
The Justification of a Realist Rationalism

WHEN WE TRY to understand another person's experience, we usually rely on a number of ontological assumptions. First, we generally assume that the experience we seek to understand or explain is in some way "real." We do so even when we seek to explain behavior that strikes us as strange or absurd at first. For instance, we may find it absurd that someone remains in deep mourning for many years after the death of a cat. Yet, we will think that something must be significant about this long-lost cat. Second, we assume that the experience of others is generally accessible to us. Their reactions may seem very strange indeed—but we assume that their experience can be explained if we inquire into the causes and background of their reactions. In our attempts at an explanation, we, third, presume that we can *more or less* approximate the real state of affairs and that there is only one complete and truthful description of that state of affairs.

It is instructive to see how the first few propositions of *de Mente* relate to this problem; their purpose is to explicate, on a fundamental level, the implicit assumptions from which we proceed in these kinds of situations. In a first step, the preliminary yet crucial point is made that thought (and, by analogy, extension) is an attribute of God. As a result, thought is assigned an incontestable role within the ontological framework of Spinoza's approach. More than that, though, the status of thought as an attribute of God also guarantees that our ideas—which, according to 2ax3, form the basis for all our experiences—exist in reality (2p1). In a second step, the existence of an idea of God is inferred, which demonstrates that all being is in principle intelligible (2p3). Finally, in a third step, it is maintained that God's idea—and thus the very concept of reality—is unique (2p4).

In the following, I explicate this in more detail. I proceed from an assumption we have already discussed above, namely that these propositions say nothing about God's properties; they actually advance ontological tenets about the

fundamental constitution of being. While this assumption poses a significant hermeneutic challenge, it makes other difficulties disappear. For instance, Spinoza can no longer be accused of positing that thought is an attribute of God while refusing to grant him an intellect prior to the level of infinite modes.¹ On the other hand, all those theses that operate with the concept of God in a seemingly traditional fashion lose their casual meaning. If “God” no longer refers to a quasi-personal, intelligent entity, what exactly is it supposed to mean that thought is an attribute of God or that God has an idea of himself and everything following from himself?

My analysis will point to an alternative interpretation of the assumptions, now apparently meaningless, that thought is a divine attribute and that God has an idea of himself. In fact, these assumptions establish, as it were, the ontological foundations on which we rely whenever we seek to explain an instance of experience and expect, in a realist manner, that we can do so. To that purpose, I will first focus on the concept of attribute (a). Then, I will discuss the two related claims that an idea of God exists (b) and that this idea is unique (c).

a) Thought as an Attribute: On the Reality of the Mental

The view that thought is an attribute of God plays a crucial role within the train of thought in the first few propositions of Part One. By positing this attribute, Spinoza not only justifies the assumption of an *idea Dei* (albeit in a somewhat problematic fashion)²—he also creates the precondition for rejecting any causal interaction between thought and extension (as we can see from his use of the concept of “attribute” in 2p6dem).³ The view that thought is an attribute makes it possible to conceive of the mental world, too, as causally closed—and not just the physical world, as is often asserted today. This view requires, however, that 2p1 formulates a genuinely ontological thesis, not a theological one. According

1. For this objection, see Kammerer 1992, 22. In his theological reading of the *Ethics*, Kammerer reflects on the fact that Spinoza understands the *idea of God* as a mode of the attribute *thought*—instead of claiming the opposite, i.e., that thought is the product of a divine intellect. Kammerer interprets this in a purely negative way, namely as a means to rule out a personal God (249). Hubbeling (1977, 595–6) also assumes that Spinoza’s God is self-conscious (albeit in a rather weak fashion), as does Wilbur 1976.

2. See this Chapter, § b.

3. Here, Mattern’s index is imprecise. Although 2p1 is not mentioned explicitly, it obviously functions as a premise. Since 2p5dem refers to 2p3dem, 2p1 is also present. Thus, the index should include 2p1 in parentheses.

to this view, it is not Spinoza's aim to ascribe to God the property of thought; rather, he seeks to prove that thought is a fundamental feature of being. We can confirm this view by perusing 2p5 and 2p6, in which propositions the concept of attribute plays a prominent role. The crucial point these propositions bring out is not that God is endowed with the property of thought but that thought has an irreducible ontological status.

