's the best interpretation, though as noted in the introduction, he's not very confident, because he thinks the text is too mysterious. Following Curley, Steinberg ("Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*," 146 n. 9) says that a coherence theory seems prominent in the *Emendation*.

Walker ("Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth," 4) and Harvey ("Spinoza's Theory of Truth (review)," 106) both suggest that, given Spinoza's other commitments, the correspondence and coherence interpretations might be consistent. For Walker, the relevant commitment is idealism. For Harvey, the relevant commitment is a coherence theory of nature, and the view that ideas both express and correspond to their objects. I doubt that Harvey and Walker are right, because I doubt that Spinoza has these other commitments, but in any case my objections are supposed to apply to all variants of each kind of interpretation, and therefore should apply to variants of both.

forms:  $p, q, p$  if and only if  $q$  (where this is a material biconditional). Such a collection is coherent, because from any two you can drive the third. But there's no guarantee that they agree with their objects. Thus, the coherence explanation does not seem to explain AGREEMENT.

Aware of this kind of problem, some defenders of the coherence interpretation endorse idealist interpretations of Spinoza's metaphysics (see Walker, "Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth," 8–10). According to idealist interpretations, a set of coherent ideas about a particular body grounds the existence of that body, which is why coherent ideas agree with their objects. Rather than engage with the details of idealist interpretations, let's just note that they have serious and well-known problems, leaving it at best unclear whether this interpretation can explain AGREEMENT.<sup>21</sup>

As an alternative, defenders of the coherence interpretation might argue that a dream or hallucination can't cohere with *all* the ideas in our mind, because they can't cohere with our idea of God's essence, given that God's essence entails the existence or non-existence of each thing. This variant of the coherence interpretation might explain AGREEMENT. But it undermines CERTAINTY. To deduce the existence or non-existence of a finite thing would require an infinitely long deduction, an impossible feat for us (see TIE §100, E1p28). Thus, we couldn't become certain that our ideas of finite things are true, because we couldn't deduce them from our idea of God's essence. But some of them would still be true, because they would still cohere with our idea of God's essence. Thus, this variant preserves AGREEMENT at the expense of CERTAINTY, and we're looking for an interpretation that preserves all of the data.

The coherence interpretation also does not seem to explain ESSENCE, DEDUCTION, or FOUNDATION. With respect to ESSENCE, consider dreams, hallucinations, or a set of ideas with the aforementioned logical forms. These ideas don't represent essences. More generally, this interpretation does not explain ESSENCE, because it makes no demands on what true ideas represent. It does not seem to explain DEDUCTION, because whether a set of ideas is coherent seems independent of its etiology. Ideas resulting from testimony and sense perception seem just as capable of cohering as ideas formed through the power of the intellect. Finally, it doesn't seem to explain FOUNDATION, because whether a set of ideas is coherent seems independent of the tools we first used to form them.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, in the *Ethics* he says that each of God's attributes, including thought and extension, must be conceived through itself (1p10) and could not have been produced by another attribute (1p10s). For more discussion see Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, Chapter 6. For background on idealist interpretations, see Newlands, "More Recent Idealist Readings of Spinoza."

## CAUSAL INTERPRETATION

Let's end with the causal interpretation:<sup>22</sup>

*S*'s idea of *x* is true if and only if it was not caused by anything outside the mind.

The causal interpretation explains INTRINSIC and MIND-RELATIVITY. It explains INTRINSIC, because whether an idea is true is a fact about its relation to the mind containing it, rather than something external. It explains MIND-RELATIVITY, because an idea's causes might be contained in one mind but not another. The causal interpretation might also explain CERTAINTY, as long as we can become aware of how an idea was caused.

But the causal interpretation has trouble explaining the other data. It has trouble explaining AGREEMENT, because it is unclear why an idea would agree with its object just because it was internally caused. It also has trouble explaining ESSENCE, because it doesn't place any restrictions on what a true idea can be about, and therefore it doesn't imply they represent essences. And it has trouble explaining DEDUCTION, because it's unclear why an idea that's caused from within the mind must be formed through the power of the intellect rather than, for example, the power of the imagination. Finally, it has trouble explaining FOUNDATION, because it's unclear why ideas formed by the mind must be formed using a certain inborn idea, rather than *ex nihilo*, or from several different inborn ideas.

