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## Obscurity and involvement on the unconscious of thought in Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume

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**Obscurity and Involvement**  
**On the Unconscious of Thought in Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume**

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

February, 2019

By  
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## Abbreviations

Complete bibliographic information for all texts is available in the works cited at the end of this dissertation.

For abbreviated citations I provide the following. First an internal reference, with increasing specificity based on the text's own divisions; then the source of the English quotation, if different from the first; then a citation for the critical edition of the source text, if different from the preceding.

### I. Abbreviations for Texts

AT	Descartes, <i>Oeuvres</i> , eds. Adam and Tannery.
CPR	Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der Reinen Vernunft)</i> .
CSM	Descartes, <i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> , eds. Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch.
CWS	Spinoza, <i>Collected Writings of Spinoza</i> , ed. Curley.
DM	Leibniz, <i>Discourse on Metaphysics (Discours de métaphysique)</i> .
DNR	Hume, <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> .
E	Spinoza, <i>Ethics (Ethica)</i> . (See internal reference conventions for this text below.)
EHU	Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> .
G	Spinoza, <i>Opera</i> , ed. Gebhardt.
L	Leibniz, <i>Philosophical Papers and Letters</i> , ed. Loemker.
LEHU	Locke, <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> .
LPS	Leibniz, <i>Philosophische Schriften</i> .
M	Leibniz, <i>Monadology (La Monadologie)</i> .
MFP	Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy (Meditationes de Prima Philosophia)</i> .
MOR	Descartes, <i>Objections and Replies to the Meditations on First Philosophy</i> .
NE	Leibniz, <i>New Essays on Human Understanding (Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humaine)</i> .
NS	Leibniz, <i>New System of the Nature and the Communication of Substances (Système nouveau de la nature et de la communication des substances)</i> .
PP	Descartes, <i>The Principles of Philosophy (Principia Philosophiae)</i> .

PNG	Leibniz, <i>Principles of Nature and Grace (Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison)</i> .
PS	Descartes, <i>The Passions of the Soul (Les passions de l'âme)</i> .
SAT	Malebranche, <i>The Search After Truth (De la recherche de la vérité)</i> .
T	Hume, <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i> .
TdIE	Spinoza, <i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione)</i> .
TH	Leibniz, <i>Theodicy (Essais de Théodicée)</i> .
TP	Spinoza, <i>Political Treatise (Tractatus Politicus)</i> .
TTP	Spinoza, <i>Theologico-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)</i> .

## II. Reference Conventions for Spinoza's *Ethics*

Roman numeral	Part number
A	Axiom
App.	Appendix
cor.	Corollary
Cap.	Chapter
D	Definition
DA	Definitions of the Affects
dem.	Demonstration
exp.	Explanation
GDA	General Definition of the Affects
L	Lemma
P	Proposition
Post.	Postulate
Pref.	Preface
s	Scholium

## Introduction

This project seeks to retrieve and defend a simple idea: thought and consciousness are not coextensive. It is a project of retrieval, since the idea that thought and consciousness are identical is a relatively recent invention, a piece of modern doxa or ideology. But I want to put this nonidentity in a positive form, that is: there is an unconscious of thought. I will defend this positive claim by exploring the unconscious of thought as it is articulated in the metaphysics of ideas of early modernity, and in particular in the work of G.W.F. Leibniz, Benedict de Spinoza, and David Hume. These thinkers, I will strive to show, were highly sensitive to profound dimensions of unconscious thought, a domain that is not just unconscious accidentally, in the sense that there are ideas of which I may happen not to be conscious, but unconscious structurally, essentially, or necessarily, in the sense that there are elements of thought of which I am constitutively incapable of becoming directly conscious. Stronger still, these unconscious elements constitute conditions for the possibility of consciousness at all: without them, there could not even be consciousness. I argue not only that there is an unconscious of thought, but that we must actively work toward a devaluation of consciousness. To the extent that philosophical modernity effects an elevation of consciousness at the expense of the unconscious of thought, this project might even be called reactionary.

It is a project of retrieval, then, but also a project of invention or rereading, since the positive terms in which I am putting this claim were not available as such to the thinkers in question. None of them said explicitly that there is an unconscious of thought. My task is to demonstrate that they nevertheless held this position. To do this I will undertake close readings of certain specific aspects of their philosophical works. In a sense, these readings should be able



to stand alone, but by threading them together I try to show that they all point toward and clarify a robust concept of the unconscious of thought.

In this introduction I attempt to do three things. First of all, I try simply to get the concept of the unconscious of thought on the table, which involves sketching out what is involved in the concept itself as well as giving the reader a sense for the motivating stakes of the project. As I see it, the problem that gives the concept of the unconscious of thought its clearest stakes is the problem of *akrasia*, or *akratic* desire, that is, how it is possible to ‘see the better but do the worse’. Why do we persist in wanting what we know is bad for us? I hold that ‘voluntarist’ paradigms in which one’s actions follow from, and are thus fully explicable in terms of, conscious decisions or volitions are incapable of giving a satisfying account of this possibility. By contrast, I think a much better account of *akratic* desires and behaviors can be given on the basis of a conception of the mind and ideas that accords the unconscious dimension of thought its proper place, in which one’s actions are significantly determined by unconscious elements of thought rather than by conscious, voluntary decisions. For this reason, I will sometimes speak of an ‘involuntarism’ common to the three major figures treated.<sup>1</sup> As for the concept of the unconscious of thought itself, it can only be sketchily introduced at the outset; it will become increasingly concrete as the individual chapters unfold. I have something of a Hegelian worry here about the limits of introductions. I think that preliminary gestures at what is meant by ‘the

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<sup>1</sup> I am adopting the term ‘involuntarism’ from François Zourabichvili, who used it as early as 1996 to describe Deleuze’s metapolitical orientation. See François Zourabichvili, “Deleuze et le possible (de l’involontarisme en politique),” in *Gilles Deleuze. Une vie philosophique*, ed. Éric Alliez (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1998). The term also has a life of its own beyond these continental walls; in as different a context as a journal devoted to the analytic philosophy of mind, it was recently used to discuss Hume’s position on the nature of belief. See Hsueh Qu, “Hume’s Doxastic Involuntarism,” *Mind* 126:501 (2017): 53-92.

concept of the unconscious of thought' will be necessarily abstract, and that only the work of the chapters themselves will give the concept the determinacy it really involves.

Second, I present some methodological considerations, most importantly those concerning how I try to read and present these thinkers synoptically. That is, I try to indicate some principles that are guiding me in my efforts to synthesize these three philosophers. The basic problem is that I am not reading for any one particular concept or problem, but instead for a pattern of thought across diverse concepts and problems. What I am looking for is a kind of metaphilosophical orientation, in which the active power of thought is sought out and affirmed not primarily in consciousness but below or behind it. Reading these thinkers with a view toward understanding this orientation gave rise to the particular analyses that I carry out below: it led me to the *petites perceptions* in Leibniz, to inadequate ideas and involuntary desire in Spinoza, and to unconscious habits in Hume. I will argue that in each of these cases, the philosopher in question makes the unconscious of thought absolutely central to their analysis, which in my estimation helps account for both their novelty as well as their remarkable explanatory power.

Third, I will try to situate this project. Against the potential objections of voluntarist moral philosophers, I hold that determinism by way of the unconscious of thought does not commit one to nihilism or quietist stoicism, let alone moral relativism. I also suggest that this project's philosophical orientation is in accord with a kind of (basically Althusserian) materialist epistemology, and (Deleuzian) transcendental empiricism. Once again, I think that these sorts of claims can only be sketched in rough outline in an introduction. The work of the chapters will show whether they are justified or not.

## 1. Philosophy, Genealogy, Symptomatology

This dissertation constitutes a philosophical contribution to the history of ideas. I claim that in the works of certain early modern philosophers, in particular Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume, we can discern the development of a concept of the unconscious of thought. But how to write a history of an idea? To go about constructing such a history, one might comb the archives for the earliest appearances of the term, note its conceptual contours as its deployment in successive contexts forced or reflected its historical development, and, depending on the ambition or perhaps the precocity of the historian, suggest that some feature of this developmental arc has abiding relevance for the present, whether in everyday practice or as an aspect of contemporary discursive formations. Following Foucault, we might call this a *genealogical approach* to constructing the history of a concept.<sup>2</sup>

That would be highly valuable and fascinating work. John Shannon Hendrix goes quite far in this direction in his *Unconscious Thought in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*. That text is also impressive for its ambition of scope and breadth, especially when compared with other histories of the concept, such as Henri Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. Ellenberger allows that the conceptual foundations of modern psychoanalytic categories must have a long history, and traces them back to so-called magical thinking in archaic societies, but nevertheless focuses primarily on the work of early figures from the history of psychoanalysis such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Carl Jung. He even

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<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

gives a precise date—1775—for the birth of dynamic psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, I find Hendrix’s genealogy to be more robust and adventurous: he speculatively proposes that the first thinker of the unconscious is in fact Plotinus, and dedicates whole chapters to exploring how the concept is already operative in the Peripatetics, Ibn Rushd (i.e., Averroes), and German idealists like Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. Hendrix writes:

It is necessary to look to philosophy and psychoanalysis to understand the possible roles that unconscious thought plays in more advanced intellectual activities. How is unconscious thought known, conceived, and apprehended by conscious thought? Is conscious thought possible without unconscious thought? In order to ask these questions, it is necessary to consider, not just pathologies, as introduced by Freud, but the history of philosophy, and the ways in which an unconscious element of thought has been conceived, prior to the coining of the term ‘unconscious’, and after.<sup>4</sup>

I agree with the spirit of this claim entirely. And in fact, some of the very questions that Hendrix raises here will also be raised in the chapters below. However, the historical sequence that Hendrix presents has a major gap: it rather abruptly jumps from Ibn Rushd and Robert Grosseteste, medieval philosophers and theologians of the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, directly to Kant. But for scattered occasional references to Leibniz and Berkeley, which are all made just in order to paint a more complete picture of the sources of Kant’s thinking, Hendrix’s reader might come away with the impression that early modernity contributed essentially nothing to the development of the concept of the unconscious. Spinoza and Hume, who I will here argue develop conceptions of desire and habit that have extremely robust unconscious dimensions, are

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<sup>3</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> John Shannon Hendrix, *Unconscious Thought in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

not mentioned by Hendrix at all. If it is helpful for the reader, this dissertation may be characterized as an effort to fill in this conspicuous lacuna in Hendrix's work.

That said, the sort of genealogical approach Hendrix employs is not exactly my own. Of course, none of the figures I treat have the word 'unconscious' in their vocabularies. The term itself was apparently coined later, by Schelling.<sup>5</sup> There are points at which they come close. Leibniz can probably be said to come closest to directly pointing at the concept, by means of his distinction between apperception and perception, since this comes down to a difference between conscious and not-necessarily-conscious perception. Spinoza says that infants are "as it were, unconscious of themselves [*quasi sui inscius*]" (E V P6s / CWS I.600 / G II.285). Hume sometimes speaks of ideas of which we are 'insensible', even though they play a role in the operations of our mind. But even here, it is a bit of a stretch to say that any of them make the positive claim that there is an unconscious of thought. And other figures that are central in this dissertation, like Descartes and Locke, stand at an even farther remove. Indeed—and I hope in this regard that I have not produced any strawmen—in the chapters below they are frequently invoked to play the role of a negative foil, examples of thinkers whose real lack of a concept of the unconscious makes the work of Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hume stand out all the more. My argument is that, despite the conspicuous terminological absence, there is in fact a robust concept of the unconscious of thought that these thinkers articulate when read in the correct light.

The set of readings presented here, then, seeks to distinguish between the *real lack* of a concept in certain figures and its merely *apparent absence* in others, in whom, however, the indispensable functioning of that very concept hums beneath the surface at almost every key

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<sup>5</sup> W.F. Bynum, E.J. Browne, and Roy Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of the History of Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 292.

point. Rather than being simply genealogical in a Foucauldian sense, the kind of approach adopted here thus also resembles the kind of *symptomatic reading* that Althusser discusses in *Reading Capital*, in which the conspicuous absences of a text can bear as much significance as what it says outright. This kind of reading, he says, “divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to *a different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first.”<sup>6</sup> Since, moreover, Althusser argued that the first thinker even to philosophically pose the *problem of reading* was Spinoza, I have to confess that I find very appealing the idea of reflexively performing a symptomatic reading of Spinoza’s own texts—much in the same way that Althusser himself claimed only to be following Marx’s protocol for symptomatically reading the classical texts of political economy in taking up Marx’s texts themselves.<sup>7</sup> In short, if symptomatic reading treats the explicit statements of a doctrine as answers to a question nowhere explicitly asked, in this dissertation I proceed on the hypothesis that the unasked question of the metaphysics of ideas in early modernity is: what is the unconscious of thought?

Finally, I described this project not just as a contribution to the history of ideas, but as a *philosophical* one. This is because I am interested in tracing out the deployments of the concept of the unconscious of thought as a necessary element within (a particular set of) philosophical systems. The necessity of a given conceptual element is determined by the conceptual

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” in Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2015), 27. Like Althusser in reading Marx, I make no pretension of ‘innocence’ in constructing my readings of early modern metaphysics: “a philosophical reading of *Capital* is quite the opposite of an innocent reading. It is a guilty reading, but not one that absolves its crime on confessing it. On the contrary, it takes the responsibility for its crime as a ‘justified crime’ and defends it by proving its necessity” (Althusser, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” 13).

<sup>7</sup> See Althusser, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” 14-7, 27-9.

architecture of the system in which it plays a role, and refers ineluctably to the particular philosophical problems whose resolution conditioned the development and structure of that architecture. This is, incidentally, the sense of ‘dialectics’ that Deleuze defends in *Difference & Repetition*: ideas as the necessity of problems.<sup>8</sup> If it is true that the sense of a given concept is determined by its role in the systematic unity whose necessity is occasioned by a specific problem, this is why it is so difficult to consider abstracted pieces of philosophical systems without seriously compromising their coherence and integrity. The typical reception of early modern philosophical concepts is overflowing with valuable examples of this point. Consider the ostensible absurdity of Leibniz’s claim that ‘this is the best of all possible worlds’ or Malebranche’s occasionalist denial of secondary causation, or even the received wisdom regarding what constitutes Hume’s ‘empiricism’: when cut out from the context of the systematic thought that provides their sense, these are reduced to highly impressionistic concept-sketches, and are thereby invariably distorted, to such a degree that they can even appear ridiculous.

My emphasis on philosophical-systematic context means that I am arguing for the necessity of an idea. It is one thing to claim that Leibniz, Spinoza, or Hume happened to have some intimation of what today we call the unconscious, and quite another to argue, as I try to do here, that their philosophical systems involve the unconscious of thought as an integral concept, one that is necessary both as a condition for these systems to function, and also as a consequence elaborated by the very functioning of those systems. Programmatically, then, I can say the following: I contend that a rational reconstruction of the philosophical systems of Leibniz,

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Continuum, 2001). See Dan Smith, “Deleuze, Kant, and the Theory of Ideas,” in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); and James Bahoh, “Deleuze’s Theory of Dialectical Ideas: The Influence of Lautman and Heidegger,” *Deleuze Studies* 13:1 (2019): 19-53.

Spinoza, and Hume is in some way incomplete, or inadequate, if it is missing a concept of the unconscious of thought.<sup>9</sup>

The present work is the result of an approach to the history of ideas that freely—some would object, I am sure, *too* freely—draws on all three of these methodological approaches: it is by turns genealogical, symptomatic, and philosophical. I argue that the epistemological frameworks and metaphysics of ideas of early modernity, particularly in Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume, necessarily involve and explicate an unconscious of thought insofar as they conceive of thought as being objective, and as having a less-than-essential relationship to consciousness. Together they insist that the unconscious of thought is not negative: it is, instead, positively structured and structuring. There are unconscious perceptions, unconscious elements of understanding, volition, and desire, and unconscious habits of thought. These are not defined by their absence, as though ‘unconscious’ meant that they are *negations* of thought insofar as it is essentially conscious. Instead, they are positively differentiated determinations of thought insofar as it is objectively real. Thus this work is an investigation into the metaphysics of thought more than it is an evaluation of merely epistemological categories.

In at least one sense, my central claim is not a particularly surprising or novel one. The notion that what is not consciously recognized has an objective structure might even be called the central tenet of Platonism, and it would be absurd to suggest that this idea has somehow gone

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<sup>9</sup> This is in the spirit of Maimon: “I feel I have comprehended a book only when, after I fill in all its gaps, all its ideas cohere with one another” (Salomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Salomon Maimon*, eds. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham P. Socher, trans. Paul Reitter [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018], 50). This approach to the history of philosophy is what Martial Gueroult called *dianoematics* (see Martial Gueroult, *Dianoématique*, vol. 2 [Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1979]). On Gueroult’s dianoematics as a philosophy of the history of philosophy, see Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 69-73.



unnoticed in the history of western philosophy. But early modern philosophers explored these structures of the unconscious of thought in extremely rigorous and important ways that genuinely bear little resemblance to those of their predecessors. For Leibniz, consciousness is an integration of unconscious elements of perception, imperceptible differentials without which consciousness would not even be possible. For Spinoza, thought is one of the attributes of the one substance, *Deus sive natura*, and so has an ineluctably necessary and objective structure irrespective of any particular consciousness of it. The desire that each individual *is*, according to Spinoza, is a striving that is only partially accessible to consciousness under certain very precise conditions. For Hume, the habitual associations by which the mind moves from one idea to another are almost always unconscious, and are certainly formed unconsciously; moreover, any efforts to bring them to consciousness in order to attempt to correct them, as Hume countenances, are extremely precarious and difficult. In each case, we are not dealing with thoughts or ideas that merely happen not to be conscious, but which are structurally and necessarily unconscious: perceptions too minute to register in the conscious mind, desires that are determined unconsciously by virtue of the unknown ideas that obscurely constitute them, associations and habits that are unconsciously formed in the very process of constituting a mind.

When we read these thinkers together in this light, I claim, we are able to formulate answers to questions about the limits of consciousness—and the consequences that follow from those limits, which are most obviously epistemological, but which are also crucially ethical and political—that have greater explanatory power than those given by philosophers either prior to or after the early modern period. If part of my argument is that these early modern thinkers develop a genuinely novel concept of the unconscious of thought *avant la lettre*, my investigation is also guided by the intuition that it is a more robust conception than that of many subsequent

philosophical traditions as well. The former claim is probably less than surprising, precisely because the very concept of consciousness was itself coming into being during early modernity. As for the latter intuition, I would argue that one of the features of philosophical modernity, in particular after Kant, is a kind of overemphasis on consciousness, which I might characterize, perhaps somewhat polemically, as an overzealous optimism with regard to the possibility of subjectivity transcending its own constitutive limits. Perhaps due to their notable lack of—or even, in Spinoza’s case, outright opposition to—a philosophy of history in which the concept of history is identified with the idea of teleological progress, the early modern philosophers in question here are extremely skeptical about the prospects of such historical transcendence by the historically constituted subject. The unconscious of thought that they elaborate, consequently, is in no way minimized or downplayed, but instead is allowed to take on the full scope of its proper determining power. It is as if the unconscious of thought were somehow unleashed during the reflections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before an increasingly confident modern subjectivity repressed it with its imperial consciousness. And part of the dissertation’s implicit claim is that this peculiar feature of early modern philosophy—as well as others not discussed here, surely, and in other periods as much as in early modernity—is best accessed by a reading that allows itself to engage with the history of ideas genealogically, symptomatically, and philosophically, as the investigation demands.

## **2. The Unconscious of Thought**

To get a sense for what I mean when I say that the concept of the unconscious of thought allows for a rigorous reframing of longstanding philosophical problems, let us briefly consider, by way of example, the ancient problem of *akrasia*, that is, incontinence or lack of self-control. I take

this problem to be paradigmatic here: I hold that its proper articulation, and consequently its resolution, is only truly possible by means of the concept of the unconscious of thought. Spinoza obsesses over this problem, which informs the whole of his work: how is it possible that we see the better but do the worse, a possibility that seems to be confirmed by daily experience?<sup>10</sup> The *locus classicus* of this problem is Plato's *Protagoras*, in which Socrates explicitly states that what one understands to be good is irresistibly desirable:

[No] one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better. To give in to oneself is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom. [...]

Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater if he is able to choose the lesser.<sup>11</sup>

If Socrates is right about this, then we seem to have to accept that when people act in ways contrary to their well-being, this must express a lack of knowledge on their part, since if they had adequate knowledge their desires would be correctly determined in accordance with what really is good for them. Hence the Platonic conclusion here is that the only real evil is in fact ignorance, since the actual possession of knowledge immediately solves the problem of misguided desire.

On the one hand, this Platonic framing is very close to Spinoza's line of thinking when he argues that human beings, insofar as they are determined *ex ducto rationis*, or according to reason, always agree and act in such a way that is beneficial for themselves and others, whereas

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., E III P2s / CWS I.496 / G II.143.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 358c-d.

by contrast, insofar as they are determined *ex suo ingenio*, or in accordance with their own idiosyncratic temperament, which is a product of chance encounters, they tend to disagree and are led to do what is worse.<sup>12</sup> However, on the other hand, Spinoza clearly disagrees with this Platonic argument in a crucial way. For Spinoza, in fact, the problem is that *even when we have adequate knowledge*, our desires can be determined such that we act otherwise than what this knowledge countenances as the best course of action. That is, contra Socrates, Spinoza does not think that if only someone knew what was really better, they would never do the worse. As Spinoza writes: “No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect” (E IV P14 / CWS I.553 / G II.219). Because “nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true” (E IV P1 / CWS I. 547 / G II.211), our affective determination can remain stubbornly backward even when someone presents a convincing argument about why it is incorrect, or about what would constitute a genuinely better way to act. The real issue, in other words, is that not even consciously recognizing the truth of the true necessarily determines us to live rationally, so that the problem is not simply ignorance. Spinoza recognizes that the truth is, in fact, relatively impotent on its own; a true idea can determine us to act, but only insofar as it engenders a more powerful affect than those that presently structure our desire—that is, not insofar as it happens to be true. The question of the *power* of an idea, for Spinoza, is importantly disarticulated from that of its *veracity*.

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., E I App. / CWS I.440 / G II.78); and IV P39s1 / CWS I.565/ G II.236. On Spinoza’s concept of *ingenium* in the phrase ‘*ex suo ingenio*’, see Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: L’expérience et l’éternité* (Paris: PUF, 1994), part II, chapter 3; and François Zourabichvili, “Individual Identity in Spinoza,” trans. Gil Morejón, *Parrhesia* (forthcoming).

Martin Lin has recently argued that Spinoza's account of *akrasia* hinges on the difference between *temporally distinct* motivations of the will—that is, he argues that the lesser intensity of rational desires based on a potentially positive future outcome can be overruled by the greater intensity of irrational desires in the moment.<sup>13</sup> Now it certainly seems correct that this occasionally happens, but I do not think it gets at the heart of the matter. At the very least, I doubt that this disparity between short- and long-term cost-benefit analyses was sufficiently interesting to Spinoza that it would motivate the incessant references to the problem of seeing the better and doing the worse across the whole of his corpus: *video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor*, the philosopher quotes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (E IV P17s / CWS I.554 / G II.221). I argue, instead, that Spinoza's obsession with this problem points to the concept of the unconscious of desire that his philosophical system requires and explicates: it is not that one is able to freely will against what one understands to be better, in a morally compromised choice of how one exercises one's power of volition; rather, it is that positive elements in the unconscious of thought frequently determine one's desire in spite of conscious understanding. Lin's account makes it seem as though if opposing courses of action did not appear closer to or farther in time from a given subject, akratic desire would never even arise as a possibility. But Spinoza's discovery of the unconscious of desire is much more profound—and consequently more troubling—than this would suggest: akratic desire is nearly ubiquitous, because individual desires are unconsciously determined in a way that is only accessible to consciousness under very specific conditions, and such access does not imply the power to consciously restructure

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Lin, "Spinoza's Account of Akrasia," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7:3 (2006): 395-414.

those desires. The whole conceptual frame of this Spinozist analysis of the problem of akratic desire is obviously very different from the Platonic one.

But what kind of unconscious at work in Spinoza's metaphysics of thought? And how does it relate to consciousness, its conceptual twin? Consciousness is, as Gilles Deleuze argues, an integration, "a matter of threshold":<sup>14</sup> a synthesis in the present of complex disunities and impure mixtures, selections based on unclear principles and whose matter is obscure. It is ambivalently given at best; its genesis is, for us, a matter of inferential reconstruction and retrospective positing, never something immediately accessible. I am not simply deluded when I admit that I knew something was wrong and wanted it anyway. There is no real contradiction in my conscious, volitional opposition to the forms of my actual determination. Rather, this tension underscores the unconscious character of the processes of my determination. My determination takes place below and behind my consciousness of it. We posit the unconscious axiomatically, as a concept that makes it possible to ask after the intelligibility of human behavior given the obvious insufficiency of well-intentioned self-conscious expression. Conscious expression and reflection are subject to habitual forms that are historically given and unconsciously adopted—and so too, unavoidably, will be any attempt at critical reflection on this problem. This is what Althusser means when he says that philosophy, and even that of scientists, is itself a mode of ideology.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the unconscious of thought is always involved in a particular

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 101.

<sup>15</sup> See Louis Althusser, "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Ben Brewster, James H. Kavanagh, Thomas E. Lewis, Grahame Lock, and Warren Montag (New York: Verso, 2015). This is why the very first thesis he presents in that lecture course is 'dogmatic' and obviously circular: "*Thesis 1*. Philosophical propositions are Theses" (Althusser,

consciousness, as something that cannot but be expressed, even if this expression is obscure, incomplete, involuntary, or imperceptible.

The fact that a set of unconscious determinations finds oblique expression in consciousness does not mean that the unconscious is isomorphic to these expressions; we should not imagine that the unconscious is structured ‘like’ the habituated forms in which we are determined to express it as consciousness. It would be a kind of transcendental illusion to assume that the unconscious, as that which grounds consciousness, somehow resembles what it grounds.<sup>16</sup> But on the other hand, if we need a concept of the unconscious to navigate the apparent contradiction of an involuntary consciousness, surely this unconsciousness cannot be absolutely indifferent to conscious expression. Or, we might say that the problem of relating the unconscious of thought to consciousness leads to a Rousseauian dilemma: whenever we think we have identified the conditions for the possibility of the genesis of consciousness *in* the unconscious of thought itself, we will have succeeded only in pushing the structures of consciousness into the unconscious and subsequently ‘discovering’ them there.

If there is an ahistorical aspect to the unconscious, it is the simple fact of its existence, the *naturans* to conscious *naturata*.<sup>17</sup> The potential risk in this formulation is that it seems to align

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“Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists”, 74). The circularity here is, to borrow a phrase from the language of computer programming, not a bug but a feature.

<sup>16</sup> This is one of the great lessons taught by Deleuze. “[T]his bestowal of sense, on the basis of the immanent quasi-cause and the static genesis which ensues for the other dimensions of the proposition, may occur only within a transcendental field which would correspond to the conditions posed by Sartre in his decisive article of 1937: an impersonal transcendental field, not having the form of a synthetic personal consciousness or subjective identity—with the subject, on the contrary, being always constituted. The foundation can never resemble what it finds” (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, trans. Constantin V. Boundas [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990], 98-9).

all productivity, generativity, and creativity with the unconscious, and consequently relegates consciousness at once to both reproduction and sterility (a fundamentally misogynistic conceptual couplet). Instead, we should say that consciousness and the unconscious both play roles in the social processes of production and reproduction, but that subjective consciousness is incapable of grasping or comprehending these processes as the concrete totality they synthetically constitute. Conscious expression is always expressive of a process that also involves unconscious determinations. This process as a whole is necessarily social and historical, but it is not entirely expressed at the level of consciousness.

The unconscious is a concept of the involuntary, an idea axiomatically necessary as a corollary to the principle of sufficient reason in the domain of human action and behavior. It is resolutely opposed to all idealist fictions of purely self-determining subjectivity and voluntarist decisionism. This is why Schelling, in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, names the unconscious as the ineradicable element of necessity that stands opposed to the free act of the will as its objective condition and obstacle.<sup>18</sup> But it is from Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume that I

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<sup>17</sup> See E I P29s / CWS I.434 / G II.71.

<sup>18</sup> “Freedom is to be necessity, and necessity freedom. But now in contrast to freedom, necessity is nothing else but the unconscious [*das Bewußtlose*]. That which exists in me without consciousness is involuntary [*unwillkürlich*]; that which exists with consciousness is in me through my willing. [... The] conscious, or that freely determining activity which we deduced earlier on, is to be confronted with an unconscious, whereby out of the most uninhibited expression of freedom there arises unawares something wholly involuntary, and perhaps even contrary to the agent’s will, which he himself could never have realized through his willing. [...] Such intervention of a hidden necessity into human freedom is presupposed, not only, say, in tragedy, whose sole existence rests on that presumption, but even in normal doing and acting” (F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001], 204; *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling [Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta’scher Verlag, 1856-61], Volume III, 594).



would like to excavate elements for a theory of the unconscious of thought as materially and even historically conditioned on the one hand, and as determining the conditions for and limits of conscious thought on the other. There is no escape from the circle of necessity, except by espousing an irrationalism, the possibility of whose intelligibility vanishes along with that of any human action. For the image of voluntarist decisionism asks us to accept ‘for no reason’ as the final cause of concrete human actions.<sup>19</sup> And while Spinoza and Hume are explicit in their rejection of such a model of self-determination in favor of the external, involuntary, and unconscious determination of subjects, even Leibniz’s theory of inclination, his attempt to save the metaphysical freedom of the subject, cannot help but become a doctrine of subjective necessity, as I will argue in Chapter 1. For my purposes, the issue is not whether it is possible to salvage these doctrines without the metaphysics of a God or substance that, while once providing their ground, have become distasteful or suspect to modern readers; instead it is a matter of positing the necessity of subjective determination as an axiom without which human action is unintelligible in principle. For we do indeed often see the better and do the worse; the question is what must be true in order for that to be possible, and exploring the consequences of this truth.

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<sup>19</sup> A contemporary version of such irrationalism can be found in Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, where the ‘principle of unreason’ is given as that there “is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is; everything must, without reason, be able not to be and/or be able to be other than it is” (Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier [New York: Bloomsbury, 2010], 60). This is presented as a consequence of Meillassoux’s grappling with what he calls ‘Hume’s Problem’. How anything meaningfully, that is, *nontrivially* intelligible about actual states of affairs, bodies, facts, relations, or concepts could still be said once this principle is accepted remains entirely unclear to me.

### 3. Involuntary Freedom

There do follow a number of consequences that might strike some as pessimistic. If ‘Spinozism’ was for a long time used as a term of abuse denoting *fatalism*, then I will be accused not only of having accepted this fatalism but of having turned Hume and Leibniz into fatalists as well. For example, if Leibniz is right to define freedom as the proportion of active to passive thought, or conscious to unconscious perception, as we will see in the first chapter, then it turns out that freedom is infinitesimally small: a vanishing quantum of conscious activity perpetually submitted to the laws of indistinctness and obscurity. Hume and Spinoza, on the other hand, flatly deny that there is such a thing as human freedom, if by ‘freedom’ we mean ‘spontaneous self-determination’. Our putative experience of this kind of freedom, for Spinoza, is in fact just a function of the epistemic gap between the real determining power of the unconscious of thought and our typically weak conscious grasp of the nature of things. Hume, for his part, denies that such putative experience is even possible.

The standard line of criticism against various forms of involuntarism has always been that the denial of spontaneous human self-determination entails a nihilistic stoicism at best, leading to the necessary collapse of anything like a genuine ethics. And to be sure, many typical articulations of moral philosophy do indeed require the spontaneous freedom of the subject, so it is easy to see why the denial of the latter looks to many like the renunciation of the former. Thus Kant’s basic reaction to Spinoza’s ‘righteousness’ in the *Critique of Judgment* is one of stunned incomprehension: the relentless indifference of nature to morals, the unnecessary evils suffered by the virtuous, Kant thinks, should by rights have *broken* Spinoza. Kant concludes that in spite of Spinoza’s denial of *physical* teleology, the heretic’s apparent reverence for the moral law means that he must have been implicitly committed to a *moral* teleology and a moral author of

the world.<sup>20</sup> The alternative, for Kant, if not outright unintelligible, is certainly nihilistic.<sup>21</sup> A similar point could be made about how Kant finds Hume's own reputedly irreproachable moral conduct basically unintelligible in light of what he takes to be the untenable essence of Hume's metacritical skepticism.<sup>22</sup>

However, I do not think that the denial of spontaneous self-determination is nihilistic, nor do I think that it entails pessimism. Quite the contrary: as a Spinozist, I am committed to the joy that the power of thought necessarily involves insofar as it is active. But thought is active even when it is unconscious. The polemical target, then, of this work is any conception of thought in which only conscious thought is allowed activity; any formulation in which thought is conceived as active and positive insofar as it is conscious, and passive and negative insofar as it is unconscious. Such a conception is, to be blunt, false, and from it follow precisely the sad passions that Spinoza ceaselessly denounces as debilitating. There is nothing sadder than thinking oneself to be spontaneously self-determining while really being determined by external causes. Even real joys are mutilated in that light: they become pale confusions, determining one to continue along the path of passivity and sadness. But this dissertation is not a polemic: it is a joyful exploration of the unconscious of thought in its positivity and difference. Coming to understand these unconscious structures is a necessary step along the way toward grasping for

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<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §87; 336-7.

<sup>21</sup> See Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), for a detailed reading of Kant's critical system as an attempt to deal with (Jacobian) Spinozism as the metaphysical collapse into nihilism. This excellent work, which however I would argue misunderstands Spinoza in some important ways, deserves a more detailed engagement than is possible in the present dissertation.

<sup>22</sup> See CPR A745/B773-A769/B797.

ourselves the nature of our own determination, and this does indeed deserve the name of freedom. Consider Leibniz's peculiar metaphysics of differentials: these vanishingly small quanta, which may appear as nothing beside the infinite actualities to which they are intrinsically related, are in fact not nothing; and the same must be said for freedom, an ephemeral degree of activity in an ocean of passive determination, infinitesimally small but still not nothing. Perhaps this is a disheartening picture when compared to the radiant myth of spontaneous self-determination, that masculine and imperialist imaginary of sovereign subjective independence; but it would surely be sadder to continue to long for the promises of this destructive mythos when the alternative is open to us to leave it behind and explore the vibrant possibilities of a freedom without spontaneity and independence—that is, freedom without voluntarism. Or as Spinoza put it, too many philosophers have “learned how to praise in many ways a human nature which doesn't exist anywhere, and how to bewail the way men really are. They conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be” (TP I.1 / CWS II.503 / G III.273).

Why was it possible for this concept of the unconscious of thought to be so rigorously formulated in early modernity? Here I can only venture some hypotheses. For one thing, it is in early modernity that the concept of *consciousness* came to be directly thematized, and the unconscious is its necessary corollary. This is to say that there is some truth to the claim that modernity is essentially defined in reference to subjectivity, and subjectivity necessarily involves some concept of the unconscious.<sup>23</sup> Spinozist, Leibnizian, and Humean subjects have astonishing

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<sup>23</sup> By this I in no way mean to claim that subjectivity is *the* essentially determinative concept of modernity; it will be sufficient if the reader grants me that consciousness or subjectivity constitutes one of its key conceptual aspects. After all, as David Lachterman wrote in his remarkable genealogy of modernity, *The Ethics of Geometry*, “reflection upon the possible unity of ‘modernity’ as well as frustration with its elusiveness seem somehow part and parcel of the

depths: these thinkers teach us that subjectivity involves necessarily unconscious thought to an extraordinary degree. To identify the whole of thought with conscious expression (as for instance Locke does, as I will briefly show at the beginning of Chapter 1) is to misunderstand all the concrete logics of subjective determination. In that case, why were Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hume able to reach the postulate of an unconscious of thought that is positive and determinate, while some of their contemporaries did not? This question is much more difficult to answer. I might suggest that this partially results from their pragmatic or realist orientation: their desire for the active constitution of transformative ethical practice led them to recognize clearly that consciousness alone could not possibly account for the nature of human activity, which so frequently runs counter to what is consciously grasped as good. If we posit that subjectivity is defined and determined exclusively in terms of consciousness, then we will remain structurally incapable of answering the question of why we often see the better and do the worse, and our transformative aspirations will be condemned to impotent confusion from the start.

That is why this project, which in its details will focus almost exclusively on ostensibly esoteric questions of metaphysics and epistemology, must be understood as being essentially political in its guiding orientation. That is, the theory of the unconscious of thought as articulated in early modern philosophy has much to teach us about the mechanics of ideologies. As I write this, it must be confessed, things are going rather badly: late capitalist climate change is eradicating the very ecology and biosphere that constitute the material conditions for the possibility of terrestrial life; racist nationalism is resurging across the global north; toxic masculinity and white supremacy refuse to die; thirty years of neoliberal technocracy have

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phenomenon of modernity itself” (David Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* [New York: Routledge, 1989], 1).

opened onto a broken dialectic of frustrated progressive class struggle and reactionary backlash. In this context, it is extremely important for us to understand the nature and logic of subjective determination: none of the ideological justifications for these historical tendencies has a genuinely rational basis, but they all seem to *function* perfectly well. Spinoza and Hume, again, recognized that the determining power of ideas has nothing to do with their rational validity. They proceed by distinguishing the question of the power of ideas from that of their veracity, and the philosophical consequences of this critical disarticulation are monumental.

There may have been historical reasons why they were inclined to effect this disarticulation. Perhaps Spinoza's experience of the murder of the brothers De Witt, an extreme moment of violent political reaction in seventeenth century Holland, *ultimi barbarorum*, pushed him in this direction.<sup>24</sup> And it is certainly possible that Hume was similarly frustrated with the ideological incoherence of the Jacobite rebellions and eighteenth-century Tory propagandists, in light of their stubborn resilience and continued political effectiveness.<sup>25</sup> This is of course only speculative, and risks leaving behind the philosophical for the historiographic or biographical. But it is at least true that, in the tumultuous political landscape of early modernity, the conditions existed for a discerning thinker to realize that the truth-content of an ideological formation has little to do with its effectiveness or actuality.

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<sup>24</sup> See Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 26-7; and Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> See F.J. McLynn, "Jacobitism and David Hume: The Ideological Backlash Foiled," *Hume Studies* 9:2 (1983): 171-199.

Instead, its effectiveness has everything to do with affect. Spinoza has rightly enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years as so-called affect theory has risen in prominence,<sup>26</sup> but Hume and Leibniz could also contribute substantially to that discussion in ways that are not so often recognized. A moment's reflection shows that Hume's famous subordination of reason to the passions can serve as a maxim for the project of ideology critique: it is at the level of their capacity to effectively engender passions and affects that ideologies must be engaged, since the question of their veracity or rational ground is actually trivial from this perspective. As I will explore in detail in Chapter 4, Hume is entirely correct when he identifies belief as absolutely central, as indispensably necessary for the most basic operations of conscious thought, and at the same time denies that it has anything to do with the logic of demonstrative certainty or veracity, thus raising the problem of distinguishing belief from mere fiction.<sup>27</sup> And Leibniz, as we will see, invokes precisely the unconscious elements of perception whenever he critiques the inadequate concept of freedom as indifference, arguing that decisions made under conditions of apparent indifference are subtended by real imperceptible differentia, unconsciously making more desirable the choice that ultimately wins out. Once again, Spinoza's formulation clearly lays out the coordinates of the problem: "No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of

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<sup>26</sup> For example, consider the preponderance of references to Spinoza as a crucial precursor in: Anna Gibbs, "After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication," Gregory J. Siegworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," and Megan Watkins, "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 83-109; and Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden: Polity Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> See EHU V.10-12 / 47-9.

good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect” (E III P14 / CWS I.553 / G II.219).

How do we account for the determining power of a given affect? Why does one ideal configuration affect us more strongly than another, if its veracity cannot account for this force? My claim is that any minimally adequate account of an idea’s determining power must necessarily involve the unconscious of thought. The dicethrow of this project is thus as follows. I wager on investigating the unconscious dimensions of perception, desire, and habit or belief, in order to try to find resources by which we might learn to perceive differently, to unmake our desires, to actively disbelieve, to try to form better habits of thought. Along the way, this investigation might allow us to get a sense for what is necessary and sufficient for an ideal formation to be affectively powerful enough to produce real effects at the level of subjective determination. What is required is to develop the capacity of active thought to intervene in the processes of subjective genesis, which precede and subtend consciousness. Hence the spirit of this project is aligned with that of Theodor Adorno when he wrote that philosophy must “use the strength of the constituted subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.”<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. Empiricism and Materialist Epistemology**

Critical philosophy begins with the question of where and how one must begin, which is why it is an inherently reflexive and self-reflexive theoretical practice. Empiricism answers this question in a way that appears, at first glance, to be an empty tautology: we can only begin with what is given. At the formal level of its pure concept, Hegel is surely right about ‘the given’: it is

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<sup>28</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 2004), xx.



a name for empty identity, and the immediate vacuousness of ‘here’ and ‘now’ is enough to push the movement of thought onward.<sup>29</sup> But what is *empirically* given is never simply identical. Hence there is an immediate distinction to be made between the *conceptual identity* of any ‘this’, which in fact expresses the indifference of the universal to the non-identity of empirical experiences, and the *real difference* between every ‘this’, which escapes the universal determinations of the concept of the given.<sup>30</sup> To begin with the given is not, therefore, to begin with immediate identity or conceptual indifference; it is rather to begin with irreducible multiplicity and real difference. As Deleuze writes, justifying his formulation of empiricism and pluralism as an inclusive disjunction, while so-called rationalism commences with the postulate of an abstraction and seeks the conditions for its empirical instantiation, empiricism “starts with a completely different evaluation: analysing the states of things, in such a way that non-pre-existent concepts can be extracted from them. States of things are neither unities nor totalities, but multiplicities.”<sup>31</sup>

The rationalist objection to this approach, which is radicalized in the Hegelian effort to exclude from philosophy all objective and subjective presuppositions, is that too much or too little is always delivered to philosophical reflection in its attempt to start with the given. Either ‘the given’ includes too much, because the apparent immediacy of the given is subtended by and expressive of a vast network of socio-historical and metaphysical or logical mediations; or too

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<sup>29</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), §§90-110.

<sup>30</sup> See Bruce Baugh, “Transcendental Empiricism: Deleuze’s Response to Hegel,” *Man and World* 25:2 (1992): 133-148.

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Hammerjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), vii.

little, because thought finds itself unable to move beyond the merely hypothetical mode, that is, to raise itself to the properly philosophical level of necessity and universality. This is why empiricism is constantly threatened by two forms of idealist relapse: on the one hand, a pure analytics in which one derives the mediations through which immediacy has its possibility and meaning, an anamnetics or geometrics of sense (phenomenology), and on the other, a fetishism of the immediate according to which the passage beyond apparent contingency to scientific systematicity is barred in advance as a matter of speculative agnostics (positivism). Here one can sense the proximity of Adorno and Althusser, whose otherwise very different approaches to Marxist philosophy are united in their polemical critiques of these two tendencies in thought, understood as intimately connected modes of ideological regress in epistemology—two poles at which, as Paul Feyerabend says, the empiricist deflation of metaphysical commitments “is on the best way to becoming a dogmatic metaphysical system.”<sup>32</sup>

At either of these extremes, empiricism becomes an uncritical means for carrying out a program of legitimating the existent. It becomes epistemological conservatism. Idealist epistemology is marked by its effort to produce criteria for legitimation, or logics of justification, for the sanction of already existing practices of knowledge and objects of belief. It is a rights discourse at the level of thought: idealist epistemology asks whether we have the right to the knowledge we already have.<sup>33</sup> Kant explicitly articulates the logic of this tendency:

When teachers of law talk about rights and claims, they distinguish in a legal action the question regarding what is legal (*quid iuris*) from the question concerning fact (*quid*

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Feyerabend, “How to be a good empiricist,” in *Knowledge, Science, and Relativism: Philosophical Papers Vol. III* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 81.

<sup>33</sup> An effort, incidentally, of dubious merit: “science can stand on its own feet and does not need any help from rationalists, secular humanists, Marxists...” (Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* [New York: Verso, 2010], xviii).

*facti*), and they demand the proof of both. The first proof, which is to establish the right, or for that matter the legal entitlement, they call the deduction. [...] I distinguish transcendental deduction from empirical deduction, which indicates in what way a concept has been acquired through experience and through reflection upon experience, and which therefore concerns not the concept's legitimacy but only the fact whereby we came to possess it. (CPR A84/B116)

Idealist epistemology understands itself as posing the question *quid iuris*, that is, what are the grounds for the legitimacy of applying concepts as we do? What right do we have to the knowledge we already possess? But this presupposes that thinking is already actual, that true knowledge exists, and that its process is ultimately a matter of course—a presupposition Deleuze calls the good sense of common sense, or the dogmatic image of thought.<sup>34</sup> If the Kantian suggestion of an oppositional philosophical typology of rationalism and empiricism is inadequate, evidence for its inadequacy is found in the fact that Hume and Spinoza agree on precisely this point: the skeptical empiricist and the rationalist metaphysician both treat thinking as something that must be accomplished, a surprising navigation of numerous complications, an almost unbelievable achievement as rare as it is difficult.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising that thought sometimes falls into error; what is surprising is that it is occasionally possible for thinking to occur at all, that it sometimes happens that an unassignable threshold is crossed and a real movement of thought erupts from within an objective milieu of thoughtlessness.<sup>36</sup> Such *surprise*

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<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, ch. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See E V P42s / CWS I.617 / G II.308.

<sup>36</sup> Spinoza's role here is perhaps less obvious than Hume's, since the former has been influentially interpreted as an arch exemplar of dogmatic (uncritical) rationalism by the German Idealists. But Deleuze rightly identifies this objective surprise as one of the motivating concerns of Spinozism: "The whole problem is therefore: How do we manage to have, to form adequate ideas, since our natural condition determines us to have only inadequate ideas?" (Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 75-6).

is the orienting passion and affective disposition of transcendental empiricism; its practical correlate in materialist epistemology is the active construction of new modes of knowledge, which involves a critical interrogation of the objective logics of apparent immediacy and the currently existing milieus of non-thought or the unthought, that is, the positive, determining power of thought that is unconscious—or, in a word, ideology critique.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that empiricism begins with the given means that it sets out from nonidentity, and the question it needs to answer is: how is it occasionally possible that determinate relations are postulated on the basis of the differentially given? In this context, Hume’s principles of association constitute a typology of external relations posited between nonidentical terms. As we will see in Chapter 4, the epistemic consequences here are far-reaching: claims about matters of fact will only be possible as synthetic, that is, as habits and not as reason. But this is the case because contiguity, resemblance, and causality relate terms that are always strictly nonidentical. Empiricism asks after the logic according to which, for instance, an objective resemblance between nonidentical givens is subjectively registered, which is also to ask after the determinate conditions under which what is given constitutes an occasional cause for the postulate of a differential resemblance. That the given can constitute an occasional cause for such a postulate is not the same as its constituting a sufficient reason. If associated relata were identical, then we

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<sup>37</sup> Althusser writes: “perceptions and images [*Anschauung und Vorstellung*] were treated by Marx as abstractions, and I attributed to this abstraction the state of the concrete or of experience as you find it in Spinoza’s first level of knowledge—that is, in my language, the status of the ideological” (Althusser, “Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?” in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Ben Brewster, James H. Kavanagh, Thomas E. Lewis, Grahame Lock, and Warren Montag [New York: Verso, 2012], 226). Althusser suggests that the theory of the epistemological break, and the distinction between ideology and science, is, even before Canguilhem and Bachelard, already elaborated in Spinoza—and even in the early Spinoza of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Understanding*.

could not say that they bear a resemblance, are contiguous, or stand in a causal relation; we would have to say that they were simply identical. In fact, in association we posit a relation between nonidentical terms whose concepts do not involve each other, that is, we posit external relations. Empiricism therefore begins with given differences and remains with their nonidentity: there is no question of deriving some objective identity on the basis of what is differentially given as nonidentical. Hume teaches us, for instance, that what is repeated in sense is never a pure identical instance (A and A) but always nonidentical cases involving impure mixtures (AB and AC).<sup>38</sup> The principles of association are principles of selection: syntheses that are apparently posited immediately and spontaneously, but whose apparent spontaneity is a function of objective processes of social habituation, which, I argue, are unconscious.