But what about 2p1 itself? Is the interpretation that this proposition is significant primarily from an ontological point of view really supported by the formulation of 2p1 and its argument? It seems to me that we have good reasons to read this proposition in an ontological vein, even though 2p1d may not be fully satisfactory on that account. Let us first consider the exact phrasing, "Thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing."⁴ There is something peculiar about the structure of this proposition: it consists of two phrases, which according to the conjunction *sive* are meant to be equivalent—and yet, the two phrases have different grammatical subjects. This combination—an apparent equivalence accompanied by a change of subject—leaves open which of the two expressions, *cogitatio* or *Deus*, is the actual topic of the proposition. This raises the question whether we are dealing with a thesis about God here or with a thesis about the nature of thought—or, more precisely, of *our* thought.

There is a certain logic behind this lack of clarity. Not only does 2p2 contain exactly the same construction, but it should also be noted that 2p1d consistently operates with both possibilities—*cogitatio* and *Deus*—in the subject position, thus extending the vagueness of the proposition to the demonstration. In the same vein, it is enlightening that Spinoza gives the a priori proof for 2p1 only later in 2p1s, which seems to suggest that he considers it of secondary importance.⁵ There, the possibility of conceiving of an infinite thinking being gives rise to the claim that thought is one of God's attributes. It seems difficult to read this proof without placing God—or the infinite thinking being—in the center (and, thus, the subject position) of the statement.

Overall, it almost appears as if Spinoza would like to dispel the impression—as intuitive as it may seem—that God's thought is the subject matter at hand. Earlier, I expressed the view that Spinoza's metaphysics is a general ontology

4. C I, 448; G II, 86.

5. I disagree with Gueroult 1974, 49, who claims that the argument of 2p3d makes use of 2p1s (instead of 2p1). In my view, the scholium is merely of secondary importance for Spinoza's argument.

rather than a rational theology. Now, we get some confirmation for this view from a number of single, seemingly unambiguous theological statements. We can at least assume that the actual goal of 2p1 is not to ascribe the attribute of thought to God but to establish that thought is an attribute of the single substance—which makes thought a feature of reality that is justified in itself. This is corroborated by our previous assumption that, as an attribute, thought must be causally closed. If thought is conceived of as an attribute itself, then it may not originate from other attributes.

But what, we may ask, is the meaning of this thesis—that thought is an attribute—aside from the argumentative function just mentioned? What does it mean for something to be an attribute?

At this point, I will neither give a detailed account of the definition of attribute nor revisit the research that has been done on this issue.⁶ Instead, I shall address these questions by taking a closer look at Spinoza's reference to 1p25c in the first sentence of 2p1d. This allows us to illustrate a few things without looking at 1def4, which has proved notoriously open to contradictory interpretation. To begin with, note that 1p25c does not directly deal with attributes; it rather states how particular things, *res particulares*, are to be defined within the ontological framework laid out by the metaphysical vocabulary of Part One. Particular things are described as “modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way.”⁷ In 2p1d, Spinoza applies this definition to singular thoughts, *cogitationes*, concluding a posteriori (with the help of 1def5) that God, too, must have an attribute called *cogitatio*. This move is facilitated by the double meaning of the Latin *cogitatio*, which is both a verbal noun and a term signifying singular thoughts. *Cogitationes* are thus understood as modes, or particular entities, which express the attribute referred to by the verbal noun *cogitatio*.

6. There are various points of contention arising from the vague definition of the term “attribute.” 1) According to 1def4, whose essence is constituted by God's attributes—God's own or that of our human comprehension? 2) Do the attributes dissimulate this essence, or do they make it knowable? 3) Who perceives the attributes—the infinite or the human intellect? (For these questions, see Haserot 1972a and b and Schnepf 1996, 241 ff.) But even independently of 1def4, Spinoza's concept of attributes frequently gives rise to discussion. 4) There is a debate, for instance, about how many attributes God has—aside from the fact that humans can know only two (see Wolf 1972; and Bennett 1984, 75 ff. 5) There is also the problem of the precise character of the attributes (see Becher 1905; Wolf 1972; Haserot 1972a and b; Deleuze 1968, 36–7; Bennett 1984, 60–1, and 1994; Wilson 1999).