While the causal interpretation by itself has trouble explaining much of the data, it might be able to explain the data if conjoined with Spinoza's other commitments. For example, it might explain DEDUCTION if conjoined with Spinoza's claim that all internally caused ideas are caused by the power of the intellect

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<sup>22</sup> Della Rocca (*Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Chapter 3) and E. Marshall ("Adequacy and Innateness in Spinoza") both endorse interpretations along these lines, though they just claim to be capturing the extension, not the definition, of truth. Also, while they cite passages from the *Emendation*, and therefore presumably think Spinoza accepts a causal account in the *Emendation* as well, they are focused on the *Ethics*. LeBuffe (*From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*, 55) and Steinberg ("Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*," 148) say that this is Spinoza's account of adequacy in the *Ethics*, which is worth mentioning because in the conclusion I'll explain why I think the essentric interpretation is also the correct account of adequacy in the *Ethics*.

For what it's worth, I believe all these authors are led astray by a common pattern in Spinoza's arguments. Spinoza repeatedly argues the following: Our idea of *x* is inadequate because *x* is preceded by an infinitely long series of causes, including external causes (see E2p24d, E2p25d, E2p30d, E2p31d). These scholars take this to be definitive of inadequacy. But, as I argue in this subsection, they can't explain many of Spinoza's claims about true, and therefore adequate, ideas. The essentric interpretation can explain this pattern. If *x* is preceded by an infinitely long series of causes, we can't infer *x* from our own essence or God's essence, because it doesn't follow from our own essence, and because we can't complete the infinitely long deduction that would be required to deduce *x* from God's essence.

(e.g., TIE §84). Even so, it wouldn't be a plausible definition. First, it just says how true ideas *aren't* caused, and a negative characterization can't serve as a thing's definition, that is, a description of its essence (TIE §96). Second, a thing's definition is supposed to allow us to infer all its necessary properties "when it is considered alone, without any other conjoined" (TIE §96). At least some of these data points, including ESSENCE, seem like necessary properties of true ideas, assuming they aren't definitive. But, as noted above, this definition of true ideas does not by itself let us infer all these properties of true ideas. Thus, even if the causal interpretation captures the extension of truth, it doesn't capture its definition.

### Essentric Interpretation

I propose a different interpretation:

An idea of  $x$  that's contained in  $S$ 's mind is true if and only if:

- i. It represents  $x$ 's essence, and perhaps  $x$ 's properties, but nothing else;
- ii. It is contained in  $S$ 's inborn idea of her own essence, or  $S$  formed it through the power of her intellect (e.g., by deduction) from ideas contained in her inborn idea of her own essence.

I already have clarified most of the terms used in this definition ("inborn," "deduced," "idea," "property"). But I haven't said anything about "contained in." I'm using "contained in" (and "included in") mereologically, so that an idea contained in another idea is *part* of that idea. Our mind contains a number of ideas. Many of these ideas are themselves composed of further ideas. But some of our ideas lack parts, including our idea of infinite extension (TIE §108[2]).<sup>23</sup> All our other ideas are composed of these simple ideas. In Spinoza's tradition, parts are more fundamental than wholes, so the true idea of our essence can contain more fundamental true ideas, such as a true idea of God. I'm using "contained" to include improper parts. Thus,  $S$ 's idea of her own essence is true, because it contains itself. If you prefer to use "contained" another way, just reformulate (i) accordingly.

There's an important question of how to understand the relevant notion of parthood, that is, what it is for an idea to be part of another idea. Spinoza doesn't say in the *Emendation* or *Ethics*, and there are a number of interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Presumably influenced by his scholastic teachers, Spinoza uses "quantity" [*quantitas*] rather than "extension" [*extensio*] in the *Emendation*. For more on the relation between "quantity" and "extension," see Pasnau's *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671*, 279f.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 95.

This is too big an issue for us to resolve here, so, as much as possible, just draw on your understanding of what it is for a body to be part of another body.

Let's now consider each of the data points one by one, starting with AGREEMENT. The essentric interpretation explains AGREEMENT, because, for example, the intellect forms an idea of a circle's essence by forming an idea that *accurately* and *completely* describes that essence, and therefore must *agree* with that essence. I'll first address accuracy and then address completeness.