There is thus another sense to the question of ‘where we begin’, in which what is at stake is a matter of subjective demarcation or genesis: where does the world end, and where do we begin as subjects? Here transcendental empiricism becomes properly speculative, since it posits an immanent identity between, on the one hand, the process of social habituation that gives rise to the apparent immediacy of ideal associations, and, on the other, the process of subjective genesis. The subject or the mind is nothing other than its spontaneous ideal associations, whose logic and apparent immediacy are the result of social processes of unconscious habituation. Where the question raised is that of the possibility of the postulate of objective identity on the basis of the differentially given, the anamnetic doctrine of innate ideas eminently fails to suffice as an answer, as Leibniz argued; besides which, the indifferent identity of ideas supposedly innate to human minds would thereby be incapable of accounting for the real differences

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<sup>38</sup> See Jay Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 14-6.

involved in subjective individuation.<sup>39</sup> For the same reason, the Lockean *tabula rasa* involves only what is indifferently universal, never what is irreducibly singular about individual subjects. Empiricism remains at the level of the differentially given, the nonidentity of the repeated, in order to pose rigorously the problem of subjective constitution, or of the actual genesis of subjects. Hume, Spinoza, and Leibniz constantly argue for the analytically unresolvable character of subjective knowledge, our inability to separate out clearly that which in a representation or imagination is ‘ours’ and that which is ‘from without’, or as I will put it, they argue that consciousness obscurely involves a complex unconscious of thought. Transcendental empiricism affirms the analytic ambiguity or topological indistinction between the subjective and objective, or the interior and exterior. In this sense, where we begin is not and can never be clearly given. As Maimon wrote, “‘given’ means only this: a representation that arises in us in an unknown [*unbekannt*] way.”<sup>40</sup> In their uncompromising fidelity to this founding insight, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume, although obviously pre-Kantian, cannot be called pre-critical.

## 5. Outline of the Project

This project will unfold across four chapters. In each chapter I engage primarily with one of the main figures of the investigation, and with a particular focus on one aspect of the unconscious of thought: Leibniz on the unconscious of perception (Chapter 1), Spinoza on the unconscious of ideas and desire (Chapters 3 and 4), and Hume on the unconscious of habit (Chapter 4). At first glance, this organization might be read as quasi-dialectical in a Hegelian mode, as in: perception

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<sup>39</sup> See NE I.I.1-5 / 74-7.

<sup>40</sup> Solomon Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. Nick Midgley, Henry Somers-Hall, Alistair Welchman, and Martin Reiglitz (New York: Continuum, 2010), 108.

turns out to presuppose desire, which turns out to presuppose habit, so that the project may be read as beginning with what appears as maximally immediate, and then dialectically unfolding the progressively more complex concepts that subtend the merely apparent immediacy of that starting-point. However, that reading would be slightly misleading, since this is not the only direction in which this ‘unfolding’ might be played out. This is because perception, desire, ideas, and habits form a complex knot of intrinsically interconnected modalities of thought that can only heuristically be separated for the purposes of presentational simplicity; in the end it is impossible properly to understand any of them without reference to all the others. It would also have been possible, for example, to show that the formation of habits is only possible on the basis of desire, which presupposes perception and ideas.

In other words, the structure of my exposition here should by no means lead one to think that, for instance, only Hume of the three major figures discussed has anything to teach us about the unconscious of habit, or that only Leibniz recognizes the unconscious of perception. Still less should one think that Spinozist desire does not involve habits or associations, or that Leibnizian perception does not involve desire. I consider this division to be heuristically helpful, at least, and partially justified by the differences in emphasis found in these different thinkers: Leibniz clearly does tell us more about the unconscious of perception than does Hume or Spinoza, for example. But this does not mean that any of these figures are exclusively focused on the aspect I have ‘assigned’ them, so to speak, that the arrangement of the chapters below testifies to an order of logical or conceptual priority, or even that this way of arranging their contributions in light of the thematic of the unconscious of thought is the only possible one.

In Chapter 1, “The Obscure Dust of the World: The Unconscious of Perception in Leibniz”, I develop and present a reading of Leibniz’s mature metaphysics that highlights the

central role played by his concept of *petites perceptions*. This concept provides us with a first foray into the unconscious of thought in the constitution of conscious thought. I reconstruct his arguments for the existence of these perceptions and concerning their nature insofar as they are unconscious, and unpack the consequences that this notion entails for his concept of freedom. I will show that, in spite of Leibniz's avowed desire to save the concept of freedom as spontaneous, volitional self-determination, consistency and rigor demands that this desire be frustrated in light of the theory of *petites perceptions*. But I also argue that while Leibniz's desire to save the concept must be abandoned, the same is not true for the concept of freedom itself; rather, the *petites perceptions* force it to undergo a serious reevaluation. Reformulated in terms of the degree of activity of a given subject, the concept of freedom, I show, is structurally isomorphic to that of the *petites perceptions*, insofar as they both express an infinitesimally small power of thought that, nevertheless, is not nothing. I therefore argue that Leibniz's recognition of the reality of unconscious perception transforms freedom from being a state of affairs whose conditions are already met into a genuinely infinite task for thought: to become active.

The next two chapters together form an argument according to which Spinoza shows us the irreducible and ineradicable significance of the unconscious of thought for desire. In Chapter 2, "Inevitable and Persistent Inadequacies: The Unconscious of Ideas in Spinoza", I begin by giving an account of Spinoza's reformulation of the Cartesian epistemic framework of clarity and distinctness into his own framework of adequate and inadequate knowledge. This framework, I show, is distinguished by its emphasis on actuality and genesis, or sufficient reason as opposed to non-contradiction: adequate knowledge clearly and distinctly involves its own cause, whereas inadequate knowledge only obscurely involves its own cause. I then reconstruct a substantial argumentative thread of the second part of the *Ethics*, which as I show is primarily



concerned with demonstrating the great extent to which we are strictly incapable of forming adequate knowledge about ourselves or others, which is also to say the extent to which we are strictly incapable of being fully conscious of the ideas that constitute our own minds. In other words, Spinoza argues that we are, not just accidentally, but structurally and necessarily, determined to have inadequate knowledge in the vast majority of cases. I then return to the question of this epistemic reframing and argue that Spinoza undertakes it in the service of the problematic of increasing one's power rather than establishing certainty for itself. Finally, I consider Spinoza's arguments for the unavoidable persistence of inadequate ideas, and their continued determining power as modes of thought, even in the context of the formation of more adequate ones. In this way I connect the structure of Spinoza's epistemic framework to the problematic of freedom and activity laid out in the preceding chapter, while pointing forward to the next chapter's explicit engagement with Spinoza's theory of desire.

Chapter 3, "Inadequate and Involuntary Desire: The Unconscious of Desire in Spinoza", combines the insights from the preceding with a major claim from the end of the second part of the *Ethics*, according to which understanding and volition are not really distinct but instead are identical. I reconstruct in detail Spinoza's argument for this identity claim and illustrate the extent to which it separates him from his contemporaries. I proceed to argue that the conjunction of this identity claim with the previous chapter's arguments for the necessarily unconscious character of significant aspects of subjective understanding have the immediate consequence that desire is irreducibly determined by unconscious ideas, and show how Spinoza's theory of affect provides a robust account of how this determination takes place through the imagination. To show this I will argue for a precise conception of the relation between Spinozist volition and desire. Finally, I argue that this account of unconscious determination by means of affect makes

it necessary to ask after the structure of the habits of thought that we develop in experience and which provide one aspect of the answer to the question of why some ideal formations are more powerful for us than others. Moreover, I suggest that the mechanisms of imaginary mediation that engender the affects, on Spinoza's account, are precisely the principles of association that Hume places at the heart of his metacritique of epistemology, which opens onto the final chapter.

Chapter 4, "Passages of the Mind: The Unconscious of Habit in Hume", explores the philosopher's arguments for the ineradicable and problematic status of belief, primarily in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. I argue that, according to Hume, thoughts about matters of fact are unavoidably synthetic, which means that they constitute objects of belief rather than knowledge strictly speaking. All such thought, which Hume characterizes as the mind's passage beyond what can be given in experience, invariably involves the relation of causation. I therefore reconstruct his critiques of knowledge of causation in detail, which sharpens the problem of belief with regard to matters of fact. Hume argues that belief is not itself an idea, but is rather a passion of the mind, a sentiment, or an affective constellation that is affixed to certain ideal formations rather than others. Hume's answer to the question of the basis for this differential affixion is custom or habit, and I argue that these habits of thought must be conceived as unconscious on Hume's account. Not only is the process of habituation unconscious, but the mind's passage along the habituated pathways of ideal association are unconscious for the most part as well. In a brief final section I show that this remains ineluctably true even when the mind attempts to correct its own habits of thinking.

In the conclusion I return to and recapitulate the major themes of these readings through the concepts of obscurity and involvement. I argue that obscurity and involvement play a central role in the manner in which the unconscious of thought is thematized by each of these

philosophers. Reading these figures together paints a striking picture of the obscurity of the unconscious of thought out of which consciousness is occasionally capable of emerging. A conscious mind is a socially and materially conditioned set of unconscious habits of thought, which by virtue of these habits is determined to experience certain ideal formations as more or less affectively powerful, thereby shaping its desires. Conscious perception involves an infinity of unconscious perceptions; conscious desire involves inadequate ideas that only obscurely express their causes; conscious thinking involves unconscious and involuntary habits of ideal associations. What the discovery of the unconscious of thought in early modern philosophy rules out absolutely is the voluntarist image of subjective self-determination; what it makes possible is the development of practices of becoming active in thinking, though this activity never amounts to a transcendence of the unconscious of thought, which remains the ground and limiting condition of conscious reflection. It makes possible, in other words, a finally practicable ethics of thought, which posits axiomatically that subjects are not defined by their consciousness but rather by their specific determination in and through unconscious milieus of thought. And because this unconscious of thought is positive and objective rather than being a negation of consciousness, it can be actively understood and directly transformed by thought itself.

## Chapter 1.

### The Obscure Dust of the World

#### The Unconscious of Perception in Leibniz

‘Unconscious perception’ seems to be a contradiction in terms. What is perceiving, if not, one way or another, a conscious mode of experience? Is it not part of the definition of ‘perception’ that it is somehow conscious? If something happens in our body, which does not affect our mind in any conscious way, does it make any sense to say that we ‘perceive’ it? This standard intuition, according to which perception necessarily implies consciousness, is given philosophical expression by Locke in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

*Perception*, as it is the first faculty of the mind, exercised about our ideas; so it is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection [i.e., not from sensation], and is by some called thinking in general. [...] *What perception is*, everyone will know better by reflecting on what he does himself, when he sees, hears, feels, *etc.*, or thinks, than by any discourse of mine. [...] This is certain, that whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the mind; whatever impressions are made on the outward parts, if they are not taken notice of within, there is no perception. (LEHU II.IX.1-3 / 142)

But Leibniz teaches precisely that there are unconscious perceptions. Not only are there perceptions of which we are not conscious, since they are imperceptibly minute, according to Leibniz, but conscious perceptions themselves involve, are indeed constituted by, these imperceptible or unconscious perceptions. By distinguishing between the concepts of perception and apperception, Leibniz breaks decisively with the notion that perception is inherently tied to consciousness or of being ‘present to the mind’, and this forces a profound reformulation of the problem of freedom, for unconscious perceptions as well as conscious ones play a role in the determination of a subject’s desire and agency. Indeed, as we will see, the role played by

unconscious perceptions in this regard must be, without exaggeration, infinitely greater than that played by conscious perceptions.

In this chapter, I will take up Leibniz's mature metaphysical writings in order to isolate the resources for thinking the unconscious of thought that his philosophy articulates. His primary contribution to this conceptual endeavor is the theory of *petites perceptions*, paradoxically imperceptible perceptions, or unconscious affections of the mind. These perceptions constitute an unconscious of thought that extends to infinity. The chapter begins by outlining the significance of this conceptual development, first by highlighting the limitations that are inherent to theories of the mind that do not make space for such an unconscious. In particular, they are incapable of explaining habituation, and run aground on the problem of akrasia: these theories cannot, on his analysis, give a satisfactory account of how it is possible to see the better and do the worse. Subsequently I will reconstruct Leibniz's arguments for these unconscious perceptions, of which I identify three distinct versions that reveal three different aspects of these perceptions. Finally I show the significance of these perceptions, and the unconscious of thought they constitute, for Leibniz's theory of freedom. My argument is that the unconscious of thought, which Leibniz's own philosophical system demands and elaborates, in fact undermines the very foundations of the conception of freedom that he attempts to defend. As I will try to show, the unconscious of thought that Leibniz discovers in the *petites perceptions* pushes his conception of the mind closer to Spinoza's than he would like to admit. Although I think Spinoza's position is ultimately more defensible in this regard, it is Leibniz whose reflections on perception, expression, and the mind lead to the discovery of unconscious perceptions as a distinct theoretical object. And Leibniz himself consistently emphasizes the *power* that these unconscious modes of thought exercise in the determination of a singular mind.

## 1. Conscious Thought and its Limits

Descartes argued, in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), that thought coincides with awareness.

“By the term ‘thought’, I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us [*quae nobis consciis in nobis fiunt*], in so far as we have awareness of it [*quatenus eorum in nobis conscientia est*]” (PP I.9 / CSM I.195 / AT VIIIA.7) For Descartes, the emphasis on awareness is crucial, since it makes possible the argumentative movement of the *cogito*.

Awareness or consciousness links thought to actuality—I (*actually*) *am*—even if the object of thought does not itself actually exist *in the way that* it is imagined or understood. Aware as I am that I might be wrong about what I think, I must still exist as a thinking thing. Descartes distinguishes between two faculties or modes of thinking, perception and volition, of which further distinctions may be made: “Sensory perception, imagination, and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing” (PP I.31 / CSM I.204 / AT VIIIA.17).

The fact that the will is capable of going beyond what is given in perception, or that “the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect” (PP I.35 / CSM I.204 / AT VIIIA.18), indicates for Descartes an epistemic danger that risks becoming a moral one: one can affirm or deny, can pass judgments on, things that are not sufficiently clear and distinct, and this is the only possible source of error. Hence Descartes counsels that we intentionally restrict the scope of our volition, refusing to will with regard to anything that is not clearly and distinctly perceived.<sup>1</sup> Descartes defines a clear idea as one “present and accessible to the attentive mind,” and calls an

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see in Chapter 3, Spinoza argues that such ‘intentional restriction’ is in fact impossible, and relies on a misunderstanding of the relationship between ideas and volition.

idea distinct “if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (PP I.45 / CSM I.207-8 / AT VIII.A.22).

The lack of clarity and distinctness in a perception, according to Descartes, is only a privation, expressing nothing positive. It would not seem to make sense, in Cartesian terms, to speak of an idea’s efficacy or power, outside of its capacity to determine the mind to affirm in accordance with what it clearly and distinctly involves. Rather, the lack of clarity and distinctness of an idea, by virtue of its privative character, leaves the will free to determine itself, but without a solid principle for doing so. It seems that ideas, for Descartes, are determining precisely to the extent that they are clearly and distinctly present to the mind; absent consciousness, ideas are merely negative indices, expressing an under-determination of perception and understanding, rather than positive factors in subjective determination.

Still, Descartes hints at a determining power of ideas that are not clear and distinct, for which he cannot fully account,<sup>2</sup> when he suggests that the greatest impediment to forming clear

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<sup>2</sup> The full account would ostensibly have to be found in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), Descartes’ last published work, and one he was prompted to write by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia; in her extended correspondence with Descartes, she made clear her principled dissatisfaction with his attempts at giving an account of the relationship between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* (See Deborah Tollefsen, “Princess Elisabeth and the Problem of Mind-Body Interaction,” *Hypatia* 14:3 [1999]: 59-77). However, the text of the *Passions* does not seem to provide what we are looking for. For example, Descartes writes that there is nothing to our minds except thoughts, and that these “are of two principal kinds, some being actions of the soul and others its passions. Those I call its actions are all our volitions, for we experience them as proceeding directly from our soul and as seeming to depend on it alone. On the other hand, the various perceptions or modes of knowledge present in us may be called its passions, in a general sense, for it is often not our soul which makes them such as they are, and the soul always receives them from the things that are represented by them” (PS I.17 / CSM I.335 / AT IX.342). Descartes’ insistence on distinguishing between volition and perception involves his claim that volition is by definition *always* active, whereas my interest lies in exploring the ways in which knowledge determines the will, and in particular in cases where that knowledge is inadequate or the mind is passive, since one’s volition in that case will be passive as well.

and distinct understanding is the habitual inertia of ‘preconceived opinions’. According to Descartes, we primarily acquire these preconceived opinions during childhood, when “the mind was so closely tied to the body that it had no leisure for any thoughts except those by means of which it had sensory awareness of what was happening to the body” (PP I.71 / CSM I.218 / AT VIIIA.35). Even when the mind later attains a relative degree of autonomy, and by means of clear and distinct understanding denies the veracity of such preconceived opinions, “it is not easy for the mind to erase these false judgments from its memory; and as long as they stick there, they can cause a variety of errors” (PP I.72 / CSM I.219-20 / AT VIIIA.36-7). Descartes contends that the veracity of clear and distinct perceptions actually present to the mind is beyond doubt, but when we are considering ideas of things not presently being perceived, he tells us, the temptation to regress to preconceived opinions is quite strong: “our judgments on these things are habitually based not on present perception but on preconceived opinion” (PP I.73 / CSM I.220 / AT VIIIA.37).<sup>3</sup> While unclear and indistinct ideas, insofar as they express only a privation, seem to contain nothing positive in themselves that could directly account for their potential influence on the mind, Descartes at least acknowledges this influence of learned, habituated associations.

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This latter position is what Spinoza argues for by collapsing the distinction between volition and knowledge, as we will see in Chapter 3. It is not by chance that Spinoza refers precisely to *The Passions of the Soul* in the Preface to Part Five of the *Ethics*, where he objects that, according to Descartes, “since the determination of the will depends only on our power, we shall acquire an absolute dominion over our Passions, if we determine our will by firm and certain judgments according to which we will direct the actions of our life” (E V Pref. / CWS I.596 / G II.280). Of course, Spinoza thinks that such ‘absolute dominion’ is a fantasy, and that the determination of the will does *not* depend ‘only on our power’.

<sup>3</sup> The original Latin reads: “et ideo assueti simus de illis, non ex praesenti perceptione, sed ex praeconcepta opinione iudicare.” *Assuetudo* is custom or habit, association by repetition.



Locke, on the other hand, leaves no room for any such concession. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he vociferously identified thinking with conscious perception alone. Consider his remarks on memory:

For to remember, is to perceive anything with memory, or with a consciousness, that it was known or perceived before: without this, whatever idea comes into the mind is new, and not remembered: this consciousness of its having been in the mind before, being that, which distinguishes remembering from all other ways of thinking. Whatever idea was never perceived by the mind, was never in the mind. Whatever idea is in the mind, is either an actual perception, or else having been an actual perception, is so in the mind, that by the memory it can be made an actual perception again. (LEHU I.IV.20 / 101-2)

Locke's claim about memory here is a stronger variant of the argument against innate ideas that he had already articulated concerning ideas immediately present to the mind. For Locke, a thought just is the consciousness of a perception or its reflection. There is nothing that could be consistently called thinking that lies outside of consciousness, and to say otherwise would amount to an absurdity or a contradiction. He writes: "'tis altogether as intelligible to say, that a body is extended without parts, as that anything *thinks without being conscious of it*, or perceiving, that it does so" (LEHU II.I.19 / 118). In this way, Locke restricts all inquiry and investigation to that of which one is conscious, relegating any possible questions pertaining to unconscious thought to the domain of purely illegitimate speculation: "Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man's own mind. Can another man perceive, that I am conscious of anything, when I perceive it not myself? No man's knowledge here, can go beyond his experience" (Ibid.). Ideas, for Locke, are conscious, that is, a subject is directly aware of them, or they are literally nothing at all. In producing a cartography of ideas, Descartes marks the unclear and indistinct with an obscure danger; for Locke, the map is coextensive with consciousness, and there is simply nothing beyond its borders.

For his part, Leibniz could not disagree more. Commenting on Locke's identification of all thinking with conscious perception in his *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1704), Leibniz writes that "he cannot hold strictly to this; otherwise his position would be too paradoxical, since, again, we are not always aware of our acquired dispositions [*habitude*] or of the contents of our memory, and they do not even come to our aid whenever we need them" (NE Preface / 52). The reference to *habit* here is revealing; habits are unconscious, or the unconscious is habituated, and Leibniz claims that this is only possible because perception is precisely *not* identical with consciousness: there are perceptions of which we are not aware. This in turn undermines Locke's doctrine of personal identity, which invokes as a principle the unity of consciousness over time.<sup>4</sup> Leibnizian subjectivity will require a different principle, but by the same token will have much greater depths: unconscious habits and dispositions obscurely expressing past determinations, subtending the integrated surface of conscious awareness. Beneath this conscious level, "at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflection; that is, of alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own" (NE Preface / 53). It is easy to understand how habituation can take place on the basis of conscious perceptions. But these habits themselves have a twofold unconscious aspect: on the one hand, we tend not to be aware of them; and on the other, they are frequently formed on the basis of perceptions of which we are not conscious. These *petites perceptions* form the theoretical basis of an unconscious affection and habituation.

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<sup>4</sup> See LLEHU II.XXVII.10 / 302-3; II.XXVII.17 / 307-8.

## 2. Imperceptible Perceptions

The *New Essays* is a relatively late work of Leibniz's, and in it, along with the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714), he works out the theory of petite perceptions in greatest detail. But the insight underlying this theory is already present in the earliest articulations of his mature metaphysics; between the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) and the final works, I would argue, the differences are mostly terminological. Already in the *Discourse*, he introduces the key thought for the first time: what if perception and consciousness are not coextensive? What if it is possible to perceive without being aware of it?<sup>5</sup> Deleuze has remarked that the concept of *expression* is what enabled both Leibniz and Spinoza, in their own ways, to surpass the boundaries intrinsic to the Cartesian project.<sup>6</sup> And indeed it is Leibniz's fundamentally expressivist conception of the relationship between minds and the world that decisively transcends the limitations of the paradigm that tends to identify perception with consciousness. We will see, moreover, that this conception involves, perhaps surprisingly, given the generally idealist tenor of Leibniz's typical reception,<sup>7</sup> a materialist emphasis on bodily relations of proximity as that which grounds the principle of expressive clarity and distinctness.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Kulstad has pointed out that Leibniz already argued that "minds are not conscious of all their actions" on another basis, namely that the reflexivity of reflection would in that case make action impossible, as early as in 1669 (see Mark Kulstad, "Leibniz on Consciousness and Reflection," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 21:S1 [1983]: 39-65).

<sup>6</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), especially its Conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to claim that Leibniz is not in fact an idealist. As Jolley writes: "It can hardly be doubted that in his later writings Leibniz is an idealist, claiming that the only substances are souls" (Nicholas Jolley, *Causality and Mind: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], 185). But I do contend that there are some surprisingly robust materialist aspects of his monadological metaphysics.

The *Discourse* is comprised of 37 numbered sections; each begins with a declarative metaphysical assertion, which is elaborated upon and defended in the paragraphs that follow it. Section 9's thesis reads: "*That each singular substance expresses the whole universe in its own way, and that in its concept are included all of the experiences belonging to it together with all of their circumstances and the entire sequence of exterior events*" (DM 9 / L 308). The 'singular substances' in question are what will, in his later formulations, come to be called 'monads': the minds or souls of individual beings. The curious dialectic at work here is as follows: there is only the world, but this world is made up exclusively of the monads that express it. On the one hand, the world does not exist outside of its expressions in and by individual substances or minds; on the other hand, that world is nothing other than the complete set of such individual substances or minds. Together, these claims reveal a peculiar metaphysics of ideas in individual minds: your mind and mine express, in different ways, the world as a whole. And yet, as Leibniz says here, it is not the case that minds *partially* express the world, or express some determinate part of it; rather, *each singular substance expresses the whole universe in its own way*.

If each monad expresses the whole world, and if individual substances or monads *just are* their manner of expressing one and the same world, in what could the difference between individual monads consist? We can start to answer this question by noticing how perception is a particular kind of expression, and especially insofar as Leibniz distinguishes between perception and apperception. According to Leibniz, each monad, or simple substance, is a point of view or perspective on the world as a whole. But the world itself is only made up of other monads. In this whole, perception is the manner in which the world is expressed by or folded into a particular subject. As he writes in the *Monadology* (1714), the "passing state which enfolds and represents a multitude in unity or in the simple substance is merely what is called *perception*. This must be

distinguished from apperception or from consciousness” (M 14 / L 664). Perception, for Leibniz, is a matter of resolving unity and multiplicity: it is how the singular monad expresses the totality of all the world at once—or, conversely, how the infinity of the world is expressed in the mind’s perception of it. A mind is the integration into a unity of the infinite multiplicity of the world, but there are an infinity of ways in which this unification can take place, *each giving rise to a totally distinctive, singular unity*.<sup>8</sup> The key is this: if it is true that each monad or mind expresses the entire world all at once, it is false that they all do so *clearly*. Each mind “expresses, *however confusedly*, everything that takes place in the universe, past, present, or future” (DM 9 / L 308). Thus, the individuating difference between any two monads is *the particular distribution of clear and confused or obscure perceptions they have of the same world*. If you and I have or are different minds, this is not because we perceive or express different worlds; rather, it is because your mind and mine express the same world as a whole, but as a whole with differing distributions of clarity and obscurity of expression.

It is in the new scope, the new *depths*, that Leibniz accords to the category of confused or obscure perceptions that we can grasp the radicality of his deployment of the concept of expression here. As he writes in the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714), there is a distinction to be made between *apperception*, or those modalities of expressing regions of the world in a mind that are clear and distinct, and *perception*, which includes these but also encompasses the whole set of obscure expressions, *including those of which one is entirely unaware*. And here is where we return to the question of unconscious perception, which I argue forms the basis of

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<sup>8</sup> This is why, immediately after giving the thesis of Section 9 above, he asserts that “it is not true that two substances can resemble each other completely and differ only in number” (DM 9 / L 308)—to differ in number would already be to differ substantially, since what really distinguishes substances is that they are different modalities of expressing the multiplicity of the world as a unity.

processes of unconscious habituation. Since my mind is nothing other than its perceptions of the world, what do we make of those cases, Leibniz asks, where I do not seem to perceive anything distinctly at all? In this context he invokes a few favored examples: he frequently refers to the experiences of deep, dreamless sleep, of blackouts and fainting, or of extreme dizziness (M 20-24 / L 645; PNG 4, 13 / L 637, 640). We can formulate this first argument for the existence of unconscious perceptions in the following way: nothing can exist without being in some way; but having some perception just is the way of being for a monad, since its differentiation or individuation is its perspective on the world; so, unless we want to say that one ceases to exist while not consciously perceiving, as in dreamless sleep, it must have been true that perception was taking place at some level. And since, by hypothesis, one had no conscious experience during such a sleep or a blackout, at that level the perceptions were unconscious: they were too minute or indistinct to be noticed consciously. We only make this inference to their existence subsequently, retroactively, after waking up or becoming conscious again: “Since as soon as you recover from the faint you *apperceive* your perceptions, it clearly follows that you were having perceptions immediately before, even though you did not apperceive them” (M 23 / L 645).

In a second variation on this theme, Leibniz raises the example of background noise, like the ambient sound of wind in the trees or the drone of a low hum: at some point in a conversation, one interlocutor might point this out to the other. When that happens, the other will have to acknowledge that, in retrospect, they had been perceiving the sound all along, although they had not noticed it at the time (NE Preface / 54). It is crucial to recognize the extremely broad consequences of this argument, since its application is only apparently limited to sensible phenomena such as ambient noise. In fact, it applies, first, to the entire range of possible sensible phenomena: sounds, colors, tactile and proprioceptive affections, even taste: in each case, it is

possible to imagine that *one feels nothing, tastes nothing*, and so on. But there is no pure absence of affection; rather, a particular affection, or set of affections, is common and familiar enough to become a kind of sensible background or sensate ambience, escaping notice while partially determining by contrast the nature of the other affections that stand out from it as foreground or figure. An empty mouth nevertheless tastes.<sup>9</sup> And the argument also applies, second, in the *ideal* and not just the sensible register: certain thoughts, ideas, desires, imaginations—in short, certain modifications of what Descartes would call *res cogitans*—participate in constituting an ideal milieu, an ambient background hum comprised of certain particular ideal determinations that escape notice while partially determining the nature of thoughts that stand out in consciousness. No thought appears in isolation in a mind; but its environing ideas, the ambient milieu of ideas that surround and subtend it, may not be apparent to conscious reflection.<sup>10</sup>

So far, we have established that there are minute perceptions while we are unconscious, as in dreamless sleep, and even while we are conscious, as in the case of background or ambient noise. In these first two kinds of examples, unconscious or minute perceptions are posited retroactively: at that time, we say, I must have been perceiving them. But in our conscious experience *petites perceptions* play a third, still more profound role, and here Leibniz's argument for the existence of unconscious perception becomes properly transcendental. To see this, consider what is perhaps Leibniz's most famous example: that of the crashing wave. The sound of a crashing wave is a determinate perception that we consciously experience, which is made up entirely of minute perceptions that we do not: "Every soul knows infinity, knows everything, but

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<sup>9</sup> See Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 20-22, in which 'the tree greens'.

<sup>10</sup> This tendency of the milieu of environing ideas to vanish is one sense of the problem of ideology.

confusedly. Just as when I walk beside the sea and I hear the great noise that it makes I hear, though without distinguishing them, the individual sound of every wave out of which that total sound is made up, so in the same way our confused perceptions are the total outcome of the impressions which the whole universe makes on us” (PNG 13 / L 640). The world is actually infinite, and so too is the multiplicity of our modes of being affected by it. And thus, our perceptions, both distinct and confused, are comprised of an actual infinity of minute perceptions. As Deleuze puts it, for Leibniz, “clarity comes from obscurity and is endlessly plunging back into it [...] The *petites perceptions* constitute the obscure dust of the world, the dark depths every monad contains.”<sup>11</sup>

If this is indeed a properly transcendental argument, it is because, in moving from the first two kinds of arguments for the existence of unconscious perceptions to the third, we are no longer dealing with temporally prior perceptions that subsequent reflection instructs us must have existed—as is the case for the perceptions by which I must have been affected during deep sleep, or for a previously unnoticed audible hum or ideal background—but instead with logically or metaphysically prior perceptions that function as transcendental elements of composition *for any possible empirical instance* of apperception. In other words, the argument shows that no conscious perception exists that does not involve a multiplicity of unconscious perceptions. In the *Principles*, Leibniz writes: “each of the soul’s distinct perceptions involves an infinity of confused perceptions which encapsulate the entire universe” (PNG 3 / L 640). It is when these obscure, infinitesimally small, imperceptible elements enter into relations of composition with one another that they can cross a threshold of intensity, engendering a distinct and determinate perception, affection of the mind, or expression of the world. We do not hear distinctly the

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 102 (translation modified).



collision of each of a hundred thousand drops of water—let alone the incomprehensible multiplicity of molecular interactions that comprise each droplet itself—but these must affect us, since they combine to form the sound of a crashing wave that we ultimately hear. For a unity formed of a multiplicity of nothings would itself be nothing; therefore, we are forced to conclude that these minute perceptions must exist—beneath or below our consciousness, indeterminate and indistinct in themselves, but not nothing.

Leibniz suggests that the positivity of these *petites perceptions* is itself sufficient to dismantle the idea of freedom as indifference: “it is these minute perceptions which determine our behavior in many situations without our thinking of them, and which deceive the unsophisticated with an appearance of *indifference of equilibrium*—as if it made no difference to us, for instance, whether we turned left or right” (NE Preface / 56). At the level of consciousness, there may be an apparent indifference between choices; but, Leibniz argues here, the fact that one rather than another is willed testifies to a real difference at the level of our unconscious perception of them. Leibniz’s doctrine of freedom as subjective inclination, then, is nevertheless a doctrine of subjective determination; and the theory of *petites perceptions* explains that this determination can be effective while remaining entirely unconscious.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This connection, which is to my mind absolutely decisive, between the theory of *petites perceptions* and the critique of freedom as indifference, seems to have escaped most—if, indeed, not all—commentators. There is of course no proving a negative, but allow me to adduce several telling examples. Borst’s critical review of claims in the scholarly literature to the effect that Leibniz is (some kind of) a compatibilist or ‘soft determinist’ does not raise the concept of *petites perceptions* or even his general theory of perception at all (Clive Borst, “Leibniz and the Compatibilist Account of Free Will,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 21:2 [1992]: 49-58). Jolley’s more recent overview of Leibniz’s philosophy does not point out this connection in any way, which is particularly striking given that its chapter on Leibniz’s concepts of mind, knowledge, and ideas, which concludes with a section on the argument for unconscious perception, is immediately followed by a chapter on his account of freedom (Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz* [New York: Routledge, 2005], chs. 4-5). Redding helpfully situates Leibniz as elaborating, against Hobbes’

Now, an important question arises here, and its answer will bring to light what may be a surprisingly materialist strain of Leibniz's thought. What is the principle according to which such minute perceptions, which themselves are not consciously perceptible, constitute determinate and conscious perceptions? We can reformulate this question in terms of the problem of genesis, or individuation: why do *just these* minute perceptions combine into *this* distinct perception—rather than another set combining into a different apperception? Leibniz's insistence that each mind expresses 'the whole universe' means that there exists an actual infinity of ways in which we are affected by things that seem to have no chance of becoming consciously determinate for us. To borrow the hyperbolic, but justified, example provided by Antonie Arnauld, we would seemingly have to say that each of our minds somehow expresses, in some wildly obscure and

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nominalist conception, the concept of freedom that would be central in the subsequent development German Idealism, but the *petites perceptions* are nowhere to be found (Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* [New York: Routledge, 2009], chs. 1-2.).

Sometimes we find a tantalizing near-miss: after recapitulating the arguments for the existence of *petites perceptions*, Arthur writes that Leibniz "has rightly been credited with being the first to recognize the significance of the unconscious," and then even cites the same quotation as above regarding the 'apparent indifference of equilibrium', promising to return to the topic; but when he does return to it, it is in the context of the problem of the identity of indiscernibles in Leibniz's metaphysical account of space and time, and their relationship to the problem of subjective freedom is left entirely unexamined. (Richard T.W. Arthur, *Leibniz* [Malden: Polity Press, 2014], 117-19; chs. 7 and 8.)

In all these cases—and they are in no way exceptional—a strange disconnect is manifest, in which Leibniz's theory of subjective freedom, on the one hand, and on the other his theory of perception, including the notion of *petites perceptions* as distinct from apperception, are treated as being entirely separate from one another. I dare say this would be hermeneutically odd even if it were not for Leibniz explicitly saying, as quoted above, that the concept of minute perceptions accounts for the 'apparent indifference of equilibrium', with a *choice* being the immediately provided example.

In the secondary literature I have surveyed, only Seidler draws this connection out in any detail (Michael J. Seidler, "Freedom and Moral Therapy in Leibniz," *Studia Leibnitiana* 17:1 [1985]: 15-35), and Deleuze clearly recognizes its importance in several places, most notably in Chapter 7 of *The Fold*.

indeterminate way, the region of the universe occupied by the dust on the far side of each of the four Galilean moons. Let us grant that I do in fact perceive this dust, albeit totally without being aware of it. Why do these perceptions, these modes by which my mind is really but unconsciously affected, not seem to cross the threshold of intensity requisite to constitute distinct, conscious perceptions? Part of the answer, according to Leibniz, has to do with relations of *bodily proximity*. In his letter to Arnauld on October 9, 1687, Leibniz writes:

I have said that the soul, which naturally expresses the entire universe in a certain sense and according to the relationship which other bodies have to its own, and which as a consequence expresses more immediately the properties of the parts of its body, must therefore, by virtue of the laws of relationship which are essential to it, particularly express certain unusual motions of the parts of the body. (L 339)

Leibniz anticipates that his interlocutor will object that this suggests that “the soul has more thought and more knowledge of the motion of the lymph in the lymphatic ducts than it has of the satellites of Saturn” (Ibid.), which would be problematic if not impossible to explain, if the sole criteria for expressive apperception were bodily proximity.

Arnauld had written that if this thought-experiment presents a genuine difficulty, perhaps the problem could be located in the notion of *expression* that Leibniz mobilizes. Leibniz thus tries to explain the concept:

Expression is common to all the forms and is a genus of which natural perception, animal feeling, and intellectual knowledge are species. [... In] the reasonable soul this representation is accompanied by consciousness, and then it is called thought. Now this expression takes place everywhere, because every substance sympathizes with all the others and receives a proportional change corresponding to the slightest change which occurs in the whole world, although this change will be more or less noticeable as other bodies or their actions have more or less relationship with ours. (Ibid.)

The argument Leibniz offers for this latter claim essentially repeats Descartes’ argument against the possibility of vacuum in extended substance—or, which amounts to the same thing, his

argument for extended plenum—in the *Principia*: to say that there is *nothing* between two corporeal substances is in fact to say that they are in immediate contact with one another (PP II.16-18 / CSM I.229-30 / AT IXB.49-50). Thus any motion anywhere in the universe causes an actual infinity of reverberating effects, ultimately affecting every other material body in the entire universe: “the slightest movement exerts its effect upon nearby bodies, and so from body to body to infinity, but in diminishing proportion. So our body must be affected in some way by the changes of all the rest” (L 339). We should understand the principle of ‘diminishing proportion’ here on the model of a magnitude’s diminution to an infinitesimally small quantity, as in Leibniz’s articulation of the calculus: so, too, the *petites perceptions*, these imperceptibly small quantities, are never simply nothing.<sup>13</sup>

While this helps respond to the minor issue about my lack of consciousness regarding Galilean dust, the major issue, however, still remains unresolved. The principle of bodily proximity can indeed account for why events taking place at a remove from our own body will only have infinitesimally small effects at the level of our consciousness. But this principle is inadequate for resolving the problem of conscious individuation: that is, why I have *this* conscious perception rather than another cannot be simply due to bodily proximity, or, again, we would necessarily be conscious of lymphatic motions. My argument is that while Leibniz’s *petites perceptions* are indeed a necessary component of a sufficiently robust conception of the problem of conscious individuation, his relatively underdeveloped notion of habituation and the association of ideas means we must turn at this point to Spinoza and Hume for answers, which I will do in later chapters.

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<sup>13</sup> See L 545-6.

These notions may be relatively underdeveloped in Leibniz, but they are not entirely absent: “The strong imagination which strikes and moves [souls] comes either from the magnitude or from the number of the perceptions which preceded it. For often one single strong impression produces at once the effect of a long-formed *habit* or of many frequently repeated ordinary perceptions” (M 27 / L 645). And, in fact, in focusing on the concept of habit we rediscover the image of background and figure that the example of the ambient noise expressed: here, the background is constituted by habituated perception, and this habit plays a significant role in determining which perceptions are able to reach the level of consciousness, and in what form. Finally, Leibniz argues in the *New Essays* that nothing *in principle* makes it impossible for us to become conscious of the infinitesimally small perceptions subtending our apperception, although *in practice* other perceptions will constitute barriers to this awareness: “We could in fact become thoroughly aware of them and reflect on them, if we were not distracted by their multiplicity, which scatters the mind, and if bigger ones did not obliterate them, or rather, put them in the shade” (NE II.IX.1 / 134). But if those perceptions of which we are already aware can obscure [*obscurcissent*] other possible conscious perceptions, what is the principle according to which these ‘bigger’ perceptions occupy the mind in the first place? As we have seen, Leibniz, for all his ostensible idealism, concedes that part of the answer has to do with relations of bodily proximity; I will return to this in section 4. But for now let us turn to his conception of freedom, since these imperceptible perceptions play a crucial role in his critique of indifference and thus force him to rethink freedom in terms of differential activity.

### 3. Inclination and Determination

Leibniz is widely regarded to be a compatibilist on the question of freedom.<sup>14</sup> Compatibilism is the doctrine according to which there exist both causal determinism and free will. In the essay “On Freedom” (1679), Leibniz poses the question quite clearly: “One of the oldest doubts of mankind concerns the question of how freedom and contingency are compatible with the chain of causes and with providence” (L 263). The compatibilist affirms that the conjunction is possible and actual; the incompatibilist has the alternatives of either denying causal determinism, the freedom of the will, or both. Leibniz, arguably due more than anything else to his theological commitments,<sup>15</sup> takes the compatibilist route. Of course, everything hinges on the precise interpretation given to both of the terms in this conjunction: what sort of determinism and what sort of free will are involved in this conception?

Leibniz famously distinguishes between contingent and necessary truths; in “On Freedom” he rehearses this distinction, and states, rather summarily, that “there can and must be truths which cannot be reduced by any analysis to identities or to the principle of contradiction but which involve an infinite series of reasons which only God can see through. This is the nature of everything which is called free and contingent and especially of everything which

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Borst, “Leibniz and the Compatibilist Account of Free Will”; Jolley, *Leibniz*, 130-142. For a dissenting view, in which Leibniz’s “Necessary and Contingent Truths” is read such that Leibniz is an incompatibilist committed to a curious sort of libertarianism, see Ori Beck, “Leibniz: A Freedom Libertarian,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 47:1 (2015): 67-85; Similarly, Paull argues that the incompatibilist position that seems to be espoused in “Necessary and Contingent Truths” should not be classified as a mere aberration: “the theory of miraculous freedom presented in the NCT is not an unreasonable (or, really, an uncharacteristic) one for the mature Leibniz to have held” (R. Cranston Paull, “Leibniz and the Miracle of Freedom,” *Noûs* 26:2 [1992]: 218-235, 232).

<sup>15</sup> See R.W. Meyer, *Leibniz and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, trans. J.P. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 216, n. 428.

involves space and time” (L 266). Here he suggests that part of the solution to the compatibilist dilemma involves recognizing that the contingency of contingent truths leaves room for freedom. If matters of fact were indeed absolutely necessary, freedom (construed in almost any terms) would consequently be impossible on pain of violating the principle of noncontradiction; but since they are only contingently necessary, Leibniz says, freedom in this domain is, at least, not impossible. Thus, the causal determinism of matters of fact or states of affairs, for Leibniz, remains intact, but on condition that it is only contingently or hypothetically necessary. This is well enough, but the text says surprisingly little, indeed, almost nothing, about the nature or concept of freedom that this contingency supposedly leaves room for.

In the *Theodicy* (1710), Leibniz’s specific conception of freedom is worked out in much greater detail. There he argues that freedom has three conditions that, as Jolley puts it, are “individually necessary and jointly sufficient for free agency”:<sup>16</sup> intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency. Leibniz writes:

[Freedom], according to the definition required in the schools of theology, consists in intelligence, which involves a clear knowledge of the object of deliberation, in spontaneity, whereby we determine, and in contingency, that is, in the exclusion of logical or metaphysical necessity. Intelligence is, as it were, the soul of freedom, and the rest is as its body and foundation. The free substance is self-determining and that according to the motive of good perceived by the understanding, which inclines it without compelling it: and all the conditions of freedom are comprised in these few words. (TH 288)

Contingency here just means the absence of strong or absolute necessity: “freedom must exclude an absolute and metaphysical or logical necessity” (TH 302). The key is that the contrary to anything called contingent involves no contradiction. This contingency, he is careful to note, is not the same thing as *indifference*, which he claims to be the third condition demanded for

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<sup>16</sup> Jolley, *Leibniz*, 129-30.

freedom by ‘the Schoolmen’: “I do not admit an indifference of equipoise, and I do not think that one ever chooses when one is absolutely indifferent. Such a choice would be, as it were, mere chance, without determining reason, whether apparent or hidden. But such a chance, such an absolute and actual fortuity, is a chimera which never occurs in nature” (TH 303). And we have seen that it is the concept of *petites perceptions* that Leibniz uses to deny the actuality of indifference: in each case, there are differentials of perception that actually incline the soul toward one of several apparent options, even though these differentials may not themselves be consciously registered. Far from implying such indifference, the contingency he has in mind “does not prevent one from having stronger inclinations toward the course one chooses” (TH 302). Leibniz even (somewhat perversely) invokes the Epicurean *clinamen* here: he denies that the deviation of the atom genuinely occurs for no reason—which would violate the principle of sufficient reason, and is arguably the most consequential metaphysical tenet of the doctrine of the *clinamen* itself—but suggests the image as a model for grasping the real non-indifference of the soul’s inclination (TH 303).<sup>17</sup> Finally, he underscores the determining power of unconscious perceptions: “although I do not always see the reason for an inclination which makes me choose

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<sup>17</sup> On the relation between Epicurean-Lucretian atomism, particularly the concept of the *clinamen* and its infinitesimal mathematics, and Leibniz’s metaphysics, see Serres: “Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, carefully reread in the presence of the Syracusan, and Leibniz’ *De rerum originatione radicali*, which did not need two conjoined authors, are in many respects isomorphic texts. In terms of the question of their genesis, birth or origins, in terms of equilibrium in general and the declining deviation, in terms of the law of the extreme slope, in terms of the model of drops of rain, and so on, as long as you like” (Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, ed. David Webb, trans. Jack Hawkes [Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000], 158); and Michel Serres, *Le système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques* (Paris: PUF, 1968), for example 293 and 324.



between two apparently uniform courses, there will always be some impression, however imperceptible, that determines us.”<sup>18</sup>

I argue that the implications of the theory of *petites perceptions* invoked here are irreparably damaging for the other two conditions for Leibnizian freedom, namely, intelligence and spontaneity. What I want to suggest is that if we take Leibniz seriously when he invokes imperceptible impressions in this way, the image of subjective inclination that we end up with brings him much closer to Spinozist involuntarism than he would want to admit. In other words, Leibnizian inclination becomes a doctrine of necessity or determination, regardless of whether matters of fact are actually contingent. But, on the other hand, the concept of *petites perceptions* itself has no robust correlate in Spinoza’s conceptual vocabulary, or in Hume’s, and is thus useful to retain from Leibniz’s work as a crucial element in working through the unconscious of thought. Let us consider in turn the other two conditions for Leibnizian freedom and how the implications of the theory of *petites perceptions* undermine them.