7. 1p25c: “Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way” (C I, 431; G II, 68).

Let us now consider the relationship between modes and attributes underlying 1p25 in more detail. In particular, three structural features are to be emphasized:

1. From a formal point of view, we are dealing with a relationship between *three* terms that cannot be reduced, without a significant loss of differentiation, to a relationship between two terms. By expressing attributes, modes exhibit something pertaining to God's nature, not to their own. If we were to reduce the three-term relationship to that between the modes and the substance, we would have to revise the assumption, discussed above, that Spinoza rejects both an inherent and a direct causal relation between modes and substance.⁸ Reducing it to the relation of modes and attributes, on the other hand, would mean jettisoning this differentiation between the nature of God and the nature of modes. Finally, any reduction to the relation of substance and attribute would eliminate the term that stands for singular things, which would thereby completely lose their place in Spinoza's ontology.
2. So from a formal point of view, the relationship consists of three related terms; yet only two of them, namely mode and substance/God, can actually be *qualified as entities*. The attribute exists only insofar as it exists *within* an entity; it is identified with a feature of this entity, be it explicitly or implicitly.⁹ Whenever the term "attribute" appears by itself in the text, it always stands for the attributively specified substance. This is why, in 2p1, where Spinoza talks about specific attributes for the first time, he cannot dispense with the genitive attribute "of God," despite his overall metaphysical approach. Attributes are properties that are attached to something else—something that essentially displays these properties while not being fully characterized by them.
3. The formulation that singular things are modes *expressing* God's attributes carries an *implicitly realist claim*. Spinoza nurtures something like a kind of structural realism here. It is crucial to note, though, how exactly the concept of attribute is put into play. By describing something as a mode of some attribute, we do not classify it as a kind of object—that is what the categorical distinction between modes and substance is for—but we point to some dimension of being that can be identified in what we describe thus. Attributes, in other words, do not constitute highest genera or class terms, with modes as their specimens—they always have a *fundamentum in re*.

8. See Part I, Chapter 2, 3 c.

9. For a more precise analysis, see Schnepf 1996, 167–8 and 242–3.

Against the backdrop of these observations, we are now in a better position to say what is behind the notion that thought and extension are attributes of God. It is obviously a matter of identifying fundamental ontological features by which being is realized. Attributes are not independent entities but rather properties within things. As such, they are real and more than just subjective perspectives on things.¹⁰ They occur *within* entities, and, as the proof for 2p1 shows, they must even occur within singular things, for otherwise, they could not be identified in them. Thus, even if cogitation is an attribute of the substance in the first place, it is no less possible that it is also a property of singular things. On the other hand, we must stress that singular things are not sufficiently determined by attributes.

The latter point is significant, considering the implicit thematic structure of Spinoza's philosophy of mind: by characterizing thought as an attribute, he actually says nothing about the individuation of singular thoughts. Further specifications are required for that. We must be able to say what a given thought is about, and we must be able to determine the bearer of the thought. An ontological statement to the effect that thoughts are modes within the attribute of thought will be unable to provide this information.

Still, the view that thoughts are modes within the attribute of thought is not an empty formula. It may be a merely preliminary statement, but it is not without relevance. If nothing more, it rules out the following conclusions: if something is a mode in the attribute of thought, it cannot be a mode in any other attribute. Even outside of Spinoza's terminological approach, this is more informative than it may appear at first glance. Confronted with a particular thought, we can very well reach the verdict that it is simply a thought. In doing so, we make a preliminary yet potentially quite meaningful statement about the nature of our affection. For instance, if an acquaintance asks me about my subdued mood in the last few days, I can be evasive by saying: "Well, I'm troubled by certain thoughts." This reveals nothing about my reasons for feeling subdued—but it tells my acquaintance where he would have to look if he were to pursue the matter any further. He can learn from my response that I am neither sick nor simply tired but that there are very specific thoughts—which are perfectly well known to me—that I hold responsible for causing my current condition. That is why we would consider it inappropriate if someone were to react to my statement by recommending a good doctor or certain vitamin pills.