Consider the idea of an enclosed figure formed by four straight lines. What could make it an *inaccurate* idea of a circle's essence rather than an *accurate* idea of a quadrilateral's essence? Not our use of the word "circle," because words are in the imagination, not the intellect (TIE §§88–89). Not causal relations to the circle's essence, because it was formed by our intellect through deduction, rather than by causal relations to the essence of a circle (recall TIE §71). Finally, not intrinsic characteristics of the idea, because its intrinsic characteristics describe the essence of a quadrilateral, rather than the essence of a circle. Thus, there appears to be nothing that could make this an incorrect idea of a circle's essence. It's instead an idea of a quadrilateral's essence, because that's what it accurately describes. An idea represents an essence by accurately describing it.

Now consider an idea of how ellipses are formed. Because ovals and circles are ellipses, this idea describes a process that could create an oval or circle. What could make this an *incomplete* idea of a circle's essence? As before, there's no plausible candidate, because it's not due to the word "circle," causal relations to the essence of a circle, or the intrinsic characteristics of the idea. Thus, there appears to be nothing that could make this an incomplete idea of a circle's essence. It's instead an idea of an ellipsis's essence, because that's what it completely describes. An idea represents an essence by completely describing it.

Putting these points together, true ideas represent essences in virtue of accurately and completely describing them, and therefore must agree with them. Thus, an idea that satisfies conditions (i) and (ii) must agree with what it represents. In this way, the essentric interpretation explains AGREEMENT.

The essentric interpretation explains INTRINSIC, because, as noted above, an intellectual idea represents an essence in virtue of that idea's *intrinsic* characteristics, and thus whether an idea satisfies (i) is intrinsic to that very idea. Moreover, whether an idea satisfies (ii) is a fact about its relation to the mind containing it, rather than something external, like the object it represents.

The essentric interpretation straightforwardly explains ESSENCE, because true ideas always represent essences. Remember that Spinoza seems to treat this as a definitive feature of true ideas, as it is according to the essentric interpretation.

The essentric interpretation explains CERTAINTY. We can become aware of whether an idea represents an essence, because, as noted above, an idea

represents an essence in virtue of that idea's intrinsic characteristics. We can also become aware of whether an idea was inborn or appropriately formed, perhaps because ideas with the relevant intrinsic characteristics can be formed in only these ways, or perhaps by simply forming the idea again (e.g., re-deducing it). We can thus become aware of the features in virtue of which an idea is true, which is all that CERTAINTY requires.

It might help to list some of Spinoza's suggestions for avoiding errors. This will not only give us a firmer grip on why Spinoza accepts CERTAINTY, but will further confirm the essentric interpretation, because the errors he considers are exactly the errors we'd expect him to consider if the essentric interpretation were correct.

First, in addition to representing a finite thing's essence, we might represent it as existing (TIE §§53–54). That would be an error, because it's not essential to any finite thing to exist, and we're unable to deduce the existence of any finite thing from God's essence. According to Spinoza, we can avoid this kind of error by carefully attending to the thing's essence (thereby reminding ourselves that it isn't essential to that thing to exist) and also carefully attending to the order of nature (thereby reminding ourselves that, unlike God, we're unable to deduce that thing's existence from God's essence) (TIE §65, 100).

Second, we might construct an idea that contains a contradiction, such as an idea of a square soul (TIE §58). According to Spinoza, we can avoid this error by deducing a contradiction, in this case between our true idea of square and our true idea of soul (TIE §§61, 104). We can also avoid this error by dividing all the relevant ideas into their simplest parts, because that will prevent us from forming a contradictory composite, such as square soul (TIE §64).

Third, an idea can incorrectly represent something as following from a thing's essence, as when we represent a circle as moving (TIE §72). That would be an error, because while a true idea of a circle can also represent whatever follows from the circle's essence, it can't represent anything else. According to Spinoza, we can avoid this kind of error by never relying on abstractions or sensory ideas, and to deduce everything in the order of nature (TIE §75).

Fourth, we could mislabel the essence. For example, after hearing a parent use the word "square," we could call the figure that's formed by rotating a line "square" rather than "circle." While Spinoza doesn't address this specific kind of error, he warns us against using words when forming true ideas (TIE §§88–89). Labels like "square" and "circle" are fallible, because they are derived from testimony. We might have misunderstood our parents. Our parents might have misunderstood their parents. Or our parents might be conspiring to mislead us. Because we can't exclude these possibilities, we can never be certain about the labels we use to describe essences, and therefore they have no place

in the intellect. By never combining our true ideas with ideas about what an essence is *called*, we can avoid this error.