1. *Spontaneity*. Leibniz’s articulation of the principle of sufficient reason is extremely strong. In the *Theodicy*, he lays out the two great principles of his argumentation. The first is the principle of non-contradiction; “the other principle is that of the *determinant reason*: it states that nothing ever comes to pass without there being a cause or at least a reason determining it, that is, something to give an *a priori* reason why it is existent rather than non-existent, and in this wise rather than in any other” (TH 44).<sup>19</sup> He specifies that this principle holds absolutely, admitting of

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<sup>18</sup> Leibniz, TH 305.

<sup>19</sup> As Couturat explains, the ‘principle of determinant reason’ is just an early name for what Leibniz will later call ‘the principle of sufficient reason’ and sometimes simply ‘the principle of

no exception whatsoever, and in particular that it applies to human volition. “There is always a prevailing reason which prompts the will to its choice, and for the maintenance of freedom for the will it suffices that this reason should incline without necessitating” (TH 45). It is this last claim that causes problems: since there is always a sufficient reason for the inclination of the will, the question is whether and how inclination can fail to be necessitation. Leibniz argues that we will to act, but not to will, since the latter would itself require a higher-order volition and this would imbricate us in an infinite regress. But a particular will to act, he claims, is free in the sense of being spontaneous in addition to being contingent as part of a particular existing world whose necessity is merely hypothetical.

This postulate of spontaneity plays a crucial role in Leibniz’s effort to distance his philosophy from that of Spinoza. For Spinoza, as we will see in Chapter 3, the will is fully determined in the sense of being strictly necessary: “The will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one” (E I P32 / CWS I.435 / G II.72). For Leibniz, this claim is utterly incompatible with a moral vision of the world in which justice is even remotely possible (See DM 2 / L 304). Leibniz’s attempt to deny this necessitarianism by means of the concept of spontaneity is, however, a troubled affair. Arnauld, for his part, considered the effort to be a failure.<sup>20</sup> One aspect of this problem has an Augustinian flavor: how is it possible to reconcile a subject’s spontaneous freedom with God’s foreknowledge and preordainment of everything that

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reason’ (Louis Couturat, “Sur la métaphysique de Leibniz (avec un opuscule inédit),” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 10:1 [1902]: 1-25, 7-10).

<sup>20</sup> See R.C. Sleigh, Jr., *Leibniz & Arnauld: A Commentary on their Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), ch. 4.

will happen in a particular world?<sup>21</sup> First, as might have been expected, Leibniz reiterates that even though it will always have been necessary that Caesar crosses the Rubicon, this necessity is contingent or hypothetical rather than absolute; alternative states of affairs remain absolutely possible in themselves. But second, his more detailed argument for substantial spontaneity involves reiterating the doctrine of pre-established harmony.

As Leibniz himself frequently notes, his doctrine of pre-established harmony was developed in response to the perceived inadequacies of alternative accounts of causation, and in particular the issue of mind-body causation. He claims that the scholastics “believed that there was a reciprocal physical influence between body and soul” (TH 59), whereas the moderns, at least since Descartes, recognize the lack of a common measure between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, thus making their interaction metaphysically impossible by definition. But the occasionalist solution to this problem, which Leibniz sometimes refers to as the ‘Cartesian’ one, is also unacceptable, he argues, since it, “besides introducing perpetual miracles to establish communication between these two substances, does not obviate the derangement of the natural laws obtaining in each of these same substances, which, in the general opinion, their mutual influence would cause” (TH 61).<sup>22</sup> Leaving aside the accusation of *Deus ex machina*, Leibniz’s critique here is that this ad hoc solution has the unfortunate consequence of rendering nature

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<sup>21</sup> Borst relates an argument by Parkinson to the effect that, for Leibniz, God’s foreknowledge is posterior to preordainment: it is only after having chosen to bring a particular possible world into existence that God knows everything that will happen (Borst, “Leibniz and the Compatibilist Account of Free Will,” 53).

<sup>22</sup> See also NS 13-14 / L 457-8. On Leibniz’s accusation that occasionalism amounts to the ‘introduction of perpetual miracles’, see Donald Rutherford, “Natures, Laws, and Miracles: The Roots of Leibniz’s Critique of Occasionalism,” in *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism, and Preestablished Harmony*, ed. Steven Nadler (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

disorderly to the point of chaos; if the nature of things is such that minds and bodies should not be able to communicate, then they should not be able to communicate.

Indeed, the doctrine of pre-established harmony asserts that minds and bodies *do not* interact, and this as an implication of the more radical claim that each substance is in fact causally independent of all others. He articulates the doctrine in the *New System of the Communication of Substances* (1695) as follows:

God has originally created the soul, and every other real unity, in such a way that everything in it must arise from its own nature by a perfect *spontaneity* with regard to itself, yet by a perfect *conformity* to things without. And thus, since our internal sensations, that is, those which are in the soul itself and not in the brain or in the subtle parts of the body, are merely phenomena which follow upon external events or better, are really appearances or like well-ordered dreams, it follows that these perceptions internal to the soul itself come to it through its own original constitution, that is to say, through its representative nature, which is capable of expressing entities outside of itself in agreement with its organs—this nature having been given it from its creation and constituting its original character. (NS 14 / L 457-8)

It is clear that, for Leibniz, spontaneity means precisely that what happens to a mind, soul, or monad is caused only by itself and never by anything else. The principle of sufficient reason entails that every mental state has a reason for being so and not otherwise; the principle of spontaneity entails that this reason must not be located outside that mind itself. As Murray puts it: “When free action was in view, Leibniz characterized spontaneity as the absence of any external, determining, proximate, ‘phenomenal’ cause.”<sup>23</sup> And it is notable that, in connection with satisfying this demand for the condition of spontaneity by means of the system of pre-established harmony, Leibniz consistently describes individual minds as ‘spiritual automatons’.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Murray, “Leibniz on Divine Foreknowledge of Future Contingents and Human Freedom,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55:1 (1995): 75-108, 80.

<sup>24</sup> As in, e.g., NS 15 / L 458.

But of course, although automata may be ‘spontaneous’ in the sense that they are automotive, they also exemplify precisely the strictly mechanistic determinism that Leibniz is trying to avoid.<sup>25</sup> The difference that is supposed to make all the difference here is the third condition: the claim that souls are spontaneous automata that are *intelligent*, to which we will return momentarily. As Leibniz writes: “it must be said that, on a rigorous definition, the soul has within it the principle of all its actions, and even all its passions, and that the same is true in all the simple substances scattered throughout Nature, although there be freedom only in those that are intelligent” (TH 65).

How is this doctrine of spontaneity affected by the theory of *petites perceptions*? We saw that Leibniz flatly denies the actuality of indifference: two apparently identical options are in fact subtended and constituted by imperceptible differentials of perception that determine the will to incline towards one rather than the other. In order for the condition of spontaneity to be maintained, Leibniz must hold that these imperceptible differentials, or unconscious perceptions, arise from the mind itself in a kind of autoaffection. But then the perceptions would not be of anything other than the mind itself, since it would violate the principle of spontaneity if the mind were affected by impressions of external things. Rather, as in the articulation of the doctrine of pre-established harmony above, he would have to say that the mind affects itself with imperceptible impressions or unconscious perceptions that are in conformity with, but in no way caused by, the nature of the external things represented by the mind. In other words, he is able to say that “we are determined only in appearance and that in metaphysical strictness we are in a state of perfect independence as concerns the influence of all the other created beings” (NS 16 /

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<sup>25</sup> For a comprehensive and detailed account of the concept of spiritual automaton, see Christopher P. Noble, *The Soul as Spiritual Automaton in Leibniz’s Synthetic Natural Philosophy*, Dissertation (Villanova University, 2016), ProQuest No. 10099855.

L 458), but only at the risk of rendering his theory of perception incoherent as a theory of perception. For what is an imperceptible perception *of*, if the relation to the external things represented or expressed in the mind is strictly non-causal? Leibniz would have the mind to be entirely the source of its own actions qua independent substance, but that spontaneity seems to be in direct contradiction with the claim that “there will always be some impression, however imperceptible, that determines us” (TH 305).

It should be noted that Leibniz himself recognizes this issue, but thinks that the doctrine of pre-established harmony simply solves the problem.

The impressions of external things often, indeed, divert us from our path, and it was commonly believed that, at least in this respect, some of the sources of our actions were outside ourselves. I admit that one is bound to speak thus, adapting oneself to the popular mode of expression, as one may, in a certain sense, without doing violence to truth. But when it is a question of expressing oneself accurately I maintain that our spontaneity suffers no exception and that external things have no physical influence on us, I mean in the strictly philosophical sense. (TH 290)

In other words, Leibniz argues that it is merely apparent that external things have any influence on minds, and that in reality our minds are fully and exclusively auto-affective; it is just a manner of speaking to say that we are determined by external things.<sup>26</sup> But this should be seen as explaining away the difficulty, rather than genuinely resolving it, as I have argued. If it is true that, for Leibniz, strictly speaking, external things have no influence on minds, it is significant that he cannot seem to avoid helping himself to more conventional, admittedly unphilosophical modes of expression whenever it is a matter of the determination of the will. As Seidler puts it, “this equation of monadic, metaphysical spontaneity with actual independence of action in the

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<sup>26</sup> “Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit ... Also because it’s nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it’s only a manner of speaking” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005], 3).

experienced, phenomenal world can only be accomplished with linguistic sleights of hand such as Leibniz himself often censured.”<sup>27</sup>

2. *Intelligence*. Leibniz considers an action free when it is based on actual understanding: “The will is never prompted to action save by the representation of the good, which prevails over opposite representations” (TH 45). As we saw, Leibniz defines the condition of intelligence as one’s having “a clear knowledge of the object of deliberation” (TH 288). He goes on in the *Theodicy* to distinguish between knowledge that is distinct and knowledge that is confused, and writes: “Distinct knowledge, or *intelligence*, occurs in the actual use of reason” (TH 289).<sup>28</sup> But as Leibniz himself is keen to note, this condition is only rarely satisfied: “the senses supply us with confused thoughts. And we may say that we are immune from bondage in so far as we act with a distinct knowledge, but that we are the slaves of passion in so far as our perceptions are confused” (TH 289). It seems straightforward enough to suggest that we are free insofar as we act based on distinct understanding, but unfree when our actions are based on obscure perception. But when we start to ask when the former condition is adequately satisfied for an

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<sup>27</sup> Seidler, “Freedom and Moral Therapy in Leibniz,” 19.

<sup>28</sup> This is surprisingly simplistic for Leibniz. Elsewhere he puts forward substantially more robust taxonomies of knowledge than this basic and unqualified division into ‘distinct’ and ‘confused’. For example, in §24 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* he distinguishes between the following kinds of knowledge: confused, clear, distinct, adequate, intuitive, and suppositive; then he distinguishes between definitions that are nominal, only real, real and causal, and perfect or essential. Similarly, in “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” (1684), he writes: “Knowledge is either obscure or *clear*; clear knowledge is either confused or *distinct*; distinct knowledge is either inadequate or *adequate*, and also either symbolic or *intuitive*. The most perfect knowledge is that which is both adequate and intuitive” (L 291).

individual Leibnizian subject, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine that it ever actually takes place.

The magnitude of the problem here is hard to overstate. As we have seen, Leibniz is committed to the idea that individual perceptions are actually infinite. Given that perception is defined as “the passing state which enfolds and represents a multitude in unity or the simple substance” (M 14 / L 644), we ought to ask whether the multitude thereby represented is finite or infinite, and Leibniz must claim that it is infinite, for at least three reasons. First, because the “mutual connection or accommodation of all created things to each other and of each to all the rest causes each simple substance to have relations which express all the others and consequently to be a perpetual living mirror of the universe” (M 56 / L 648). That is, it is the actual infinity of created substances that constitutes the multitude expressed in unity in perception. Second, as we explored in the previous section, even in cases of clear and distinct apperception, each such impression is made up of and involves an infinity of obscure differentials of perception, as in the sound of the sea. Leibniz writes: “a soul can read within itself only what it represents distinctly; it cannot all at once develop all that is enfolded within it, for this reaches to infinity” (M 61 / L 649). Third and finally, Leibniz is clear that the infinity at stake here is not simply horizontal, as it were, insofar as there are an actual infinity of distinct substances side-by-side; it is also, so to speak, vertical, insofar as each thing possesses an actual infinity within itself:

[The] machines of nature, living bodies, are still machines in their smallest parts, into infinity... each part of matter not only is infinitely divisible, as the ancients recognized, but also is actually subdivided without end, each part into parts, each of which has its own distinct movement... It is clear from this that there is a world of creatures, living beings, animals, entelechies, souls, in the smallest particle of matter... Each part of matter can be thought of as a garden full of plants or as a pond full of fish. But each branch of the plant, each member of the animal, each drop of its humors, is also such a garden or such a pond. (M 64-7 / L 649-50)



Keeping in mind these three ways in which perception is actually infinite, we should now recall one of Leibniz's constantly repeated arguments, namely that only God is capable of an infinite analysis, whereas for finite minds such as ours this task is strictly impossible.<sup>29</sup> In the *New Essays* he writes: "All we can do with infinities is to know them confusedly and at least to know distinctly that they are there" (NE Preface / 57). But the kind of understanding required for free volitional action must involve more than knowing *that* an option exists; one must know *what* it is, in order to intelligently determine it to be good, even if only relatively good in relation to the other available options. And these three ways in which perception is actually infinite, and of actually infinite things, would seem to make it impossible for finite minds to know them any way other than confusedly.

This issue is bound up with what is required in order to satisfy the first condition for the possibility of freedom, namely contingency. As we saw, Leibniz argues that truths about states of affairs in the created world are only hypothetically or contingently necessary, since their contraries do not involve contradictions; this contingent necessity is based on the fact that God willed the creation of the world in which they are true. Now those truths that are absolutely necessary can be derived by finite minds, because they are based on the principle of noncontradiction, whereas those that are contingently necessary require an infinite analysis,

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<sup>29</sup> For example, in "On Freedom": "there is no truth of fact or of individual things which does not depend upon an infinite series of reasons, though God alone can see everything that is in this series. This is the cause, too, why only God knows the contingent truths a priori and sees their infallibility otherwise than by experience" (L 264); "In contingent truths, however, though the predicate inheres in the subject, we can never demonstrate this, nor can the proposition ever be reduced to an equation or an identity, but the analysis proceeds to infinity, only God being able to see, not the end of the analysis indeed, since there is no end, but the nexus of terms or the inclusion of the predicate in the subject, since he sees everything which is in the series" (L 265). See Jolley, *Leibniz*, 140-2.

because they are based on the principle of sufficient reason. Therefore, in order for the condition of contingency to be met, deriving the kinds of truths that obtain about contingently necessary things would require the kind of infinite analysis that only God can carry out.<sup>30</sup>

Now although we cannot execute such infinite analyses, Leibniz does say that there are two ways in which we can know contingent truths. “The one is experience; the other reason. We know by experience when we perceive a thing distinctly enough by our senses; by reason, however, when we use the general principle that nothing happens without a reason, or that the predicate always inheres in the subject by virtue of some reason” (L 265). We have seen, however, that in the *Theodicy*, where Leibniz explains what he means by the condition of intelligence, sensation is disqualified because it provides us with confused perceptions. Therefore, he must mean for the condition to be satisfied by the latter alternative, namely, by virtue of our invoking the principle of sufficient reason, in spite of our inability to carry out the requisite infinite analyses. Once again, it must be said that Leibniz recognized the problem here, although, as before, what he writes seems to be more of the order of explaining it away than resolving it:

A very clear recognition of the best *determines* the will; but it does not necessitate it, properly speaking... all intelligent creatures are subject to some passions, or to perceptions at least, that are not composed entirely of what I call *adequate ideas*. And although in the blessed these passions always tend towards the true good, by virtue of the laws of Nature and the system of things pre-established in relation to them, yet this does not always happen in such a way that they have a perfect knowledge of that good... As for us, in addition to the judgment of the understanding, of which we have an express knowledge, there are mingled therewith confused perceptions of the senses, and these beget passions and even imperceptible inclinations, of which we are not always aware. These movements often thwart the judgment of the practical understanding. (TH 310)

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<sup>30</sup> See DM 13 / L 310-11.

Indeed, an actual infinity of imperceptible perceptions always subtends even the most maximally distinct perception that we may have; these must necessarily participate in determining the will, whether or not we are aware of it, and nothing prevents this determination from running entirely counter to the understanding. In short, given how he characterizes intelligence as a condition for rational freedom, Leibniz seems to understate the case when he claims that we are “mere empirics in three-fourths of our actions” (M 28 / L 645).<sup>31</sup>

Finally, there is one last strategy that Leibniz employs here in the effort to ward off the threat of Spinozism. For Spinoza, as we will explore in greater detail in Chapter 3, the will and the understanding are identical: “In the Mind there is no volition, *or* affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea” (E II P49 / CWS I.484 / G II.130). This identity is one of Spinoza’s most radical gnoseological claims. By contrast, for Descartes, the will and the intellect are not coextensive, and the possibility of moral failure or sin arises from the fact that one can will with regard to things that one does not understand.<sup>32</sup> But for

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<sup>31</sup> Leibniz repeats this elsewhere: “Men too, insofar as they are empiricists, that is to say, in three-fourths of their actions, act only like beasts” (PNG 5 / L 638).

<sup>32</sup> “So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin” (MFP IV / CSM II.40-41 / AT VII.58). Arnauld, in the fourth set of objections, argued that Descartes “is dealing above all with the mistakes we commit in distinguishing between the true and the false, and not those that occur in our pursuit of good and evil” (Arnauld, MOR IV / CSM II.151 / AT VII.215]). He warns that this doctrine could be misleading, and might be theologically objectionable if taken out of context. Descartes responds: “this is something that the entire context of my book makes clear” (MOR IV / CSM II.172 / AT VII.248); nevertheless, he suggests that he has taken Arnauld’s concern seriously by adding an ‘advance warning’ on this score: “I do not deal at all with sin, i.e. the error which is committed in pursuing good and evil, but only with the error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood” (MFP Synopsis / CSM II.11 / AT VII.15). How best to reconcile this warning with the actual text of the fourth meditation is not particularly

Spinoza, there is no such possibility: one affirms what one understands, and vice versa. Leibniz seems to agree with the former, that one affirms what one understands, but not the latter, that one understands what one wills, thereby insisting that the will and the understanding are therefore importantly nonidentical: “a clear and distinct perception of a truth contains within it actually the affirmation of the truth: thus the understanding is necessitated in that direction. But whatever perception one may have of the good, the effort to act in accordance with the judgment, which in my opinion forms the essence of the will, is distinct from it” (TH 311). One is justified in asking, then, what would be the principle by which the will would be determined to a course of action, if not in accordance with the judgment of the understanding. And the *petites perceptions* would seem, yet again, to supply a satisfying answer insofar as they participate in the determination of the will. But in this way, Leibniz once again comes closer to Spinoza than he would like: for according to both philosophers, it cannot be by virtue of a lack of understanding that the will is determined, but only by virtue of the positivity of some affection. Leibniz’s imperceptible impressions or unconscious perceptions here play the same role as Spinoza’s inadequate ideas, which I will explore in Chapter 2, insofar as both give rise to passionate affects that determine one to act in a particular and determinate way. *Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor*. If Leibniz were to object that this amounts to seriously undermining the freedom of the will by deflating the determining power of rational understanding, Spinoza would have to agree.

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clear. Ariew contends that, in any case, Descartes’ position on sin as laid out in the meditation itself was not obviously in conflict with the official Jesuit doctrines of the day, according to which sin had to be considered only a privation and nothing positive in itself (Roger Ariew, “Descartes and Scholasticism: the intellectual background to Descartes’ thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 65-6).

#### 4. The Metaphysics of Interaction and the Problem of Bodies

The whole difficulty here, for Leibniz, lies in his need to reconcile two seemingly incompatible claims: that *there is freedom*, and that *everything has a sufficient reason*. As we have seen, his strategy for doing so involves several distinct steps: first, he claims that any state of affairs or matter of fact is contingent in itself, since freedom is strictly speaking incompatible with any absolute determination. This he argues for by noting that the contraries of such matters of fact cannot involve any contradiction, so that true claims about them can still be considered contingent. Second, he argues that while there do exist determinations of the will, these “incline without necessitating” (TH 45), since it is precisely such necessitation that a genuine theory of subjective freedom rules out (and vice versa). He makes two kinds of arguments in favor of inclination without necessitation: on the one hand, he suggests that the intelligence of monads is such that it makes a monad’s deliberate actions freely willed in accordance with inclination. However, I have pointed to some objections to the viability of this account. In particular, I argued that it seems either that a monad’s deliberate actions are never sufficiently intelligent to constitute free volition, owing to the structure of finite minds and the infinite analysis required for the cognition of the real goodness of contingent things; or else that these actions are simply free by definition, which would amount to evacuating the concept of freedom of all the moral weight Leibniz would like it to bear (not to mention that it would contradict his repeated claims that we are ‘mere empirics’ three-quarters of the time). On the other hand, Leibniz also continually emphasizes that the metaphysical vision of nature he forwards is one in which individual substances, that is, minds or monads, never really interact; instead they unfold totally separately from one another such that their actions, even if they have sufficient reasons for being

so and not otherwise (and they always do<sup>33</sup>), remain free in the sense of being entirely spontaneous. This is the doctrine of pre-established harmony.

What is at stake in this doctrine, which Leibniz clearly considered so central to his metaphysics and as one of his most significant and novel philosophical contributions? In particular, we should consider some features in which it is remarkably similar to, and yet distinct from, Spinoza's central metaphysical thesis in relation to the same problem. As many have noted,<sup>34</sup> the various theories of causation that developed in the seventeenth century have their basic root in the widespread recognition of the problem presented by the Cartesian model of substantial interaction, which the question of mind-body causation made explicit and acute, namely, since minds are not extended substances, how is it possible for them to cause physical movements, as seems to be the case when I will my arms to move in typing this sentence? Or, vice versa, how is it possible for my mind to be affected in some way as a consequence of some state of bodily affairs, as seems to be the case when I have difficulty focusing when I have not eaten recently enough? To this sort of question, two kinds of answers can evidently be given: either one can affirm that minds do in fact cause bodily movements and vice versa, which would require that one give an account of how this is metaphysically possible, or one can simply deny that such causal relations exist—that is, one can argue that, metaphysically speaking, minds are

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<sup>33</sup> Again (see note 14, above) I should point out that this is actually a matter of debate; Paull and Beck both argue that the position Leibniz forwards in “Necessary and Contingent Truths” is one in which human actions are free in the sense that they *do not* have sufficient reasons. Paull, quite precisely, calls this the ‘theory of miraculous freedom’.

<sup>34</sup> See Steven Nadler et al., *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism, and Preestablished Harmony*, ed. Steven Nadler (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Kenneth Clatterburgh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy 1637-1739* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Walter Ott, *Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

not and cannot be the causes of anything physical, and that bodies are not and cannot be the causes of anything mental. If one takes this latter route, the issue is to give an account of the *merely apparent* interaction of minds and bodies. It is significant that almost none of the metaphysical theories of causation developed in the wake of Descartes take the first horn of this dilemma: Malebranchian occasionalism, Leibnizian pre-established harmony, and Spinozist parallelism all involve the denial of such causal relations, although in importantly different ways.<sup>35</sup>

Leaving aside occasionalism here,<sup>36</sup> closer consideration of parallelism and pre-established harmony reveals more affinities than one might expect. For one thing, Leibniz and

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<sup>35</sup> To be sure, Hobbes could accurately be described as a thinker whose metaphysical position allows for bodies to be the cause of mental states; in his materialism, minds just are bodily interactions. But Hobbes' position here is so radically different from that of the others that it would deserve its own treatment. To round out the post-Cartesian picture a bit: Arnauld, on the question of mind-body causation at least, is clearly an occasionalist—indeed, as Nadler notes, he is “the *only* Cartesian to recognize [the mind-body problem] and to use occasionalism to resolve it” (Steven Nadler, *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 89); Berkeley's eliminativism with regard to bodies entails that he too denies such causal relations, because for him there are no real bodies to affect or be affected by minds (see Jolley, *Causality and Mind*, 186-90, 244-51); Locke argues that bodily interactions cannot give rise to mental states, as in his argument for our knowledge of the existence of God: “it is as impossible to conceive, that ever bare incogitative matter should produce a thinking intelligent being, as that nothing should of itself produce matter” (LEHU IV.X.9 / 550-1). Finally, Hume (in a Malebranchian-occasionalist register) mutates the problem, yielding a critique of causal knowledge in general, which I will explore in detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup> As a provisional justification for leaving occasionalism aside, let me briefly reconstruct Leibniz's charge of *deus ex machina*. The problem is that on the occasionalist account, the apparent interactions of things cannot be understood on the basis of the natures of the things that seem to interact. Leibniz argues that God's intervention to make things interact, even if it is in a maximally general way, is arbitrary from the perspective of the natures of the occasional causes themselves; these interactions thus constitute miracles “in the philosophical sense of that which exceeds the powers of created beings. It is not enough to say that God has made a general law, for besides the decree there is also necessary a natural means of carrying it out, that is, all that

Spinoza both hold that causal relations between substances are impossible. In Leibniz, as we have seen, this impossibility leads to his argument for the doctrine of pre-established harmony and the spontaneity of monads. But Spinoza is also committed to the same impossibility. The intuition forming the basis of the mind-body problem is formalized in the third proposition of the First Part of the *Ethics*: “If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other” (E I P3 / CWS I.410 / G II.47). The demonstration appeals to two axioms from Part One: Axiom 4, that the “knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46); and Axiom 5, that “things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another” (E I A5 / CWS I.410 / G II.46). With these axioms in hand, the problem can be rigorously articulated: if two things have nothing in common, one cannot be the cause of the other, for knowledge of effects involves that of their causes, and the supposed lack of commonality precludes this.<sup>37</sup> Of course, whether this demonstration is satisfying depends on whether one agrees to accept Spinoza’s definitions and axioms, and Leibniz certainly did not accept all of them; indeed, he is particularly frustrated by Spinoza’s definition of substance as *quod in se est et per se concipitur*

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happens must also be explained through the nature which God gives to things. The laws of nature are not so arbitrary and so indifferent as many people imagine” (L 494). It is the *arbitrariness* of nature here that he considers impermissible; nature, for Leibniz, must itself be rationally intelligible, and it should be possible to give an account of why a bodily state would give rise to a mental one, other than the non-explanatory ‘God willed it so’. Still, more should be said on the subject of occasionalism as a metaphysics of causation—I will bring it up again briefly in Chapter 4—and I leave it aside primarily due to constraints of space and time. On this subject, see Rutherford, “Natures, Laws, and Miracles”.

<sup>37</sup> On the curiously *gnoseological* character of this Spinozist argument, according to which things with nothing in common cannot cause one another *because this would imply that knowledge of one would involve knowledge of the other*, see Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1968), 115-6.



(L 196). But it is noteworthy that, in his notes on the opening of the *Ethics*, Leibniz remarks that he believes “that the third, fourth, and fifth axioms can be proved” (L 197), and raises no objections to this third proposition.<sup>38</sup>

Having demonstrated this proposition, Spinoza proceeds to argue that there cannot be more than one substance of a given attribute (E I P5 / CWS I.411 / G II.48), and that, since this is the case, there is no intersubstantial causation: “One substance cannot be produced by another substance” (E I P6 / CWS I.411 / G II.48). It might be thought that this refers solely to the *creation* but not the *modification* of a substance, i.e., that while one substance cannot *produce* another, it might still be possible for one to modify or affect another. However, Spinoza’s argument clearly denies this possibility by the same reasoning: in order for one substance to produce even a modification in another, the two substances in question would have to possess a common attribute, and this possibility was already ruled out by P5. Therefore, any substance can only be auto-affective; there is no consistent way to hold that one substance can produce, determine, affect, or modify another. To this extent, Spinoza and Leibniz are in perfect agreement regarding the metaphysics of substantial causation.

However, their disagreement becomes apparent when we ask how many substances exist in their respective metaphysical cosmologies. Spinoza famously argues that there is only one substance, which necessarily exists and possesses an infinity of attributes (E I P11 / CWS I.417 / G II.52). For Leibniz, the answer is somewhat more complicated. On the one hand, the world is made up of an actual infinity of distinct substances, an infinity of minds or monads, each of

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<sup>38</sup> It is equally noteworthy that Leibniz thinks these can be *proved*, since this would seem to suggest that their proper status is not axiomatic but propositional or theorematic. Leibniz does not here provide any indication as to how it might be possible to prove the truth of these claims, and I leave aside as falling outside the scope of the present inquiry the question of how Leibniz might have proceeded in this regard.

which is itself finite, and, on the other hand, there is God, the infinite substance that creates the world.<sup>39</sup> This seems to create a problem for Leibniz, insofar as, outside this single exception of divine creation, he is committed to the metaphysical impossibility of intersubstantial causation, and it would seem improper to fall back here on a *deus ex machina*—since, after all, he objected to the occasionalists in precisely these terms (NS 13 / L 457). Yet when it comes to resolving this difficulty, Leibniz seems to do just this: “I have shown *a posteriori*, through the pre-established harmony, that all monads were created by God and depend on him; yet we cannot understand in detail *how* this was done” (NE IV.X.19 / 443). Spinoza’s monism involves no such difficulty, and there is no exception in his system to the prohibition on intersubstantial causation—although, of course, his pantheism involves other sacrifices, most notably moral ones, that Leibniz is unwilling to make.

Here then are two major differences: first, the infinite number of finite substances in Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, against the infinity of the single substance, *Deus sive Natura*, in Spinoza’s metaphysics; and second, the exception to the impossibility of intersubstantial causation in the divine creation of the world in Leibniz, which has no correlate in Spinoza. But there is yet another, perhaps more profound, metaphysical difference between the two systems, which has to do with the status of bodies. It is generally accepted that if Leibniz is an idealist, this is most obvious in terms of his rejection of corporeal or bodily substantiality. In his notes on the *Ethics*, Leibniz parenthetically and cautiously remarks concerning Proposition 14: “it does not yet seem certain to me that bodies are substances; with minds the case is different” (L 201).

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<sup>39</sup> “The sufficient reason, therefore, which needs no further reason, must be outside of this series of contingent things and is found *in a substance* which is the cause of this series or which is a necessary being bearing the reason for its existence within itself; otherwise we should not yet have a sufficient reason with which to stop. This final reason for things is called *God*” (PNG 8 / L 639; first emphasis mine).

Elsewhere he is more direct in asserting that the only true substances are minds or monads. In the *Principles of Nature and Grace*, he writes that each monad “is surrounded by a mass composed of an infinity of other monads which constitute the body belonging to this central monad” (PNG 3 / L 637); in the *Monadology*, he argues that the simplicity of substances entails that “it is impossible [for them] to have either extension, or figure, or divisibility” (M 3 / L 643). In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he directly argues against corporeal substantiality at length:

...the entire nature of the body does not consist merely in extension, that is to say, in size, figure, and motion, [but] there must necessarily be recognized in it something related to souls, which is commonly called a substantial form [...] It can even be demonstrated that the concepts of size, figure, and motion are not so distinct as has been imagined and that they include something imaginary and relative to our perceptions, as do also (though to a greater extent) color, heat, and other similar qualities which one may doubt truly are found in the nature of things outside ourselves. This is why qualities of this kind cannot constitute any substance. And if there is no other principle identity of body than those we have just mentioned, no body can ever subsist longer than a moment. (DM 12 / L 309-10).

Now clearly, bodies do often subsist for longer than a moment. But what does this tell us? Here, Leibniz argues that their subsistence in fact constitutes an argument for the active, unifying power of really existing substantial forms, that is, minds or monads.

However, if it is clear enough that only minds qualify as substances, this still leaves open the question of the precise status of bodies in Leibniz’s metaphysics. There is some disagreement on this question. On the one hand, Leibniz frequently writes as though bodies are merely *phenomena*, even if he insists that the pre-established harmony entails that they are well-founded ones (*phenomena bene fundata*).<sup>40</sup> This has given rise to the so-called ‘phenomenalist’ interpretation, which holds that, as Jolley glosses it, “according to Leibniz, physical objects are

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<sup>40</sup> See LPS II.276, 306; III.636; IV.467.

reducible to sets of perceptions.”<sup>41</sup> However, as he also argues, even if Leibniz is an idealist, this does not necessarily commit him to phenomenalism, and there are good textual reasons (some of which we have just encountered) to entertain the possibility of another status for Leibnizian bodies: namely, that they somehow arise out of aggregates of monads.<sup>42</sup> Jolley writes: “Leibniz often prefers to speak of body, not as an aggregate of monads, but as a being by aggregation which results from monads.”<sup>43</sup> Jolley convincingly argues that Leibniz is not an *eliminativist* with regard to bodies, as for example Berkeley is, but some kind of *reductivist* with regard to them. The phenomenalist has Leibniz reducing bodies to aggregates of monads; Jolley’s intervention consists in suggesting that bodies are phenomena ‘resulting from’ such aggregates, but without conceding thereby that monads constitute *parts* of the bodily phenomena in question.<sup>44</sup> This would seem to make bodies a kind of emergent phenomena with regard to

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<sup>41</sup> Jolley, *Causality and Mind*, 184. Some variants of the phenomenalist interpretation are defended in the following: Montgomery Furth, “Monadology,” in *Leibniz: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Harry G. Frankfurt (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976); Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), ch. 7; and Daniel Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Woolhouse also seems to contest the phenomenalist interpretation: “though not substances or *entia per se*, masses of material are not like rainbows, mere phenomena or appearances. They have reality, and they derive it from being aggregates of material substances” (R.S. Woolhouse, *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz: The concept of substance in seventeenth-century metaphysics* [New York: Routledge, 1993], 94-5). But this latter formulation seems to beg the question, if it doesn’t directly misconstrue the issue. Leibniz is clear that bodies cannot be *simple* substances, since they admit of infinite divisibility, and so it is beside the point to suggest that *composite* bodies are substantial insofar as they are ‘aggregates of material substances’. In his arguments for monads and substantial forms, Leibniz constantly returns to the theme that bodies cannot themselves constitute unities.

<sup>43</sup> Jolley, *Causality and Mind*, 188.

monads—which is an appealing alternative, since bodies clearly evince properties that monads do not have (divisibility *ad infinitum*, for example).<sup>45</sup> But whether bodies in his system turn out to be mere aggregates or constitute some kind of emergent phenomena, Leibniz unambiguously asserts, throughout his mature metaphysical works, including in the extended correspondences with Arnauld and Des Bosses, that only minds are substantial. Yet, as we have seen, Leibniz makes surprisingly materialist overtures in his account of perception: that region of the world that we clearly and distinctly perceive or express is in some way a function of our relations of bodily proximity. And this account is troubled by the consistently insubstantial character of bodies, whatever their ultimate metaphysical status.

For Spinoza, by contrast, there is no difficulty or confusion on the issue: bodies are just as substantial as minds; God, the absolutely infinite substance, is both thinking and extended. The scholium to Proposition 15 of Part One includes a detailed defense of the possibility of divine corporeality, which in fact proceeds by arguing that corporeal substance is not really, but only imaginarily or ideally, divisible. His aim is to argue that extension, insofar as it is really infinite and indivisible, is perfectly commensurate with the divine nature. Spinoza first notes that most often thinkers tend to equate corporeality with “quantity, with length, breadth, and depth, limited by some certain figure” (E I P15s / CWS I.421 / G II.57), which are characteristics of finitude incompatible with the absolute infinity of God—and he does not dispute this

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> For further reading on this subject, see Look and Rutherford’s introduction to G.W.F. Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Brandon C. Look and Donald Rutherford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xlix-lvi and lxvi-lxxi; and Sleight, *Leibniz & Arnauld*, 101-115.

incompatibility or absurdity.<sup>46</sup> But, he continues, these thinkers “entirely remove corporeal, *or* extended, substance itself from the divine nature. And they maintain that it has been created by God. But by what divine power could it be created?” (Ibid.). Spinoza, unlike Leibniz, does not allow any exception to the metaphysical impossibility of intersubstantial causation: Spinoza’s God, insofar as it is corporeal substance, produces infinitely many extended things in infinitely many extended modes (E I P16 / CWS I.424 / G II.60); there is no *deus ex machina* here, only the absolute consistency of immanent divine infinity. Indeed, in the scholium to P15 he continues: “I have demonstrated clearly enough—in my judgment, at least—that no substance can be produced by any other” (E I P15s / CWS I.421/ G II.57).

If Spinoza rejects the possibility of intersubstantial causation more consistently than Leibniz, this is not to say that he denies interaction or causation *between individuals*. For Spinoza, all individuals are only modifications of the one infinite substance; and there is no contradiction whatsoever in the idea of a modification generating effects outside itself but within the same substance. In fact, Spinoza’s theory of conatus involves an essentially expansive understanding of modal interaction: each mode or finite thing, insofar as strives to persevere in its being, must necessarily attempt to transform all modes that it comes into contact with so that their nature follows from and conforms with its own (E III P4-9 / CWS I.498-9 / G II.145-7).<sup>47</sup> Freedom, for Spinoza, consists precisely in the degree to which a mode is effectively capable of actively producing effects that follow from its own nature as a finite mode, both in itself and in external modes. This is metaphysically possible because all modes, for Spinoza, are simply

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<sup>46</sup> “...all those absurdities (*if indeed they are all absurd, which I am not now disputing*) ...” (E I P15s / CWS I.422 / G II.58). In fact, he does not dispute them at all.

<sup>47</sup> See Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988), chs. 1-4.

modifications of one and the same infinite substance, *Deus sive natura*; intersubstantial causation is impossible, but Spinozist individuals are not distinct substances. Thus we are led to ask of Leibniz: what does it mean to talk about a substance's 'degree of activity' or its acting freely, if it is metaphysically impossible for it to affect anything outside itself? According to the pre-established harmony, my acting does not amount to nothing, since my actions will form part of the perceptions of other monads; but this action does not really affect any other monads, and the relation between my action and another's perception is expressive *instead* of causal. This is why Leibniz says that the soul's inner perceptions of the external world are in fact only "like well-ordered dreams" (NS 14 / L 457). But is it really freedom to systematically dream about one's activity, while in reality remaining entirely incapable of causally affecting anything outside oneself?

One final point deserves to be made here. Like the pre-established harmony, Spinoza's parallelism does indeed deny intersubstantial causation, and it even denies causal relations between mind and body. But whereas the pre-established harmony denies the latter by refusing bodies the status of being metaphysically real, Spinozism does so by insisting that mind and body are one and the same thing, understood in two different ways: a given mode of substance may be understood under the aspect of extension, as a body, or under the aspect of thought, as an idea. It is true that for Spinoza the relationship between bodies and minds is decisively not causal but expressive: bodies are expressed in and as ideas, and ideas imply and involve corporeal expressions. But for Spinoza, this is a function of a unified order underlying both thought and extension, the order of absolute necessity or divine consistency, rather than being a benevolent and freely-chosen divine decision to have us dream in an orderly way. "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E II P7 / CWS I.451 / G II.89). For

us, then, parallelism has three crucial aspects: bodies and minds are equally substantial, modes really do interact and affect one another within their substantial attribute, and the logic of one kind of modal interaction (e.g., in thought) is isomorphic to that of another (e.g., in extension). This means that our developing knowledge of bodies also deepens our knowledge of their correlative ideas, and vice versa. Spinozist parallelism, therefore, provides us the theoretical means to explore the unconscious of thought, since the logic of mental determination is also that of bodily determination; as Deleuze writes, a key part of Spinoza's intervention consists in "a devaluation of consciousness in relation to thought: a discovery of the unconscious, of an *unconscious of thought* just as profound as *the unknown of the body*."<sup>48</sup> But as we have seen, this unconscious of thought is also present in Leibniz, in the *petites perceptions* and the infinite obscure depths of each and every individual mind.

## 5. Infinitesimal Agency

I began this investigation into Leibniz's metaphysics with the assumption that he contributes to our understanding of the unconscious of thought. As I have argued, Leibniz elaborates a robust theory of unconscious mental affection in the form of the *petites perceptions*. This affection is actually infinite, such that it is no exaggeration to say that, in relation to it, the conscious part of the mind is infinitesimally small. And since the degree of a mind's freedom is precisely the degree of its activity, or the ratio of conscious to unconscious thought, each mind's degree of freedom is also infinitesimally small. But Leibniz must also be credited with consistently arguing for the metaphysically consequential status of the infinitesimal: an infinitesimally small freedom is not nothing. Moreover, he argues that the nature of infinitesimals is not indifferent; in other

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<sup>48</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 18-9.



words, even infinitesimally small elements are distinct from one another. Thus, as he says, although monads are “*metaphysical points*” (NS 11 / L 456), still it is “necessary for each monad to be different from every other” (M 9 / L 643). Everything in Leibniz is a matter of ratio, and ratios are always absolutely singular.

The theory of unconscious affection or *petites perceptions* has no equivalent in Leibniz’s contemporaries. As I indicated, this is clear with regard to Descartes and Locke, for both of whom thought seems to be directly bound to consciousness. But even with regard to Hume and Spinoza, who, as I will argue in the coming chapters, also develop sophisticated accounts of the unconscious of thought, Leibniz’s concept of unconscious perception stands alone. In Hume and Spinoza, the ideal and affective associations by which the mind is led from one idea to the next are habituations that tend to be unconscious. With Hume we can say that the movement by which my mind believes in the persistent existence of external bodies is an unconscious mental mechanism; and with Spinoza we can say that the affective relationship I have with an external cause rests on unconscious associations, through the persistent power of inadequate ideas. But Leibniz shows us that even at the level of perception itself, consciousness is only the evanescent unity of an unconscious infinite multiplicity. Neither Hume nor Spinoza provide us the resources to think this infinity, or to grasp the metaphysically consequential status of the infinitely small in the unconscious of thought.

With his differential calculus, Leibniz provides us a model for thinking the nature of the conscious mind: consciousness is the singular integration of an actual infinity of infinitesimally small perceptions. The integrated unity of a mind is the singular ratio of conscious and unconscious perceptions, of minute perceptions and the apperceptions that strike a mind as clear and distinct. The singularity of this integration—that is, of an individual mind—is precisely the

uniqueness of this ratio, which involves and expresses the relations of one's body to the world as a whole. The Leibnizian individual is nothing other than the relations it maintains with others, but those relations are nothing other than the infinite totality of individuals in its actuality. In other words, the world is constituted of monads, but the monads are just their perspective on the world—the infinitesimally small portion of clear and distinct perceptions and the actually infinite multiplicity of unconscious perceptions that together constitute an individual mind.

As I have tried to argue here, this means that Leibniz's doctrine of subjective inclination must amount to a doctrine of subjective determination. Could it ever be otherwise, for a philosophy that insists on the actuality of infinity and the principle of sufficient reason? For it is precisely the actual infinity of infinitesimal mental affections, or differentials of perception, that Leibniz consistently refuses to deny. These paradoxically imperceptible perceptions, as we have seen, subtend his denial of indifference: the reality of differentials means that indifference is actually impossible, so that any concept of freedom as choosing among indifferent options must be rejected as incoherent. And they also subtend his affirmation of mental habituation: the integrated totality of imperceptible perceptions determines the mind's very capacity for active thought. Taken together, this denial and this affirmation force his systematic reevaluation of the concept of freedom: freedom cannot consist in indifferent choice but in the habit of active thinking. The degree of a mind's freedom, its proportion of clear to obscure expression, must always be one of infinitesimal vanishing, but this in no way implies that all degrees of freedom are identical. The mind's activity can only increase as it discovers within itself clear and distinct perceptions; one's relations with others can indeed be clearly and distinctly expressed. Leibniz teaches us that depths of the subject infinitely exceed its consciousness, and this infinite excess is what makes it always possible for the mind to become more active in thought. This is why

Leibnizian freedom is not a condition that can be taken as already satisfied, but constitutes an infinite task.

## Chapter 2

### Inevitable and Persistent Inadequacies

#### The Unconscious of Ideas in Spinoza

“Desire,” Spinoza says, “is the very essence of the human” (E III DA 1 / CWS I.531 / G II.190). For Spinoza, there is no ‘essence of humanity’, as in the scholastic Aristotelian ‘rational animal’, the ζῷον λόγον ἔχον that Heidegger describes.<sup>1</sup> Rather, in Spinoza’s metaphysics each individual mode of substance, and so each human being, has its own unique essence: its conatus or striving to persevere in its being (E III P7 / CWS I.499 / G II.147. This striving should not be understood statically, as though each being strives only to *remain what it was*, but dynamically, in the sense that each being strives to *become what it is* by actively seeking to increase its powers to affect and be affected, in thought as well as in extension.<sup>2</sup> This is the metaphysical basis for Spinoza’s lauded non- (or anti-) anthropocentrism. But human beings are not entirely unremarkable for Spinoza; they are, for one thing, highly complicated as finite modes go, capable of affecting others and being affected by them in a great many ways (E II Postulates, P14-15 / CWS I.462-3 / G II.102-3). And the complex dynamic striving that constitutes the essence of each human being

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Plato’s Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 19. On Spinoza’s relationship to the category of ‘species’, see Zourabichvili, “Individual Identity in Spinoza”.

<sup>2</sup> Macherey argues that this dynamism is one of the major differences between Spinozist and Hobbesan conatus; the latter, he claims, is precisely this ‘static’ formulation. See Pierre Macherey, *Avec Spinoza: Études sur la doctrine et l’histoire du spinozisme* (Paris: PUF, 1992). See also Matheron on the development of Spinoza’s theory of conatus: Alexandre Matheron, *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, eds. Filippo del Lucchesse, David Maruzzella, and Gil Morejón, trans. David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming), above all ch. 11, but also chs. 4 and 9.

is clearly both mental as well as corporeal: I strive to increase the power of my body to act, but also my mind's power to think, in one and the same movement; conversely, as a human being, my incapacities are both corporeal, insofar as there are things that my body cannot do, and mental, insofar as there are things that I do not and cannot adequately understand. The fact that we must have such incapacities in general is inescapable: this is one of the demonstrated propositions of Part Four of the *Ethics* (E IV P4 / CWS I.548 / G II.212), but it is also axiomatic (E IV A1 / CWS I.547 / G II.210). Spinozist ethics is the practice of systematically replacing such incapacities in thought and extension with active powers, so that one actively produces the effects that follow from one's nature, instead of passively undergoing changes determined by natures other than one's own.

To what extent is our striving or desire conscious? In the scholium to *Ethics* III P9, Spinoza seems to suggest that human desire is essentially conscious: “*desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*” (E III P9s / CWS I.500 / G II.148). But this formulation is misleading, as I will show in greater detail in Chapter 3. As Spinoza later writes, in his explication of the definition of desire at the end of Part III, consciousness is not a necessary feature of human striving: “whether a human being is conscious of his appetite or not, the appetite remains one and the same” (E III DA1 exp. / CWS I.531 / G II.190). Indeed Spinoza argues that for the most part our determination and our desire is in fact unconscious; it is only under certain determinate conditions, and only to a limited extent, that we can be conscious of the striving that we are. For Spinoza, our mind is nothing other than the idea of our body, and his parallelism commits him to the claim that “nothing happens in the body which is not perceived by the Mind” (E II P12 / CWS I.456-7 / G II.95). But as I showed in the previous chapter, perceptions may be perfectly unconscious. And indeed, it would be a mistake to think that

Spinozist perceptions are necessarily conscious: that is, the mind necessarily perceives everything that happens in the body, but it does not follow that the mind is always consciously aware of these perceptions. And once we allow that the ideas that constitute a mind may not be consciously registered as such by that mind, or that the Spinozist mind has an unconscious component, it follows that the desire that constitutes each individual has a profoundly unconscious dimension as well.

In this chapter and the next, I will argue for this unconscious of desire in Spinoza's metaphysics of thought in the following manner. In this chapter, I will explore Spinoza's typology of adequate and inadequate ideas in Part II of the *Ethics*, arguing that it is a reframing of the Cartesian typology of ideas as being clear and distinct or obscure and confused. I will argue that Spinoza undertakes this reframing for the following two reasons. First, whereas unclear and indistinct ideas can be, so to speak, effectively quarantined on Descartes' account, Spinoza's inadequate ideas are *necessary*, in that there are things of which we are only able to form inadequate ideas. Second, and more importantly, they are *persistent*: inadequate ideas remain in the mind, and continue to produce effects, even when we have formed more adequate ones. After laying out Spinoza's framework of adequate and inadequate ideas in broad outline, I will first show how inadequate ideas are inevitable, and then how and why they persist in the face of the development of adequate knowledge. One way to sum up the results of this investigation is as follows: even though we may come to *possess* adequate knowledge of certain things, our knowledge of the idea that we *are* must always, to a significant degree, remain inadequate; the conditions of consciousness imply the unavoidable involvement of unconscious ideas.

Then, in Chapter 3, I will consider ideas as components of desire. To this end I will first give an account of Spinoza's argument, at the end of Part II of the *Ethics*, that intellect and volition are identical; then I will explore the relationship between volition and desire itself in Part III. All together, this will provide us with a robust account of Spinozist desire, the striving by which each human being seeks to increase its power to think and to act, and that each human being *is*, which has an inescapably unconscious aspect insofar as some of the ideas that constitute the mind, as understanding and volition, are necessarily inadequate. Ideas themselves, just like human beings, are modes of substance, and so are also essentially characterized by their striving to persevere in their own being: persistent inadequate ideas continue to produce effects in the mind, or continue to determine one's desire, unconsciously and often in spite of the adequate ideas that one manages to form. For on Spinoza's account, ideas determine one's desire insofar as they constitute affects with a certain degree of power, not insofar as they are true or false (E IV P14 / CWS I.553 / G II.219). Even when one is genuinely active, the unconscious of desire, the potency of inadequate ideas constituting the mind, persistently and significantly continues to determine what one does. This necessity according to which one's desire must remain unconscious in spite of the formation of adequate ideas is not, I argue, cause for epistemological defeatism, but is a condition for the possibility of a genuine ethics of knowledge.

One of Spinoza's most significant conceptual innovations is his distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas. In this chapter, I propose an interpretation of what is at stake in this distinction: I argue that it is motivated by a different set of philosophical concerns than that which motivated the category of clear and distinct ideas as Descartes formulated it. The latter, I claim, responds to the skeptical problem of uncertainty, whereas the distinction between adequate and inadequate knowledge is formulated in the context of Spinoza's ethical imperative

to increase one's power. Even true inadequate knowledge is 'like a conclusion without premises', and expresses the passivity and impotence of the mind that happens to stumble upon it, whereas even the most threadbare adequate idea involves the affirmation of the power of the mind that forms it. I then trace out a major argumentative thread of Part II of the *Ethics*, which illustrates the extent to which we are only capable of forming inadequate ideas. Based on Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas, insofar as our minds are finite modes of thought, we are only able to form inadequate ideas concerning the nature of external bodies or the parts of our own bodies, the nature of our own mind based on the ideas of our affections, and knowledge of the specific durations of singular things, including our own bodies and external things. Since inadequate ideas are not false, according to Spinoza, by virtue of anything positive in them, but rather due to their partiality or what they are lacking, this means that, at least with regard to these objects of knowledge, our mind is necessarily constituted by ideas that are only partially present to the mind. Consequently, I claim that the obverse, non-present aspects of these inadequate ideas can be considered their positively determined and determining unconscious aspect, from the perspective of the minds that they partially constitute.

I then give an account of what it means, according to Spinoza, to form adequate knowledge: namely, the self-affirmation of the mind's genuinely active power to think, and its correlative direct increase in power. Finally, however, I show that Spinoza argues that even assuming that one successfully forms adequate ideas, with all that this entails, inadequate ideas are not thereby destroyed but remain as constitutive elements of the mind. Indeed, inadequate ideas, insofar as they are really existing modes of thought, persistently and stubbornly continue to affirm what they only confusedly involve, and thus continue to determine the mind that they participate in constituting at an unconscious level.



Spinoza's metaphysics of thought is remarkable insofar as it accounts both for the possibility of the formation of genuinely adequate ideas, and also for the deep, unavoidable persistence of inadequate ones. He shows us not just how adequate ideas are possible, but also how to go about seeking to form them practically. But the sober realism of the *Ethics* also warns us that the ideal of a mind constituted solely and exclusively of adequate ideas is absolutely unattainable for finite modes such as ourselves. To that extent, at the very least, there is an irreducibly unconscious dimension to every mind, every singular mode of thought that, while necessarily involving absolutely everything that happens in the body of which it is the idea, is only partially and inadequately conscious of that totality.

### **1. From Clarity and Distinctness to Inadequacy**

Descartes distinguishes between ideas that are clear and distinct, and those that are not. It is by the clarity and distinctness of an idea that the doubting philosopher can find solace. Such an idea will not lead us astray; here there is certainty at last, an idea that provides the basis for practical wisdom. Once we restrict the domain of our judgments in accordance with the principle of clarity and distinctness, we have no cause for concern. Whatever else may turn out to be the case, at least we can rest assured that these judgments will not be incorrect. Clarity and distinctness come to be equated with certainty itself, the ideal characteristics that lead us out of the skeptical labyrinth. The trouble with unclear and indistinct ideas is not that they are necessarily wrong, but that we cannot really be sure about them either way. How could we say that an idea that we only perceive unclearly and indistinctly is correct or not? In order for us to pass that kind of judgment with any measure of certainty, we would require the impossible, that is, we would need to apprehend it clearly and distinctly. Better to remain agnostic on that terrain.

Spinoza seems to agree, at first. But something happens between the early writings and the *Ethics*, where the language of clarity and distinctness have largely fallen by the wayside. Clear and distinct understanding has not vanished entirely, but a new epistemological framework has taken the place of the doctrine of the clear and distinct. In the *Ethics*, it is a matter of marking the difference between *adequate and inadequate ideas*. In part, this is because the *problem* has changed: there is no skeptical labyrinth to escape for Spinoza, but rather an imperative to seek joy, to strive ontologically to increase one's power in thought and extension. Adequacy will be the marker not of an idea that grounds the certainty of a judgment, but of one that ensures and is itself the passage to a greater perfection. And conversely, an inadequate idea expresses the impotence of the mind that thinks it, its incapacity or passivity.

But of course, it is not just the problematic that has changed in the shift from of clarity and distinctness to that of adequacy. The very nature of the ideas themselves is transformed in this shift. The clear and distinct idea correctly describes its object, representationally capturing its essential features; the adequate idea grasps its object from the perspective of its production, genetically comprehending its causal necessity. But how do these typologies of ideas relate to their motivating problems—why should the accurately representational deliver us from skepticism, and why should the genetically comprehensive increase our power? In what follows we will consider the categories of clarity and distinctness and adequacy, exploring the epistemological claims and commitments of each and the stakes of the Spinozist shift from the former to the latter.

Concluding the Second Meditation, Descartes writes: “I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else” (MFP II / CSM II.22-3 / AT VII.34). He has found the Archimedean point for which he was searching. The

*cogito* is beyond all doubt, and he seems to be poised to exit the intolerable whirlpool of skepticism. And yet he hesitates upon resuming the investigation: what is the principle according to which the *cogito* is indubitable, after all? “In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false” (MFP III / CSM II.24 / AT VII.35). He immediately concludes: whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived must be true. But this is not particularly satisfying, even for Descartes. He admits that this conclusion is too quick as a means to resolve the radical suspension of belief he has been attempting.

When he underscores this difficulty himself, recalling things that he had perceived through his senses, like the earth and the sky, Descartes drops the language of distinctness: “What was it about them that I perceived clearly? Just that the ideas, or thoughts, of such things appeared before my mind” (Ibid.). And the same striking omission reappears when he considers the uncertain foundations even of mathematical truths, on the hypothesis of a deceptive God: “it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye” (MFP III / CSM II.25 / AT VII.36). What then does Descartes mean by ‘distinct’ as opposed to ‘clear’? In section 45 of the first part of the *Principles of Philosophy*, entitled ‘What is meant by a clear perception, and by a distinct perception’, he writes:

I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as when we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (PP I.45 / CSM I.207-8 / AT VIIIA.21-2)

Clarity, on this account, is just the presence of some reality to a mind that perceives it.

Distinctness, on the other hand, involves a principle of exclusion: an idea that is not just clear but is also distinct<sup>3</sup> excludes what does not belong to it. For example, my perceiving a four-sided shape as a 'polygon' is clearly true but nevertheless obscure, since the category 'polygon' includes indistinctly all *n*-sided plane figures; if I had perceived it as a quadrilateral, the perception would have been more distinct. And again, the perception of a rhombus, as opposed to, say, a trapezoid, would be more distinct than the perception of a quadrilateral. Although Descartes said above that clarity can be grasped by way of analogy to a visual impression of 'sufficient degree of strength and accessibility', *distinctness* seems to admit of degrees in a way that clarity itself does not. Nevertheless, a less distinct perception is still supposed to be true to the extent that it is distinct: it is not false to perceive a rhombus as a quadrilateral or, less distinctly still, as a polygon. But the question is, how can we be sure that an idea that we perceive both clearly and distinctly is true?

The argument fractures at this point: on the one hand, Descartes will pursue the line that God cannot be a deceiver, which guarantees the veracity of the clear and distinct perception to which I cannot help but assent; on the other, he will argue that the very force of the clarity and distinctness of an idea is an indisputable guarantor of its immediate truth, irrespective of any hypothetically deceptive God. In spite of his protestations to the contrary, these two lines of argument do form a kind of vicious circle, as we will see: God's not being a deceiver is both guaranteed by and the guarantor of the veracity of clear and distinct ideas. But from another

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<sup>3</sup> An idea that is *distinct but unclear* is impossible for Descartes (PP I.46 / CSM I.208 / AT VIIIA.22).

angle, rather than a vicious circle, what this Cartesian argument exhibits is the necessity of a dialectic of faith and reason.

In the second line of this broken dialectic, the forcible truth of clear and distinct ideas leads to the conclusion that God is not a deceiver. Descartes appeals directly to the spontaneous persuasive character of clarity and distinctness: “whenever I turn my attention to those very things that I think I perceive with such great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them that I spontaneously blurt out these words: ‘let him who can deceive me’” (MFP III / CSM II.25 / AT VII.36)—that is, even God would be unable to convince me that what is clearly and distinctly contradictory is nevertheless true. In Descartes’ Reply to the Second Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, he repeats this appeal: “as soon as we think we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true” (MOR II / CSM II.103 / AT VII.144). On this account, spontaneous conviction would itself constitute certainty in the immediacy of a perception. The question reduces to the existential matter of whether this kind of immediate conviction actually exists: “it may be doubted whether any such certainty, or firm and immutable conviction, is in fact to be had” (MOR II / CSM II.103 / AT VII.145). Descartes claims that we can rule out the possibility of this kind of conviction attending either a minimally obscure or confused perception, or clear perceptions when they are purely sensorial: some doubt remains there, even in the best of cases. “Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else” (MOR II / CSM II.104 / AT VII.145).

These kinds of perceptions, he tells us, are of two kinds. First, there are those that “are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true” (Ibid.). In these cases, disbelief would involve a manifest or obvious

contradiction, as in the paradoxical claim that ‘I think that I am not thinking’ or that ‘parallel lines in Euclidean space intersect’. Hence, they cannot be doubted. But second, there are also things perceived by the intellect whose contrary does not involve a *manifest* contradiction, although this is ultimately due to the complexity of the chain of reasoning by which we reach them. These truths “are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them *during this time*. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them” (MOR II / CSM II.104 / AT VII.146). Ostensibly, then, if we were able to keep in view the entire line of argumentation by which we reach these conclusions, we would recognize that their denial would indeed involve a contradiction. Clarity and distinctness here seem to be the defining characteristic of those ideas whose truth is guaranteed by the principle of non-contradiction. At this point, the argument folds back toward resolving the theological anxiety of a deceptive God. Since it would be contradictory to posit evil as an attribute of the supreme being, we can clearly and distinctly perceive that God is not a deceiver. This is precisely the sort of claim that Descartes means with this second description. The claim that God is a deceiver is contradictory, but that God is not a deceiver is not *immediately* clear and distinct. It is inescapably clear and distinct when we rehearse the argument; it is just that we do not always have the entire chain of reasoning in view. So much for the first side of the fracture.

But on the other hand, this argument also runs in reverse from the contrary perspective. This line of argumentation turns once again on the principle of non-contradiction: “Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends toward falsehood”

(MOR II / CSM II.103 / AT VII.144). Descartes first derives the benevolence of God from the postulate of divine perfection, and on this basis concludes that the things that we take to be true insofar as they are clearly and distinctly perceived are indeed true. “Since it is impossible to imagine that he is a deceiver, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain” (Ibid.). This argument clearly proceeds in the direction opposite to that which we analyzed above, and we are left, to borrow Kant’s terminology, in a kind of antinomy. Is clarity and distinctness the basis for our belief in the benevolence of God, or does the impossibility of a deceptive God ground our faith in the truth of clear and distinct perception? The always-incendiary Arnauld recognized this circularity and raised it directly in his set of objections to the *Meditations*:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. (Arnauld, MOR IV / CSM II.150 / AT VII.214)

Descartes denies the charge of vicious circularity, citing the distinction he made earlier with regard to the two kinds of indubitable truths—as we saw, there are those whose contraries manifestly exhibit a contradiction, and those whose contraries do ultimately involve a contradiction, but not obviously or immediately, since we reach them as the conclusions of complex arguments. According to Descartes, the existence of a benevolent God is an example of the latter kind of ultimately indubitable truth. As he writes in response to Arnauld, “we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that

it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver” (MOR IV / CSM II.171 / AT VII.245-6). Even so, it is not obvious how this is supposed to resolve the problem. We still rely, in this demonstration of the existence of God, on the truth of clear and distinct perceptions, which God’s existence as benevolent will sanction as argumentatively legitimate. The unstated premise in either case is that the principle of non-contradiction is itself beyond doubt; that a thesis whose negation involves a contradiction must be true lies at the heart of Descartes’ arguments proceeding in either direction.

It seems clear, however, that this is not a problem for the Cartesian project. On both sides of the circular argument we have been exploring, Descartes consistently exhibits the dialectic of the rationality of faith and of putting faith in reason, where both rely on and reinforce the other by virtue of the principle of non-contradiction as ground and consequence. What counts then are the limits to this kind of reasoning. What kind of truth does reasoning by the principle of non-contradiction deliver, and what can it not accomplish if it is to remain within itself? Descartes himself acknowledges these limits: this kind of reasoning delivers indisputable truths about what is *necessarily possible*, but cannot indicate anything about the *necessity of actual existence*, as he explains in the First Set of Replies. “It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God” (MOR I / CSM II.83 / AT VII.116). And this line between necessary existence and possible existence marks precisely the limit of reasoning by means of the principle of non-contradiction, and thus of the epistemological categories of clarity and distinctness. In other words, however much I may clearly and distinctly understand something, this understanding will never involve an account of the sufficient reason for its existence, or an explanation as to why it actually exists. Clear and



distinct understanding can thus constitute true knowledge at increasingly distinct levels of descriptive complexity, but never involves a genetic account of actual necessity.

The problem is that Descartes nevertheless intends to demonstrate rationally the necessary existence of actual things, and not just their possibility, in the final two Meditations. But this is precisely what clarity and distinctness, and its exclusive reliance on the principle of non-contradiction, can by definition never provide. In Meditation 5, Descartes notes the difference in kind between reasoning about the distinction between essence and existence of God, on the one hand, and on the other hand, absolutely everything else. Regarding the latter, Descartes puts the abstract claims of mathematical science on the same level as propositions about physical reality: it is true *in the same way* that the greatest side of a triangle is opposite its greatest angle as that the concept of a mountain is inseparable from that of a valley. They are true in the same way because their contraries would involve contradictions. But these are therefore claims about the essence of these mental entities, not about their existence, and indeed “from the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable” (MFP V / CSM II.45-6 / AT VII.66-7). However, he argues, while this separability of essence and existence in the case of absolutely all nondivine beings makes arguing for their existence difficult—indeed, on my account, impossible, given the limitations of the Cartesian epistemic framework—things are different in the case of God, whose essence and existence are *not* similarly separable. And the inseparability of essence and existence in the concept of God lies at the basis of the argument for the existence of God in this fifth meditation: “what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?” (MFP V / CSM II.47 / AT VII.69).

But that is not the issue; the issue is whether and how it is possible to demonstrate the existence, to use the Cartesian way of putting things, of anything to whose essence existence does *not* belong. This is the challenge Descartes faces in the sixth meditation. We have described Descartes' twofold argument for the existence of God and the veracity of clear and distinct ideas as exhibiting a dialectical necessity; but here there will be no such dialectic. Descartes admits that the actual existence of corporeal beings is *suggested* by the nature of imaginary understanding, but that "this is only a probability; and despite careful and comprehensive investigation, I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination can provide any basis for a necessary inference that some body exists" (MFP VI / CSM II.51 / AT VII.73). Similarly, sensory perception and the memories we have of all kinds of sensory experiences suggest that we have a body that is affected by others that really exist, but this remains probabilistic; and Descartes notes that the very skeptical arguments that he himself has raised cast insuperable doubt on the idea that such real existence can be deduced from something as unreliable as sight or even pain (MFP VI / CSM II.53 / AT VII.76-7). However, these sorts of experiences are precisely the kind that Descartes will invoke in making the inference to the existence of external corporeal reality, buttressed by the additional claim that God is not a deceiver.

Sensory experiences, such as my finger's pain when I touch a sharp object, suggest that my body and this sharp object really exist. But Descartes argues that this mental operation actually involves two faculties: a *passive* faculty of sensory perception, and an *active* faculty that produces the ideas of those objects corresponding to these sensory perceptions.

But this [latter, active] faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me—a substance which contains either formally or eminently all

the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty (as I have just noted). This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally everything which is to be found objectively in the ideas; or else it is God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently. (MFP VI / CSM II.55 / AT VII.79)<sup>4</sup>

It is this genetic problematic of sufficient reason, which is inherently tied to the question of the conditions for the actual increase of power, and which is quite different from Descartes' problematic of skepticism, that Spinoza will take up in elaborating his own epistemological framework of adequacy and inadequacy.

## 2. Inadequate Knowledge: Partial and Abstract Ideas

Spinoza's motto was '*Caute*'. The infamous *Theologico-Political Treatise*, which in 1670 was published anonymously and by a fictional publisher, was summarily condemned by a cacophony of religious and philosophical authorities as, to take but one formulation from the South Holland Synod of 1670, "the vilest and most sacrilegious book the world has ever seen."<sup>5</sup> And while his authorship of the first *Treatise* was something of an open secret, only one text was published in his lifetime that bore his name: the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, which appeared in 1663

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<sup>4</sup> Note that one of the possibilities that Descartes rules out here—namely, that these ideas are produced directly by God—is precisely the alternative that Malebranche will accept and develop in his doctrine of vision in God. See Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and On Religion*, ed. Nicholas Jolley, trans. David Scott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Dialogue XIII; SAT III.2, and Elucidation Ten.

<sup>5</sup> W.N.A. Klever, "Spinoza's Life and Works," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39-41. See also Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 275-85.

with an Appendix on *Metaphysical Thoughts*. But it would be misleading to periodize his work, as though the earlier writings evinced a Cartesianism with which he had definitively broken in the mature statement of his philosophical system, the posthumously published *Ethics*. In his Preface to the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza's friend and collaborator Lodewijk Meyer warns the reader not to take the text as a statement of the author's own philosophical commitments:

Our Author quite frequently departs from Descartes, not only in the arrangement and explanation of the Axioms, but also in the demonstration of the Propositions themselves, and the rest of the Conclusions; he often uses a Proof very different from Descartes'.

[...] our Author has only set out the opinions of Descartes and their demonstrations, insofar as these are found in his writings, or are such as ought to be deduced validly from the foundations he laid.<sup>6</sup> For since he had promised to teach his pupil [i.e., Caesarius, a student at Leiden University] Descartes' philosophy, he considered himself obliged not to depart a hair's breadth from Descartes' opinion, nor to dictate to him anything that either would not correspond to his doctrines or would be contrary to them. *So let no one think that he 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 different opinion.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that Meyer immediately gives as an example of a profound philosophical difference between the two thinkers the fact that, unlike Descartes, Spinoza does not consider the will and the intellect to be distinct. If the identity of *Deus sive Natura* is his theological heresy, the identity of the will and the understanding is, as we will see in the next chapter, Spinoza's epistemic or gnoseological heresy.

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<sup>6</sup> Curley scoffs at this: "It would take a very generous interpretation of this last clause to justify everything that appears here" (CSM I.222, fn).

<sup>7</sup> Lodewijk Meyer (CSM I.228-9); emphasis added.

Spinoza's thought always contained unique insights and novel conceptual formulations. Any account of his obvious debts to the various traditions of medieval Aristotelian scholastic philosophy and theology, nascent Cartesian and post-Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology, Jewish mysticism, and contemporary developments in optics and physics must nevertheless acknowledge his striking originality. For example, Yitzhak Melamed notes that Spinoza's concept of 'infinite modes', which "has no equivalent among his predecessors or contemporaries"<sup>8</sup> (and, we might add, very few equivalents among his successors) appears as early as the *Short Treatise*, which was surely written no later than 1662.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Ethics*, I will show, the framework of adequate and inadequate ideas constitutes a novel Spinozist conceptual formulation, which in many respects replaces that of the clear and distinct. But the language of clarity and distinctness has not entirely vanished in this text. Spinoza writes that "if someone were to say that he had a clear and distinct, i.e., true, idea of substance, and nevertheless doubted whether such a substance existed, that would indeed be the same as if he were to say that he had a true idea, and nevertheless doubted whether it was false

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<sup>8</sup> Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113.

<sup>9</sup> There are conflicting accounts regarding when Spinoza wrote the *Short Treatise*. Indirect evidence for dating it comes from the 1662 Letter to Oldenburg, in which Spinoza says that he had already "composed a whole short work" on the topic of the relationship between things and God as their first cause (Spinoza, Letter 6 / CSM I.188). But he may have also been referring to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Nevertheless, Michael L. Morgan, editor of the Hackett *Complete Works* of Spinoza, takes this reference as compelling evidence for its having been written in 1662 (see Michael Morgan, in Spinoza, *The Complete Works of Spinoza*, 31). Curley also relates a hypothesis forwarded by Mignini, the editor of the critical edition of the *Short Treatise*, according to which it was actually written in 1660 in Latin, while noting that this interesting hypothesis is all but impossible to prove or refute (see Curley, CSM I.50-1). Whatever the case, the *Short Treatise* is indisputably an 'early' text.

(as is evident to anyone who is sufficiently attentive)” (E I P8s2 / CWS I.414 / G II.50). Here Spinoza seems to accept the Cartesian articulation of the clear and distinct idea: it necessarily delivers a true conception of what is possible, on the basis of the principle of non-contradiction. But in that same scholium, he also indicates the necessary limits of this epistemic framework. “The true definition of each thing,” that is, the clear and distinct idea of it, “neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined” (Ibid). It follows, he tells us, that “there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists” (E I P8s2 / CWS I.415 / G II.50). Presumably this cause could either be internal to or external to the definition. But for things whose definitions do not involve numerically distinct existence, the definitions do not and cannot include any ‘cause on account of which one exists’. For instance, the definition of human being—the clear and distinct idea of what it is to be a human being, according with the principle of non-contradiction—does not involve or express anything about the existence in fact of any particular human beings. Spinoza concludes that “whatever is of such a nature that there can be many individuals [of that nature] must, to exist, have an external cause to exist” (E I P8s2 / CWS I.415 / G II.51). The second scholium of Proposition 8 of the *Ethics*, while explicitly formulated as a defense of the infinity and indivisibility of the unique substance called God or nature, thus amounts to an immanent critique of the category of the clear and distinct idea. Clear and distinct knowledge is true, but its object is definitions that formally exclude any account of genesis or individuation. It can never amount to knowledge of a sufficient reason for existence. For the latter, a different set of epistemological categories must be elaborated. And from the perspective of this new set of categories, as we will see, further critiques of the limits of the clear and distinct will emerge.

But if Spinoza has just shown us that clear and distinct knowledge is limited insofar as it amounts only to a definition, it will no doubt seem objectionable that he introduces the category of adequacy *as one of the definitions* that begins Part II of the *Ethics*. This brings to mind the critiques of Spinoza's geometric manner of exposition, perhaps best formulated by Hegel:

To render his philosophy mathematically conclusive and consistent, Spinoza presented it according to a geometrical method, but one that is only appropriate for the finite sciences of the understanding. Hence he begins with definitions. These definitions involve universal determinations, and they are adopted directly or presupposed, they are not deduced, for Spinoza does not know how he arrives at them.<sup>10</sup>

There does indeed appear to be a dialectical tension here between the content of an epistemic category that seeks to surpass definitional knowledge, and its formal appearance in the system as one definition among others. To show that this is not a genuine contradiction with devastating consequences for Spinoza's epistemological system would require a too-lengthy digression on the nature and limits of *more geometrico*.<sup>11</sup> It will suffice, for our purposes here, to leave this apparent paradox aside and consider on its own terms Spinoza's elaboration and usage of the category of the adequate idea.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown, trans. R.F. Brown and J.M. Stewart with H.S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 155.

<sup>11</sup> On this score, Pierre Macherey's text remains definitive: see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), ch. 2. Julie Klein's reading of the nature of definition in Spinoza's systematic philosophy and the epistemic status of his concept of eternity is also illuminating in this regard. See Julie Klein, "By Eternity I Understand: Eternity According to Spinoza," *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2002): 295-324. Finally, see Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 61, 115-21, etc.

<sup>12</sup> I cannot help noting here in passing that when Hegel explicitly critiques the definitions of Spinoza's system, he always focuses on the *substance–attribute–mode* triad, and never considers the definition of adequacy—perhaps because, I am tempted to suggest, this might reveal too

The definition itself is, on its own, rather opaque. It reads: “By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, *or* intrinsic denominations of a true idea” (E II D4 / CWS I.447 / G II.85). A first clue as to what this means is given in the explication that immediately follows, wherein Spinoza adds that he specified ‘intrinsic’ denominations in order “to exclude what is extrinsic, *viz.* the agreement of the idea with its object” (E II D4 exp. / CWS I.447 / G II.85). It is thus clear that adequacy is *not* a matter of representational ‘accuracy’; *adequatio* is at a remove from any correspondence theory of truth. Still, this is only a negative determination, indicating what adequacy does *not* mean. Two other passages help suggest some positive content. First, the crucial fourth axiom from Part I: “The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46). And second, the first definition of part three, not of adequate *ideas*, but of adequate *causes*: “I call that cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial, *or* inadequate, if its effect

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great a proximity between Spinozism and his own thought, whereas he is always eager to mark his distance from Spinoza (see Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III*, 155-9; see also G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. George di Giovanni [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 21.37, 21.101, 21.324).

Similarly, the fact that Spinoza abandoned the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, his attempted contribution to the literature of ‘discourses on method’, can be read as in part reflecting his discovery that, as Hegel would later argue, method cannot be determined in advance, but rather emerges in the course of an investigation and can only be articulated for itself at the investigation’s end. As Spinoza explains: “Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea; and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea. So that Method will be good which shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea” (TdIE 38 / CWS I.19 / G II.15-6). Compare this to what Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Mind*: “This movement [of absolute cognition], which philosophy is, finds itself already accomplished, when at the conclusion it grasps its own concept, i.e. only *looks back* on its knowledge” (G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], §573).



cannot be understood through it alone” (E III D1 / CWS I.491 / G II.139). Taken together, these give us the sense that the adequate idea of a thing clearly and distinctly expresses, not what it is abstractly, but its concrete genesis or actual necessity: adequacy seems to be concerned with sufficient reason, the causal relations that constitute the object of knowledge. But the fact that these two passages are drawn from parts of the *Ethics* other than Part II itself means that we must be cautious in relying on them here.

Moreover, within Part II, Spinoza is not particularly forthcoming about what he means by adequacy. Most of what happens in this part of the *Ethics* is a “way of despair”,<sup>13</sup> to use Hegel’s turn of phrase: a catalogue of what turn out to be the *necessarily inadequate* forms of knowledge, to which the human mind seems condemned. Only with the introduction of the common notions, the second kind of knowledge which, according to Spinoza, “can only be conceived adequately” (E II P38 / CWS I.474 / G II.118), does the category of the adequate begin to be positively and concretely articulated. But since, as Spinoza also says, “he who knows how to distinguish between the true and the false must have an adequate idea of the true and of the false” (E II P42 dem. / CWS I.479 / G II.123), it is from the vantage of adequate knowledge that these forms of inadequate knowledge are understood and their necessity is demonstrated. It will thus be helpful to review this catalogue, to take stock of what Spinoza means by ‘inadequate’ in each of these cases, and to consider the arguments he provides for this inadequacy. Here are the relevant propositions:

The human Mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body. (E II P24 / CWS I.468 / G II.110)

The idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of an external body. (E II P25 / CWS I.469 / G II.111)

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<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §78.

The ideas of the affections of the human Body, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused. (E II P28 / CWS I.469 / G II.112)

The idea of the idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human Mind. (E II P29 / CWS I.470 / G II.113)

We can have only an entirely inadequate knowledge of the duration of our Body. (E II P30 / CWS I.471 / G II.114)

We can have only an entirely inadequate knowledge of the duration of the singular things which are outside us. (E II P31 / CWS I.472 / G II.115)

These naturally break into three groups.

1. *II P24 and P25*. The demonstrations for Propositions 24 and 25 rely on a distinction that is first articulated in the corollary to Proposition 11, where we find the first appearance of what I will hereafter refer to as ‘the formula for inadequacy’:

...when we say that the human Mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, *or* insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human Mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human Mind, then we say that the human Mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately. (E II P11c / CWS I.456 / G II.94-5)

At this point in the text, these formulations are no doubt puzzling and less than helpful, and in the scholium here Spinoza even asks his readers to stay their objections and questions for the time being. In P24 their sense begins to become concrete. The human mind is, he tells us there, the idea of the actually existing human body (E II P13 / CWS I.457 / G II.96). Now this body is made up of parts, and nothing can happen in this body that is not perceived by the mind (E II P12 / CWS I.456-7 / G II.95). But it does not follow that we have adequate knowledge of these

bodily parts. For one thing, Spinoza's claim is not that our minds perceive everything in the body, but everything that *happens* in the body. This indicates that the mind perceives only those parts of the body that are presently undergoing some kind of affection or modification. Indeed, he writes: "The human Mind does not know the human Body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the Body is affected" (E II P19 / CWS I.466 / G II.107). Since an individual is a mode, it is only manifest and knowable in and through its modifications, that is, its interactions with other modes.

Spinoza argues that the individual parts that constitute the human body whose idea is the human mind are similarly only perceived and known *insofar as* they constitute that body—that is, "not insofar as they can be considered as Individuals, without relation to the human Body" (E II P24 dem. / CWS I.468 / G II.111). Adequate knowledge of these parts would thus have to be knowledge of them, to repeat the phrase, 'insofar as they can be considered as individuals'. The 'insofar as they can be considered' is significant here, given the *really indivisible* nature of Spinoza's monistic substance. There are *no real distinctions* in Spinoza's metaphysics, in thought or in extension.<sup>14</sup> To return to the formulations from the corollary to P11: adequate knowledge of these parts considered as individuals does exist in the mind of God, but "insofar as he is affected with a great many ideas of things, and not insofar as he has *only* the idea of the human Body, i.e. (by P13), the idea that constitutes the nature of the human Mind" (E II P24 dem. / CWS I.469 / G II.111; emphasis added). The idea of the human body surely involves these parts, but it does not explain them on its own, since they are not determined solely as parts of this body. Thus the knowledge the human mind has of them is inadequate.

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<sup>14</sup> See E I P13 / CWS I.420 / G II.55; and P15s / CWS I.422-4 / G II.58-60. On the sense and concept of *distinction* in Spinoza, see Deleuze, *Expressionism*, chapter 1.

The case is even simpler in P25. The human body is affected by another body; this entails a modification of the mind, or the perception of that modification of the body. Now the nature of an affection must not just involve the nature of some of the bodies affected in the interaction; it must involve all of them, on pain of violating the principle of sufficient reason, Spinoza's explicit formulation of which is given in the third axiom of Part I: "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow" (E I A3 / CWS I.410 / G II.46). And so, while it must be the case that something about the nature of the external body is expressed in the idea of the modification, it does not follow that this idea involves an adequate idea of the external body. Again in terms of the corollary to P11, or the formula for inadequacy: "adequate knowledge of the external body is not in God insofar as he has the idea of an affection of the human Body, *or* the idea of an affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the external body" (E II P25 dem. / CWS I.469 / G II.111). God surely has adequate knowledge of the nature of this external body, but this nature is only inadequately expressed in the idea of the affection produced by its interaction with the human body.

In both P24 and P25, inadequacy is a necessary consequence of the fact that the bodies involved are only obscurely or partially expressed in the mind. In other words, the human mind does not have an adequate idea of the parts of the body, or the nature of the external body in an encounter, because the nature of these bodies is not fully expressed in the composition they form with the human body in a determinate modification. They are not reducible to the roles they play in a given modification, although they obviously do play these roles in it. Therefore, the knowledge of them formed on the basis of these roles is surely not nothing, but can only be inadequate.

2. *II P28 and P29.* Propositions 28 and 29 deal, not with inadequate knowledge of bodies, but with inadequate knowledge of the human mind itself. The movement from P28 to P29 underscores that the inadequacy in these cases is not a matter of the mind's being insufficiently reflexive. In its explicit formulation, P28 is unique in this succession of propositions. In all the rest, Spinoza writes that the ideas in question 'do not involve adequate knowledge', whereas here he uses the language of clarity and distinctness: "The ideas of the affections of the human Body, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused" (E II P28 / CWS I.470 / G II.113). This suggests that, if it is true that adequacy is not the same as clarity and distinctness, the domains of the inadequate and the confused might still be coextensive.

The demonstration for this proposition, like those of the two we have just considered, turns on the difference between knowledge of a thing abstractly or 'in itself', and knowledge of a thing in its concrete relations. The idea of an affection of the human body, again, involves the natures of the human body and those of whatever other bodies enter into the modification. But we have just said that ideas of this sort do not involve adequate knowledge either of the parts of the body or of the external parts affecting it. Hence, Spinoza says, "these ideas of the affections, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are like conclusions without premises, i.e. (as is known through itself), they are confused ideas" (E II P28 dem. / CWS I.470 / G II.113). If inadequacy, as I have been suggesting, characterizes a kind of knowledge that does not involve knowledge of the object's concrete causes or sufficient reason, the claim that confused ideas 'are like conclusions without premises' seems to confirm the hypothesis that the inadequate and the confused overlap. In the scholium to this proposition, Spinoza says that the same argument would suffice to demonstrate that "the idea which constitutes the nature of the human Mind is

not, considered in itself alone, clear and distinct; we can also demonstrate the same of the idea of the human Mind and the ideas of the ideas of the human Body's affections [viz. that they are confused], insofar as they are related to the Mind alone" (E II P28s / CWS I.470 / G II.113). The confusion or inadequacy of an idea is here tied to abstraction, in the sense of abstracting the thing known from its real context and genesis, as the repetition of the term *alone* (*sola, solam*) makes evident.

Proposition 29 introduces a higher order of reflexivity to this issue and shows that the problem of inadequacy nevertheless remains in play. "The idea of the idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human Mind" (E II P29 / CWS I.470 / G II.113). We know, again, that the idea of an affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of that body; and, again, that the human mind just is the idea of the human body. From this it follows that "the idea of this idea [of an affection of the human body] does not express the nature of the mind adequately, *or* does not involve adequate knowledge of it" (E II P29 dem. / CWS I.471 / G II.114). This last formulation is revealing. For an idea to involve adequate knowledge of something is *the same as* expressing the nature of that thing adequately. Since the idea of an affection, at best, expresses the nature of the body only partially—that is, insofar as it is affected in a particular way—the conclusion that this idea only partially expresses the nature of the mind follows immediately. This suggests that adequate knowledge involves the nature of the thing in a fully expressive or non-partial way; but such knowledge cannot be attained by means of abstraction, as we have seen.

3. *II P30 and P31*. Propositions 30 and 31 concern the knowledge that we can have of *durations*, whether of our own bodies ("*de duratione nostri corporis*") or of external bodies that

Spinoza specifies as being singular (“*de duratione rerum singularium, quae extra nos sunt*”) (E II P30 and 31 / CWS I.471-2 / G II.114-5). Spinoza defined duration at the beginning of Part II: “Duration is an indefinite continuation of existing” (E II D5 / CWS I.447 / G II.85).

The first thing to note here is Spinoza’s unalloyed confidence in formulating this definition; *caute* underlies every other definition in the *Ethics*, as can be seen by the way he qualifies them: “By body *I understand* a mode...”, “*Per corpus intelligo modum...*” (E II D1 / CWS I.447 / G II.84; emphasis added); “*I say that* to the essence of any thing belongs that which...”, “*Ad essentiam alicujus rei id pertinere dico...*” (E II D2 / CWS I.447 / G II.84; emphasis added). These formulations are typical of Spinoza’s definitions throughout the *Ethics*.<sup>15</sup> But the definition of duration is in no way qualified—indeed, it is surprisingly direct and assertive: “*Duratio est indefinita existendi continuatio*” (E II D5 / CWS I.447 / G II.84). Spinoza’s explication of the definition shows us why he is so confident: “I say indefinite because it cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even by the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of the thing, and does not take it away” (E II D5 exp. / CWS I.447 / G II.85). This is consistent with the doctrine of conatus, according to which each thing just is its striving to persevere in its being; Spinoza will later argue that the “striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time” (E III P8 / CWS I.499 / G II.146). And the only prior claim he refers to in his demonstration for this proposition is that things are only and always destroyed by external causes—which, in turn, he claims is simply self-evident (E III P4 and dem. / CWS I.498 / G II.145). Therefore, the claim that the striving of any thing is durationally indefinite is practically tautological; when a thing ceases to exist, it will not be by virtue of its own nature or through its

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<sup>15</sup> See Klein, “By Eternity I Understand.”

causes, but through its being destroyed by something external, and that very externality entails that the moment of destruction cannot be read off the essence alone of the thing that will be destroyed.

The particular point in time at which a given thing will be destroyed is not, however, absolutely unforeseeable: God has adequate knowledge of when this will take place. Strictly speaking, the time of a thing's destruction, or of the duration of its existence, is not contingent but is determined by "the common order of Nature and the constitution of things. But adequate knowledge of how things are constituted is in God, insofar as he has the ideas of all of them, and not insofar as God has only the idea of the human Body" (E II P30 dem. / CWS I.471 / G II.115). The formula for inadequacy reappears. To know adequately the duration of our own body would require that we know adequately: 1. the laws of modal generation and destruction, or 'the constitution of things'; 2. the nature of our own body, which is a characteristic relation of the communication of motion and rest with a significant degree of complexity, so that we would thereby know what it would take for it to be destroyed; 3. the nature and current position of all external bodies, so that we would be able to discern which of them would, by its very nature and striving to persevere in its being, at one determinate point come into contact with our own body and destroy our characteristic corporeal relations of movement and rest. God has all of these ideas adequately.<sup>16</sup> But our own mind, being just the idea of our body, has only confused and

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<sup>16</sup> Actual and complete knowledge of 'the nature and position of all bodies' is precisely what is ruled out in the epistemology of contemporary physics; in this regard, the claim that God actually knows this, that such knowledge actually exists or even that it is theoretically possible, stands in clear violation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The case is less clear, however, concerning Bohr's 'complementarity thesis' (see Arkady Plotnitsky, *Complementarity: Anti-Epistemology after Bohr and Derrida* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1994], ch. 7; and Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2007], chs. 3, 7, and 8, and Appendices B and C). This is one



inadequate ideas of such things. “So the knowledge of the duration of our Body is quite inadequate in God, insofar as he is considered to constitute only the nature of the human Mind, that is (by P11C), this knowledge is quite inadequate in our Mind” (E II P30 dem. / CWS I.471 / G II.115). And the exact same argument goes for our knowledge of the durations of external things, which Spinoza tells us we can only know quite inadequately (E II P31 and dem. / CWS I.472 / G II.115).

The corollary to this proposition informs us that it follows that “all particular things are contingent and corruptible” (E II P31 cor. / CWS I.472 / G II.115-6). Spinoza dialectically folds contingency and necessity into one another. The destruction of a thing is actually necessary, and indeed necessary at a certain determinate point, and *the necessity of our inadequate knowledge of this necessity* is “what we must understand by the contingency of things and the possibility of their corruption”; and he then writes, even more forcefully: “beyond that there is no contingency” (Ibid.).

Bringing this all together, we see that Spinoza argues for the necessarily inadequate character of:

1. knowledge of the natures of external bodies, or the parts of our own bodies;
2. knowledge of nature of our own mind, insofar as it is based on the ideas we have of our affections; and
3. knowledge of the durations of existences of our own bodies, or of external things. In each case, this is because we do not have clear ideas of the causes of the things involved; we have only at

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key aspect of Spinozist metaphysics and epistemology in which it would be extremely valuable to consider the implications of metalogical problems of totality and reflexivity; in particular I am thinking of Grim’s claim that paradoxes of self-reference, when taken seriously, render the very notion of divine omniscience irrevocably incoherent (Patrick Grim, *The Incomplete Universe: Totality, Knowledge, and Truth* [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991]). But these matters are of course outside the scope of the present inquiry.

best a partial understanding of the causes at work in these situations, and thus are condemned to imagining the nature of things and their contingency, rather than understanding them in their necessity. The fact that we only inadequately understand the natures of things is a consequence of our inadequately understanding the actual relations of causality involved in their production and maintenance. But none of this could be grasped from within the framework of clarity and distinctness, or by virtue of the principle of non-contradiction alone. Since they bear on relations of actual existence, these instances of knowing must involve something more than the mere definition of the thing. If this string of propositions constitutes, as I have suggested, something like a Hegelian pathway of despair, Spinoza's typology of inadequate knowledges reveals that "there is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false" (E II P33 / CWS I.472 / G II.116), and thus that "falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve" (E II P35 / CWS I.472 / G II.116). Even true inadequate knowledge is, at best, 'a conclusion without premises.' By contrast, adequate knowledge, as we will see in the next section, will have to do not with the definitions of things in the abstract, but with their concrete causes. And yet, as we will also see, the development of such adequate knowledge in no way eliminates the inadequate ideas that constitute our mind.

### **3. Adequate Knowledge: Causes and Actuality**

How many kinds of knowledge are there in Spinoza's thought? This question can be answered in several ways. Spinoza famously distinguishes, in the *Ethics*, between three kinds of knowledge: imaginary or inadequate knowledge, rational knowledge by and of common notions, and intuitive knowledge of the third kind, i.e. beatitude or the intellectual love of God. But one could also say that there are really only two kinds of knowledge, adequate and inadequate, since both

the second and third kinds of knowledge in Spinoza's typology constitute systems of adequate ideas, the only difference being their respective object of knowledge, which in the second kind is *relations or unities of composition* and in the third kind is *singular essences*.

Then again, in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza—who, according to a hypothesis advanced by Deleuze, had not yet discovered the theory of common notions<sup>17</sup>—distinguishes between four different 'modes of perception' based on their origins: knowledge from signs, or hearsay; perception or knowledge from chance encounters; the inadequate perception of a cause indirectly based on the experience of something presumed to be an effect; and, finally, perception of a thing through its essence alone, that is, through knowledge of its proximate causes (TdIE 20 / CWS I.13-4 / G II.10-1). Later, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza repeats the gesture of distinguishing between forms of knowledge on the basis of their origins, and again he gives us four kinds, now rearranged and with the common notions in play. We "perceive many things and form universal notions" (E II P40s2 / CWS I.477 / G II.122) 1. from random experience; 2. from signs or by associative memory; 3. from common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (to which we will return in a moment); and 4. as the intuitive knowledge or beatitude that "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things" (E II P40s2 / CWS I.478 / G II.122). He calls the first two "knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination" (E II P40s2 / CWS I.477-8 / G II.122). The third, knowledge from common

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, ch. 5.

notions, he calls ‘reason’ or knowledge of the second kind; and the last he calls knowledge of the third kind.<sup>18</sup>

Spinoza provides a mathematical example to illustrate the distinction between the three kinds of knowledge: when presented with three numbers and asked to produce the fourth that stands in the same relationship to the third that the second does to the first, one can either remember being told the procedure for determining it without really understanding why that procedure works (first kind), understand the rule for its production and determine it by that means (second kind), or intuitively grasp the singular determination of the fourth number (third kind).<sup>19</sup> And in the very next proposition he announces: “Knowledge of the first kind is the only

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<sup>18</sup> Two brief notes on Spinoza’s Latin here. First, when he describes knowledge of the first kind here, ‘opinion or imagination’, the *or* is not a Spinozist *sive*, as in the inclusive disjunction ‘*Deus sive natura*’, but rather *vel*: “*Utrumque hunc res contemplandi modum cognitionem primi generis, opinionem vel imaginationem in posterum vocabo*” (G II.180). This suggests that ‘opinion’ and ‘imagination’ constitute genuine alternatives and are not two names for the same thing, the way God and Nature (and, as we will see, ‘will’ and ‘intellect’) are really identical.

Second, it is noteworthy that the first two kinds of knowledge are *cognitionem (primi generis and secundi generis)* while only the third earns the title of *scientia*: “*Praeter haec cognitionis genera datur, ut in sequentibus ostendam, aliud tertium, quod scientiam intuitivam vocabimus*” (G II.182).

<sup>19</sup> The example Spinoza gives here in II P40s2 is, like many of his mathematical examples, somewhat frustrating and unhelpful on the face of it (like the circle’s chord sections in II P8s; or the inscribed circles exhibiting ‘infinite inequalities’ in Letter 12—on the latter, see Simon Duffy, “The Differential Point of View of the Infinitesimal Calculus in Spinoza, Leibniz, and Deleuze,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 37:3 [2006]: 286-307). Allow me to indicate a way through.

Given three numbers  $(x_1, x_2, x_3)$ , the problem is to find the fourth  $(x_4)$  that stands in the same relation to the third that the second does to the first. Spinoza tells us that merchants will remember from being told in school—knowledge of the first kind—the brute-force procedure for finding the solution to this problem:  $\frac{x_2 x_3}{x_1}$ . But to know, even correctly, the mechanical solution does not, on its own, mean that one adequately understands the nature of the problem. However, if those same merchants were able to figure out this procedure themselves, or understand the force

cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and of the third kind is necessarily true” (E II P41 / CWS I.478; G II.123).