One final point about the essentric interpretation and CERTAINTY: Spinoza explicitly connects certainty and essence. He writes:

From this it is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself. (TIE §35)

Since truth, then, needs no sign, and to have the objective essences of things, or—what is the same—their ideas, is enough to remove all doubt [ . . . ]. (TIE §36)

None of the other interpretations can explain why Spinoza links certainty and essence.

The essentric interpretation explains DEDUCTION, because true ideas are either contained in the inborn idea of our own essence, or formed by the intellect from that idea.

The essentric interpretation explains FOUNDATION, because true ideas are formed using an inborn idea of our own essence. As I mentioned before, there's no direct evidence that the relevant inborn idea represents our own essence, rather than another essence. But here are two pieces of indirect evidence.

First, while he uses a different vocabulary, this is his view in the *Ethics*:

Whatever the Mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the Body's present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the Body's essence under a species of eternity. (E5p29)

More succinctly: we must deduce knowledge of eternal things from knowledge of our essence. Because all our true ideas involve knowledge of eternal things (E2p44c2), we must deduce all our true ideas from knowledge of our essence. Spinoza's view is evident in other passages as well (e.g., E2p24d, E2p11c). Don Garrett has a nice way of putting this point:

Just as all imaginative cognition (cognition of the first kind) constitutes cognition of other things only by first being cognition of some accidental states of the actually existing body, so all intellectual cognition (cognition of the second and third kinds) constitutes cognition of other things only by being first cognition concerning the formal essence of the human body.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal," 296.



In the *Ethics*, Spinoza never uses “inborn” [*nativus*] and only rarely uses “innate” [*innatus*] (e.g., 1app). He might have stopped using these terms because there was so much disagreement about their meaning, as evidenced by Descartes’ exchange with Hobbes (see *Third Set of Objections with Replies*, CSM II 130–2 | AT VII 186–189). Nonetheless, Spinoza claims that our mind *necessarily* contains an idea of its own essence (E2p13), which is enough to satisfy any reasonable definition of inborn or innate.

Of course, we can’t use the *Ethics* as an infallible guide to the *Emendation*. Nonetheless, this should give us added confidence that this was his view in the *Emendation* as well.

Second, while Spinoza doesn’t give many examples of true ideas (see TIE §§22, 78, 108[3]), they all cohere with this hypothesis. Several of his examples are about our mind and body, including what it is to know something, how the mind is united to the body, and how the senses operate. Plausibly, these ideas are deducible from our essence, if they aren’t already included in our essence. Most of his other examples are about geometry and arithmetic. These ideas can be constructed from an idea of infinite extension (see TIE §108[3]) and it’s plausible that an idea of infinite extension is one of the “fixed and eternal things” that constitute our essence (TIE §100). He seems to think that our idea of any finite body, including our own body, is constructible from an idea of infinite extension (see again TIE §108[3]), in which case an idea of infinite extension must be part of our idea of our own essence. Spinoza’s only other example of a true idea is our idea of God. Plausibly, this idea is included in our essence, because he causes our existence, and perhaps also because we’re essentially modes of God. But even if not, our idea of God might still be deducible from our idea of infinite extension, because that’s one of God’s attributes.

Importantly, we can have a true idea without being fully aware of it (TIE §47). Thus, one shouldn’t object that many of us aren’t already fully aware of much of what’s included in the inborn idea of our own essence. Perhaps we’re initially aware of a few of the ideas it includes, such as an idea representing our mind’s union with a body. But then, through the activity of the mind, we can become aware of more inborn ideas, including our inborn idea of infinite extension.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In the *Emendation*, Spinoza doesn’t explore the processes that underlie our awareness of ideas. He just says we can become aware of more true ideas through our mind’s activity, without explaining how our mind can accomplish that feat or describing what underlies our awareness of these ideas. He fills this hole in the *Ethics*. He says we’re aware of ideas that sufficiently influence our thinking and behavior. Given the way we’re built, some inborn ideas are naturally very powerful, which is why we’re immediately aware of them, like the idea that we’re united with something extended in space (TIE §22, E2a4), an idea that always exerts a tremendous influence on our thoughts and behaviors. Through training we increase the power of other true ideas by giving them more influence. See Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza’s Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination,” for more details.