We know by now what marks inadequate knowledge: in the best possible case, where it happens to be correct, inadequate knowledge is like a conclusion without premises; a form of imagination rather than reason or genuine understanding, it is an abstraction or subtraction, a generalization, or a projection. An *abstraction or subtraction*: I only inadequately understand something when I imagine it out of the real context of its causal genesis and its concrete milieu

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of Euclid’s demonstration, by “grasping the common property of proportionals,” we could then say they have knowledge of the second kind.

Finally, Spinoza says, one might simply intuit the solution, inferring “at a glance” the fourth number from the ratio of the first to the second. Now, he says this sort of intuition happens easily in the simplest cases, and he instructs us to consider 1, 2, and 3 as our three givens, where the missing fourth term is 6. Now this might be initially perplexing if only because, if given 1, 2, and 3, the solution that one might intuit for the fourth might easily be—4! The mistake here is thinking that the three terms are part of a *series*, which they are not; what we have is *two pairs of terms*: one fully determinate pair of terms (1, 2) and the first term of a second pair (3,  $x$ ).

What one is supposed to intuit, then, is the proportional relation of (1, 2): a productive procedure of *doubling* (analogous, here, to the ‘attribute of God’ that one adequately understands), from which one ‘sees’ immediately the second term of the second pair, *whatever* its given first term happened to be (‘proceeding to the formal essence of the singular thing’). That is, knowledge of the third kind grasps the necessity according to which individual existents follow from God’s attributes, or divine rules of production: one intuits that the fourth term will be twice the third—in this case, 6. A kind of *arithmetic prejudice*, if I can speak of such a thing, might lead us to think that 1, 2, and 3 form a series whose fourth term will be 4; there may have been less cause for confusion if Spinoza had given us three numbers in which no immediately obvious arithmetic series presented itself, for instance 1, 2, and 7, where the fourth number would clearly be 14.

For another example, taking up the very first proposition of Euclid’s *Elements*, one might note the difference between knowing that the radii of a given circle are all always equal in length (knowledge of the second kind) and knowing that a pair of determinate equilateral and equiangular triangles are engendered by the shared radius of two equal circles and the radii where those circles intersect (knowledge of the third kind). Here we see the genesis of the individual (an equilateral, equiangular triangle with a given side length) as contained within and following from the genetic rule of production when it is adequately understood (the necessary attributes of the circle).

of effectivity (since a thing's actual striving and power, *just is* its essence). A *generalization*: I only inadequately understand something when I imagine it to have characteristics observed in what seems similar to it (for Spinoza, analogical reasoning is always inadequate).<sup>20</sup> A *projection*: I only inadequately understand something when I imagine it to resemble or be structurally similar to myself (most obviously absurd in the anthropomorphic conception of God). I am trapped in and by the imagination, relying on analogies, resemblances, and hearsay. I mistake effects for causes, inverting the real order of nature and the production of things; indeed, I never get to real causes, staying at the level of apparent effects. In this regard, Spinoza agrees entirely with a key aspect of Humean empiricism, which we will explore in Chapter 4: causal relations never appear as such, and knowledge that remains at the level of what is given is inadequate. If it is true, as Spinoza posits axiomatically, that "knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause" (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46), in inadequate knowledge these causes are involved only in a confused and obscure manner. It is the clarity and distinctness of a thing's actual cause that is missing in an inadequate idea of it: "Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, *or* mutilated and confused, ideas involve" (E II P35 / CWS I.472 / G II.116). By contrast, adequate knowledge *always involves causes clearly and distinctly*. As I said, adequate knowledge is bifurcated into knowledge of the second kind by common notions, and knowledge of the third kind, the intuition of singular essences; in both cases we understand the thing as caused, as a necessary expression of determining causal relations.

Common notions or knowledge of the second kind is generic, not abstract: "What is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing" (E II P37 / CWS I.474 / G II.118). Every body, from the smallest (*corpora*

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<sup>20</sup> See Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 63-4.

*simplicissima*<sup>21</sup>) to the largest, the whole of physical reality (*Facies Totius Universi*<sup>22</sup>), is characterized by relations of movement and rest; this is universally true, and follows from the very nature of what it is to be a body<sup>23</sup> without expressing anything determinate about any one body in particular. That bodies are characterized by relations of movement and rest is a common notion, valid at any and every descriptive level; thus “those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately” (E II P38 / CWS I.474 / G II.118). In his demonstration of this proposition, Spinoza finally inverts the formula for inadequacy: we always have such ideas adequately *because God always does*—not just insofar as God constitutes these things ‘in themselves’, but “insofar as God constitutes the human Mind, *or* insofar as God has the ideas that are in the human Mind” (E II P38 dem. / CWS I.474 / G II.118-9. This follows precisely thanks to the ubiquity of that which is understood in and through common notions. Since they are common to all things, and exist equally in the part and in the whole, the idea one forms of them can never lack anything essential. Again, if in the formula for inadequacy in Spinoza’s refrain was that God had an adequate idea of something, but only insofar as God is absolutely infinite and not insofar as God constitutes the individual human mind, here his claim is that the nature of the things understood and consequently of the ideas that can be formed of them must be adequate no matter what, since God necessarily has these ideas

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<sup>21</sup> See E II L7s after P13 / CWS I.461 / G II.101.

<sup>22</sup> See Spinoza, Letter 64 / CWS II.439 / G IV.278.

<sup>23</sup> Spinoza never ceases denouncing the Cartesian idea that the nature of body is merely to be extended. See Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy, 1637-1739*, ch. 6; Woolhouse, *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz*, 94-96; Alison Peterson, “Spinoza on Extension,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 15:14 (2015): 1-23; Matheron, *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, ch. 3.

adequately insofar as God constitutes our minds, or for that matter any finite mode of thought. From this, Spinoza draws the corollary claim that “there are certain ideas, *or* notions, common to all human beings” (E II P38 cor. / CWS I.474 / G II.119), since all *bodies* have certain things in common and which can only be understood adequately.

The next proposition indicates the way in which these generic relations of composition or common natures can be understood adequately on the basis of determinate and particular affections. Three conditions must be met for this to obtain, according to Spinoza: “If something is common to, and peculiar to, the human Body and certain external bodies by which the human Body is usually affected, and is equally in the part and in the whole of each of them, its idea will also be adequate in the Mind” (E II P39 / CWS I.474 / G II.119). The three conditions are as follows: 1. the thing to be known must be ‘common and proper’<sup>24</sup> to both the human body and some external body; 2. the common thing to be known is that through which the external body affects the human body; 3. the thing to be known must be equally in the part and in the whole. Now, in the demonstration, Spinoza asks us to read the third condition as refracted through the first two: whatever the thing to be known is, it must be equally in the part and in the whole of the human body; equally in the part and in the whole of the external body; and equally in the part and in the whole of the conjunction human body–external body (E III P39 dem. / CWS I.475 / G II.119). When an external body affects my body, can only be by virtue of something common to both of these bodies.<sup>25</sup> As we know, all knowledge of any effect—whether this knowledge is

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<sup>24</sup> Curley’s translation of this phrase as ‘common and peculiar’ is itself a bit peculiar: Spinoza in fact writes “*commune est et proprium*” (G II.119).

<sup>25</sup> The necessity of a common element as a condition for causal interaction is a constant theme in the *Ethics*, most prominently forming a key element in the argument for substance monism in the early propositions of Part I (E I P3 / CWS I.410 / G II.47).



adequate or inadequate—necessarily “depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46). The previous proposition demonstrated that, due to the ubiquity of these common natures—being equally in the part and in the whole—we can only form adequate ideas of them; and given finally that they are the causes of the nature of the affection of our body by some external body, an affection of which we necessarily form an idea (even if this idea itself is inadequate), the conclusion is inescapable that any idea of these commonalities must necessarily be adequate.

These, then, are the common notions. They are generic ideas, not abstractions or universals, whose truth is guaranteed by virtue of the fact that the idea of what is common is necessarily adequately involved—to employ an anachronistic term, we might say ‘losslessly’, in that nothing is missing from it—in any idea of an effect of which it is the cause. Common notions may be organized along on a spectrum, according to which they indicate a maximum or minimum of generality; at one end they describe what is common to all modes of a given attribute, and at the other what is common to just two modes of an attribute.<sup>26</sup> At the latter extreme, the *least general common notion* of which I can form an adequate idea is of my body and one other body. We can say that the less general the common notion, the more ‘useful’ it is, since the domain of bodies whose relations it adequately expresses is more specifically delimited the less general it is. By contrast, a *maximally general common notion* is almost practically useless; to recapitulate the example given above, all bodies are modes of extension, involving relations of movement and rest, from the simplest body to the face of the whole universe; the universal applicability of a concept is at the same time its necessary fall into triviality. No matter the degree of a common notion’s genericity, however, Spinoza is adamant that any ideas that

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<sup>26</sup> See Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 114-5.

follow from them “are also adequate” (E II P40 / CWS I.475 / G II.120), and his argument for this claim directly ties the question of adequacy to the theme of causality and genesis:

[W]hen we say that an idea in the human Mind follows from ideas that are adequate in it, we are saying nothing but that (by P11C) in the Divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause, not insofar as God is infinite, nor insofar as God is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things, but insofar God constitutes only the essence of the human Mind. (E II P40 dem. / CWS I.475 / G II.120)

The common notions are adequate because they all relate the thing known to its cause, God or nature, conceived as the unity and necessity of relations of composition or rules of production of finite and determinate things. As Deleuze writes, “common notions give us knowledge of the positive order of Nature as an order of constitutive or characteristic relations by which bodies agree with, and are opposed to, one another.”<sup>27</sup>

Spinoza’s claim that the ideas of singular things necessarily refer back to and involve an idea of God that can only be adequate is further developed in Propositions 45-47, which link the now-united themes of adequacy and causality with that of actuality or actual existence. “Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God” (E II P45 / CWS I.481 / G II.127). As he explains in the demonstration, the idea of a singular thing involves both its essence and its existence; but, as we have seen, when it comes to determinate singular things or individual beings, their essence (or their definition, or their clear and distinct idea *in abstracto*) cannot possibly involve existence. The sufficient reason for a thing’s existence is contained either within itself or in something else, and as we know, in the case of a finite thing, it is absolutely impossible that this reason could be in itself, or else it would be actually infinite, contradicting the hypothesis. This kind of essential

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<sup>27</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 291.

or definitional self-causation can only be attributed to *Deus sive natura*.<sup>28</sup> Hence it follows that “because (by [II]P6) they have God for a cause insofar as God is considered under the attribute of which the things are modes, their ideas must involve the concept of their attribute (by IA4), i.e. (by ID6), must involve an eternal and infinite essence of God” (E II P45 dem. / CWS I.482 / G II.127). Insofar as the idea of a thing involves that thing’s existence, and insofar as that existence cannot by definition be found in the abstract idea of that thing’s nature alone, any idea of an actually existing thing must necessarily involve the idea of God or nature as its cause.

Moreover, that idea of God or nature as the cause of existing things, which is necessarily involved in any idea of such existing things, “is adequate and perfect” (E II P46 / CWS I.482 / G II.127). Spinoza tells us that the argument for this claim has already been made in the previous proposition’s demonstration, which he calls ‘Universal’: that the idea of God as cause is involved in any idea of existing things holds whether the existing thing is conceived as a part or as a whole; it holds for everything actual, from the smallest conceivable parts of matter to the entire corporeal world as a whole (E II P46 dem. / CWS I.482 / G II.127). It is on the basis of this knowledge or idea of God as cause, which is common to and involved in all ideas in the same way that God *is* the cause of all things, that we will be able, according to Spinoza, to form adequate ideas of the third kind (E II P47s / CWS I.482 / G II.128).

It is striking to every reader of the *Ethics* how little Spinoza says about knowledge of the third kind here in Part II, the ostensibly ‘epistemological’ text where one might have expected some elaboration on the concept. It will only be directly thematized in the final book, *De Potentia Intellectus seu de Libertate Humana*; even there what Spinoza says is tantalizingly brief and schematic, and I will not do more than mention it in passing. For now, let us return to the

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<sup>28</sup> See E I D1, A1-2, P5-8, and P11.

matter of the transformation of the *problematic* to which Spinoza's newly elaborated epistemic framework responds: ethics, or the increase of power.

#### **4. Understanding and Power**

Every epistemological framework bears the implicit injunction to develop those ideas that it valorizes. For Descartes, as we saw, this means that one should strive to form clear and distinct ideas, and to will only in accordance with what one understands clearly and distinctly. This framework, I argued, is motivated by the problem of skepticism, and involves the figure of knowledge as an unalloyed good in itself: razing to the ground all that which is built on unstable epistemic foundations, the Cartesian can contribute to the project of philosophical modernity by advancing the universal sciences of mathematics and its application, as in physics. The problem is essentially Platonic: it is the problem of the pretender or of the indistinguishable; as we saw, the problem with unclear and indistinct ideas is that they do not exhibit any internal criteria of validity—consequently, with such ideas one will not necessarily be wrong, but must always be unsure. Its solution is the elaboration of the clear and the distinct, about which there can be no confusion and with which one is in no danger of being led astray.

With Spinoza's elaboration of adequate and inadequate ideas, the problem, the solution, and the injunction are very different. It is true that in having inadequate knowledge, one is as uncertain as the Cartesian whose knowledge is based on unclear and indistinct ideas; and Spinoza is categorical that this condition is both natural and necessary—it is that in which we find ourselves at first and for the most part. As Deleuze writes, this “initial knowledge corresponds first of all to the *state of nature*: I perceive objects through chance encounters, and

by the effect they have on me. Such an effect is but a ‘sign’, a varying ‘indication’.”<sup>29</sup> One need only consider Spinoza’s characterization of the biblical Adam’s wildly confused interpretation of his encounter with God concerning the fruit of the tree of knowledge: imaginary projections, postulated analogies and teleologies, and the failure to grasp real causal necessity all proliferate wildly (TTP II.14 / CWS II.97 / G II.32). At the same time, Spinoza tells us, Adam no less than anyone else *could* have formed adequate knowledge of God: “since this natural divine law is understood simply by the consideration of human nature, it is certain that we can conceive it just as much in Adam as in any other human being” (TTP IV.18 / CWS II.129 / G III.61). We are at first and for the most part beholden to inadequate knowledge, not as a consequence of the Fall, but simply as a natural characteristic of finite processes of thought—or, I might say, as a consequence of the fact that consciousness emerges from out of and involves the obscure unconscious of thought.

Still, this ubiquity of inadequate knowledge does not capture Spinoza’s problem, but only characterizes one aspect of it. Long before Nietzsche claimed to ‘split history in two’, Spinoza had already rejected the assumption that knowledge is a good in itself. For Spinoza, the injunction is to form adequate knowledge, but this is a conditional imperative, in the service of a more fundamental injunction to *become active*. As Clatterbaugh puts it, “for Spinoza, the metaphysical and epistemological problems of causation serve as a means to the moral end of happiness or freedom.”<sup>30</sup> For the Spinozist, inadequate knowledge must indeed be overcome—not because adequate knowledge is intrinsically valuable, but because one is always passive and reactive when in thrall to inadequate ideas. By contrast, adequate knowledge necessarily involves

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<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 289.

<sup>30</sup> Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate*, 130.

an activity, an increase in the extent to which the one who understands is active, and an increase in power. Therefore, we can say that Spinoza's fundamental problem, even at the level of categories of thought, is not skepticism but impotence or passivity, to which the solution is to become active and increase one's power by the development of adequate understanding. In other words, the categories of adequacy and inadequacy are secondary in relation to the doctrine of conatus, which lays out the terms of this problematic of power. And so it is in Part III, with the elaboration of the concepts of joy and sadness, activity and passivity, and adequate and partial causes, that the epistemic framework of Part II finds its sense and significance.

The very first proposition of Part III makes this apparent. "Our Mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, viz., insofar as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily does certain things, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes other things" (E III P1 / CWS I.493 / G II.140). This distinction between activity and passivity, between acting and being acted upon, is given as a definition at the beginning of this Part:

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it [our nature] alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause. (E III D2 / CWS I.493 / G II.139)

A pair of series is established, each of which, of their own accord, will become reflexively ramified. On the one hand, we have adequate knowledge, and are active; our idea of adequate knowledge itself contributes to our power; by this increase of power, we are led to form more adequate ideas, and so on. On the other hand, we have inadequate knowledge, and things happen to us; this undergoing (*passio*) decreases our power; by this decrease of power, we are blocked from forming adequate ideas, and so on. In other words, both passivity and activity tend to reinforce themselves, together forming an asymmetrical affective-epistemic circuit that could

accurately be described as a negative feedback loop in the case of passivity (negative feedback loops being characterized by inherent stasis or closed repetition), and a positive feedback loop in the case of activity (positive feedback loops being characterized by an inherent openness and an intrinsic tendency to expand).<sup>31</sup>

Let us examine Spinoza's argument for this first proposition. The first premise is that each human mind has some adequate and some inadequate ideas. As we have seen, Spinoza thinks that the most precise way to articulate this situation is as follows: in the case of my mind having an adequate idea, we say that God has this idea adequately insofar as God constitutes the essence of my mind alone; in the case of my mind having an inadequate idea, we say that God has this idea adequately, but insofar as God constitutes not the essence of my mind alone but the essence of my mind along with other things external to my mind. Spinoza then refers back to the final proposition of Part I, one of his formulations of the principle of sufficient reason: "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" (E I P36 / CWS I.439 / G II.77). This applies to the ideas under consideration here, those we actually have, whether they happen to be adequate or inadequate. Such ideas are determinate modes, and they necessarily produce effects.

Next, from any given idea some effect must necessarily follow (IP36), of which God is the adequate cause (see D1), not insofar as God is infinite, but insofar as God is considered to be affected by that given idea (see IIP9). But if God, insofar as God is affected by an idea that is adequate in someone's Mind, is the cause of an effect, that same Mind is the effect's adequate cause (by IIP11C). (E III P1 dem. / CWS I.493-4 / G II.140)

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<sup>31</sup> The language of 'feedback loops' comes from the discourse of cybernetics, whose foundational text is Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1961). On the concept of feedback loops, see Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 156-64, 199-209, 229-32, etc. The use of such cybernetic notions to describe Spinozist concepts goes back at least to the early 1960's, in Sylvain Zac, *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 1963).

Of course, God is the adequate cause of all things. But it is also correct, Spinoza has told us, to call a cause adequate when an effect can be clearly and distinctly understood just through it. That is, to say: ‘God, insofar as God constitutes the essence of my mind alone, is the adequate cause of some effect  $x$ ’, is equivalent to saying: ‘My mind is the adequate cause of that effect  $x$ ’. And so, an effect that necessarily follows—within me or outside me—from my having an adequate idea is properly called my *action*, rather than something that happens to me, since it follows from and can be explained by my nature alone. On the other hand, an effect that necessarily follows from an inadequate idea that I have cannot be explained through the nature of my mind alone, since my mind is only a partial cause of that idea. This idea, in God, is adequate, but “insofar as he has in himself the Minds of other things together with the mind of that man” (Ibid.). Whatever it is that follows as an effect from the fact that I have an inadequate idea, it will not be an action but a *passion* that I undergo or suffer, that I am subject to. And Spinoza makes plain what this means in the corollary: “the Mind is more liable to passions the more it has inadequate ideas, and conversely, is more active the more it has adequate ideas” (E III P1 cor. / CWS I.494 / G II.141).

While this is a compelling argument that we act on the basis of adequate ideas, and that things happen to us when we have inadequate ideas, Spinoza wants to make the stronger claim that the mind’s actions and passions *exclusively* follow from having adequate ideas in the first case and inadequate ideas in the second. “The actions of the Mind arise from adequate ideas alone; the passions depend on inadequate ideas alone” (E III P3 / CWS I.497 / G II.144). His aim here is to rule out two possibilities: first, that the mind could become active, or act, without having adequate ideas; and second, that the mind could become passive, or undergo something, by virtue of having adequate ideas. In order to make this claim, Spinoza argues: “whatever follows from the nature of the Mind and has the Mind as its proximate cause, through which it



must be understood, must necessarily follow from an adequate idea or an inadequate one” (E III P3 dem. / CWS I.498 / G II.145). In the former case, as we have seen, the necessary effect will be an action, and in the latter case it will be a passion. The mind’s acting expresses nothing other than the adequacy of the idea it has and from which an effect follows; its passively undergoing something expresses nothing other than the inadequacy of the idea it has and from which an effect follows.

Once this is established, Spinoza lays out the theory of conatus in the next several propositions. For our purposes here, four of these are particularly important:

Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being. (E III P6 / CWS I.498 / G II.146)

The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing. (E III P7 / CWS I.499 / G II.146)

Both insofar as the Mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in this being and is conscious of this striving it has. (E III P9 / CWS I.499 / G II.147)

The idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Body’s power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Mind’s power of thinking. (E III P11 / CWS I.500 / G II.148)

Propositions 6 to 8 of Part III could be called the general theory of conatus, according to which striving to persevere constitutes the actual essence of all things. P9 affirms this of individual minds as a special case of the general theory, and irrespective of whether the mind in question has adequate or inadequate ideas. P11 reminds us that this theory in all cases must be understood in conjunction with the thesis of parallelism, articulated in II P7, according to which “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E II P7 / CWS I.451 / G II.89). Indeed, the demonstration for this proposition is a simple reference to II P7; rigorously

speaking, III P11 does not say anything new, and each reference to it in subsequent demonstrations could just as well have referred to II P7. Ostensibly, Spinoza makes this claim explicitly just in order to clearly mark his distance from Descartes, who writes in *The Passions of the Soul* that “what is a passion in the soul is usually an action in the body” (PS I.2 / CSM I.328 / AT XI.328). In the scholium to this last proposition, Spinoza draws from this conceptual matrix the celebrated definitions of joy and sadness:

We see, then, that the Mind can undergo a great many changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, indeed, explain to us the affects of Joy and Sadness. By *Joy*, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that *passion by which it passes to a greater perfection*. And by *Sadness*, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*. (E III P11s / CWS I.500 / G II.148-9)

Perfection, for Spinoza, is nothing other than power: the power to affect and to be affected, as well as the power to persevere in being. Joy is the affect—he is careful to note that he is describing joy insofar as it is a passion and not an action—that one undergoes when the mind and the body together pass to a greater perfection, or experience an increase in their power. The theory of conatus thus entails that we seek joy.

Producing a full account of the complexities of Part III is not my aim here, so I will limit my comments in what remains to noting a few remarkable moments of Spinoza’s presentation as it relates to our current question, that of the relationship between the problematic of becoming active and the epistemic category of adequate knowledge. As such we will skip the propositions from 11 to 53, in which Spinoza elaborates a robust theory of ideal-affective association based on the identity of the will and the intellect and its relation to desire, which I will explore in the next chapter.

In Proposition 53, Spinoza writes: “When the Mind considers itself and its power of acting, it rejoices, and does so the more, the more distinctly it imagines itself and its power of

acting” (E III P53 / CWS I.524 / G II.181). In the demonstration, Spinoza points out that to consider one’s own mind insofar as it is capable of acting or thinking is already to pass to a greater perfection, since the mind only thinks of itself in strictly positive terms when it considers its power to think. Conversely, “When the Mind imagines its own lack of power, it is saddened by it” (E III P55 / CWS I.525 / G II.182). Both of these propositions are accompanied by corollaries noting that when these positive and negative self-appraisals are echoed by the others, the joy and sadness that follow from them are correlatively more intense. But even in the case of the joy that follows from my reflecting on my mind’s singular power to think, corroborated by others, this kind of joy remains a passion. This is attested to by the fact that Spinoza, in P53, is careful to write that the joy involved arises from *imagining* one’s own mind and power to think: this is not yet adequate understanding, it is not an action.

In addition, however, there are active joys and desires, which are the focus of the final two propositions of Part III. “Apart from the Joy and Desire that are passions, there are other affects of Joy and Desire that are related to us insofar as we act” (E III P58 / CWS I.529 / G II.187). In the demonstration he argues for the possibility first of active joys, and then of active desires. In the first case, the argument has three premises. First, the mind has some adequate ideas; we have seen this argued for in the case of common notions. Second, “the Mind necessarily considers itself when it conceives a true, *or* adequate, idea (by IIP40S2)” (E III P58 dem. / CWS I.529 / G II.187). Now it is not clear to what, exactly, Spinoza is referring with this parenthetical citation; in that scholium (which we encountered earlier in this chapter), he distinguishes between four different kinds of perception based on their sources, and provides the mathematical example of the ordered pairs (E II P40s2 / CWS I.477-8 / G II.122). But his intention seems clear enough, so I will allow myself to reconstruct the reasoning. Axiomatically,

the idea of an effect necessarily involves the idea of its cause (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46).

And as we have seen, in the case of adequate knowledge, the mind is the proximate cause of the effect of the adequate idea; thus when the mind conceives any idea adequately, it also necessarily conceives of itself adequately as the proximate cause of that idea. Third, Spinoza refers us back to the joy described in P53: “When the mind conceives itself and its power of acting, it rejoices [...] Therefore, it also rejoices insofar as it conceives adequate ideas, i.e. (by P1), insofar as it acts” (E III P58 / CWS I.529 / G II.187). The argument for active desire follows the same line, showing that the joy that one experiences in desiring is active precisely to the extent that our desiring is determined by our adequate understanding. The proposition that follows denies that this kind of active mental affect can in any case be a sadness, since it is predicated on the mind’s activity qua adequate understanding: “Hence no affects of Sadness can be related to the Mind insofar as it acts, but only affects of Joy and Desire” (E III P59 / CWS I.529 / G II.188).

Thus we can distinguish between *passive joys*, in which the mind passes to a greater perfection or increases its power, but is not the adequate cause of this passage, instead being only a partial cause of it, since it only imagines and does not yet understand; and *active joys*, in which the mind, by forming adequate ideas and understanding itself to be the adequate cause of such adequate ideas, passes immediately to a greater perfection or increases its power. In either case, joy is preferable to sadness, as it involves an increase of power or a passage to a greater perfection; but active joy is always preferable to passive joy, since by understanding itself and its own power of acting adequately, the mind is able to determine an ethical rather than an epistemological Archimedean point. Because everything that follows from adequate ideas must itself be adequate, as we have seen, the discovery of active joy, in the contemplation of one’s

own power to form the adequate idea that one actually has, can ground a dynamic process of increasing that power indefinitely and without needing to rely on imaginary ideas.

One last way to put this would be to recall a formulation we earlier explored in our analysis of inadequate knowledge of the mind. Spinoza wrote that “the idea of this idea [of an affection of the human body] does not express the nature of the mind adequately, *or* does not involve adequate knowledge of it” (E II P29 dem. / CWS I.471 / G II.114). But in the case of active joy, we are dealing precisely with adequate expression. The idea in the mind—some common notion, a unity of composition or a rule for the production of actual existents in nature—is adequate; in this idea, the mind itself is adequately expressed, as a mode of thinking capable of producing this adequate idea; this reflexive or bifurcated adequacy is experienced as joy, the mind’s passage to a greater perfection, the increase of its power, in an entirely active and self-affecting manner. In such cases there seems to be no partiality, no confusion, and no passivity. The mind understands itself as adequately expressed in its formation of adequate ideas.

Adequate understanding, causal genesis, active joy, and the increase of power in this way form a conceptual knot responding precisely to the ethical problematic of becoming-active whose resolution is the *conditio sine qua non* of Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas and, arguably, his metaphysics as a whole. In it the categories of the clear and distinct are retained, but only after their immanent critique revealed their limits and they were put in their proper place, as that which provides indubitable truths about formal essences or possible existences, but without being able to reach the level of genesis, causality, or actuality. According to Spinoza, it is of the nature of reason to grasp things not as contingent, but as necessary—that is, from the perspective of their actuality and genesis, in the light of their sufficient reason, or *sub specie aeternitatis* (E II P44 / CWS I.480 / G II.125). Knowledge becomes adequate, the mind becomes active, formal

definitions are affirmed when we posit their individual existences as necessary. When a mind does this, its power can only increase, and as it reflects on its own power to do so, the cascading effects are active, affirmative, and joyful. These are only the first steps toward beatitude.

## 5. The Persistence of the Inadequate

However, things are not quite as rosy as this description might lead one to believe. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on one final feature of inadequate ideas: their tendency to persist. It turns out that, on Spinoza's account, inadequate or imaginary ideas are impossible to do away with once and for all, even when one successfully manages to form adequate ideas. And even when I recognize the necessity of an adequate idea of some thing, inadequate ideas of those same things continue to produce effects in my mind. An example is illuminating here: grasping the force and necessity of Spinoza's demonstrations in Part I, I am able to recognize rationally, to adequately understand, that *you and I* are not really distinct things, but are only modifications or modes of one thing, namely the unique substance, God or nature; *but I still cannot help but imagine, or inadequately think, that you and I are really distinct things*. We might say that, insofar as this is the case, in my mind there are competing ideal accounts of the nature of things, one of which I am able to consciously recognize as rationally superior to the other, but both of which participate in constituting my mind insofar as it is a singular mode of thought. As we will see in the next chapter, this is extremely important in light of another of Spinoza's characteristic gnoseological claims, namely that the will and the understanding are identical. If I cannot do away with inadequate ideas even when I have adequate ones at my disposal, these inadequate ideas will continue to play a role in constituting my volition and, consequently, determining my desire.

The sting in the tail, so to speak, comes in Part IV, whose very first proposition announces the problem: “Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true” (E IV P1 / CWS I.547 / G II.211). The demonstration is straightforward. As we have seen, Spinoza argues that there is no positive form of falsity, but rather that it is the expression of an absence or a privation. Inadequate ideas are missing something essential. Consequently, “if what a false idea has that is positive were removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true, then a true idea would be removed by itself, which (by IIP4) is absurd” (E IV P1 dem. / CWS I.547 / G II.211). If inadequate ideas, as I have been suggesting, are characterized by their partiality or incompleteness, then it is clear why true ideas do not destroy them: a partial understanding of a thing is not incompatible with its complete understanding. I can therefore restate what I take to be at stake in Spinoza’s articulation of ideas in terms of adequacy and inadequacy: the difference between an adequate and an inadequate idea of something *cannot be expressed in terms of contrariety or contradiction*. Rather, an inadequate idea is merely a partial expression of the complete idea of the thing in its full concreteness. There could only be a contradiction between an adequate and an inadequate idea of some thing *if the inadequate were taken to be fully adequate*. But this is not strictly implied in the nature of the inadequate idea itself. It affirms only what it involves, which cannot include the claim that it is exhaustive or complete in itself. To return to one of our geometric examples, the adequate idea of a three-sided figure *as an isocetes triangle in Euclidean space* is not incompatible or inconsistent with its inadequate idea *as a polygon*. If there were any genuine contradiction between these two ideas, as Spinoza says, this would amount to the absurd claim that the true stands in contradiction with itself insofar as it is true. Again, inadequate ideas are *not false as such*. Indeed, as Spinoza emphasizes, “insofar as they are related to God, they are true” (Ibid.). Thus if I form an adequate

idea of something, the inadequate idea of it that I previously had can remain perfectly intact. At best, all that can happen here is that I retrospectively recognize the inadequacy of my previous conception. But even this is not a necessary consequence.

In the scholium to this proposition, Spinoza gives the example of imagining the distance from the sun: when we look at it, he says, we imagine it to be a few hundred feet away from us. “In this we are deceived so long as we are ignorant of its true distance; but when its distance is known, the error is removed, *not the imagination*, i.e., the idea of the sun, which explains its nature only so far as the Body is affected by it” (E IV P1s / CWS I.548 / G II.211; emphasis added). My inadequate idea continues to exist, continues to play a role in constituting my mind, the idea of my body. In a way, this is simply obvious: it would be ridiculous if, upon learning that a geometric figure is an isosceles triangle in Euclidean space, I ceased thinking that it is a polygon. Or if, upon learning that you and I are merely modes of the single substance, I ceased imagining that you and I are different things. From the perspective of the concrete constitution of my mind as the idea of my body, which does not on its own adequately express or involve the ideas of the affections of my body, since those ideas must necessarily involve the natures of the external bodies affecting mine, there is nothing in an adequate idea that could ‘undo’ the fact of this real inadequacy. “And so it is with the other imaginations by which the Mind is deceived, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the Body, or that its power of acting is increased or diminished: they are not contrary to the true, and do not disappear on its presence” (E IV P1s / CWS I.548 / G II.211-2).

This problem can also be put in terms of an important distinction in Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas. Insofar as it is a mode of thought, my mind *is* an idea—the idea of my body—but it also *has* ideas. Spinoza’s argument here is that having an idea does not necessarily



change the constitution of the mind insofar as it is an idea. As Deleuze writes, “as for this idea which constitutes our soul, *we do not possess it*. Or we do not at least possess it immediately; for it is in God only insofar as he also possesses an idea of something else.”<sup>32</sup> Here the fact that increasing orders of reflexivity does not do away with the inadequacy of idea, which we saw above in our discussion of II P29, takes on its full import: even *having an idea of the idea that I am* does not change the nature of the idea that I am. If I manage to form a genuinely adequate idea of the idea that I am, we must say that I have an adequate idea of the idea that is my mind—an idea that, on its own terms, is necessarily inadequate. As we saw, insofar as my mind is a finite mode of thought, there are a number of ways in which my mind is necessarily constituted by inadequate ideas. Consequently, even in the ideal best possible scenario, in which I form an absolute maximum of adequate knowledge, this bears only on the ideas that I *have*, but does not necessarily imply a transformation of the idea that I *am*.

In other words, inadequate ideas are unavoidably, stubbornly persistent. “The force of any passion, *or* affect, can surpass the other actions, *or* power, of a human being, so that the affect stubbornly clings to them” (E IV P6 / CWS I.550 / G II.214). Inadequate ideas, insofar as they are modes of thought, involve their own affirmation, as we will see in the next chapter; their power to produce effects in the mind can only be countered by the contrary power of another idea, but this contrary power cannot be a function of the truth of either of these ideas, since insofar as they are positive, adequate and inadequate ideas cannot contradict one another. Throughout Part IV, Spinoza constantly reiterates the claim that in order for it to be possible for our minds to not be constituted by ideas that are inadequate, it would have to be the case that we were more powerful than everything else in nature (E IV P4 / CWS I.548 / G II.212). And this is

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 145-6.

clearly not the case: human beings are not God, which alone is absolutely powerful; there are invariably an infinite number of things more powerful than us (E IV A1 / CW I.547 / G II.211). Thus the fact that our minds are constituted by, and inevitably involve and express, inadequate ideas, remains necessarily true no matter how many adequate ideas we manage to form.

What then can be said about adequate and inadequate ideas with respect to the question of whether they are conscious or not? Here Proposition 8 is illustrative: “The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it [*quatenus ejus sumus conscii*]” (E IV P8 / CWS I.550 / G II.215). What does this mean? In the Preface to Part Four, Spinoza had denied that the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ refer to anything positive in the nature of things. Instead, he says, they are “only modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another” (E IV Pref. / CWS I.545 / G II.208). The only consistent sense of these terms, he then posits as definitions, is the following: things are good that “we certainly know to be useful to us” (E IV D1 / CWS I.546 / G II.209), whereas things are evil that “we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good” (E IV D2 / CWS I.546 / G II.209). Thus when we perceive that some external thing affects us with joy, or increases our power to act, we call it good; and conversely, when we perceive that some external thing decreases our power to act, or affects us with sadness, we call it evil (E IV P8 dem. / CWS I.551 / G II.215). But, Spinoza now argues, an idea of a thing that affects us *is not really distinct* from that affect, or “from the idea of the Body’s affection” (Ibid.). In what sense, then, are we conscious here? What is it that we are conscious of? We are conscious only in the sense that we perceive that some external thing affects us with joy or sadness; nearly every idea involved in this perception, in my conscious apprehension of an external thing as the cause of my affect is, in fact, inadequate. Even if my perception that some thing is the cause of my affect is *true*, in the

sense that this thing really does cause an increase in my power to act, nearly all of the ideas involved in this affirmation must necessarily be inadequate. The idea of the nature of my mind, that of the nature of my body, that of the idea of the affection of my body, that of the nature of the external body affecting mine: all of these, as we have seen, must necessarily be inadequate, ideas that constitute my mind but which my mind does not adequately express as their cause. Indeed, this risks confusing cause and effect. My mind is constituted by *them*, not the other way around. All of these unavoidably inadequate ideas indeed constitute affects, thereby playing an important role in determining my mind insofar as it is a singular mode of thought. How this constitution of affects relates to the determination of *desire* will be the subject of the next chapter, but one can already see where this argument will lead: “A Desire which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other Desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented” (E IV P15 / CWS I.553 / G II.220).

What I am conscious of, according to Spinoza, is always a *an encounter*, an encounter of modes, or an ideal mixture obscurely involving the natures of things. My mind consciously has the ideas of affections, or of the modifications of our body by other modes of extended substance, which “*indicate* a state of our body, but do not *explain*”<sup>33</sup> the nature of the external body that affects me, or the nature of my own body or mind. Consciousness, for Spinoza, thus stands in a peculiar relation to knowledge: knowledge is defined as knowledge of causes, but consciousness is always consciousness of effects. This can be put in terms of a ‘demarcation problem’: given the inadequate idea of an effect of which I am conscious, the idea of an encounter between my body and another, on what basis could I clearly separate out the distinct nature of my own body and that of the external one, moving from this necessarily inadequate

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<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 147.

starting-point to an adequate idea? If I have the idea of something that causes me joy, how can I use this as the first moment of a process of distinction that leads to distinct, adequate ideas of me and the external thing? Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas teaches that there is no such process, no procedure that would lead back to the adequate ideas of the singular natures that must be the causes of this idea-effect. The only way to move from the inadequate ideas of modal mixtures to any adequate idea at all is on the basis of what these modes must share in order for their encounter to be possible, that is, their common natures, which can only be conceived adequately. The natures of singular things, whether we consider them as bodies or as minds, and the causal relations that really obtain between them, are never objects of consciousness as such. These can only be inadequately involved in constituting the ideas that our minds *are*, even when we consciously form and possess adequate ideas through common notions. Effects must necessarily involve the nature of their causes, and conscious knowledge of effects must necessarily involve the knowledge of their causes as well. But insofar as they constitute a mind as a mode of thought, these concrete causes are and must remain inadequate, involving positive ideal determinations of which we can only be unconscious. We may be conscious of the ideas that we have, but we can come to possess these ideas only under highly restrictive conditions. We have ideas consciously, according to Spinoza, on condition that there is an encounter (E II P16, 19, 23 / CWS I.463, 466, 468 / G II.103, 107, 110). These ideas are the obscure effect of the interaction of modes, the encounter between our body and another external one, or the reflexive ideas of the ideas of these encounters. Even these consciously recognized ideas involve other ideas of which we remain necessarily unconscious. And as for the rest, the absolute infinity of finite and infinite modes of thought perfectly positive in their determinacy and powerful in their actual determination of the

singular mind, there is no occasion for their being anything other than inadequately,  
unconsciously involved.

### Chapter 3

#### Deteriora Sequor

#### The Unconscious of Desire in Spinoza

Human minds are modes of thought, and the question of what they understand and how is an important one. But answering that question does not fully capture what Spinoza calls the ‘actual essence’ of finite beings, which is its *striving*. The striving of a human being to persevere in its being, to increase its power to think and to act, to produce the effects that follow from its nature, insofar as it is expressed both corporeally and mentally—Spinoza calls this *desire*. What does the persistence of the inadequate, as a consequence of Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas, mean for this conception of desire as the actual essence of individual human beings? In the previous chapter, I argued that Spinoza’s categorical framework of adequate and inadequate ideas, which is articulated in light of the ethical problematic that informs his metaphysics as a whole, namely the striving to increase one’s power, has the following significant features. First, the adequate and inadequate are not related to one another as are the true to the false. The inadequate is characterized not by anything positive on account of which it could be called false, but rather by its partiality: an inadequate idea does not *fully explain* that of which it is an idea, but clearly and distinctly *expresses only some part* or aspect of it. In particular, inadequate ideas tend not to clearly and distinctly express their own cause, which they must nevertheless involve obscurely and indistinctly. Error consists, then, in taking an inadequate idea to be adequate, that is, in confusing the partial for the completely expressive.

Second, following Spinoza’s analyses in Propositions 24 to 31 of Part II, there are some things of which we can only form inadequate ideas. In particular, as we saw, the human mind can

only form inadequate ideas of the natures of external bodies and the parts of its own bodies, the nature of its own mind based on the ideas of its body's affections, and the durations of singular things, which includes itself as well as external things. In each case, Spinoza shows us that the mind's ideas of these things are only partially expressive of their natures because the mind, as the idea of the body through whose affections these things are known, only involves them partially. In other words, Spinoza shows us why we necessarily have inadequate ideas, instead of leaving their actual genesis and appearance in the mind essentially unexplained, in the manner of assuming their appearance as a mere uncritical doxology or a matter of inherited prejudices. He even, as we saw, explicitly rejects the theological gesture according to which the confusion of human minds is a consequence of the fall, for Adam could have conceived of God adequately.

Third, this way of articulating the difference between the adequate and the inadequate has the crucial consequence that the formation or appearance of more adequate ideas by a mind does not in any way necessitate the elimination of their corresponding inadequate ideas. This kind of elimination, according to Spinoza, which would proceed by way of some contrariety, could only happen on the basis of some shared common nature, and, in terms of what they positively share, adequate and inadequate ideas must, in fact, always agree. This is what I termed the persistence of the inadequate: the fact that the mind can and does form adequate ideas does not entail that the mind will thereby be constituted by adequate ideas. In fact, insofar as it is the idea of the body, or insofar as it is a finite mode of thought, the mind must necessarily continue to be constituted by inadequate ideas, no matter how many adequate ideas it manages to form.

This can all be summed up in terms of the unconscious of thought in the following way. For Spinoza, the mind is conscious only in and through the ideas of the affections of itself and of the body of which it is an idea, but, as a singular mode of thought, it remains constituted by, and

thus necessarily involves, much more than this. And that remainder, from the perspective of the mind insofar as it is conscious, can be identified as the unconscious dimension of thought in Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas. These are not merely ideas that happen not to be conscious, but ideas whose unconscious involvement in the mind is structurally necessary.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of the Spinozist theory of desire in light of these consequences. My goal is to show precisely how, given the preceding, there is a necessarily unconscious dimension to desire that Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas helps us understand and explicate. To do this I will first sketch, in broad outline, the Spinozist critique of free will, and his way of thinking through the problem of akratic desire, or the problem of 'seeing the better but doing the worse', which will help generically orient our reading in the rest of the chapter and indicate what conceptual terms require further elucidation, namely volition and desire. I will therefore need to account for two conceptual relationships in Spinoza's gnoseology. First, there is the relationship between the understanding (or intellect) and the will (or volition). This is necessary because, up until now, we have almost exclusively been discussing ideas in terms of their being modes of understanding. Yet as we will see, Spinoza thinks that they are already, as such, also modes of volition. I will show how Spinoza argues for the counterintuitive claim that the understanding and the will are in fact one and the same thing, which involves his critique of any 'faculty' psychology and his argument that a volition is the particular affirmation always already involved in an idea. Second, I will need to clarify the relationship between volition and desire, since these are importantly distinct in Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas. Desire is the actual essence of an individual human being, whose mind is constituted by ideas whose affirmation is what we understand by particular volitions. In this way, I draw attention directly to the structurally unconscious aspect of desire, as the determination of



the nature of a mind's striving to persevere by the persistently inadequate ideas that invariably constitute it.

### **1. Spinozist Desire and the Critique of Voluntarism**

Spinoza's critique of the concept of free human volition is, in some respects, quite simple: human wills are not exempt from the principle of sufficient reason, according to which everything that exists is necessarily determined to exist in the way that it does and not otherwise. The metaphysical basis of this critique, laid out in Part I of the *Ethics*, lies in the idea that the human being is a mode of substance like any other. Modes of substance are, as we saw in section 4 of Chapter 1, perfectly capable of interacting with one another—indeed, they are characterized by their striving to persevere, and their capacity to affect and to be affected by other modes. In the seventh definition of *Ethics* I, Spinoza lays out the difference between what he understands by a free thing and a necessary one: “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner” (E I D7 / CWS I.409 / G II.46). But only one thing really meets the criteria of ‘existing from the necessity of its nature alone’ and ‘being determined to act by itself alone’, namely, God, which is indeed free in this sense; all modes of substance will, by contrast, be necessarily determined rather than free. It is axiomatic, for Spinoza, that causes are determined necessarily to produce their effects (E I A3 / CWS I.410 / G II.46); from this, he says, it follows that determinate causes cannot render themselves undetermined (E I P27 / CWS I.432 / G II.68).

Proposition 32 of Part I reads: “The will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one” (E I P32 / CWS I.435 / G II.72). As the demonstration makes clear, Spinoza

holds that this is true whether we consider the will to be finite or infinite. If the will is finite, then, like all other finite things, it is determined to exist in a certain and determinate manner by external things and so to produce the effects it does necessarily (E I P28 / CWS I.432 / G II.69). And if it is infinite, Spinoza remarks that the determination of infinite modes is no less necessary than the determination of finite ones, referring to the notorious discussion of infinite modes (I P21-23).<sup>1</sup> Significantly, in the first corollary to this very proposition Spinoza draws out the

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion of infinite modes is justifiably notorious. Spinoza says that there are both immediate and mediate infinite modes, where the first are always produced by the absolute nature of substance, and the second, while also having always eternally been produced, are caused indirectly, either by the immediate infinite modes themselves or by other mediate infinite modes (and subsequent mediations could ostensibly proceed *ad infinitum*). In their correspondence, Schuller asks Spinoza for examples to clarify what this means, and Spinoza responds in Letter 64: “the examples [of infinite modes] which you ask for: examples of the first kind [i.e., of things produced immediately by God] are, in Thought, absolutely infinite intellect, and in Extension, motion and rest; an example of the second kind [i.e., of those produced by the mediation of some infinite modification] is the face of the whole Universe, which, however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same” (Spinoza, Letter 64 / CWS II.439 / G IV.278). He then refers to the scholium to the seventh Lemma before P14 of *Ethics* II, which discusses the capacity for an individual retaining its nature in spite of its being affected in many ways; he then suggests that this capacity increases as the degree of complexity of the individual does, and that “if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual” (Spinoza, E II L7s after P13 / CWS I.462 / G II.102).

Still, just what Spinoza exactly means, and what conceptual work is done, by the infinite modes remains somewhat unclear and has been the focus of several investigations in recent Spinoza scholarship. See Charles Huenemann, “The Necessity of Finite Modes and Geometrical Containment in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *New Essays on the Rationalists*, eds. R. Gennaro and C. Huenemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Tad Schmaltz, “Spinoza’s Mediate Infinite Mode,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35:2 (1997): 199-235; Alan Gabbey, “Spinoza, infinite modes and the infinitive mood,” *Studia Spinozana* 16 (2008): 41-66; Don Garrett, “The Essence of the Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal,” in *A Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, especially Chapter 4.

consequence that not even God produces any effects through any supposed freedom of the will—namely, because God’s will is also necessarily determined to produce the effects that it does (E I P32c1 / CWS I.435 / G II.72). Thus Spinoza has no proper place in the great debates, in seventeenth century philosophical theology, about the problem of theodicy, insofar as its articulation requires a concept of free divine volition—a concept shared, in one contentious form or another, by Leibniz, Malebranche, and Arnauld.<sup>2</sup>

However, the fact that things are necessarily determined to exist in a particular way by no means that we, as finite modes of thought, must necessarily understand these causes. In fact, Spinoza holds that just the opposite tends to be true: “all human beings are born ignorant of the causes of things” (E I App. / CWS I.440 / G II.78), and the process by which we come to adequately know any causes is a difficult one that is only rarely carried out successfully. It is in the epistemic gap between our consciousness of our volitions and actions, and our unawareness of the causes of these volitions and actions, that Spinoza identifies the source of the voluntarist conception of free will. “Human beings think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]” (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> On this debate, see Nigel Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936); Sleigh, *Leibniz & Arnauld*; Donald Rutherford, “Malebranche’s Theodicy,” and Denis Moreau, “The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tad Schmaltz, “What Has Cartesianism To Do with Jansenism?” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60:1 (1999): 37-56; and cf. Steven Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Spinoza repeats this in Part III: “experience itself, no less clearly than reason, teaches that human beings believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined, that the decisions of the Mind are nothing

other words, Spinoza identifies an informal fallacy at the source of the concept of free human volition: from the (negative) lack of knowledge of a cause of something, namely human actions, it is (positively) inferred that there really is no cause of these actions. This *argumentum ad ignorantiam* is strictly invalid.<sup>4</sup>

The third part of the *Ethics* seeks to explain the processes by which our appetites are determined, which is a matter of strict necessity *even when those appetites are irrational*. ‘Irrational’ here does not mean, to be clear, that these appetites have no reason for being so and not otherwise. Rather, it refers to the fact that these desires are determined by inadequate ideas, or the imagination, since the images of things by which we are affected do not necessarily correspond to the real order and nature of things. To take the simplest example: love is defined as “Joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (E III P13s / CWS I.502 / G II.150). However, there is no guarantee that the thing that I imagine to be the cause of a joy *is in fact* the cause of my joy, understood as my passage to a greater perfection or the increase of my power to think and to act. Indeed, it may be the case that, in reality, the thing I imagine to be the cause of my joy is in fact something whose nature necessarily diminishes my power to think and to act. Now, “one who loves necessarily strives to have present and preserve the thing he loves” (Ibid.), and so even if the nature of the thing I love is in reality such that it diminishes rather than increases my power to think and to act, this love necessarily determines me to act in such a way that I imagine is beneficial to it—because I also imagine that what benefits that which brings me

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but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the dispositions of the Body varies” (E III P2s / CWS I.496-7 / G II.143).

<sup>4</sup> This precise informal fallacy also, and for exact the same reason, underlies Spinoza’s critique of so-called ‘miracles’ and the possibility of obtaining any knowledge of God based on the miraculous (TTP VI.16-28 / CWS II.156-9 / G III.84-7).

joy will also thereby bring me joy: “We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, *or* will lead to Sadness” (E III P28 / CWS I.509 / G II.161). Thus *Ethics* III teaches us how to regard desires and behaviors both as necessarily rational, insofar as their existence and nature are a matter of necessity to the extent that we are determined to act in certain and determinate ways by desires structured by how we imagine things to be; and as potentially irrational, insofar as how we imagine something to be may not correspond to its actual essence or conatus, its real tendency to aid or restrain our power to think and to act.

Of course, this is also not to say that the imagination *never* corresponds to the real nature of things. As we saw in the previous chapter, inadequate ideas are not false by virtue of anything they positively contain, but are inherently partial. Insofar as they are related to God, Spinoza reminds us, they must in fact be true in some way, expressing some real involvement of the nature of external things in my body and mind: “an imagination is an idea which indicates the present constitution of the human Body more than the nature of an external body—not distinctly, of course, but confusedly” (E IV P1s / CWS I.547 / G II.211). But when these converge—for example, when the thing I imagine to be the cause of my joy *really does* aid my power to think and to act, and so I am correct to love it—it is only accidentally, since the imagination does not grasp things through their causes (a conclusion without premises). Hence: “Any thing can be the accidental cause of Joy, Sadness, or Desire” (E III P15 / CWS I.503 / G II.151). The demonstration for and corollary to this proposition precisely disarticulate the *real order* according to which the nature of a thing in itself aids or restrains my power to think and to act, from the *imaginary order* according to which I attribute the increase or decrease in my power to think and to act to something that I imagine to be the cause of this modification of my power.

“From this alone—that we have regarded a thing with an affect of Joy or Sadness, of which it is not itself the efficient cause, we can love it or hate it” (E III P15 cor. / CWS I.503 / G II.152). And, once again, my love or hate for a thing determines me necessarily to act in a certain and determinate way towards it, regardless of whether it is in reality the efficient cause of my joy or sadness. This is why it should not be surprising that when Spinoza finally comes to discuss *active joys*, that is, joys that do not simply happen to us, but which follow from our own natures, the key difference is that they always involve the understanding rather than the imagination, adequate rather than inadequate ideas (E III P58 / CWS I.529 / G II.187). But the vast majority of affects defined in *Ethics* III are strictly passive, even those that are joyous: something happens *to me* from which it follows that my power increases, and I imagine something to be the cause of this increase and thus am passively determined to love it.

I do not think it should be necessary to go through the entire series of affects enumerated in *Ethics* III in order to support my claim that the text is a rigorous account of how desire is determined by inadequate images of the natures of things and of causal relations, and how desire so determined necessarily leads one to act in certain and determinate ways. Everything essential can be understood from the example I have just given, in which confused love determines one to act in ways that they imagine to be beneficial for whatever they imagine to be the cause of their joy; *mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for confused hatred (i.e., the case in which I take something whose actual nature tends to increase my power to think and to act, to be the cause of my sadness). Spinoza says explicitly that he considers joy, sadness, and desire to be the three primary or fundamental affects, from which the rest follow as modifications or permutations (E III P11s / CWS I.500-1 / G II.148-9). Love and hate are the simplest cases of joy and sadness being modified by the imagination, or inadequate ideas, in which the mind posits that some

particular external thing is the cause of its joy or sadness. The rest of the affects merely involve more complicated variations of love and hate through increasingly complex systems of relations between inadequate ideas. For example, my *shame* is a sadness accompanied by the idea of an internal (rather than external) cause, arising from the fact that I imagine that others *blame* me, i.e., they experience sadness in relation to me, owing to actions that they imagine that I have performed (E III P29s and P30s / CWS I.510-12 / G II.162-4). It does not matter that I may not have performed the actions that others think I did, or that I may be incorrect in thinking that others blame me for these actions. When I imagine this state of affairs, I experience shame, and this sad passion determines me to act in a certain and determinate way.

It is clear that insofar as affects involve the imagination, or inadequate ideas, they can arise in a manner that does not correspond with the real relation between one's own nature and the natures of things that the mind imagines. And from this affection, my will to act in particular ways follows necessarily, whether or not I am conscious of this series of causes that really determines my will. As we have seen, positing that something is the cause of an affect is one way in which inadequate ideas determine an individual's conatus. There are at least two other ways. The first is by resemblance, in which Spinoza clearly underscores the imaginary character of the supposed resemblance and separates it from the real order of efficient causality: "From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have some likeness to an object that usually affects the Mind with Joy or Sadness, we love it or hate it, even though that in which the thing is like the object is not the efficient cause of these affects" (E III P16 / CWS I.503 / G II.152-3). The second is by memorial association: "If the Mind has once been affected by two affects at once, then afterwards, when it is affected by one of them, it will also be affected by the other" (E III P14 / CWS I.502 / G II.151). This is one of the ways, Spinoza tells us, in which something can become

an accidental cause of joy, sadness, or desire. Our imagination habitually associates together things based on our prior experiences of them. Thus, if I have experienced A and B together, and imagined that A was the cause of my sadness, this is already sufficient to determine my desire to avoid B just as much as A. Here again we can highlight the simultaneously rational and irrational character (in the sense indicated above) of such an affect. It is entirely rational, insofar as it follows necessarily from the inadequate associations of ideas that our mind habitually forms and reiterates, but potentially irrational, insofar as such habituated associations can be entirely disarticulated from the question of whether the nature of this thing has any relation *qua* efficient cause to the affect we believe it engenders in us.

Is it surprising that these three kinds of operations of the imagination that give rise to various affections of the mind and that determine desire are precisely what Hume will identify as the principles of association, those habits by which the credible mind passes beyond what is given? The whole complex tapestry of Spinozist affects are all joys, sadnesses, and desires, coupled with the idea of something as its cause (causality), with the habitual association of another affect or object that we imagine to resemble it (resemblance), or with the habitual association with another affect or object that we previously experienced alongside it (spatiotemporal contiguity) (T I.I.IV / 10-13; EHU III.1-3 / 19-20). These ideal associations, these habits of the imagination that determine our manner of being affected and thus our desire, arise in the mind according to strictly necessary force. And when they do, they constitute modifications of our conatus that determine us to act in particular ways, whether or not we are aware of them. Indeed, as I will argue in my reading of Hume in the next chapter, these habits of thought are almost always formed unconsciously, and they tend to operate below or behind the threshold of our conscious awareness.



Spinozist involuntarism consists in the fact that even if we consciously recognize that, in any given instance, our affects are irrational insofar as the imaginary associations subtending them clearly do not refer to the real nature of the things imagined, even then, such recognition is not sufficient to undo the affective force these imaginary associations engender. Only another affective constellation, stronger than those that arise from these associations, is adequate to such a task (E IV P7 / CWS I.550 / G II.214). Inadequate ideas have a real determining power that must be considered a positive feature in its own right—not insofar as they are false, but precisely insofar as they constitute affects that modify the desires of individuals and lead them necessarily to act in particular ways. “Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true” (E IV P1 / CWS I.547 / G II.211). And although adequate knowledge can also be said to have a determining power, this in no way guarantees that the determining power of true or adequate ideas will be stronger than that of confused or inadequate ones. As we have seen, the degree to which it may be said that an idea has a power to determine one to act in a particular way has only an accidental relation to whether it happens to truly or falsely represents the nature of its object. Indeed, to the extent that it is considered as having a power to determine one to act or to suffer actions, it simply does not matter whether an idea is adequate or inadequate, whether it involves understanding things through their causes or imagining them confusedly: “No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect” (E IV P14 / CWS I.553 / G II.219). And so in outline, at least, it is clear how it is possible for us to see the better, but do the worse: too often, our habituated ideal associations incline us toward that which we consciously understand to be worse, by the superior power of the affects they engender in us involuntarily.

## 2. The Identity of Intellect and Volition

By now we have a robust sense for what is at stake in the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas, but how do ideas in general relate to volition, or the will? In fact, Spinoza argues, the will and the understanding are identical. Ideas just are volitions, insofar as they immediately and unavoidably involve their own affirmation. The complexities of this argument require a detailed reconstruction. Let us take as a point of departure Spinoza's outright denial of free or spontaneous volition at the end of Part II.

As we have seen, the human mind is a finite mode, according to Spinoza, that is, it is the idea of the body. Finite modes absolutely cannot be self-determining, which is a characteristic only of the absolutely infinite substance, God or Nature. As such, human minds are determined to act as they do by external causes. And no mode can render itself undetermined, in order to access any kind of undifferentiated pure possibility, which seems to be the condition for the possibility of spontaneous volition or free choice. Hence Spinoza writes: "In the Mind there is no absolute, *or* free, will, but the Mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so on to infinity" (E II P48 / CWS I.483 / G II.129). This proposition comes at almost the very end of Part II. As we saw in the last chapter, the vast majority of this second Part of the *Ethics* is in fact a typology of inadequate knowledges: a systematic account of the various ways in which the mind can only inadequately grasp what it thinks, or how we are condemned to imagine confusedly the natures of ourselves and the beings related to us, as well as the natures of those relations. But none of this matters for the demonstration of P48, which appeals only to a single proposition from Part II, P11, which is said to show that "the Mind is a certain and determinate mode of thinking" (E II P48 dem. / CWS I.489 / G II.129). Once this is given, the demonstration need only appeal to the metaphysical

apparatus of Part One, which I recapitulated at the outset of the previous section and which explains that finite modes are determined by external finite modes in a chain of efficient causes that proceeds to infinity (E I P28 / CWS I.432 / G II.69). Minds are characterized by their power to think, but what they actually think at a given point is a matter of their specific determination, not any spontaneous volition or free choice. Thus, as Spinoza already argued at the end of Part One, “The will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one” (E I P32 / CWS I.435 / G II.72). And the corollary to this proposition makes it clear that God enjoys no special privilege in this regard: “God does not produce any effect by freedom of the will” (E I P28 cor. / CWS I.435 / G II.73).

Now in the scholium to P48, Spinoza explicitly lays out his rejection of any ‘faculty’ theory of the mind: “there is in the Mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, etc.” (E II P48s / CWS I.483 / G II.129). We can identify this as a consequence of Spinozist immanence in the attribute of thought. Just as substance does not exist outside its expression in modes, and modes are only expressions of the unique substance, so there cannot be said to be any power or faculty of the mind outside the actual expressions of that power. On Spinoza’s account, in the attribute of thought, what exists are singular modes of thinking substance, individual thoughts that we name as instances of understanding, desiring, and so on. To posit a distinct *faculty* or unique *capacity* for any of these kinds of modes of thought would be an unwarranted metaphysical posit. Part of the problem with such hypostasis is that there are no immanent criteria for its legitimate as opposed to illegitimate usage. If distinct ‘faculties’ of understanding and volition have sometimes been posited, why would there not also be a faculty of ‘loving’, as Spinoza’s formulation forces us to ask? Why not, for that matter, a faculty of

‘formulation’? Or of ‘hesitation’? In other words, it seems possible to posit a distinct faculty for every distinct kind of mode of thought.

This problem is compounded in two ways, corresponding to two distinct multiplicities complicating the nature of mental affections. On the one hand, there are different objects of affection, and on the other there are different subjects of experience. According to Spinoza, even different modes of thought *grouped under the same name* (i.e., different instances of ‘understanding’, or ‘desiring’, or ‘loving’, etc.) are sufficiently distinct that each would call for positing corresponding faculties if this move were legitimate. This is because, first, as Spinoza says, “There are as many species of Joy, Sadness, and Desire, and consequently of each affect composed of these (like vacillation of mind) or derived from them (like Love, Hate, Hope, Fear, etc.), as there are species of objects by which we are affected” (E III P56 / CWS I.526 / G II.184). Different objects inspire different loves. Nothing is explained by suggesting that I have a distinct faculty of loving for every such different love. Second, he writes: “Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other” (E III P57 / CWS I.528 / G II.186). The fact that you and I, when we are affected by hatred (defined as a ‘sadness or a decrease in power accompanied by the idea of an external cause’), have different natures or actual essences (for, again, the actual essence of each individual is their singular striving or *conatus*), is sufficient to entail that the hates we experience are themselves really different. In short, nothing is explained by positing that the mind possesses distinct faculties of affection, which in any case could not be said to exist outside the specific affections that they are supposed to explain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, then, Spinoza’s critique of the concept of ‘mental faculty’ here is essentially a variant of the critique of ‘occult qualities’ found in many early modern thinkers. Both Descartes and Malebranche argued that ‘occult qualities’, which, they claimed, were invoked by medieval

But P48 is not the end of the story, as there is another consequence of Spinozist immanence in the attribute of thought, more profound and radical than the denial of distinct mental faculties. Spinoza continues: “In the Mind there is no volition, *or* affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea” (E II P49 / CWS I.484 / G II.130). This claim is surprising, for Spinoza argues that the will is not distinct from the understanding. As he says in the corollary, the argument for this proposition amounts to a demonstration that “the will and the intellect are one and the same” (E II P49 cor. / CWS I.485 / G II.131). I will first turn to his demonstration for the proposition and then the unique demonstration he provides for its corollary, before discussing some of the wider ramifications of this claim for my argument about the nature of unconscious determination.

The demonstration has three steps. It refers only to what we have just said about faculties, and a single axiom from the beginning of Part II, and can be formalized as follows:

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metaphysicians in their efforts to give an account of the interactions of substances, do nothing more than (re)name the thing to be explained. Malebranche, for example, considers the question: ‘why does rhubarb purge bile?’ and derides as explanatorily useless the response that rhubarb possesses the ‘purgative’ quality. “Philosophers cannot, through their principles, explain how horses pull a chariot [...] and brushes clean clothing. For they would make themselves ridiculous to everyone if they assumed (the existence of) a motion of attraction and *attractive* faculties to explain why chariots follow the horses to which they are harnessed, and a *detersive* faculty in brushes to clean clothing, and so on with other questions. Thus, their great principles are useful only for obscure questions because they are incomprehensible” (SAT VI.II.4 / 455).

Similarly, Hobbes critiques faculty psychology as a kind of occult quality argument in *Leviathan*: “For cause of the will to do any particular action (which is called *volition*) they [i.e., scholastic philosophers] assign the faculty (that is to say, the capacity in general that men have, to will sometimes one thing, sometimes another, which is called *voluntas*), making the *power* the cause of the *act* (as if one should assign for cause of the good or evil acts of men, their ability to do them. And in many occasions they put for cause of natural events their own ignorance, but disguised in other words: as when they say, fortune is the cause of things contingent (that is, of things whereof they know no cause; and as when they attribute many effects to *occult qualities* (that is, qualities not known to them, and therefore also (as they think), to no man else)” (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994], IV.XLVI.28-29 / 463).

1. There are only singular volitions, i.e., particular affirmations and negations, in the mind.
2. An affirmation or negation necessarily involves the idea of the thing affirmed or denied.
3. The idea of the thing affirmed or denied necessarily involves this affirmation or negation.
4. Together, 2 and 3 are supposed to show that the affirmation or negation of a singular volition involves *nothing other than or outside of* the idea of the thing affirmed or denied. That is, the volition just is the mind's understanding of the idea of the thing involved in the volition.

As we have seen, Spinoza denies that there is a distinct faculty that involves the power to will or not to will. Spinoza argues that when the mind wills, it does so necessarily, as a matter of its determination, not out of any free or spontaneous power of volition; and that, strictly speaking, there are only individual or singular modes of thought that we call volitions, that is, the mind is determined to affirm or to deny something with regard to an idea that it has. Spinoza now asks us to conceive some singular volition, and the example he gives is drawn from geometry. Imagine the singular mode of thought “by which the Mind affirms that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” (E II P49 dem. / CWS I.484 / G II.130).

In steps two and three, Spinoza argues that the will and the understanding are identical by showing how each term in the relation involves the other. He approaches this first from the side of the will, showing how volitions always already involve ideas. He writes: “this affirmation involves the concept, *or* idea, of the triangle, i.e., it cannot be conceived without the idea of the triangle” (Ibid.). This step seems unproblematic, as without an idea of a triangle, it seems impossible to conceive of the affirmation that a triangle's inner angles are equal to two right angles. Here Spinoza invokes II Axiom 3: “There are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire,

or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same Individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, etc.” (E II A3 / CWS I.448 / G II.85-6). His formulation of the consequence that follows here recalls the axioms from Part I that have to do with the ontological status of modes: “this affirmation can neither be nor be conceived without the idea of the triangle” (E II P48 dem. / CWS I.484 / G II.130). In other words, it is impossible to conceive of an instance of volition without the idea of the thing involved in that affirmation or negation. Although this is so, it is still not obvious that a volition is *nothing other than* the idea of the thing itself. Could it not be the case that a volition ‘adds’ something to an idea, namely, the affirmation or negation, which is not already contained in the idea? No, Spinoza replies, for the following reason.

In the third step, he approaches the identity from the side of ideas, showing how ideas always already involve volitions. “This idea of the triangle must involve this same affirmation, viz. that its three angles equal two right angles. So conversely, this idea of the triangle also can neither be nor be conceived without this affirmation” (Ibid.). In other words, it is impossible to conceive of an idea without affirming that which it involves. The very nature of an idea, according to Spinoza, necessarily involves the affirmation of what pertains to it. In the example he gives, the nature of the triangle is such that its idea necessarily involves the affirmation that its angles are equal to two right angles (in Euclidean space), and the implicit denial of any contrary to this affirmation that would be contradictory. In other words, there is nothing that can be said to be ‘added’ to the idea involved in the instance of volition. What is affirmed or denied is always already involved in the idea insofar as it is understood.

Spinoza therefore concludes, “this affirmation pertains to the essence of the idea of the triangle, and is nothing beyond it. And what we have said concerning this volition (since we have

selected it at random), must also be said concerning any volition, viz. that it is nothing apart from the idea” (Ibid.). The argument is that an idea cannot be or be conceived without the affirmation of what it involves, and the denial of any affirmation that would be in contradiction with what it involves; and that no volition can be or be conceived without the idea of the thing about which one makes an affirmation or negation.

But is this example really ‘selected at random’, as Spinoza claims? For it must be admitted that the apparently *compulsory* character of the necessity of mathematical truths is frequently invoked by early modern philosophers as exemplary, and this would therefore seem to be a poor example for demonstrating the identity of understanding and volition in general. That is, typically when one speaks of volition, one tends to have in mind statements such as *I want to do some x*, which seems to have a different form than *I affirm this characteristic of a given idea*, let alone *I affirm x characteristic of y mathematical object*. What is at stake are instances of volitional desire. Are these also identical to the understanding? Does Spinoza’s argument apply in such cases as well? I think that it does, but the argument for why this is the case can only be addressed later, after I have clarified the conceptual link between volition (*volitio*), which is what is under discussion here, and desire (*cupiditas*) as such.

The corollary to Proposition 49 reads as follows: “The will and the intellect are one and the same” (E II P49 cor. / CWS I.485 / G II.131). The demonstration is brief and direct. First, as we have seen, the will and the intellect are not distinct faculties, but instead are nothing other than singular volitions and ideas. Second, as was just argued in the demonstration to P49, these singular volitions and ideas turn out to be identical to one another. Therefore, the will and the understanding are just the same thing. This is what I would call Spinoza’s epistemic heresy: not only are there no faculties distinct from the mental affections that are typically related to them



(no ‘Will’ but only ‘wills’), but also there is no real distinction between the will and the understanding. In fact, we can say that the distinction between the will and the understanding *is imaginary*, or is itself an instance of the inadequate first kind of knowledge. From the perspective of adequate knowledge, we are able to recognize their actual identity.<sup>6</sup> This is the case whether the adequate knowledge at play is of the second kind or the third. If it is the second kind, knowledge from common notions, we would see that understanding necessarily involves affirmation and negation and vice versa, insofar as this is characteristic of all modes in the attribute of thought. If it is the third kind, or beatitude, we would affirm that the essence of a singular mode of thought necessarily involves a particular understanding and a particular volition in just the same way. This is heretical because it undermines the basis on which moral judgments about singular volitions can be made. A person wills *exactly what is involved in the ideas they have*, and there is no way to decry their volition on the basis of an understanding that they do not have. If we think that the will and the understanding are distinct, two possibilities seem to present themselves: either we always do what we understand to be better, or else we are capable of doing what we understand to be worse by a sheer act of free will. Spinozist immanence in the attribute of thought denies both of these possibilities.

Lastly, note that for the purposes of the present investigation, my interest lies specifically in Spinoza’s claim that *human* volition and understanding are identical, although it must be admitted that Spinoza makes the same identity claim with regard to *divine* volition and understanding. As Heunemann argues, Spinoza’s explicit claim that God’s will is not really

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<sup>6</sup> I think it would be highly productive and valuable to consider to what extent this manner of articulating the stakes of moving from inadequacy to adequacy in Spinozism—the logic by which things that are taken to be distinct through inadequate ideas, are understood to be identical through more adequate ones—anticipates and differs from Hegel’s conceptualization of dialectical negativity, or the identity of identity and nonidentity.

distinct from God's understanding should be read in light of Descartes' difficulty on the point.<sup>7</sup> Descartes clearly claims that "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which [God] simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything" (PP I.23 / CSM I.201 / AT VIIIA.14). But elsewhere, while arguing for divine simplicity, Descartes seems constrained to treat them as really distinct functions, ultimately seeming to hold that their identity-in-difference is akin to theological mysteries like the trinity (e.g., PP I.25 / CSM I.201 / AT VIIIA.14). Spinoza recognizes no such difference. What goes for the relation between divine intellect and volition also goes for the relation between human intellect and volition. The nature of thought is such that they are necessarily identical. That said, it is specifically human volition and understanding that we are concerned with here, as it is in this connection that we see Spinoza's theory of determination in the attribute of thought opening onto a concept of the unconscious of thought. Besides, as we will see presently, the objections to the identity claim that Spinoza considers in the scholium to II P49 all seem to take aim at the idea that specifically human volition and understanding are identical, and it is to these objections that he responds directly.

### **3. In Defense of the Identity (*Ethics* II P49 Scholium)**

Spinoza is certainly aware of the counterintuitive nature of the claim that the will and the understanding are identical, as well as its heretical ramifications from the perspective of traditional formulations of morality. Indeed, this claim marks a truly radical break with Cartesianism. It amounts to a repudiation of Descartes' entire account of the sources of error in

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Heunemann, "The Middle Spinoza," in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, eds. Olli Koistinen and John Biro (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 211-4.

the Fourth Meditation (MFP IV / CSM II.39-41 / AT VII.56-9). Thus, in the scholium, he lays out four objections that a philosophically sophisticated reader is likely to raise, and responds to each in turn. The objections are as follows: 1. the will is infinite, whereas the understanding is finite; 2. by experience, we seem to know that we can suspend our judgment; 3. ideas seem to admit of degrees of reality or perfection in a way that volitions in themselves do not; 4. this seems to commit Spinoza to accepting an unappealing horn of the the Buridan's ass dilemma, according to which human beings do not differ from animals by virtue of their free will.

1. The first objection is very nearly a paraphrase of Descartes' Fourth Meditation. The claim is that while one can affirm infinitely many things, it is only possible to understand a finite number of things. Those who make this objection "think it clear that the will extends more widely than the intellect, and so is different from the intellect" (E II P49s / CWS I.486 / G II.132). In the meditation, as we saw above (Chapter 1, section 3; Chapter 2, section 1), Descartes draws from this the ethical lesson that one should only will—that is, affirm or deny—with regard to what one clearly and distinctly understands. With regard to what is only obscurely or indistinctly understood, one should restrict the will, not rendering any judgment at all, refusing to make any affirmations or negations. And this would only be possible if the will and the understanding were not identical, but in fact constituted distinct faculties.

Spinoza replies as follows: "I grant that the will extends more widely than the intellect, *if by intellect they understand only clear and distinct ideas*. But I deny that the will extends more widely than perceptions, *or the faculty of conceiving*" (E II P49s / CWS I.487 / G II.133). First of all, notice that Spinoza refers to the domain of unclear and indistinct perceptions as constituting a nontrivial part of the determination of a consciously desiring mode of thought.

This reference brings Spinoza very close to articulating something like the Leibnizian notion of unconscious perceptions, which I analyzed in Chapter 1. Although Spinoza obviously does not have the concept of *petites perceptions* at his disposal, he clearly suggests that even those perceptions of which one is not clearly and distinctly aware contribute to the determination of the will.

Spinoza's claim is that unclear and indistinct perceptions of the mind, or inadequate ideas, necessarily involve volition in just the same way as adequate or clear and distinct ones.<sup>8</sup> The key difference is that what one wills based on inadequate ideas involves, according to Spinoza, imagined natures and relations, which may not correspond with the real natures of and relations between things. For an account of what that looks like, we will need to proceed to Part III, whose focus is precisely the forms of the determination of desire or the will insofar as it is based on inadequate knowledge or the imagination: that is, the affects.

Finally, Spinoza asks whether it makes sense to claim that the will is infinite, whereas intellect or perception is said to be finite. "For just as we can affirm infinitely many things by the same faculty of willing (but one after another, for we cannot affirm infinitely many things at once), so also we can sense *or* perceive, infinitely many bodies by the same faculty of sensing" (E II P49s / CWS I.488 / G II.133). That is, the appeal to the infinity of volition is an appeal to its *potential*, not its *actual*, infinity: one can imagine affirming an infinity of things. But, Spinoza says, the apparently 'finite' capacity to encounter particular bodies, to sense and perceive determinate things, is also potentially infinite in just this sense. Thus if one wants to claim that the will is potentially infinite, in that there exists an infinity of possible objects of the will, the

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<sup>8</sup> This will be argued for directly in III P9: "Both insofar as the Mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has" (E III P9 / CWS I.499 / G II.147).

same must be said about perception and the understanding. In other words, Spinoza argues that it is inconsistent to attribute actual infinity to the will, but only potential infinity to the understanding. Spinoza's argument works whether or not one wants to attribute infinity, either potential or actual, to the will. If one claims that the will is infinite, then so too will be the understanding, and if one claims that the understanding is finite, then so too must be the will. There is therefore no ground here for affirming their real distinction.

2. Next there is the objection that we seem to be able to suspend our judgment, which again echoes the Cartesian suggestion that we intentionally restrict our will in cases of unclear and indistinct perceptions, whose possibility, Spinoza says again, seems to be taught to us 'by experience'. But of course, this apparent experience, according to Spinoza, is misleading. The suspension of judgment is a necessary determination of the mind, not something in our power as a pure faculty of volition.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Whenever Spinoza notes that we have an idea or conception 'from experience', this should always be read as skeptical if not outright derisive, because experience, which necessarily involves the imagination and the inadequate first kind of knowledge, is very nearly misleading by definition. But, as we are exploring here, Spinoza nevertheless refuses to deny the force or reality of ideas when they lack a rational basis (in the sense I indicated above) and are 'merely taught from experience'. In this regard, too, Spinoza is very close to Hume: what is philosophically required is an analysis of the structure of experience, a recognition of the epistemic illusions to which we are prone based on that structure, and consequently, as Deleuze argues, the development of concrete *corrective rules* that reflective reason can articulate for the purposes of circumventing or allaying these illusions (Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin Boundas [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], in particular ch. 3; and *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 41-3). I will return to these themes in Chapter 4.

There is another aspect to this second objection that comes into view when we consider obviously fictitious ideas. “Someone who feigns a winged horse does not on that account grant that there is a winged horse, i.e., they are not on that account deceived unless at the same time they grant that there is a winged horse” (E II P49s / CWS I.487 / G II.132-3). Since we seem able to imagine things without believing that they really exist, it seems possible for our understanding to encompass things that we do not affirm, which again seems to testify to the nonidentity of the intellect and the will. Thus these first two objections are the inverse of one another. The first argues that there is volition without understanding, and the second argues that there is understanding without volition.

Spinoza flatly denies that understanding without volition is possible. One cannot fail to affirm whatever is involved in the ideas one perceives. This is not to say that we never ‘suspend our judgment’, which, as he concedes, is something that clearly happens on occasion. Spinoza argues that the correct way to interpret this phenomenon is that “when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying nothing but that they see that they do not perceive the thing adequately. Suspension of judgment, therefore, is really a distinctive kind of perception, not an act of free will” (E II P49s / CWS I.488 / G II.134). That is, we ‘suspend our judgment’ in the same way that we ‘choose’ the acts that external causes determine us to perform, namely, we imagine this to be free, when, in reality, it follows necessarily from the nature of our bodies and their actual affections. We occasionally recognize that our ideas are inadequate. When this happens, there must be something that points to this inadequacy in the nature of the context of ideas in which the inadequate idea itself is situated. In such a case, to use Hasana Sharp’s language, something in the ‘ecosystem of ideas’ makes apparent the inadequacy of the idea in

question.<sup>10</sup> This is why Spinoza, earlier in the scholium, wrote that when someone remains satisfied with false ideas, “we do not, on that account, say that they are certain, but only that they do not doubt, or that they rest in false ideas because there are no causes to bring it about that their imagination wavers” (E II P49s / CWS I.485 / G II.131). In other words, doubt, or recognizing that something in an idea is inadequate, is also a mode of thinking that can only exist as necessarily produced by a certain and determinate mode of thought. The mistake, then, is to imagine that this kind of doubt can be directly generated freely, as though one could simply decide not to affirm an idea present to the mind.

The example of the winged horse clarifies this. In II P17, Spinoza argued that when the human body is affected by a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the mind will regard that body as actually existing *until or unless that body is affected by a contrary affect*, one that explicitly excludes the existence or presence of that body (E II P17 / CWS I.463-4 / G II.104). We can put this in terms of an idea’s conatus: each idea strives to persevere in its being, that is, to increase its power and to engender whatever effects follow from its nature within the attribute of thought. But the effects that a mode of thought can produce just are its affirmation in thought, and the modes of thought that follow from this affirmation. So a mode of thought, or an idea, strives to exist and to produce these effects, and will fail to do so only if some other mode of thought whose nature excludes it is present to the same mind, and then only if this latter idea is more powerful than the first. So, Spinoza says, if someone were to imagine a winged horse, and not perceive anything or imagine anything that would exclude the existence of the horse, they “will necessarily regard the horse as present. Nor will they be able to doubt its existence,

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<sup>10</sup> Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 2.

though they will not be certain of it” (E II P49s / CWS I.488 / G II.134). Spinoza’s adherence to the principle of sufficient reason demands that doubt only arises in the mind on the basis of some actually existing idea. Doubt cannot be spontaneously willed into existence, and it cannot follow directly from the idea that would thereby be doubted, no matter how ridiculous it is.

For what is perceiving a winged horse other than affirming wings of a horse? For if the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence, or any faculty of dissenting, unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded the existence of the same horse, or the Mind perceived that its idea of a winged horse was inadequate. (Ibid.)

Insofar as they are perceived by the mind, whether adequately or inadequately, Spinoza insists that ideas necessarily involve their own affirmation. One cannot even imagine something impossible without affirming what this idea involves. If I imagine a square circle, this imaginary idea involves its own affirmation. I must affirm that it possesses contradictory characteristics, and so that it does not and cannot really exist. Even the idea of this impossibility is a positive, determinate mode of thought from which real effects in the mind necessarily follow.

Finally, Spinoza draws a parallel to dreaming in order to clarify what it means, on his account, to say that one ‘suspends judgment’. Frequently, when we have inadequate ideas, we do not suspend judgment but simply accept and affirm them; in the same way, we frequently take our dreaming states to express really present and existing things. But sometimes we recognize that we are only inadequately understanding, and, so to speak, suspend our judgment. As he says, this is like when we find that we recognize ourselves to be dreaming while we dream. But this does not happen because we put into play some mental faculty of stepping outside of our own dreaming states. Rather, something about the perceptions themselves, something about their



fantastic nature, and the discordance that this produces with the other ideas that constitute our mind, strikes us as inadequate.

Thus far, Spinoza has denied both that we can will without understanding (objection 1) and that we can understand, or perceive, or imagine without volition (objection 2). Even obviously impossible, dreamed, fictional, or imaginary ideas necessarily involve their own affirmation by the mind that dreams of them, makes them up, or imagines them. This will form the entire basis of Part III, in which what is at stake is the determination of desire by imaginary and inadequate ideas. Such ideas may in themselves only be false due to a privation, but *as modes of thought* their very positivity involves the determination of the mind to desire and will to act in a certain and determinate way.

3. In the third place, one might object, ideas as such seem to admit of degrees of reality or perfection, whereas volitions do not. This once again has Cartesian resonances, although they are more subterranean this time. It appears to be the case that the more perfection or reality a thing has, the more perfection or reality its idea will have (the disputant can even bolster their claim here by referring to *Ethics* II P7, P11, P13 and its scholium, etc.). By contrast, “one affirmation does not seem to contain more reality than another, i.e., we do not seem to require a greater power to affirm that what is true, is true, than to affirm that something false is true” (E II P49s / CWS I.487 / G II.133). This difference, between the differential degrees of reality attributable to ideas and the static degree of reality attributed to volitions, would seem to suggest that the will and understanding are nonidentical. Spinoza breaks this kind of objection into two separate claims: first, that the affirmation and the idea are distinct from one another; second, that an equal power of the mind is involved in affirming both that what is true, and that what is false is true.

He first responds that the difficulty vanishes once one recognizes that ideas always already involve the affirmation of what they positively contain. From the perspective of the abstraction called ‘the will’, it might be possible to say that all affirmations are somehow identical; but this extremely abstract conception relies precisely on the faculty psychology that Spinoza has already criticized. By contrast, from the perspective of the singularity of the mode of thought, it is clear that every idea involves a distinct affirmation precisely to the extent that the idea is distinct from other modes of thought. He gives an example: “the affirmation that the idea of a circle involves differs from that which the idea of a triangle involves as much as the idea of the circle differs from the idea of the triangle” (E II P49s / CWS I.489 / G II.135). Because singular modes of thought involve distinct determinations, or concretely different ideal contents, the affirmations they involve must necessarily differ as well. Spinoza therefore denies that volition does not admit of degrees of reality or perfection. Though he does not say so explicitly, the clear implication is that a volition involving an idea with a greater number of ideal determinations must have a greater degree of reality or perfection, insofar as it is a mode of thought, than one involving an idea with fewer such determinations. That is, instead of evaluating the degree of perfection or reality of an idea versus that of a volition, Spinoza would have us evaluate the degree or perfection of *a given mode of thought*, which can be analytically considered in terms of its intellectual or its volitional aspects. The error would be to assume that this kind of analytic consideration of the different aspects of a mode of thought somehow implies their real distinction.

He then proceeds to the second claim: “I deny absolutely that we require an equal power of thinking, to affirm that what is true is true, as to affirm that what is false is true” (Ibid.). He refers to II P35: “Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, *or* mutilated

and confused, ideas involve” (E II P35 / CWS I.472 / G II.116). As he says, there is no positive *form* of falsity, but only a deprivation of what is true; indeed, false ideas necessarily have a positive *content*. Consequently, when we consider the two cases in question—one in which the mind affirms that something true is true, and one in which the mind affirms that something false is true—it is obvious that in the first case, the mind’s power to think is greater, that is, what it thinks involves more reality or perfection, or it is more active; and by contrast, in the second case, it is comparatively passive and the idea it conceives is relatively lacking. The alternative to this would be to posit that there is exactly as much reality or perfection in the mind’s act of affirming that what is false is true as in its act of affirming a true thing as true; but in order for that to be the case, by hypothesis, we would in fact be claiming that the mind affirms a truth rather than a falsity. Therefore, on pain of contradiction, we must admit that volitions based on adequate ideas involve more reality or perfection than volitions based on inadequate ideas or, in other words, that the mind is relatively more active in the first case than in the second. This is, indeed, the very first proposition of Part III: “Our Mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, viz. insofar as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily does certain things, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes other things” (E III P1 / CWS I.493 / G II.140).

4. Finally, one might object, does not this conception of the identity of volition and the idea or the will and the understanding commit Spinoza to impaling himself on an unattractive horn of the Buridan’s ass dilemma? This infamous thought experiment has one conceive of a hungry nonhuman animal positioned at an equal distance from two equally attractive aliments, and then ask whether the creature would be able to decide to choose one and proceed to eat it. The two horns of the dilemma are as follows: either the animal does have this power, in which case we

must attribute free will to it; or else the animal does not have free will, and so it starves to death. The objection to Spinoza here is that the claim that one wills only what is involved in the ideas that one has seems to commit him to the second horn of the dilemma, and a human being in this situation would starve: “I would seem to conceive an ass, or a statue of a human, not a human being” (E II IP49s / CWS I.487 / G II.133). If, on the other hand, he allows that a human being in that context would proceed to choose one of the options present, then he concedes that human beings are capable of free will, understood as a capacity for voluntary self-determination.

Spinoza leaves no room for confusion on this point: “I grant entirely that a human being placed in such an equilibrium (viz. who perceives nothing but thirst and hunger, and such food and drink as are equally distant from it) will perish of hunger and thirst” (E II P49s / CWS I.490 / G II.135). If this horn of the dilemma presents a disturbing possibility for some thinkers, it obviously causes no distress for Spinoza.<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza’s position on this score is extremely clear. Ideas just are volitions; a volition is the affirmation of what an idea involves, and the negation of what it does not. In other words, he denies absolutely that we can divide ‘modes of thought’ into distinct groups of ‘ideas’ on the one hand and ‘volitions’ on the other. My next step will be to show how this relates specifically to *desire*. But already it is worth pointing out that this throws the analysis of the previous chapter into a new light: if there are in the mind ideas that are structurally and necessarily inadequate, and persistently so, then by this logic we must say that there are structurally and necessarily inadequate *volitions* in the mind as well. To say that a mind has an inadequate idea of a thing, but

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<sup>11</sup> See Justin Clemens, “Spinoza’s Ass,” in *Spinoza Now*, ed. Dimitris Vardoulakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), for an extended analysis of the history and structure of this dilemma, and Spinoza’s response to it.

should nevertheless will something more adequately in relation to it, is an absurdity, akin to demanding that a square be circular. Given the persistence of the inadequate, the identity of will and understanding means that human minds, which continue to be constituted by and possess inadequate ideas even when they manage to form adequate ones, must to that extent continue to will in determinate ways that they themselves consciously recognize as inadequate. If inadequate ideas do not vanish with the appearance of the adequate, neither will the volitions that these ideas immediately involve. These are the very coordinates of the ethical problem of knowledge.

#### 4. The Unconscious of Desire

What is the difference, for Spinoza, between volition (*voluntas*) and desire (*cupiditas*)? As we have seen, Spinoza uses volition in Part Two in a very precise and restrictive sense, to refer to the affirmation or negation of an idea, which is not distinct from its understanding but is in reality identical to it. But when it comes to finite modes across attributes, as we saw in section 4 of the previous chapter, he grants a much more fundamental ontological or metaphysical status to desire, beginning in Part III. “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing” (E III P7 / CWS I.499 / G II.146).<sup>12</sup> Spinoza argues

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of *actual essence* (*actualem essentiam*) appears for the first time here in III P7. In Propositions 30 and 31 of Part I Spinoza may have seemed to discuss actual intellects, but this appearance is misleading. Spinoza’s formulation there is: “Intellectus, actu finitis aut actu infinitus...” (E I P30 and P31 / G II.71). Here *actu* has the sense of ‘in fact’, qualifying *finitus* and *infinitus*, and not *intellectus*, so this should be rendered: ‘An intellect, whether actually finite or actually infinite...’ By contrast, Curley translates this as: “An actual intellect, whether finite or infinite...” (CWS I.434), citing Gueroult’s authority (Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu*, 434). (I thank Rick Lee for pointing me to this issue.) In the scholium to I P31 Spinoza explained that he had used the language of *actu* “not because I concede that there is any potential intellect, but because, wishing to avoid all confusion, I wanted to speak only of what we perceive as clearly as possible, i.e., of the intellection itself” (E I P31s / CWS I.435 / G II.67). In other words, this formulation is

that this striving of each thing to persevere in its being will continue indefinitely, rather than for a determinate period of time (E III P8 / CWS I.499 / G II.146). Next he hones in on the specificity of human minds, and argues that they seem to have the added distinction of being conscious of the striving that they are: “Both insofar as the Mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has” (E III P9 / CWS I.499 / G II.147). And in the scholium to this proposition he draws a series of analytic or heuristic distinctions:

When this striving is related only to the Mind, it is called Will [*voluntas*]; but when it is related to the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite [*appetitus*]. This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of the human being, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so the human being is determined to do those things.

Between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to human beings insofar as they are conscious of their appetites. So *desire* [*cupiditas*] is

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strategic, and is not meant to suggest a distinction between ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ intellects; rather, it is simply meant to underscore that the thing in question is taken to exist.

Similarly, Spinoza invokes the notion of actuality in Part Two in his discussion of ideas of singular things, but there he refers only to actual *existence*, and not to actual essence: “The idea of a singular thing which actually exists [*Idea rei singularis actu existentis*] has God for a cause not insofar as God is infinite, but insofar as God is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists” (E II P11 / CWS I.453 / G II.91-2). He comes closer to the concept of actual essence a few propositions later: “The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind [*actuale mentis humanae esse*] is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists [*rei alicujus singularis actu existentis*]” (E II P11 / CWS I.456 / G II.94). Here again, however, ‘actual’ is a qualifier drawing our attention to the existence of the thing in question, and does not in any way qualify its essence. That *actual* is a reference to or qualifier of *existence*, whether as *rei* or *existentiae*, remains true throughout the rest of Part Two (see E II P13, P17, P26, P45 and their demonstrations).

Consequently, *actualem essentiam* is a genuinely new concept when it appears here in this early proposition of Part Three, and it plays a central role in Spinoza’s theory of conatus and his formulation of desire as distinct from volition.

*appetite together with consciousness of the appetite.* (E III P9s / CWS I.500 / G II.147-8)<sup>13</sup>

Spinoza's claim is not that appetite deserves the name of desire only when we are fully conscious of it, because *this is actually impossible*, and this impossibility follows as a consequence of the necessary and persistent inadequacy of our modes of self-understanding at the very least. That is, since, as we have seen, there are aspects of self-understanding that are necessarily inadequate and which therefore involve ideas of which we are unconscious, we are therefore similarly conscious of some aspects of our own appetite or desire and unconscious of other aspects. If we were fully conscious of and in possession of adequate knowledge of the natures of our mind and body, then we would also have fully conscious adequate knowledge of our desires—but this, as II P24-31 showed us, is not possible. Therefore, Spinoza's claim is that we are conscious of certain aspects of our striving, but not all of them, and *this complex of conscious and unconscious ideas* is desire; by contrast, appetite names the striving itself, entirely irrespective of whether one is conscious of it at all.

This may seem like a sleight of hand, but Spinoza himself suggests that we should understand him in this way. At the end of Part III, he provides a comprehensive enumeration of affects and defines each them in turn. The very first definition of the affects reads: "Desire is the very essence of the human being, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something" (E III DA I / CWS I.531 / G II.290). To this definition, Spinoza adds a substantial explanation:

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<sup>13</sup> Translation modified. "Cupiditas est appetitus cum ejusdem conscientia" (G II.148), which is a direct assertion. Curley significantly weakens this formulation: "*desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*" (CWS I.500). See my discussion of Spinoza's definitions in the previous chapter; and Klein, "By Eternity I Understand".

We said above, in P9S, that Desire is appetite together with the consciousness of it. And appetite is the very essence of the human being, insofar as it is determined to do what promotes his preservation.

But in the same scholium I also warned that I really recognize no difference between human appetite and Desire. For *whether a human being is conscious of its appetite or not, the appetite still remains one and the same.* (E III DA I exp. / CWS I.531 / G II.190; emphasis added)

According to Spinoza's own argument, then, desire has an unconscious component, even though his formulation of the definition in the scholium to III P9 might have led one to think that desire is defined as having an essential relation to consciousness. Indeed, here his language suggests that consciousness does not pertain to the essence of desire at all, and that it is necessary to posit a *cause for the consciousness of desire* distinct from desire itself. He continues:

I could have said that Desire is man's very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined to do something [that is, without the subordinate clause 'from any given affection of it']. But from this definition (by IIP23) it would not follow that the mind could be conscious of its Desire, *or* appetite. (Ibid.)

The proposition to which he refers here argues that the mind can know itself *only in and through* its affections—that is, that it does not have unmediated access to itself, but can only indirectly grasp its own nature through how it is expressed in its encounters with others. This is why, as Spinoza argues in P29 and its corollary and scholium, the mind is commonly determined to have only inadequate ideas of itself; for as Deleuze puts it, “the inadequate idea always has to do with a mixture of things, and only retains the effect of one body on another.”<sup>14</sup> Spinoza is being extremely careful with his phrasing here, because if in this definition of desire he did not include the reference to determination *by a given affection*, it would actually follow that it would not even be possible for the mind to become conscious of such desire at all. “Therefore, in order to

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<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 68.



involve the cause of this consciousness, it was necessary (by the same proposition) to add: *insofar as it is conceived, from some given affection of it, to be determined etc.*” (E III DA I exp. / CWS I.531 / G II.190).