Finally, the essentric interpretation explains MIND-RELATIVITY, because, for example, an idea of Peter's existence might be deducible from God's essence, but not our own essence, and therefore might be true in God's mind but not in our minds.

## Conclusion

Because Spinoza mentions the same seven features in the *Ethics*, I think that he accepts the same account of truth. But there are two complications. First, in the *Ethics*, formal essences are eternal, and Spinoza's parallelism in the *Ethics* implies that ideas of eternal things must themselves be eternal (see E2p7, E5p31, E5p39). Therefore, Spinoza's views in the *Ethics* imply that we don't form, or create, true ideas. Instead, we add true ideas to our mind, making them part of our mind, just as a mason might use preexisting stones to build an addition onto his house. Fortunately, this doesn't necessitate any changes to the essentric interpretation. We just need to think of condition (i) as specifying how we form the composite idea-in-my-mind, rather than how we form the idea itself, just as we might think of the mason as forming the composite stone-in-house without forming the stone itself.<sup>27</sup>

Second, in the *Ethics*, a true idea of  $x$  can also be a false idea of  $y$ . For example, a true idea of God can also be a false idea of a part of my body (E2p24, E2p46) as well as a false idea of an external body (E2p26c, E2p46). Thus, we need to revise the first requirement of the essentric interpretation along the following lines: (i) it represents  $x$ 's essence, and perhaps  $x$ 's properties, but nothing else *about*  $x$ .

This interpretation of the *Ethics* is bolstered by its ability to explain a feature of true ideas he mentions there, but not in the *Emendation*:<sup>28</sup>

DEGREES

Ideas are true to varying degrees.

The essentric interpretation explains this datum. An idea in  $S$ 's mind can be *wholly* or *partly* deduced from the ideas contained in  $S$ 's inborn idea of her own essence. If it's *wholly* deduced from those ideas, and therefore no other ideas are required, then it satisfies (ii) to the highest degree and is completely true. However, if it's *partly* deduced from those ideas, and therefore partly deduced from other ideas, it satisfies (ii) to a lesser degree and, as such, is less true. Thus, ideas are true to varying degrees. There's a helpful connection to his account of

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<sup>27</sup> See Garrett, "The Essence of the Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal," 296–301, for more on the eternal parts of our minds.

<sup>28</sup> See the combination of E3d1, E3d3, and E5p4s; see also TIE §73 for a suggestive passage.

action. Movements and thoughts are *actions* to varying degrees, because they follow from our essence to varying degrees (E3d2). According to the essentric interpretation, ideas are true to various degrees, because they follow from our essence to varying degrees. Thus, true ideas are a special kind of action.

I also believe this is Spinoza's account of adequate ideas. As I interpret Spinoza, "adequate" and "true" are just different ways of picking out the same kind of idea, and therefore the real definition of adequate idea is the same as the real definition of true idea, because a thing's real definition isn't sensitive to how we're picking it out.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, to adapt one of Spinoza's own examples, "Jacob" and "Israel" are different labels for the same person, and therefore the real definition of Jacob is the same as the real definition of Israel, because his real definition isn't sensitive to how we're picking him out. How do "adequate" and "true" pick out the relevant kind of idea? "Adequate" picks it out by its intrinsic features, while "true" picks it out by its extrinsic features (E2d4, E1d6, Ep. 60).

Spinoza's accounts of truth and adequacy are central to his mature philosophy. They link together his theology, epistemology, psychology, action theory, ethics, and political philosophy. For example, true ideas constitute God's intellect, provide the best kind of understanding, diminish our passions, increase our power to act, guide us toward what's best, enlarge the eternal parts of our minds, and unite us with others in tolerant communities.<sup>30</sup> If the essentric interpretation extends to Spinoza's mature work, it's worth exploring the implications for these other parts of his philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See 2d4, 2p41d, and Ep60. See also passages where Spinoza seems to freely interchange these terms: TIE §§34–35, §73, E2p41, E2p42d, and E3p58d.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., E2p32, E2p40s2, E2p41, E3p3, E4p35, E4p46, E4p73, E5p6, E5p38, and E5p42.

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