We can only become conscious of the nature of our own mind, of our own determination and desire, in and through specific and particular affections and the ideas we form of them; desire remains fully determinate and positive, objective and determinative, whether or not we are conscious of some aspect of it through our ideas of our own affections. As Lorenzo Vinciguerra puts it: “If it is true that the body exists such as we perceive it [*sentons*], this does not mean that it also exists such as we are conscious of it [*en avons conscience*]. One must attend to this difference, which turns out to be necessary to understand the redefinition of *cupiditas* in the first definition of the affects.”<sup>15</sup> This distinction also underlies how we must understand Spinoza when he discusses infants in the scholium to P6 of Part V, who “live so many years, as it were, unconscious of themselves [*quasi sui inscius*]” (E V P6s / CWS I.600 / G II.285), since he obviously does not hold that infants do not perceive, and clearly thinks that they desire.<sup>16</sup>

Even if we assume the ideally best possible case in which we form all and only adequate ideas whenever their formation is possible, there are two ways in which inadequate ideas remain operative in the determination of the mind, as I argued in the previous chapter. The first is that there are things of which we can only form inadequate ideas. The second is that even in cases

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<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et le signe. La genèse de l’imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 68 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed analysis of Spinoza’s concept of *infancy*, and especially the apparently contradictory *infans adultus* (E IV P39s / CWS I.569 / G II.240) as an extraordinarily productive point of entry into Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas and politics, see François Zourabichvili, *Le conservatisme paradoxal de Spinoza. Enfance et royauté* (Paris: PUF, 2004), especially chs. 3-5.

where we can in fact form adequate ideas of things, this formation is not itself sufficient to eliminate the inadequate ideas of them that we already possess. In both cases, the conatus of the inadequate ideas necessarily involved in our minds, their striving to produce the effects that follow from their own nature, will persistently continue to play a role in determining what we affirm and deny. Under these conditions, our desire or striving is determined not only by those ideas that we understand consciously but also by those of which we necessarily remain unconscious. In other words, in the constitution of the mode of thought that is an individual human mind, unconscious determinations play no less vital a role than conscious ones. The ineluctable necessity by which unconscious ideas are involved in the mind entails that desire is persistently determined by the imagination even when adequate ideas are formed, grasped, and consciously affirmed in their necessary truth.

Spinozist desire, then, is profoundly unconscious. It is the actual essence, the concrete and determinate form of striving to persevere, of an individual person. But the particular nature of this striving is determined by the totality of ideas, adequate and inadequate, that constitute the mind, and all that they obscurely involve. There is nothing that anyone does that fails to express this desire in some way, even under conditions of extreme coercion. At the outer limit of such imposition, a person's desire or actual essence is destroyed by the superior force of external causes incompatible with their striving as such, and they die: "No one, therefore, unless they are defeated by causes external, and contrary, to their nature, neglects to seek their own advantage, *or* to preserve their being" (E IV P20s / CWS I.557 / G II.224). In and through the things that one does, one's desire is manifest, and can be made explicit objects of consciousness; the knowledge of an effect necessarily involves knowledge of its cause, and from the manner in which I affect others and am affected I must necessarily form an inadequate idea of the

unconscious desire that, as my own actual essence, is its partial cause. And this inadequacy of my knowledge of my own desire cannot possibly be eliminated. Spinoza holds that “the human being is conscious of itself through the affections by which it is determined to act” (E III P30 dem. / CWS I.510-11 / G II.163). Any idea I form on the basis of how I affect and am affected by others must obscurely involve both the natures of myself and of others; there are no immanent criteria for distinguishing between what in this idea pertains exclusively to my essence, and what pertains exclusively to the essence of others. This holds even in the case of active joy, where the ideas formed can only be adequate, because the adequate ideas formed under those conditions are of some nature common to myself and the external thing, and not any of the singular things involved in the encounter (E II P16, P19, and P37 / CWS I.463, 466, and 474 / G II.103, 107, and 118). And it is a direct consequence of Spinoza’s metaphysics that no ideas of an actual essence in its ostensibly ‘pure’ state, of a desire but not insofar as it is affected or modified, can even conceivably be formed, because this kind of pure, unmodified desire is strictly impossible, metaphysically speaking. Spinoza teaches us that one’s desire is in fact almost entirely unconscious, an unknown vector along which power is expressed in the endless play of actions and passions, the integral striving of the obscure set of adequate and inadequate ideas that constitute the mind as a whole.

None of this should discourage us from seeking to form adequate ideas of ourselves. Indeed, if Spinoza is right, we metaphysically cannot help but continue to do so. But the conditions of the concrete determination of the mind will always prevent us from understanding our own desiring natures with total adequacy. No matter how adequate our self-understanding becomes, our desires will always involve an unconscious remainder. There will always be ideas of which we are not conscious and which yet play important roles in determining our desires, and

to that extent, we will be unavoidably passive and, in Spinoza's sense, even sad. This result hardly fits with the caricatured portrait of Spinoza, the naively affirmative thinker of joyful becoming. The *Ethics* is a systematic monument to absolute rationalism, the coincidence of joy and understanding, the power and beatitude of lives led in common and under the guidance of reason; and yet it also testifies in no uncertain terms, and from the start, to the impotent limits of reason, the necessary obscurity of causes, the inevitability of unconscious determination and akratic desire, of lives unreasonably led, of confusion and sadness. But it would be a mistake to grasp these two poles of Spinozism as though they were extrinsically related or accidental; rather, they intrinsically and necessarily implicate and complete one another, in a reciprocally conditioning systematic unity. In these two chapters, I have almost exclusively explored the more negative aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas in terms of their consequences for the epistemic limits of consciousness and the obscurity of desire, and this might perhaps give a one-sidedly negative impression of Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas. But Spinoza himself speaks to the practical necessity of this kind of focus on the negative, the inadequate, the involuntary, the unconscious:

I do not say these things in order to infer that it is better to be ignorant than to know, or that there is no difference between the fool and the man who understands when it comes to moderating the affects. My reason, rather, is that it is necessary to come to know both our nature's power and its lack of power, so that we can determine what reason can do in moderating the affects, and what it cannot do. (E IV P17s / CWS I.553-4 / G II.221)

A practical ethics of knowledge requires a systematic account of the necessary limits and impotence of the mind, in order to genuinely affirm its real powers and constitute it as a site of joyful exploration. This is just what we find in Spinoza's metaphysics of ideas.

## Chapter 4

### Passages of the Mind

#### The Unconscious of Habit in Hume

Thus far, I have argued that there is an unconscious of thought at the level of perception and at the level of ideas and desire, as attested to by my readings of Leibniz and Spinoza. But even if one were to allow that there are unconscious perceptions and desires, it might be thought that there is at least one aspect of thought in which consciousness cannot be denied: namely, thinking itself, the very movement of thought, the mental process by which the mind understands and believes; at least this, one might think, must be a matter of consciousness. But David Hume reformulates the way in which we conceive of the movement of thought: it consists, he tells us, in the mind's passage from one idea to another. And it turns out that, in many ways, these passages are neither immediately conscious nor even readily available to conscious reflection: the mind passes from one idea to another on the basis of mental habits that are formed unconsciously, those habituated ideal passages are unconsciously and involuntarily taken, and even direct reflection on them does not clearly reveal the logic of ideal passage or the mechanisms of thinking. In particular, there are no beliefs that do not involve these unconscious habits of thought; and Hume argues that nearly every movement of the mind is a matter of belief, rather than knowledge. In short, habits, which are ubiquitous, turn out to be unconscious.

This might come as something of a surprise. After all, what could be better known to the mind than its own operations, its own movements? And yet, Hume teaches us that we hardly understand how the mind works. What we can legitimately do, he suggests, is articulate the movements of thought in terms of what he calls the principles of association: resemblance,

contiguity, and causation. The mind seems to pass from one idea to another on the basis of these ideas standing in a relation to one another according to one of these principles: the idea of the Washington monument leads my mind to imagine the obelisks of ancient Egypt; the idea of a street leads my mind to imagine that of the sidewalk; the idea of fire leads my mind to imagine the heat that I believe it must cause. Even before we ask after the logical necessity of the causal relation that is said to obtain between the fire and its heat—a necessity that Hume, like Malebranche, will fervently deny—in each case we are dealing with an imaginary production, a movement of ideal transit whose operative principles remain stubbornly opaque, even when subjected to critical reflection. In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Philo takes it as given that we do not really understand the logic of natural phenomena like the growth of plants or the instinctual behaviors of animals, but objects that the logic of reasoning is similarly obscure: “reason, in its internal fabric and structure, is really as little known to us as instinct or vegetation [...] The effects of these principles are all known to us from experience: But the principles themselves, and their manner of operation, are totally unknown” (DNR VII / 80).

Everyone knows, as Deleuze says, what is obviously meant by ‘David Hume’ and ‘empiricism’.<sup>1</sup> But this obviousness is precisely why we should pause to ask whether or not the received wisdom corresponds to the real movement of Hume’s empiricism itself. The critique of innate ideas is not unique to Hume, which he shares with Aristotle and Locke,<sup>2</sup> nor is the commonplace that knowledge for the empiricist is ‘based on experience’. Kant rightly saw that with Hume, empiricism takes on a singular new depth with the critique of knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 35-6.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 100a; *Metaphysics* 993a; and LEHU I.II-III; II.I.

causation.<sup>3</sup> According to Hume, we do not and cannot have rational knowledge of causes. All that we know, all that can possibly be given in experience, are *effects*, and our inferences from them back to their ostensible causes are always less than rationally grounded. Deleuze has suggested that the formula for Hume's empiricism is that *relations are external to their terms*.<sup>4</sup> I might suggest a slightly different formula: *causes can never be given*. From the perspective of conscious thought, the causes and causal relations involved in synthetic claims about matters of fact must always remain unknown, obscure fictions of the imagination, never given as such and not even rationally deducible. These passages of the mind beyond the given, or effective belief in the existence and nature of things, are based on an involuntary process of habituation and habitual repetition that has no essential relationship with consciousness.

In this chapter, I will begin by considering Hume's argument for the ubiquity of belief; this involves showing why claims about matters of fact cannot be either intuitively or demonstratively certain. Claims concerning matters of fact are therefore not knowledge but are beliefs, and beliefs always involve the relation of causality at several levels. Once this is established, I reconstruct Hume's multifaceted assault on knowledge of causation, which I break down into three distinct critiques: he articulates a critique of knowledge of empirical causal relations, a transcendental critique of knowledge of causation as a relation, and a metacritique of causation, or an exhaustive negative analysis of the possible origins or sources of knowledge of causes. The upshot of this critique, I show, is that relations of causation, and consequently all claims about matters of fact, are matters of belief, and this shifts the terms of Hume's question. It

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (Second Edition)*, trans. Paul Carus and James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 3-5.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 17-8.

becomes necessary to ask after the basis of belief, since beliefs are not rationally demonstrable. The answer to this question is habit, which I explore in the third section; I there argue that habit is a principle of synthesis without which conscious thought would be impossible, and that as an synthetic principle it is essentially unconscious. In the fourth section I discuss the problem of correction, that is, whether and how it is possible to ‘fix’ beliefs, arguing that only habit itself can be mobilized to correct the excesses of habit, and that once again this process of correction often takes place unconsciously. I suggest that if we consider habit in these terms, we gain a sense both for the unconscious of thought as an activity or process, and also for the inherent limits of conscious reflection on these processes.

### **1. Ideal Relations and Association**

Hume begins the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) by making an immediate distinction between two kinds of “perceptions of the human mind”: impressions, which includes “sensations, passions and emotions”, and ideas, the “faint images of these in thinking and reasoning (T I.I.I / 1). The difference between them, he argues, “consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness” (Ibid.). Impressions are forceful and vibrant; ideas are their faint copies, reproduced in the mind in their original order in memory, and disarticulated from one another in the imagination (T I.I.III / 8-10). With this, Hume has already set the coordinates for reframing processes of thought in terms of passages of the mind. While memory is restricted to reproducing ideas in the same order and connection as their original impressions, with more or less accuracy, by contrast the imagination does not seem to be bound by any such restriction. He establishes as its anarchic principle “*the liberty of the imagination to transpose and changes its ideas*” (T I.I.III / 10).



The problem is that the imagining mind does not in fact seem to be nearly as anarchic as this liberty might suggest. It seems, rather, to follow observably regular patterns in terms of the ideas that it imagines. “Were ideas entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone wou’d join them; and ’tis impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they commonly do) without some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another” (T I.I.IV / 10). Hume calls these patterns the ‘principles of association’. These associations are neither simply random, as though there were no relation between the associated ideas, nor expressive of an inviolable necessity, as though they were in fact inseparable. We should, he says, regard them as a “gentle force” (Ibid.). The principles of association that he lists are *resemblance*, *contiguity*, and *cause and effect*. In the *Treatise* he presents this enumeration simply, implying that it is definitive and final, whereas in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) he is somewhat more reserved, suggesting that we might remain open to the possibility that other principles could perhaps be discovered—although these seem to be the only three he ever mentions (EHU III.3 / 20).

In both discussions, Hume moves immediately to give examples of the three principles of association, and notes that they can enter into increasingly complex combinations with one another. In the *Treatise*, he then draws an analogy between this ‘gentle force’, by which ideas are related to one another, and gravity, precisely in order to underscore that these associations of ideas are effects whose causes we do not and cannot know:

Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to shew itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous; but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolv’d into *original* qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain. (T I.I.IV / 13)

This will be a constant refrain in Hume's empiricism: the minimal systematicity, the orderliness, of ideas in the mind strongly suggests that some principle of ordering is at work; but this principle, its ostensible cause, is not something that we can know. Even before he enters directly into the analysis of the relation of cause and effect, he is willing to describe the operations of the mind as orderly effects whose ordering causes are unknown, neither given directly in experience nor indirectly accessible via conscious reflection. In other words, we are already entering the vertiginous terrain of Humean *reflection*, or self-reflexivity. The association of ideas by these principles, he will argue, are *habits*, effects of some mental process. But since we have listed 'causation' as one of the principles of association, the idea of causation must itself be an effect of habituation. This self-reflexivity concerning the idea of causation is not an accident or an oversight, but is what grants Hume's empiricism its peculiar depth.<sup>5</sup>

Before we proceed to Hume's discussion of causation in the next section, let me explain why it is such a central concept of his philosophical endeavor, which I would put in terms of its unavoidable involvement in any possible synthetic proposition, or any claim concerning matters of fact. In short, causation is implicitly involved in nearly every mental operation or movement of thought. It is necessarily at work in every thought that has to do with any matters of fact. In the *Enquiry*, Hume distinguishes between 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact' (EHU IV.1-4 /

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Baier says that, in an unsent letter, Hume allusively claims to have had some kind of revelation early in his life, indicating an entryway into a 'whole new scene of thought'. Baier rules out some suggestions for what this may have meant, before writing: "I think that Hume's new scene of thought more likely concerned the possibility of turning mental states on themselves, a project his *Treatise* is devoted to. This includes beliefs about belief, as well as passions concerning passions, and sentiments regarding sentiment" (Annette Baier, "Reflexivity and Sentiment in Hume's Philosophy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016], 55). On Baier's account, this meta-reflexive project essentially fails until the efforts of Book III, with the theory of moral sentiments.

28-9), a distinction that maps onto his dividing the seven ‘philosophical relations’ of the *Treatise* into two classes (T I.III.I-II / 69-78).<sup>6</sup>

<i>Relations of Ideas</i>	<i>Matters of Fact</i>
“such as depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together” (T I.III.I / 69)	“such as may be chang’d without any change in the ideas” (T I.III.I / 69)
Resemblance	Identity
Contrariety	Relation in space and time
Degrees of a common quality	Causation
Proportions of quantity or in number	

Table 1. Hume’s Relations

In the *Treatise*, Hume argues that the first four kinds of relation—resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity or number—are entirely determined by their relations (T I.III.I / 70). For example, I can say that there is a relation of resemblance between two particular objects of experience; but if either or both of those two objects undergo some change, the relation between them will change as well, perhaps to the point that it no longer obtains at all. This is why I hesitate to accept Deleuze’s formula for Humean empiricism (‘relations are external to their terms’) in an unqualified sense. These first four kinds of relations in fact seem to be *internal* to their terms. Hume himself suggests that knowledge of or propositions about these

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Dicker argues that there is a substantial conceptual difference in Hume’s critique of sufficient reason in the *Treatise*, where the theory of relations plays a crucial role, and in the *Enquiry*, where it does not appear at all (Georges Dicker, *Hume’s Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction* [New York: Routledge, 1998], 135). I side instead with Helen Beebe, who, by contrast, argues that although Hume “does not mention philosophical relations at all in the *Enquiry* [...] it is clear that he still has more or less the same underlying view in the later work” (Helen Beebe, *Hume on Causation* [New York: Routledge, 2006], 19).

relations are analytic. “’Tis from the idea of a triangle, that we discover the relation of equality, which its three angles bear to two right ones; and this relation is invariable, as long as our idea remains the same” (T I.III.I / 69). Similarly, in the first *Enquiry*, Hume writes: “Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe” (EHU IV.1 / 28). He describes the affirmations in these propositions as being “either intuitively or demonstratively certain” (Ibid.). We will return momentarily to the other kinds of relations, but first let us consider what Hume means by these two kinds of certainty.

‘Intuitive’ certainty is said to attend knowledge of the first three of these relations: resemblance, contrariety, and degrees in quality. “When any objects *resemble* each other, the resemblance will at first strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom requires a second examination. The case is the same with *contrariety*, and with *degrees of any quality*” (T I.III.I / 70). There is a kind of immediacy, and indeed indemonstrability, involved in knowledge of and claims about these relations. I cannot ‘demonstrate’ a resemblance or a contrariety, it is simply ‘there’ or it is not, “without any enquiry or reasoning” (Ibid.). ‘Demonstrative’ certainty, which attends mathematical relations, is a slightly more complicated affair. It clearly has to do with quantitative relations. In the *Treatise*, Hume is willing to attribute this sort of certainty to arithmetic and algebraic relations, while he denies that geometric propositions have any such certainty at all. The difference, he says, is that in arithmetic and algebra we have at our disposal “a precise standard, by which we can judge of the equality and proportion of numbers” (T I.III.I / 71), so that the veracity of the conclusions we reach by deductive chains of mathematical reasoning remains assured no matter how arbitrarily long or complicated they are. By contrast, “’tis for want of such a standard of equality in extension, that geometry can scarce be esteem’d a

perfect and infallible science.” (Ibid.). This skepticism concerning the scientific status of geometry puts Hume in good company. It is precisely its reliance on concepts derived from the intuition of extension, which seems to lack an intrinsic measure, that made the infinitesimal calculus epistemologically suspect for mathematicians and philosophers of science from the seventeenth until the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> However, notably, Hume appears to walk back his reservations about geometry in the first *Enquiry*, where he tells us that “geometry, algebra, and arithmetic” are the sciences of relations of ideas (EHU IV.1 / 28). Leaving aside the question posed by the equivocal epistemic status of geometric knowledge in his work,<sup>8</sup> Hume in any case seems to think that demonstrative certainty is ultimately reducible to intuitive certainty, but mediated by the principle of non-contradiction. In that case, I intuitively grasp the equality of two determinate numerical magnitudes (the ‘precise standard’) that a complicated, unintuitive chain of demonstrative reasoning confirms by means of the principle of non-contradiction. And

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<sup>7</sup> See Carl Boyer, *The History of the Calculus and its Conceptual Development* (New York: Dover Publications, 1949), e.g., 269-70. This skepticism is not entirely unfounded. For example, it is possible to construct, as Bernard Bolzano did in 1837, a function that, while continuous everywhere, is nowhere differentiable—representable on a Cartesian coordinate plane as a continuous curve that has no tangents—which clearly flies directly in the face of geometric intuition. Clearly, if geometry is to be ‘scientific’, its concepts cannot simply be based on intuitions about the nature of continuous magnitudes.

More generally, intuitions about the ideal infinite divisibility of extension provide occasions for all kinds of metaphysical speculation that Hume is by no means alone in considering suspect if not illegitimate. For an example of such speculation, consider Descartes’ argument for the metaphysical impossibility of atoms, or indivisible parts of matter, which is predicated on the intuition that extension is infinitely divisible (PP II.20 / CSM I.231-2 / AT VIIIA.51-2).

<sup>8</sup> For more on Hume’s apparent change of heart on the epistemic status of geometric propositions between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, see Alexander Rosenberg, “Hume and the philosophy of science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. Robert Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 80-4; and Robert Fogelin, “Hume and Berkeley on the Proofs of Infinite Divisibility,” *The Philosophical Review* 97:1 (1998): 47-69, esp. 56-9.

in any event, whether the certainty involved in a proposition concerning these four relations is intuitive or demonstrative, these propositions are all undeniably analytic, expressing only the intrinsic relations that necessarily obtain between given ideas.<sup>9</sup>

What kind of certainty is involved in propositions about matters of fact, or claims about the other three philosophical relations, namely identity, spatial or temporal position, or causation? In brief, Hume's answer is: *none*. First of all, as he is quick to point out in the *Enquiry*, the "contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality" (EHU IV.1 / 28-9). If intuitive certainty is somehow indemonstrable but is immediately apparent, and demonstrative certainty involves the principle of non-contradiction, and if there are no other kinds of certainty, then there can be no certainty about these relations at all. This is because these kinds of relations *are* necessarily external to their terms: they "depend not upon the idea, and may be absent or present even while *that* remains the same" (T I.III.II / 73). Claims about relations that are not intrinsic, but are rather external, to the terms they are said to modify are, precisely, synthetic, and not analytic. Therefore, 'knowledge' about matters of fact is necessarily synthetic.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Beebee, *Hume on Causation*, 18-21; and Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11-2.

<sup>10</sup> I put 'knowledge' in scare-quotes because, as we will see, such claims are not in fact *knowledge* for Hume but are *beliefs*. If in what follows I occasionally refer to 'synthetic knowledge', 'knowledge about matters of fact', etc., I do not mean to suggest that any propositions concerning matters of fact can meet the strict epistemic criteria for knowledge that Hume defines; rather this manner of expression simply accords with the *psychological fact*, which Hume analyzes, according to which I cannot help acting as though 'it is cold outside today' counts as some 'knowledge' I have rather than as a mere 'belief' that I hold.

Hume now makes the further claim that all knowledge about matters of fact necessarily involves causation. We know that the relations involved are external to their terms, and, consequently, that propositions about them are synthetic. When we think that such a relation obtains between two things that are actually present, whose relata are presently given, “we call *this* perception rather than reasoning; nor is there in this case any exercise of the thought, or any action, properly speaking, but a mere passive admission of the impressions thro’ the organs of sensation” (Ibid.). The activity of thought consists in *the mind’s passage beyond the given*.

According to this way of thinking, we ought not to receive as reasoning any of the observations we may make concerning *identity*, and the *relations of time and place*; since in none of them the mind can go beyond what is immediately present to the senses, either to discover the real existence or the relations of objects. ’Tis only *causation*, which produces such a connexion, as to give us assurance from the existence or action of one object, that ’twas follow’d or preceded by any other existence or action; nor can the other two relations be ever made use of in reasoning, except so far as they either affect or are affected by it. (T I.III.II / 73-4)

It is not even thinking, in other words, to make the trivial affirmation that a thing presently given to the mind is identical to itself. And as soon as I make a non-trivial claim that something is self-identical, that is, as soon as I affirm that the relation of identity obtains between something presently given and something *not* given, this would indeed constitute thinking, but such an affirmation necessarily involves the relation of causation. Here my mind passes beyond the impressions presently given to it, synthetically affirming that the same thing is their identical cause in each case. As we will see, such an affirmation, this synthetic passage of the mind beyond the given, is surely thinking, but it *cannot* be knowledge. It is unavoidably a belief, a habit of thought.<sup>11</sup> Any “conclusion beyond the impressions of our senses can be founded only

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<sup>11</sup> This is the sense in which Jacobi provocatively argues that Hume is a great *advocate* for faith, and not its adversary. See Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and*

on the connexion of *cause and effect*; nor can we otherwise have any security, that the object is not chang'd upon us, however much the new object may resemble that which was formerly present to the senses" (T I.III.II / 74). Hume reaches the same result in the *Enquiry*: "All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *cause* and *effect*. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses" (EHU IV.4 / 29). As Beebee puts it: "if our reasoning concerning 'matters of fact'—what is going on out there in the world—is to have any epistemic legitimacy, it must be *causal* reasoning."<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, according to Hume, certainty, whether intuitive or demonstrative, is involved only in those claims that pertain to the intrinsic relations that obtain between ideas considered in themselves. This is an extremely restrictive set of claims, meeting an extraordinarily strict set of criteria. It should therefore come as no surprise that his discussion of such claims is so brief in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. He holds that *all* instances of synthetic knowledge fail to meet these criteria. Even the most absolutely minimal, nontrivial knowledge about existing things, knowledge concerning the relations that obtain between things as matters of fact, is uncertain: neither demonstratively certain, because its contrary cannot involve any contradiction, nor intuitively certain, because it is by definition synthetic knowledge, involving the mind's passage beyond the given. It is not just that such claims *can* involve a passage beyond what happens to be given to the mind. Insofar as knowledge involves the relation of cause and effect, it is a passage beyond the given *as such*. As we will see in the next section,

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*Realism, A Dialogue*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel* Allwill, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), e.g., 268-74.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Beebee, "Hume and the Problem of Causation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 229. I think 'epistemic legitimacy' is a potentially misleading formulation here, for reasons that should become clear in what follows.



Hume argues that neither causality as a relation, nor causes as such, can possibly be given in experience.

## 2. Secret Powers: Hume's Critiques of Causation

Hume's rigorous critique of knowledge of causation is undertaken at several distinct levels. First, there is the critique of empirical instances of causal knowledge, in which Hume shows that there can be no certainty in the knowledge of any particular causal relation that the mind posits. I call this the *critique of empirical knowledge of causation*. Next, there is the critique of rationalism's pretension to know with any certainty the validity or necessity of the principle of sufficient reason itself, in which Hume shows that there can be no rational basis for certainty regarding the principle that everything must have a cause. I call this the *transcendental critique of causation*. Finally, there is the critique of our idea of causation *as* an idea that must have some cause; Hume shows that we cannot have any direct experience of what could be the cause of our knowledge of causation. I call this the *metacritique of causation*. Before exploring these in detail, let me lay out the concept of causality as Hume understands it.

Hume contends that the concept of causation must involve the following three essential features: contiguity, priority, and necessary connection. First, causality involves contiguity: "whatever objects are consider'd as causes or effects, are *contiguous*; and that nothing can operate in a time or place, which is ever so little remov'd from those of its existence" (T I.III.II / 75). In other words, there can be no action at a distance. Some form of contact is a prerequisite for causation. Second, the concept involves the "PRIORITY of time in the cause before the effect" (T I.III.II / 76). Hume thinks that this should be obvious. However, he notes that some thinkers allow for the possibility of a cause immediately producing its effect, such that the two are

contemporaneous rather than successive. Indeed, this seems to be a fair characterization of how Spinoza conceives of the causal relation that obtains between God or nature as absolute substance and the immediate infinite modes that follow from it eternally (E I P21-23 / CWS I.429-31 / G II.65-7).<sup>13</sup> Hume's argument against contemporaneous causation is that, if it were possible, there would simply be no succession at all. If causation or the production of effects could occur all at once, then all effects would be immediately given; and consequently, there would be no way to account for why things occur successively in time: "there wou'd be no such thing as succession, and all objects must be co-existent" (T I.III.II / 76). But he also quickly notes that if this argument is unsatisfying, this does not amount to a serious issue; as we will see, the critique of knowledge of causality that he is about to lay out does not depend essentially on this aspect, but on the third and final one.

That third feature is necessary connection. The fact that two things are contiguous and successive is necessary, but clearly not sufficient, for our attributing a causal relation between them: "An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause. There is a NECESSARY CONNEXION to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above-mention'd" (T I.III.II / 77). This feature of the concept of causation, as many have noted,<sup>14</sup> is one that Hume adopts directly from Malebranche, who wrote in *The Search after Truth* (1675): "A true cause such as I understand it

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<sup>13</sup> See above, Note 1 to Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> See, most significantly, Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), ch. 7; see also P.J.E. Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 4; Nadler, *Occasionalism*, ch. 9; Ott, *Causation & Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*, ch. 25; and Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate*, 195-9.

is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect.” (SAT VI.II.III / 450). When we posit a relation of cause and effect, we posit some ‘necessary connection’ that obtains between the relata, over and above their accidental conjunction. As Kail writes, “What else could there be, to causal relations *metaphysically speaking*, other than simply one thing following another? The only metaphysical modality that contrasts to brute regularity is absolute necessity.”<sup>15</sup> To say that one thing caused another is to say more than just that they happened to be proximate in space and successive in time. It is to say that the one follows the other as a matter of metaphysical necessity, that there is “some power in the one, by which it infallibly produces the other, and operates with the greatest certainty and strongest necessity” (EHU VII.27 / 69). It is this third and final feature, necessary connection, that plays the most significant role in Hume’s three critiques of knowledge of causation. Let us now consider each of them in turn.

1. *The critique of empirical knowledge of causation.* We do not have a rational ground for affirming with certainty that one object given in experience is the cause of another. The basis of this critique is the *real distinction* and thus *conceivable separability* of everything that is given in experience: “We have observ’d, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination” (T I.I.VII / 18). Hume argues that everything given in experience can be considered abstractly, in isolation, and therefore can be thought of as being really separate from everything else given in experience.

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<sup>15</sup> P.J.E. Kail, “On Hume’s Appropriation of Malebranche: Causation and Self,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 16:1 (2007): 55-80, 62. Kail convincingly argues that Hume’s reasoning here does not commit him to confusing what analytic philosophers distinguish as ‘metaphysical’ and ‘logical’ necessity.

But since we are seeking a ground for the affirmation of a necessary connection, this separability means that our search will be in vain.

Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv'd, after any manner, may exist after the same manner. This is one principle, which has already been acknowledg'd. Again, every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination. This is another principle. My conclusion from both is, that since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. (T I.IV.V / 233)

This is sufficient for Hume's critique of empirical knowledge of causation to hold. The real difference between perceptions given to the mind means that they, and the real objects that we suppose them to be perceptions of, can be conceived as being really separate and distinct. Consequently, whatever connection that I think exists between two perceptions or objects of perception will be less than necessary, since I can always think these objects separately.

We can also put this in terms of the possibility for our conceiving any contrary of any matters of fact without contradiction. "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality" (EHU IV.2 / 28). I believe that flicking this switch turns on the light in this room. But the connection between the two perceptions—I flick the switch, the light turns on—cannot be a necessary one, because I can conceive of one without necessarily conceiving of the other. Indeed, if the bulb has burned out, I will even experience the former without the latter. It is the nature of synthetic cognition, or knowledge of matters of fact, or claims about relations that are external to their terms, that their contraries cannot involve any contradiction in themselves. Hume imagines one billiard ball approaching another, asking:

May I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight

line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference. (EHU IV.10 / 32)

This is why demonstrative certainty cannot pertain to any claim about empirical causal relations. Practically speaking, the principle of non-contradiction is useless in this context.<sup>16</sup>

Up until this point, Hume's critique follows Malebranche's exactly, but Hume goes a step farther than the Catholic Oratorian. Having established that necessary connection is a key feature of the concept of causation, Malebranche continued: "the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects. Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies" (SAT VI.II.III / 450). This is the basis of the occasionalist position. The mind can perceive no necessary connection between anything empirically given, or between conceivable finite beings. Yet it cannot avoid finding such a necessary connection between the will of God, which is supposed to be an infinite and infinitely powerful being, and the creaturely effects that follow from divine volition. Thus, the occasionalist concludes, only God is a true cause. Hume's argument coincides with this occasionalist line of reasoning to the extent that he agrees that the mind can perceive no

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting how close Hume is to Leibniz here. Leibniz distinguished between 'truths of reason' on the one hand, and 'truths of fact' or 'contingent truths' on the other. The former have 'absolute necessity' while the latter have only 'contingent' or 'hypothetical necessity'. The absolute necessity of truths of reason can be grasped even by finite minds, since they can be deduced by means of the principle of non-contradiction. But the hypothetical necessity of contingent truths, truths of fact, cannot be deduced by finite reason, since their necessity is a function not of non-contradiction but the principle of sufficient reason, which involves something more than non-contradiction alone. Only God is capable of performing this infinite deduction. The kind of "*connection*" involved in truths of fact "is necessary only *ex hypothesi*, and by accident, so to speak, and this connection is contingent in itself when its contrary implies no contradiction" (DM 13 / L 310; emphasis added). Hume agrees entirely, simply adding that as a direct consequence we can have only beliefs, and not knowledge, about matters of fact.

necessary connection between any mundane things that are said to stand in a causal relation. But Hume further denies that the mind can find such a necessary connection between the will of God and God's creations. It always remains possible, he argues, to conceive as distinct and separable the connection between such a putatively infinite cause and its effects without contradiction (T I.IV.V / 248-9). The relations involved being external to these terms, the synthetic character of propositions concerning them cannot be grounded on the principle of non-contradiction. Thus, demonstrative certainty cannot attend affirmations or denial about the necessity of any empirical causal relation. And since intuitive certainty, as we have seen, only pertains to claims about resemblance, contrariety, degrees of quality, and quantitative proportion, it is not possible for a claim about empirical causal relations to be intuitively certain either.

This is why matters of fact cannot, according to Hume, constitute objects of knowledge, strictly speaking, since he has defined knowledge as essentially involving the certainty that he has here entirely ruled out. Matters of fact, in which relations are external to their terms, constitute instead a synthetic domain of *belief*:

Wherein consists the difference betwixt believing and disbelieving any proposition? The answer is easy with regard to propositions, that are prov'd by intuition or demonstration. In that case, the person, who assents, not only conceives the ideas according to the proposition, but is necessarily determin'd to conceive them in that particular manner, either immediately or by the interposition of other ideas. [...] But as in reasonings from causation, and concerning matters of fact, this absolute necessity cannot take place, and the imagination is free to conceive both sides of the question, I still ask, *Wherein consists the difference betwixt incredulity and belief?* (T I.III.VII / 95)

Affirmations about matters of fact, synthetic propositions about relations external to their terms, inevitably involve causal relations. These relations cannot be objects of knowledge or reason, but are instead objects of *belief*; and belief is, as we will discuss in the next section, a habit.

2. *The transcendental critique of causation.* Hume redeploys this argument about the indemonstrability of matters of fact at a higher level in the *Treatise*, in a discussion that is notably absent from the first *Enquiry*. Here his target is not the putative knowledge of some empirical causal relation, but the very principle “that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*” (T I.III.III / 78). In his discussion he is clear that the ‘whatever’ here should be construed broadly enough to encompass both ‘new things’ coming into existence, as well as ‘new modifications’ of already existing things. The principle in question holds that there must be some cause in order for things to come into existence as well as for existing things to change. His target, then, is the principle of sufficient reason, according to which there must be a cause or reason why everything that exists is so and not otherwise. But it is worth noting that his critique does not—indeed, as I will show, cannot—bear on the *truth* of this claim, but only on reason’s pretension to *know* that it is true or valid.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I am here trying to sidestep the major debate, in recent scholarship, as to whether or not Hume is ultimately a ‘realist’ or not about causes and causal relations. The ‘New Hume’ interpretation holds that he is a realist about causal relations, skeptical of our ability to know them but committed to their actual existence, evincing a kind of skeptical realism. The ‘Old Hume’ against which this interpretation defines itself is said to be an anti-realist about causal relations, one who explicitly denies the real existence of causal relations in fact, and allows only that *we* posit causal relations by custom and habit, evincing a kind of skeptical idealism (see *The New Hume Debate*, eds. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman [New York: Routledge, 2007], *passim*). To move much too quickly, I think this debate might be missing the point. Hume’s arguments concern the unsurpassable epistemic limits that prevent us from being able to take a decisive stance on the metaphysical questions of whether or not there really are causal relations ‘out there’, and of what their nature might be.

The debate also tends to psychologize the philosophical problem at hand, as though whether Hume himself believed that causes really existed is relevant for evaluating his epistemological argumentation. Hume argues that we cannot know whether there are causal relations or not, or anything about their nature if they do exist. In response, he is asked: but do you think there are, or are not, such causal relations? This ‘psychologizing’ question is importantly not the same thing as evaluating Hume’s arguments concerning the use of concepts of causation as a psychological fact and even as psychologically unavoidable. Here we might

Hume begins the discussion by noting that this principle is “commonly taken for granted in all reasonings, without any proof given or demanded” (T I.III.III / 79).<sup>18</sup> His question is whether it can be either intuitively or demonstratively certain. It cannot be intuitively certain, he says, because the claim is not founded on the relations of resemblance, contrariety, degrees of quality, or proportions of quantity. The principle does not express anything intuitively true *a priori*, nor intuitively obvious based on anything given in experience. Indeed, the principle’s *universality* is part of the issue here. It makes a claim about anything that could possibly be given in experience, and so nothing in experience can confirm or deny it as such. The universality of the ‘whatever’ in ‘whatever exists has a cause’ involves a necessity that cannot be intuited in the same way that I am intuitively certain that two people bear some resemblance to one another.

As for the question of whether or not it is demonstratively certain, Hume argues as follows. In order to prove that it is demonstratively certain that everything must have a cause, it would be necessary to demonstrate “the impossibility there is, that any thing can ever begin to

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begin to move in the direction of a strictly Humean doctrine of transcendental illusion concerning the existence of external bodies, of causal relations, of the soul, etc.

That said, I suppose I tend to sympathize more with the ‘realist’ camp, since it seems somewhat more implausible to me to ascribe a robust metaphysical anti-realism to Hume, the active historian and moralist. But the point is that the metaphysical question as to the ultimate reality of causal relations is strictly unanswerable from within Hume’s critical empiricism.

<sup>18</sup> It is easy to show that Leibniz and Spinoza are wholly committed to extremely strong variants of this principle. For example, Spinoza writes: “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence” (E I P11 dem. 2 / CWS I.417 / G II.52). And Leibniz writes: “there can be found no fact that is true or existent, or any true proposition, without there being a sufficient reason for its being so and not otherwise” (M 32 / L 646). Again, I want to emphasize that Hume does not deny that the principle is true but objects to the idea that it is an idea whose truth can be shown as a matter of intuitive or demonstrative certainty. See Harold W. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 110. I think it could be shown that the principle is *axiomatic* for both Leibniz and Spinoza, so that Hume’s critique here does not, strictly speaking, bear on them.



exist without some productive principle” (Ibid.). But this cannot be demonstrated at all, because, once again, the idea of a thing as a cause and the idea of a thing as an effect are distinct perceptions of the mind, and the relation that the mind might posit between any two distinct perceptions can only be less than necessary. Based on the real distinction between our perceptions, and the conceivable real separation of the things of which we take them to be perceptions, it is

easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere ideas; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a cause. (T I.III.III / 80)

Everything hinges, once again, on the real distinction of perceptions given to the mind. The rationalist metaphysician affirms that there must be a cause for everything that exists, but this affirmation cannot possibly be demonstrated. Demonstrative certainty requires the discovery of a contradiction in the contrary of what is to be demonstrated, but there can be no contradiction in the principle's contrary. 'There *does not* have to be a cause or reason for a thing being so and not otherwise' may perhaps be called absurd in an everyday sense, but not in the philosophical sense of expressing anything genuinely contradictory.

We may restate this Humean argument as follows, in order to highlight its transcendental character. What kind of claim does the principle of sufficient reason make? Hume argues that *it is inevitably a claim about matters of fact*. It would be a matter of fact if nothing happened without a determinate reason (as the principle of sufficient reason asserts), it would be a matter of fact if things sometimes did come into being without any cause for their existence, and it would be a matter of fact if, as Dicker rightly emphasizes, already existing things were merely

modified without there being any cause or reason for that modification.<sup>19</sup> It would even be a matter of fact if the principle of sufficient reason really does express a truth, but only occasionally or under certain specific conditions and independently of whether or not we could clearly ascertain or enumerate these conditions. Thus, no possible articulation of the principle of sufficient reason can be demonstratively or intuitively certain. ‘There must always be a cause or reason for why each thing is so and not otherwise’ is inescapably a claim about matters of fact. It is not just an unavoidably synthetic claim, but one with an explicitly universal bearing for any possible empirical given. Consequently, it is indemonstrable by reason, and unverifiable by experience. It, too, is something that can only be believed, a habit of thought.

In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume uses the same reasoning as an objection to the classical *a priori* argument for the existence of God. According to that argument, God’s essence (or concept) involves its existence; consequently, its non-existence cannot be thought without contradiction; and so, God must necessarily exist. Not so, says Cleanthes:

there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. (DNR IX / 91)

Like the principle of sufficient reason, the question of whether or not God exists concerns a matter of fact. The theist claims that God does in fact exist, while the atheist claims that God does not in fact exist. Hume’s objection against the *a priori* argument for the existence of God here is thus not atheistic in principle. It is just a special case of the reasoning that leads him to deny the certainty of knowledge of empirical causation, as well as that of the transcendental

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<sup>19</sup> Dicker, *Hume’s Epistemology and Metaphysics*, 134.

principle of sufficient reason. Absolutely no claims about matters of fact are demonstrably certain, because their contraries can clearly and distinctly be thought without contradiction.<sup>20</sup>

Hume's treatment of Locke's attempted defense of the principle of sufficient reason in this section of the *Treatise*, "Why a cause is always necessary", is particularly noteworthy.<sup>21</sup> Locke, he says, holds that "Whatever is produc'd without any cause, is produc'd by *nothing*; or in other words, has nothing for its cause. But nothing can never be a cause" (T I.III.III / 81). First, why do we think that nothing cannot be a cause? The claim that 'nothing is the cause of something' does not, Hume says, actually express anything contradictory in itself. Second, there is a formal problem with the argument as well. The argument runs: given some existing thing, it must either be caused by something, or by nothing; but if we deny that it is caused by something, it must be caused by nothing, which is supposedly absurd; hence it must be caused by something, or, there must be some cause for any and everything that exists. But as Hume points out, the

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<sup>20</sup> Kant's refutation of the ontological proof for the existence of God is quite Humean in this sense. Kant, like Cleanthes, denies that there can be any contradiction at all in the idea of a non-existing God, against the defenders of the *a priori* proof. "If in an identical judgment I annul the predicate and retain the subject, then a contradiction arises, and hence I say that the predicate belongs to the subject necessarily. But if I annul the subject along with the predicate, then no contradiction arises, for *nothing is left* that could be contradicted. [...] God is omnipotent—this is a necessary judgment. The omnipotence cannot be annulled if you posit a deity, i.e., an infinite being, with whose concept the concept of omnipotence is identical. But if you say *God does not exist*, then neither omnipotence nor any other of his predicates is given; for they are all annulled along with the subject, and hence this thought does not manifest the least contradiction. [...] You are now left with no escape except to say that there are subjects that cannot be annulled at all and that hence must remain. This, however, would be equivalent to saying that there are absolutely necessary subjects—the very presupposition whose correctness I doubted and whose possibility you wanted to show me" (CPR A594-5/B622-4).

<sup>21</sup> I leave aside his treatments of Hobbes' and Clarke's related arguments. I also leave aside as irrelevant for our purposes the question of whether in this discussion Hume's characterizations of the arguments and positions of Hobbes, Clarke, and Locke are fair.

logic of this argument begs the question, presupposing that there must be a cause for anything that exists, *even if it is nothing*, which is precisely what is at stake: “when we exclude all causes we really do exclude them, and neither suppose nothing nor the object itself to be the causes of the existence; and consequently can draw no argument from the absurdity of these suppositions to prove the absurdity of that exclusion” (Ibid.). Hume’s point remains: ‘nothing cannot be a cause’ expresses a claim about matters of fact and is therefore totally indemonstrable. To the extent that the principle of sufficient reason invariably makes a claim about matters of fact, it is indemonstrable, and is thus an object not of knowledge but of belief.<sup>22</sup>

3. *The metacritique of causation, or, on the cause of the idea of causation.* Now Hume changes the terms of the investigation. We know that empirical claims about particular causal relations, and the transcendental claim that there must always be a cause for any given existent, are neither intuitively or demonstratively certain. Nevertheless, we do have the concept of causation at our disposal and we constantly affirm that particular causal relations obtain between distinct objects of perception. Where, then, did we get this idea of causation from, and what leads us to posit the existence of particular causal relations? What accounts for the belief in this

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<sup>22</sup> I thus disagree with Kant’s assessment that Hume successfully managed only to submit the dogmatic use of pure reason to a rigorous skeptical *censure*, but that he did not take the crucial next step, the *critique* of pure reason itself, in which “what we thus prove is reason’s ignorance not merely in some part or other but in regard to all possible questions of a certain kind” (CPR A762/B790). In this section I believe I have shown just how Hume’s critical arguments have precisely the kind of universal bearing that Kant claims is missing from the reflexive analysis.

Perhaps we can attribute this mischaracterization of Hume’s analysis on Kant’s part to the possibility that he had only read the first *Enquiry* and not the *Treatise*; Beiser compellingly argues on the basis of biographical and textual evidence that this is likely and, as I noted above, Hume articulates this critique of the rationalist arguments for the validity of the principle of sufficient reason as such only in the *Treatise* (see Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], 43-7).

principle, and for our believing that causal relations obtain in particular empirical cases, since this can be neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain? Hume's answer to both questions, famously, is the same. The constant conjunction of distinct perceptions gives rise to the mind's habit of inferring their causal relation. I call this part of Hume's analysis his 'metacritique of causation' because it accepts as a premise that we have the idea of causation, whether as a transcendental principle or as an empirical postulate, and treats it *as an effect*, asking after its cause. To understand "the idea of power of necessary connexion, let us examine its impression; and in order to find the impression with greater certainty, let us search for it in all the sources, from which it may possibly be derived" (EHU VII.5 / 59). Hume's decisive arguments, as we have seen, according to which no possible articulation of the principle of sufficient reason, nor any empirically postulated relation of causation, can be intuitively or demonstratively certain, does not at all mean that his philosophical project terminates in a radically skeptical quietism—Hume ceaselessly satirizes the dialectically self-defeating absurdity of Pyrrhonic skepticism (e.g., T I.IV.II; EHU XII.2-4, 21-4 / 131-2, 139-41; DNR I / 34-6)<sup>23</sup>—but leads instead to a reformulation of the question of human nature. For, their rational groundlessness and empirical insufficiency notwithstanding, *we cannot but make use of these ideas*, which always subtend the mind's passage beyond the given.

The only three possible sources for the impression of power or necessary connection (which, as we have seen, is an essential component of the concept of causation) are, Hume says, the following: 1. our contemplation of the interaction of external bodies; 2. our consciousness of

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<sup>23</sup> See Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*, 55-7; Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), ch. 3; Stanley Tweyman, *Skepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), esp. chs. 1 and 8.

our mind's power over our own body's movements; and 3. our consciousness of our mind's power over itself, to will at will. None of these, on Hume's analysis, can possibly suffice, insofar as they all seek to locate the origin of our idea of necessary connection in *singular instances*. He argues, instead, that it can only arise on the basis of *constantly repeated similar cases*. This constant conjunction of repeated similar perceptions somehow engenders the habit of believing in the existence of causal relations.

3.1) The impressions given to us of external bodies is quickly ruled out as a possible source for the idea of necessary connection. "When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other" (EHU VII.6 / 59). The impressions given to the mind may exhibit contiguity and succession, but never necessary connection. We have seen that it is always possible for the mind to imagine the two objects as distinct and separable, and thus as not necessarily connected. But in terms of the impressions themselves, no necessity can possibly be manifest. *Causal relations cannot be given as such*; nothing that is given is given *as* a cause. "It is impossible, therefore, that any idea of power can be derived from the contemplation of bodies, in single instances of their operation, because no bodies ever discover any power, which can be the original of this idea" (EHU VII.8 / 60).

Having ruled this out, Hume now considers the alternative: that the idea is derived from some impression of a power of the mind. This might be either the mind's power to move the body, or the mind's power to conjure ideas at will: "An act of volition produces motion in our limbs, or raises a new idea in our imagination. This influence of the will we know by consciousness" (EHU VII.9 / 60). But this will not work either, and Hume's critiques of these

alternatives reveal his close philosophical proximity to Spinozist involuntarism, which we explored at length in the previous two chapters.<sup>24</sup>

3.2) Hume raises three objections to the claim that we have an experience of the mind's volitional power over the body. First there is the obvious metaphysical interaction problem. We cannot conceive, let alone clearly understand or know, how the mind, insofar as it is a 'spiritual substance', could possibly affect or determine any material one. If we did have any conscious experience of "any power or energy in the will, we must know this power" (EHU VII.11 / 61), but, clearly, we do not.

Second, we are able to will any part of our body to move, but only some of them actually do seem to act in accordance with our will. But from the perspective of our consciousness of the act of volition, there is nothing given that essentially distinguishes the two mental experiences. "Why has the will an influence over the tongue and fingers, not over the heart or liver?" (EHU VII.12 / 61). If we were conscious of the actual power of the mind to move the body, the "secret connexion, which binds them together, and renders them inseparable" (EHU VII.12 / 62), we would experience that causal power in the one instance and not the other, and thus clearly understand why we cannot move our liver at will. But we do not have any impression of this power. It is only by experience that we have come to think that the mind is able to move some parts of the body but not others, and we do not know why this is the case.

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<sup>24</sup> Hume's rejection of these alternatives helps highlight his distance from Locke. He distinguishes between 'passive power', or the capacity to receive change, whose idea, he argues, can be grasped on the basis of the perception of external interaction; and 'active power', or the capacity to produce a change, whose idea, he argues, we form by reflecting on our mental activities: "if we consider it attentively, bodies, by our senses, do not afford us so clear and distinct an idea of *active power*, as we have from reflection on the operations of our own minds" (LEHU II.XXI.4-5 / 221-2). Hume denies that we have such a clear and distinct idea at all.

Third, Hume points out that for any given apparent coordination between the mind's will and the body's movement, an extraordinary series of unperceived, unknown, and unwilled physical movements actually takes place. We can update his language about 'animal spirits' in making his point. I am in no way conscious of the mind's power to cause neurons to fire, although extremely specific neuron firings apparently constitute an important step in the chain connecting my mind's will to move one of my fingers and my finger actually moving. "Here the mind wills a certain event: Immediately another event, unknown to ourselves, and totally different from the one intended, is produced: This event produces another, equally unknown: Till at last, through a long succession, the desired event is produced" (EHU VII.14 / 62). Humean empiricism consistently emphasizes the mysterious obscurity of the apparently obvious clarity of everyday experience: see how much we do not know about what is involved in moving a finger! Spinoza agrees, of course. We do not even know what a body can do.

Hume thus concludes that there is nothing given in this kind of experience that can provide the basis for our idea of causation or necessary connection. Even if there really is such a power of the mind to move some parts of the body at will, we do not have any conscious experience of it, it is not given to us. "That [the motion of certain parts of the body] follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events: But the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable" (EHU VII.15 / 63).

3.3) There remains only the possibility that we get the idea of necessary connection or causal power from our conscious experience of the mind's self-determination in the mode of calling ideas to mind at will. The hypothesis is that "we are conscious of a power or energy in our own minds, when, by an act or command of our will, we raise up a new idea, fix the mind to



the contemplation of it, turn it on all sides, and at last dismiss it for some other idea, when we think that we have surveyed it with sufficient accuracy” (EHU VII.16 / 63). Here Hume’s involuntarism is still more pronounced. Even if we leave aside the apparently problematic metaphysical problem of mind-body causation, we do not even have an understanding of how the mind does its work ‘in its own domain’, so to speak. The experience of mental volition with regard to ideas alone is also insufficient as a source of the idea of causation. Hume claims that the same arguments apply in both of these cases.

First, we must ask whether we in fact know or have an experience of the causal power said to be at work that ties the mind’s act of volition to its supposed effect, namely the idea brought to mind. Hume argues that we do not. Once again, we have the experience of disjointed effects, two separate and distinct perceptions. There is nothing in the idea of one that brings the other with it as a matter of necessity. “We only feel the event, namely, the existence of an idea, consequent to a command of the will: But the manner, in which this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our comprehension” (EHU VII.17 / 63).

Second, just as there is nothing *a priori* that indicates which parts of the body can apparently be commanded to move at will, so too there is nothing *a priori* that accounts for the extent of the mind’s apparent power over which ideas are present to it at any given point. “Our authority over our sentiments and passions is much weaker than that over our ideas; and even the latter authority is circumscribed within very narrow boundaries” (EHU VII.18 / 64). Only by experience do we become acquainted with these limits, but this experience does not explain them. There is only the repeated experience *that* our mind does not seem to have the power to summon certain kinds of ideas at will. Hume argues that if we had a genuine understanding of

the causal power of the mind supposedly at work here, we would be able to give an account of why it extends to some ideas rather than others. But this is what we are incapable of doing.

Third, Hume points out that the mind's apparent ability to summon particular ideas is clearly conditioned by all kinds of circumstances whose relation to this power is entirely obscure. I seem to be better able to bring ideas to mind at will in the morning than late at night, or when I have not eaten too much, or when I am in good physical health: why is that? Hume insists that we simply do not know. Once again, if we had a clear conception of this supposed power of the mind, we should be able to answer these questions; thus our inability to do so indicates that our sense for the influence of such conditions is less than knowledge, and is instead only a matter of belief based on the repetition of similar experiences.

Can we give any reason for these variations, except experience? Where then is the power, of which we pretend to be conscious? Is there not here, either in a spiritual or mental substance, or both, some secret mechanism or structure of parts, upon which the effect depends, and which, being entirely unknown to us, renders the power or energy of the will equally unknown and incomprehensible? (EHU VII.19 / 64).

We frequently experience the mind's willing to think of an idea but finding itself incapable of doing so. We all know what it is like to know *that* there is an idea that one should be able to bring to mind ('Wait, I know this one!') but finding oneself unable, for one unknown reason or another, to do so at will ('Ah, just tell me the answer...'). If the mind's power to will the production of ideas were really known and clearly understood, Hume seems to suggest that this sort of experience would simply not happen. Or else, if it were still possible, then we would be able to give a satisfying account of how and why this power is limited in some contexts and under certain conditions, and not others. But this is something we learn by experience alone, and once again in the manner of running up against an apparent limit whose inner logic is not available even to direct and conscious philosophical reflection.

Hume's critique of causation reveals vast, unknowable obscurities covered over by the apparent lucidity of everyday mental operations: the Humean corollary to Spinoza's maxim is that *we do not even know what the mind can do*. All of the possible and seemingly viable sources of our idea of power or necessary connection prove to be totally inadequate upon inspection. In each case we have experiences only of distinct and separable effects or events, ideas present to the mind whose connection is invariably less than necessary, a connection external to the terms it synthetically relates together. The effective logic of this relation always remains entirely obscure and unknown. We posit that some events or perceptions are the causes of others; but strictly speaking, nothing is given to us in experience *as* a cause, or as causally related. The principle of the distinctness and separability of everything given to the mind means that at most, consciousness is only ever consciousness *of effects*. Causes are not and cannot be given to the mind as such. Nothing in individual experiences can even provide the occasion for our forming the idea of causation. Indeed, as Freyberg says, without our mind's implicit usage of the relation of causation, we "would not have anything that could be called *experience*."<sup>25</sup> But this means that any search for the source of our idea of the relation of causation *in* experience must ultimately be futile. "The necessary conclusion *seems* to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all" (EHU VII.26 / 68). But if this is indeed how things seem to stand, Hume's analysis takes another turn: the answer to this riddle lies in the nature of *belief*, that is, in habit.

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Freyberg, *David Hume: Platonic Philosopher, Continental Ancestor* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2012), 37.

### 3. Belief, Habit, Synthesis

To recapitulate, Hume distinguishes between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Propositions about the former are analytic, expressing relations internal to and dependent on their terms, whereas propositions about the latter are always synthetic, involving relations that are external to their terms. Even the most minimal claim about matters of fact (*that something exists or is some way*) involves an at-least-implicit usage of the relation of causality, which, as we have just seen, turns out to be quite problematic. Hume argues that it is absolutely impossible for empirical causal relations to be affirmed or denied with any demonstrative or intuitive certainty. There can also be no such certainty in affirming the transcendental principle that everything must have a cause for its existence. Finally, all the possible candidates for experiences from which our idea of causality as a principle might arise, or in which its postulation in empirical cases would be sanctioned, revealed themselves to be inadequate. The principle of the distinctness and separability of all perceptions given to the mind, on Hume's analysis, entails that the connection that the mind affirms between them can only be less than necessary. "On [the relation of causality] are founded all our reasonings concerning matter of fact or existence. By means of it alone we attain any assurance concerning objects which are removed from the present testimony of our memory and senses" (EHU VII.29 / 70). The movement of thought consists in the mind's passage beyond the given, and causation is necessarily involved in any such passage. "Yet so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it, that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause, except what is drawn from something extraneous and foreign to it" (Ibid.). Hume's analysis leads inexorably to the conclusion that claims about matters of fact, insofar as they are inherently synthetic and unavoidably involve a usage of the relation of causality, cannot constitute knowledge but instead amount to *beliefs*. And beliefs are habitual, rather than rational.

Before we proceed, it is important to be clear on the sense in which beliefs can be called ‘not rational’. It is not that they are *irrational* per se, but rather that their epistemic status is incompatible with the demonstrative procedures of reflection by which we establish that something counts as rational or not. For this, on Hume’s account, we would need to be able to make use of the principle of non-contradiction, but as he repeatedly emphasizes, the perfectly imaginable contraries of any matter of fact cannot involve any contradiction in themselves.<sup>26</sup> Beliefs held about the existence and nature of particular matters of fact are therefore not ‘rational’ in the sense of being demonstratively certain, but they are also not ‘irrational’ in the sense of being ‘contrary to reason’, or as involving some absurdity. Consequently, it might be better to describe beliefs, for Hume, as being ‘a-rational’ or ‘non-rational’ than as irrational.<sup>27</sup> This is also why, when he later analyzes the ‘influencing motives of the will’, Hume contends that “reason alone can never be a motive to any passion of the will” (T II.III.III / 413). The power or determining force of passionate belief has its own logic, which is different in kind than reason’s demonstrative apparatus.

The problem lies in whether and how we might be able to distinguish *belief* from *fiction*. As we saw, Hume characterizes the imagination as the mind’s reproduction of ideas based on impressions in abstraction from their original context. Unlike memory, which reproduces ideas in the same order and connection as the impressions from which they were derived, the imagination is not bound by any rules concerning the order of ideal reproduction. But it is obviously not the case that all imagined ideas are equally *credible*. Some ideal reproductions strike us as true, as

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<sup>26</sup> This is why I hesitate to endorse Beebe’s turn of phrase ‘epistemic legitimacy’ in describing ‘causal reasoning’ in the quotation cited earlier (see Note 12, above).

<sup>27</sup> This is similar to the not-irrational status of *inadequate ideas* and *affects* in Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas, which we explored in detail in Chapter 2, above.

genuine historical testimony, as accurate descriptions of matters of fact: we believe them. By contrast, some strike us as obviously fictitious, as fabrications, as fanciful: we do not believe them. “Wherein consists the difference between believing and disbelieving any proposition?” (T I.III.VII / 95). It is impossible to adjudicate this question by means of rational demonstration, since both a credible and an incredible ideal description or representation of a matter of fact are non-rational in the sense described above. Their contraries cannot involve any contradiction, and consequently neither can be shown to be preferable by rational demonstration, “since in both cases the conception of the idea is equally possible and requisite” (Ibid.). In short, the *content* of ideas cannot constitute the principle of their credibility. From the perspective of their content, all ideas satisfy the conditions for being potentially credible, but only some are actually believed.

If ideal content is not the difference that makes a difference between fiction and belief, what is? Hume argues that the answer lies in the differential *manner of conception*, that is, the way in which the idea is *felt* by the mind that conceives it.<sup>28</sup> His explanation in the Appendix to the *Treatise* is worth quoting at length:

an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the *manner* of its being conceiv'd. But when I wou'd explain this *manner*, I scarce find any word that fully answers the case, but am oblig'd to have recourse to every one's feeling, in order to give him a perfect notion of this operation of the mind. An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that

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<sup>28</sup> I follow Michael Gorman's reading of Hume's theory of belief in taking belief to be a 'manner of conception' and a 'feeling or sentiment' *in the same sense*, i.e., these are two ways of describing one and the same thing. Hume's own formulations can sometimes suggest that these are two distinct conceptions of belief. Alternative attempts at reconciling these kinds of formulations, on Gorman's account, fail. He argues, for example, that it is not viable to say that 'manner of conception' answers the ontological question of what a belief *is*, but that 'feeling' answers the question of *how we know* whether something is a belief; nor is it viable to suggest that these parallel kinds of formulation express an uncertainty on Hume's part during the writing of the *Treatise* that had been clarified by the first *Enquiry* (see Michael M. Gorman, "Hume's Theory of Belief," *Hume Studies* 19:1 [1993]: 89-102).

the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavor to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. [...] I confess, that 'tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term that every one sufficiently understands in common life. And in philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is something *felt* by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination. It gives them more force and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; infixes them in the mind; and renders them the governing principles of all our actions. (T App. / 628-9)

Several things are worth noting here. First, in attempting to describe belief, Hume clearly finds himself running up against the limits of language. He is reduced to a sort of indexical gesture, simply pointing toward what he expects is a kind of common experience. If there is nothing in the particular content of any given idea that can account for the idea's credibility, then the principle of distinction between fiction and belief must be its 'manner of conception' or how it 'feels'. But feelings or passions, on Hume's analysis, cannot be 'defined' as such. Consider his opening remarks on the first passions discussed in Book II of the *Treatise*: "PRIDE and HUMILITY being simple and uniform impressions, 'tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them, or indeed of any of the passions. The utmost we can pretend to is a description of them, by an enumeration of such circumstances, as attend them" (T II.I.II / 277). As always, Hume wants us to be exhaustively attentive to correlations, while avoiding the mistake of expecting that the constant conjunctions given in experience will tell us anything more than that. In particular, they cannot provide either knowledge of a thing's causes, or an essential description of the thing itself. We will follow this procedure for belief momentarily.

Second, if belief is characterized as a manner of conception or a particular feeling, it is in terms of a *superior forcefulness or vivacity* compared to that of mere fiction. This of course is precisely the principle of distinction between ideas and impressions, as the latter are more forceful and vibrant than the former. The mind can conceive of an idea and barely be struck by it.

The manner of conception, the idea as conceived by the mind, is insufficiently intense to constitute something really believable. But we can easily imagine that same mind conceiving that same idea and being powerfully affected by it: here it is striking, it is vibrant, affecting, believed.

Finally, the last sentence of this passage from the Appendix underscores how important this concept is for Hume. It should be clear why. I have been trying to explain the near-total *ubiquity* of belief, as an invariant element of any synthetic proposition. Belief is the name for the mind's non-rational passage beyond the given in its commitment concerning any matter of fact, which, as we have seen, necessarily involves the principle of causation. Whenever I am committed to the existence or nature of any matter of fact, I *believe* it, rather than know it. The idea of that particular matter of fact, present to my mind, is conceived in such a manner that I am struck by its vibrancy and intensity, or I am forcefully affected by it, and what I believe, or my specific manner of being affected by particular ideas, determines me to act in specific ways. Consequently, our interest in shedding light on the logic of credibility is extremely high. What I actually believe, rather than simply imagine, will determine nearly everything about how I live; it shapes and structures, effectively determines, my entire manner of being.

What is it, then, that accounts for the genesis of particular instances of belief? Why, in fact, does one idea strike my mind with sufficient force and vivacity that I believe it, while another does not? Hume's answer is *habit*. Two points in his analysis of belief formation in "Of the causes of belief" are especially significant, on my reading. First and most importantly, belief cannot be engendered on the basis of *single instances*. Experiential repetition is a necessary condition for the possibility of forming beliefs. "We must in every case have observ'd the same impression in past instances, and have found it to be constantly conjoin'd with some other impression" (T I.III.VIII / 102). The logic of this argument is closely related to the critique of the



possibility of deriving the idea of causation on the basis of any given individual experience, which we explored in the previous section. There is no basis for believing anything given in any single experience. More precisely, there are no immanent criteria for distinguishing, in what is given in any single experience, between what is worthy of belief or expectation, and what is present only accidentally or contingently. This is why empiricism is necessarily *experimental*, or pragmatic. This is another way in which Hume and Spinoza agree entirely. Beliefs can form only on the basis of, and with regard to, repeatedly conjoined perceptions, for which some unassignable number of past experiences is required.

Assuming that such past experiences have taken place, Hume proceeds to the second point: “the belief, which attends the present impression, and is produc’d by a number of past impressions and conjunctions; [this] belief, I say, arises immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination. Of this I can be certain, because I never am conscious of any such operation” (Ibid.). We have known all along that belief is involuntary, insofar as it is not something that the mind can willingly ascribe to any given idea.<sup>29</sup> But we can now add that it is well and truly *unconscious*, a spontaneous function of the mind’s habits of expectation, which are formed in and through the repetition of sufficiently similar experiences. As Hume says, “the past experiences, on which all our judgments concerning cause and effect depend, may operate on our mind in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of, and may even in some measure be unknown to us” (T I.III.VIII / 103). The formation of habits of thought, and the mind’s actual passages from one idea to another in accordance with these acquired habits of thought, both ‘insensibly’ operate beneath or below the mind’s conscious awareness.

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<sup>29</sup> See Qu, “Hume’s Doxastic Involuntarism.”

I therefore want to distinguish between two ways in which the habit of belief can be called involuntary and unconscious on Hume's account. On the one hand, there is its *formation*, which takes place unconsciously through the repetition of sufficiently similar experiences, in which distinct and separable perceptions are given as constantly conjoined, so that the mind comes to associate the two together in an increasingly invariable relation, calcifying into a felt necessity. On the other hand, there is its *influence*, in which all of one's actions, including those that involve explicitly conscious deliberations, are silently informed by the obscure network of unconscious beliefs that the mind has acquired by habit. Hume describes this in the example of someone out on a walk who stops short of walking directly into a river:

[he] foresees the consequences of his proceeding forward; and his knowledge of these consequences is convey'd to him by past experience, which informs him of such certain conjunctions of causes and effects. But can we think, that on this occasion he reflects on any past experience, and calls to remembrance instances, that he has heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies? No surely [...] the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflexion. The objects seem so inseparable, that we interpose not a moment's delay in passing from the one to the other. But as this transition proceeds from experience, and not from any primary connexion betwixt the ideas, we must necessarily acknowledge, that *experience may produce a belief and a judgment of causes and effects by a secret operation, and without being once thought of.* (T I.III.VIII / 103-4; emphasis added)

Habit is the principle in virtue of which the past is not yet even past, to paraphrase Faulkner. It selectively gathers together past experiences and makes conscious experience possible as such. If memory is the conscious reproduction of ideas based on impressions, and the imagination is the mind's conscious reproduction of ideas based on impressions without regard for their order and connection, habit is the unconscious process that associates ideas together prior to their relations being consciously recognized.

It is important to see that the involuntary, spontaneous, unconscious character of habitual association is both Hume's answer to the riddle of belief and also the basis for a new set of intractable problems for dogmatic rationalism. For instance, if we wanted to argue that the mind's passage from causes to effects and vice versa is a rational deduction, rather than a habituated association of ideas, what would we make of the inferences of infants and animals? On the basis of constantly conjoined perceptions in past experiences, habit links the perception of fire with that of heat. Consequently, the mind develops the habit of thinking of heat when it is given an impression of fire. When a very young child knows to avoid touching a flame, does it make sense to attribute this pragmatic avoidance to a conscious rational deduction, which "appears not, in any degree, during the first years of infancy; and at best is, in every age and period of human life, extremely liable to error and mistake?" (EHU V.22 / 53). If there were a rational deduction at work here, it would surely be even more embarrassing that we seem incapable of reproducing it in the explicit conscious reflection of our philosophical maturity; for as we have seen, on reason's own account, the idea of fire has no necessary connection with that of heat. Hume wants us to see that more than anything else, it is only indefensible vanity that leads us to hold wizened human rationalism in higher esteem than the empiricism of children and animals (T I.III.XVI / 176-9; EHU IX / 92-5).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Leibniz writes: "There is a connection between the perceptions of animals which has some resemblance to reason, but it is grounded only on the memory of *facts* or effects and not on the knowledge of *causes*. Thus a dog runs away from the stick with which he has been beaten, because his memory represents to him the pain which the stick had caused him. Men too, insofar as they are empiricists, that is to say, in three-fourths of their actions, act only like beasts. For example, we expect day to dawn tomorrow because we have always experienced this to be so; only the astronomer predicts it with reason, and even his prediction will ultimately fail when the cause of daylight, which is by no means eternal, stops" (PNG 5 / L 638).

Hume replies: "It is impossible, that the inferences of the animal can be founded on any process of argument or reasoning, by which he concludes, that like events must follow like

For Hume, reason is analytic, but habit is synthetic. Habit synthetically relates ideas together in the mind, but rational analysis finds no necessary connection between them. This is why it is a mistake to demand a rational justification for the habits of expectation that are involved in any belief. When it comes to matters of fact, reason can only inform us that the relations that habit has synthetically posited between ideas is less than necessary. In every case where relations are external to their terms, it is habit that synthetically posits them. This habitual synthesis, or synthetic habituation, is an unconscious process, one that necessarily takes place involuntarily, spontaneously, before and beneath conscious experience. As Deleuze writes, “Human nature means that what is universal or constant in the human mind is never one idea or another as a term but only the ways of passing from one particular idea to another.”<sup>31</sup> Habit is the principle of synthesis that constitutes the human mind by creating these passageways leading from one idea to another, in advance of the consciousness that comes to know itself in following the paths of ideal association.

If philosophy is in part a search for first principles, it is always illuminating to ask what counts as a principle for a given philosopher—that is, what they think can be given as a reason, and for which no further account can be given. For Hume, habit is such an explanatory principle, which cannot itself be explained. It is the gravity of ideas, a principle of human nature, the

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objects, and that the course of nature will always be regular in its operations. For if there be in reality any arguments of this nature, they surely lie too abstruse for the observation of such imperfect understandings; since it may well employ the utmost care and attention of a philosophic genius to discover and observe them. Animals, therefore, are not guided in these inferences by reasoning: Neither are children: Neither are the generality of mankind, in their ordinary actions and conclusions: Neither are philosophers themselves, who, in all the active parts of life, are, in the main, the same with the vulgar, and are governed by the same maxims” (EHU IX.5 / 94).

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 39.

synthetic force that relates ideas together, whose own operative logic remains inevitably obscure to the mind that consciously thinks along the paths of association.

To consider the matter aright, reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations. This instinct, 'tis true, arises from past observation and experience; but can any one give the ultimate reason, why past experience and observation produces such an effect, any more than why nature alone shou'd produce it? Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin. (T I.III.XVI / 179)

Hume no less than Leibniz conceives of the mind as a kind of automaton. It is the passage from one idea to another, which only under certain conditions we are able to consciously *notice*. Once again, consciousness requires its own principle of sufficient reason, distinct from the principles of thought. The principles of thought are necessary but not sufficient for consciousness. Hume draws our attention to the obscurity and spontaneity of the mind's passages, which are for the most part unconscious. The movement of thought along habituated associations of ideas does not require consciousness. Even when we consider an instance of genuinely rational demonstration, Hume asks why we undertake this demonstration rather than another; reason alone cannot answer this question, since there is no contradiction in our deducing irrelevant necessities. Thinking, whether it is conscious or unconscious, is always a habit of the mind. Neither the movement of thought as activity, nor the pathways of association themselves, are essentially the products of a conscious act; and consciousness is a habit of its own.

#### **4. The Problem of Correction**

When it comes to matters of fact, we form beliefs by habit, rather than obtaining knowledge through reason. As I have argued, these habits are both unconsciously formed prior to conscious

experience, and reiterated unconsciously in the mind's passage from one idea to another. Belief is a matter of the apparently spontaneous, but in fact habituated, vibrancy and force with which ideas are syntheically associated in the imagination. The question is whether and how it might be possible to distinguish between better and worse beliefs, since, as we have seen, Hume argues that reason can neither confirm or deny beliefs, whose logic is that of affective force rather than deduction. Under these conditions, what possible recourse do we have when faced with the possibility that our beliefs might not correspond with the nature of things as they really are?

Obviously, no direct recourse to 'things as they really are' is possible. In the final section of the first *Enquiry*, one encounters what I am tempted to call 'Hume's antinomy', which has to do with the relation between things in themselves and things as they appear to us, in which human nature and reason turn out to contradict one another. On the one hand, there is what Hume refers to as a natural propensity to "repose faith in their senses" (EHU XII.7 / 133), to trust that things are in fact how they appear to us. In this mode of belief, we posit a direct relation between our perceptions and that which we imagine we perceive: we "always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other" (EHU XII.8 /133). From the perception of a white table, I infer immediately the existence of a white table as its cause, an external thing whose nature I spontaneously believe does not depend in any way on my perception of it.

But on the other hand, rational reflection undermines the putative connection between the thing and its representation in my mind. For this, Hume says, all that is necessary is that we notice some disparity in our different perceptions of one and the same thing. By now the refrain should not be surprising: the mind in its rational mode can find no necessary connection between a perception and some thing in itself that, as such, is not and cannot be given in experience. "The

mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning” (EHU XII.12 / 134-5).<sup>32</sup>

As in the case of the principle of sufficient reason, the question as to the nature of the relation between perceptions and the things perceived concerns a matter of fact. Consequently, only experience seems capable of providing any basis for gaining insight into the nature of this relation. But in experience, by definition, no ‘thing in itself’ is never given, making it impossible to determine this relation. Once again, only effects are given to the mind, not the ‘real existences’ that are supposed to be their causes. Thus the antinomy:

Do you follow the instincts and propensities of nature, may [the skeptics] say, in assenting to the veracity of sense? But these lead you to believe that the very perception or sensible image is the external object. Do you disclaim this principle, in order to embrace a rational opinion, that the perceptions are only representations of something external? You here depart from your natural propensities and more obvious sentiments; and yet are not able to satisfy your reason, which can never find any convincing argument from experience to prove, that the perceptions are connected with any external objects. (EHU XII.14 / 135)

If anything, Hume’s articulation of this impasse is even starker in the *Treatise*. Habit and experience, “both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner than others, which are not attended with the same advantages... The memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of ideas” (T I.IV.VII / 265; emphasis added). The astonishing thing,

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<sup>32</sup> In light of this, it is hard to accept Kant’s description of Hume in the second *Critique* as having failed to distinguish between appearances and things in themselves: “Hume, taking objects of experience to be *things in themselves* (as, indeed, is done almost everywhere), declared the concept of cause to be deceptive and a false illusion...” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002], 72). See also note 22, above.

and what makes this a genuine antinomy rather than just a ‘tension’, is that the same principle, that of the force of ideas in the mind, gives rise to directly contradictory conclusions.

’Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects; and ’tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu’d existence of external objects, when absent from the senses. But tho’ these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu’d existence of matter. How then shall we adjust those principles together? Which of them shall we prefer? (T I.IV.VII / 266)

The problem consists in the fact that there is no available process by which to correct our habits of thought *other than habit itself*. In other words, there is no outside to habit: if habits of belief are unconsciously formed, then the process of correcting false beliefs involves nothing other than habit’s reflection upon itself, or the repetition of habituation. Once again, this process in no way depends on consciousness; like the formation of beliefs through habit, the habitual correction of beliefs is largely unconscious and involuntary.

This issue had come up earlier in the *Treatise*, in Hume’s discussion of ‘unphilosophical probability’, that is, cases of belief that seem poorly founded. In this analysis Hume shows us how habit both constitutes a source of tendential error and the principle of its tendential correction. I want to draw attention to the fourth kind of unphilosophical probability, “that deriv’d from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE” (T I.III.XIII / 146). The example he gives is of racist generalization, where the imagination extends the associations we have formed with individuals to those who we presume to be ‘like’ them on the basis of nationality or ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> Hume explicitly calls this

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<sup>33</sup> Spinoza similarly affirms the accidental character of our ideal associations and the irrational tendency to generalize them along tribalistic lines in our affects toward people belonging to, so to speak, specific ‘identity groups’—class and nation, Spinoza says, but we can easily add race, sex, gender, ability, and age (E III P46 / CWS I.520 / G II.175). I think that in this regard,



influence of the imagination on judgment an error, and seems to suggest that we should seek to eliminate it whenever we can. But why do we form general rules like this? The answer is habit: “it proceeds from those very principles, on which all judgments concerning causes and effects depend” (T I.III.XIII / 147). Unconsciously habituated syntheses make the mind’s passage between a pair of ideas forceful and lively, thus giving rise to belief, not just in cases that are *exactly like* the prior experiences on whose basis the habits formed, but more importantly in *similar* cases, in which by definition *differences are also given*. If this were not so, it would never occur to me to flick the switch in a dark room I had never entered before. But this means that habit will sometimes lead the mind to expect associations in cases where the given similarities are in fact irrelevant, and the given differences are decisive, as when I unconsciously pass judgment on a whole group of diverse people based on my prior experience of just one.

This sort of confusion, in which the unconscious habits of association we form fail to distinguish between the differences that are relevant and the differences that do not make a difference, is unavoidable, according to Hume, whenever the circumstances in which our habits are formed are sufficiently complex. As it turns out, they almost always are this complex:

In almost all kinds of causes there is a complication of circumstances, of which some are essential, and others superfluous; some are absolutely requisite to the production of the effect, and others are only conjoin’d by accident. Now we may observe, that when these superfluous circumstances are numerous, and remarkable, and frequently conjoin’d with the essential, they have such an influence on the imagination, that even in the absence of the latter they carry us on to the conception of the usual effect, and give to that conception a force and vivacity, which make it superior to the mere fictions of the fancy. We may correct this propensity by a reflection on the nature of those circumstances; but ’tis still certain, that custom takes the start, and gives a bias to the imagination. (T I.III.XIII / 148)

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Spinoza and Hume can and should be taken to task strictly on their own terms; Hume’s racism and Spinoza’s sexism are unjustifiable according to their own arguments.

Hume is describing the logic by which a mind draws inferential conclusions based on, to use Spinoza's language, inadequate ideas. Here the mind is given an effect, and knows only that there are a number of possible causes involved. As Spinoza argued, the natures of these things must all be obscurely involved in the idea of the effect insofar as they really participate in its causation. By habit the mind associates the power to produce the object of experience with one or some of these obscure natures as its cause, but this association is not rational. As Hume says, reason can focus on the circumstances of the experience, and attempt to control for the many variables at play in the inference. But this sort of reflection can only be inadequately performed, because it is impossible to recreate the conditions of a particular experience, or repeat an experience, without any differences being involved besides those that the scientific mind wants to involve.

More problematically, the principle according to which this process of correction is carried out, the attempted corrective reflection on circumstances, *is itself a general rule*, the general rule learned from experience according to which habits based on experience have proven to be unreliable. Consequently, the excesses of general rules for inferences based on unconscious habits of association can be corrected for only by contrary general rules based on unconscious habits of association. "The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet 'tis only by following them that we can correct this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities" (T I.III.XIII / 150). Once again, there is no outside to habit.

One final point to make here concerns the unconscious formation of habits of ideal association specifically with regard to other people. In Book II, Hume argues that we use the concept of necessity in the domain of human actions in exactly the same sense as when we use it to describe natural phenomena: in both cases we mean the mind's expectation that similar effects

will be conjoined with similar causes, through associations formed by habit based on prior experiences. In a wonderful passage, he argues that this univocity is attested to by the unbroken chain of causes and effects one constructs while planning an escape from prison, as it includes both the solidity of the iron bars and the obstinacy of the jailor as reliable impediments in just the same sense: the mind does not mark a difference in kind between the ‘physical’ and ‘moral’ necessity of the two obstacles (T II.III.II / 406). But in terms of processes by which habits of association are formed, Hume notes that there is a relevant difference here. It is not a difference in kind, since the process habituation is the same in each case, but a difference in the degree, or complexity. Clearly, we are apparently unable to comprehensively control for the variables of differential experience even when it comes to the simplest experiments in physics.

If this be the case even in natural philosophy, how much more in moral, where there is a much greater complication of circumstances, and where those views and sentiments, which are essential to any action of the mind, are so implicit and obscure, that they often escape our strictest attention, and are not only unaccountable in their causes, but even unknown in their existence? (T I.III.XV / 175)

Here Hume appeals precisely to the obscure multiplicity of unconscious determinations of the mind in its moral assessments and inclinations. It should come as no surprise that when Hume comes to analyze the mind’s attempt to correct its habits of thought, not concerning physical causation, but having to do with moral sentiment and passion, comes to nearly the same conclusion. The habit of sympathetic partiality, which reason deplores as illegitimately restrictive, cannot be corrected by reason itself, but only by contrary habits of sympathetic extension; but these are two tendencies of the same process, and it is not even necessary that the mind be conscious of the process by which its sympathies are rendered more general.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Marcia Baron writes that according to Hume, “When I take the general view [i.e., that according to which my sympathies become more extended and less partial—in other words, the

Synthetic beliefs about matters of fact, habits of ideal association and experiential expectation, moral sentiments, habit's excesses by general rules and its self-correction through reflection: all of these are involuntary, on Hume's analysis, and almost entirely unconscious. In their genesis and their effective reality, the passages of the mind are, Hume teaches, profoundly unconscious, only occasionally becoming the object of conscious reflection, and then only very inadequately. What is amazing is that the mind, this incredible product of the active processes of the unconscious of thought, unaware of this obscure activity involved in its every conscious passage, could have acquired the habit of mistaking its own apparent spontaneity for voluntaristic self-determination.

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perspective from which I become more moral], I need not be aware that I am doing so; I need have no notion that there is such a standard. I may not even be aware that I am correcting my sentiments" (Marcia Baron, "Morality as a Back-up System," *Hume Studies* 14:1 [1988]: 25-52, 35-6). See also William Davie, "Hume's General Point of View," *Hume Studies* 24:2 (1998): 275-94. In a longer version of this dissertation I would have explored the unconscious dimensions of this passionate-moral dynamic in Hume's theory in more detail. As it is, I can only mention it in passing.

## Conclusion

### Obscurity and Involvement

In the introduction to this dissertation I said that I wanted to argue for a devaluation of consciousness in favor of the unconscious of thought. However, I make this suggestion not because I think consciousness is absolutely unimportant, but based on my sense that consciousness has been relatively overvalued in philosophical modernity. I think that this overvaluation is clearest in moral and political discussions, where, for example, it is not uncommon to hear ‘ideology’ treated as a matter of ‘(false) contents of consciousness’. If that were true, the problem of ideology would be quite simple, barely a problem at all: a direct, rational demonstration of the falsity of the false contents of one’s consciousness would be all that is necessary in order to counteract or undo an ideological formation. First, as I repeatedly emphasized in my reading of Spinoza’s metaphysics of ideas, nothing false, insofar as it is positive, is destroyed by the appearance of the true qua true; more importantly, it is the affective determining power of an ideal configuration that is at issue in combating ideological formations, not veracity. But even beyond that, what this misses is that nearly everything important about ideologies are in fact operative at the unconscious levels I have been exploring in the chapters above. Ideology is only rarely a matter of what one consciously thinks, or thinks they think. Much more often, it is a matter of habits of thought, manners of perception, and the structures of one’s desires, none of which must necessarily be conscious at all. Indeed, as we have seen, for the most part these operate unconsciously, informing and shaping the conscious experiences, understandings, volitions, and desires of minds that remain unaware of them.

How are we to think the relationship between the unconscious of thought and conscious thought? It seems unfounded to posit a relationship of resemblance between the two, a

conclusion for which there is no clear epistemic basis. But leaving aside the extent to which this might be unwarranted speculation, there is a serious argumentative issue with positing their resemblance. In general, one invokes the unconscious in order to try to account for actions and desires that seem to be inexplicable in terms of consciousness. But to the extent that the unconscious of thought is assumed to resemble consciousness, neither can be used to explain what the other cannot account for. That is, it is the ostensible *difference* between the two that would make it worthwhile and valuable to shift the analytic framework from one to the other, and their resemblance does not allow us to think this difference meaningfully. But on the other hand, it also seems incorrect to say that consciousness and the unconscious of thought are entirely indifferent to one another. That is, if they were totally indifferent, there would again be no point, analytically, in invoking the unconscious where consciousness seems incapable of accounting for a particular mode of thought. In other words, if there were no determinate relation between consciousness and the unconscious, referring to the latter would be a non-sequitur.

What I want to suggest in these closing pages is that the concept of *involvement* can be usefully invoked here. The unconscious of thought is always involved in a variety of determinate ways in a given conscious mode of thought. Involvement does not presuppose resemblance, and it is not a matter of indifference. It is a name for a kind of implication, a specific form of causal dependence, a metaphysical relation between a condition and what is conditioned that is not merely extrinsic and formal. If we take a particular instance of conscious perception, for instance my perception of the sly glance of another, we can articulate the various ways in which the unconscious of thought plays a role in this perception rigorously in terms of involvement. The synthetic habits of anticipation and association I have unconsciously formed concerning similar perceptions are involved in the manner in which I perceive this glance, and my desire, only some

aspects of which I may even be aware of, is involved in determining the affective character of this encounter. Indeed, these unconscious habits of thought, the network of ideal and affective associations unconsciously involved in my mind, make possible my conscious perception as such. But what is it, in particular, that is actually involved in this way? Whatever it is, it is not clearly and distinctly accessible, as indicated by the analyses above, which is why I propose the concept of *obscurity* as the necessary complement of the concept of involvement when it is a matter of the unconscious of thought. In each case, the actual modes of unconscious thought at work are not clearly and distinctly expressed, but are instead obscurely involved, at the level of consciousness. Obscurity and involvement are categories for adequately thinking the unconscious of thought, categories common to the analyses of Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hume explored in the chapters above. Articulating the unconscious of thought in terms of what is obscurely involved also has the virtue of not implying that it is somehow ‘false’. Indeed, that which is obscurely involved in the constitution of conscious thought, to the extent that it is positive and determining, to the extent that it is real, cannot meaningfully be called false at all.

Leibniz showed us a way of thinking about the actual infinity of perception. On his account, as we saw, each perception is subtended and constituted by an actual infinity of unconscious perceptions. At a certain point, these imperceptible differentials of perception, by entering into relations with one another, cross a combinatorial threshold and constitute a conscious perception. It is, I argued, a kind of transcendental or retrogressive analysis that leads us back from conscious apperceptions to these imperceptible differentials of perception. Two things remain entirely obscure at the end of this analysis, namely the unconscious perceptions themselves, and the threshold of apperception or the limit of conscious integration. The obscurity of the unconscious perceptions involved in any possible case of conscious perception cannot be

clarified by means of conscious reflection. As we saw, these ineradicably obscure *petites perceptions* gave Leibniz the theoretical means to deny equilibrium or indifference. What does it mean that conscious analysis or reflection cannot reveal the reason why the soul is inclined toward one of two apparently equally attractive options? If, with Leibniz, we hold fast to the principle of sufficient reason, it means that consciousness encounters a limit in this analysis, testifying to the obscurity of causes from the perspective of the effects—conscious perceptions—that must necessarily involve them. Deleuze writes: “If, with Kant, it is objected that such a conception reintroduces infinite understanding, we might be impelled to remark that the infinite is taken here only as the presence of an unconscious in finite understanding, of something that cannot be thought in finite thought.”<sup>1</sup> If Leibnizian apperception is marked by the clarity and distinctness of its conscious perceptions, there remains an actual infinity of perceptions that continue to affect us although they do not cross this threshold of conscious integration.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the question remains: what is the principle according to which some infinitesimal differentials of unconscious perception cross this threshold of integration and manage to

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 102.

<sup>2</sup> “The reality of matter consists in the totality of its elements and of their actions of every kind. Our representation of matter is the measure of our possible action upon bodies: it results from the discarding of what has no interest for our needs, or more generally, for our functions. In one sense we might say that the perception of any unconscious material point whatever, in its instantaneous, is infinitely greater and more complete than ours, since this point gathers and transmits the influences of all the points of the material universe, whereas *our consciousness only attains to certain parts and to certain aspects of those parts. Consciousness—in regard to external perception—lies in just this choice.* But there is, in this necessary poverty of our conscious perception, something that is positive, that foretells spirit: it is, in the etymological sense of the word, *discernment*” (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, in *Key Writings*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey [New York: Continuum, 2002], 99; emphasis added).



constitute apperception or consciousness, rather than others? If conscious perception is constituted by the integration of differential unconscious perceptions, what is the principle of individuation that expresses the sufficient reason for a given integration? The fact that this threshold is obscure and singular in each case does not mean that we can say nothing more about it. In fact, this threshold is the effect of a prior habituation: the synthetic repetition of unconscious perceptions creates the conditions for their conscious integration. Habit draws the imperceptible differentials of perception into relation with one another. It establishes this threshold as a condition for differential integration in conscious perception, which also allows us to think the threshold's variability: habituation variably sets the limits for conscious awareness or perception. Variable habituation makes different aspects of the same perceptive multiplicity more or less susceptible to integration in conscious perception.

Habit, as we saw with Hume, is itself an unconscious process. It must be unconscious and involuntary, first of all, since it precedes conscious experience and makes it possible. If thinking is the mind's passage from one idea to another, habit establishes these pathways in advance of conscious thought. Once again, this analysis is retrogressive and transcendental: habit must have already been actual in order for conscious thought to have been possible. Habits of thinking are clearly involved in my consciousness of moving from one idea to another, but the principle of a given habit or association can remain totally obscure to me. Moreover, the principle of habituation itself is entirely obscure and involuntary. This does not mean, as I suggested at the end of my chapter on Hume, that all habits are on equal epistemic or normative footing. But conscious efforts at correcting habits of thought are complicated by the fact that all of the criteria for evaluating the epistemic legitimacy or normative value are themselves habits of thought that may stand in need of correction. What we might wish for, under these conditions, is some kind of

finally clear rational standard by which habit might itself be submitted to objective evaluation, but precisely this is what Hume quite consistently refuses us. In each case, the general rules by which a given habit of thought might be corrected are themselves habits of thought, involving their own obscure principles and unconscious associations. There is no outside of habit itself, no final point of reflection or critical analysis at which we are able finally to reach a clearly objective level of thought that does not involve the obscurities of habit.

Finally, unconscious habits and perceptions are always obscurely involved in desire, which Spinoza calls the actual essence of the human being. Spinoza is the great philosopher of involvement, for whom it is axiomatic that “knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (E I A4 / CWS I.410 / G II.46). An adequate idea not only involves the idea of its cause, but expresses it clearly and distinctly. An inadequate idea cannot fail to involve the idea of its cause, but only does so obscurely. In practice, Spinozism is a metaphysics of impure mixtures, an ethics of obscurely involved causes. My mind is the idea of my body, but my body is not *causa sui*; its nature involves causes that it only obscurely expresses, and the ideas of these causes are similarly involved in my mind only obscurely. As I argued, the vast majority of Part Two of the *Ethics* is an account of the necessity of our inadequate ideas, a catalogue of ideas in which the ideas of their causes are necessarily involved, but only obscurely. Similarly, Part Three concerns affects that only obscurely indicate the natures of the modes that give rise to them. For instance, my conscious joy is the effect of an encounter between my body and an external one; the ideas of both of these natures must be involved in this joyful affect, but this affect cannot tell me the nature of either of these bodies. It is not that I cannot form adequate ideas on the basis of affects, but this is only possible by a retreat to the generality of common notions: what I form thereby is an adequate idea of is the nature common to the modes in the

encounter. The natures of the modes that, in this encounter, constitute the causes of the affect, remain obscurely involved in the affect itself.

Why would the nature of one's desire need to be conscious? Spinoza teaches us to regard each encounter, and the affects that we undergo, as possible occasions for the development of adequate understanding. In every affective experience, one's desire is necessarily involved, but only obscurely, as one cause among several that cannot be clearly disambiguated by conscious analysis. In a joyful affect, what do I know about my body and the nature of the external body that affects it, other than that they form a positive unity of composition together? This is the sense in which Spinoza is also an empiricist: the ethical imperative of increasing power demands an experimental pragmatics, in which one seeks to form adequate ideas, not of their own nature in isolation, but of the natures of the individuals constituted by their encounters with others. If you and I cause each other joy, this only obscurely tells me something about my nature and your nature, since the ideas of our natures are only obscurely involved in the idea of the individual that they form together; but it can clearly tell me something about *our* common nature. Even if I form the adequate idea of that common nature, so much must remain only obscurely involved in my conscious knowledge and experience: the idea of my nature, the idea of everything external involved in the encounter, the perceptions or affections of which I am not aware, the habits and associations that determine my desire and affective sensibility.

In section 3 of Chapter 2, I drew attention to the striking parallel between Hume's principles of association and Spinoza's account of the way in which desires are determined by imaginary ideas. Resemblance, memory, and causation are fictions to the extent that they are based not on rational deduction or analysis but on the contingency of encounters; they are, however, *effective* fictions, to the extent that they necessarily participate in determining one's

desire. If Spinoza countenances an experimental pragmatics of encounters, it is because he recognizes the contingency of our habitual associations as an opportunity rather than as cause for alarm. Experimentation is the only means for correcting our habits of thought by attempting to control, however imperfectly and incompletely, for the obscure variables involved in complex encounters. And it is the only means for attempting to correct our rules of correction.

The metaphysics of ideas in early modernity grasped the nonidentity of thought and consciousness and explored the unconscious of thought with astonishing rigor. The unconscious of thought is not merely the negation of consciousness, but has its own positive and determinate elements and logic. It is not an abstraction, but is concrete and singular in each case. The unconscious habits of ideal association and expectation, the unconscious of desire, the imperceptible perceptions that affect sensibility beneath the threshold of conscious awareness—these are all invariably different and distinctive for each mode of thought, each monad, each mind, based as they are on the singularity of the differential experience of each. The obscure logics of the unconscious of thought, as imperceptible perceptions, as what is involuntary in desire, and as habits of ideal and affective association, can be articulated and expressed in formal terms. However, real thought, whether it is conscious or unconscious, is never merely a set of formal structures. It is always concrete and determinate in its singularity. It must fall to each of us to discover what our own minds obscurely involve.

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