This example can serve to illustrate yet another implication of the relationship between substance, attribute, and mode. Since attributes are real properties

10. That is to say, I consider attributes to be objective (see the second question mentioned in footnote 6). This is not the same as claiming that they can exist by themselves. It is possible to think of attributes as real properties while maintaining that they are always attached to something else.

that can be identified in particular things, they can also be appealed to, to undergird assumptions concerning the reality of things. If we address something as a mode within the attribute of thought, we acknowledge that this thought is something real, regardless of its concrete content. In other words, the thought itself is real, and yet there is no guarantee that the same goes for that which it represents. When I tell my acquaintance that I am “troubled by certain thoughts,” I invite her to make a very similar assumption of reality. I let her know that she was quite right in suspecting that something was wrong with me, and, in the majority of cases, she will keep assuming that the reasons for my current disposition are real. And depending on how well she knows me, she will show some understanding and leave me be, ask me if I want to talk about it, or invite me to the movies. And her reactions are perfectly justified since my tentative mentioning of troubling thoughts refers to something that can truly be the case and that thus belongs to reality, so to speak. It is part of reality that people have thoughts, just as much as it is part of reality that there are extended bodies. We can therefore also think of thought and extension as *ways for things to be real*.

In summary, we can say that by positing an attribute of thought, Spinoza names a fundamental property of being, meaning that things that display this property can in principle be considered real. Yet, this omits the question of how particular thoughts are individuated or distinguished from each other. This is not an arbitrary omission, for the individuation of thoughts is not an ontological issue but concerns the semantic constitution of content and the attribution of content to particular epistemic subjects. That Spinoza keeps these two theoretical dimensions strictly apart is, I think, a masterstroke of the *Ethics*. It is one thing to provide a general argument for the notion that thought is a fundamental way of being real, but it is another thing altogether to discuss the conditions for individuating particular thoughts. Indeed, it is this that—later and via additional premises—enables him to solve the other two fundamental problems of his theory of the human mind, namely the issues of the numerical difference between subjects and of the laws governing the constitution of mental content. And this is ultimately what allows him to take the phenomenological and empirical dimensions of experience seriously, without abandoning the expectation that experience is generally explainable.

*b) The Assumption of an idea Dei: Intelligibility
as a Property of Being*

After thought has been exposed as a basic ontological feature or way of being, 2p3 advances a thesis that no longer serves to prove the reality of mental life. Instead, it justifies a claim no less crucial for Spinoza’s rationalism: that being is *universally, comprehensively*, and thus *completely* intelligible. Among other things,

this claim entitles us to believe that the experience of others is in principle explainable. The proposition reads, "In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything which necessarily follows from his essence."¹¹ In contrast to 2p1, which advances the view of thought as an attribute, it is much easier to translate this third proposition into a general ontological statement, for if we take its phrasing at face value, Spinoza admittedly asserts that *there is in God* an idea of his essence and of everything that follows from him; but this idea is not attributed to God as its epistemic subject. Note that similar formulations are quite frequent in the *Ethics*: when Spinoza says that the ideas of certain things are in God, it is often to raise the possibility that certain things or events can be known or can become the object of thought.¹² Any statement to the effect that this or that idea is in God is meant as a statement about the intelligibility of this or that thing under these or those circumstances. By no means is it meant as a reference to a mental event in God's mind. And 2p3 can be understood in a similar vein, namely as an assertion that being is in principle knowable. Interpreted in this way, 2p3 leaves the question of an epistemic subject completely aside while focusing exclusively on the object of ideas.

One could object that the statement "there is an idea of x" is meaningful only if there is also an epistemic subject to which the idea of x can be attributed. Would that not also apply to the idea of God mentioned in 2p3? Since God never appears as an epistemic subject in our reading of the *Ethics*, and of 2p3 in particular, are we not at risk of destroying the very foundation of Spinoza's approach by rendering meaningless the claim that there is an idea of God?

We can react to this objection on two levels. First, it strikes me as doubtful that Spinoza would agree that any meaningful talk of ideas requires a subject that actually has these ideas. Granted, the definition of *idea* in 2def3 stresses that ideas are formed by a *res cogitans*, which presupposes the existence of an epistemic subject.¹³ And yet, this definition is meant as a contribution to a very specific discussion. As set out above, this is Spinoza's reaction to the debate between Descartes and Hobbes about the nature of the thing considered the very subject of ideas; 2def3 is Spinoza's answer to the question of whether ideas can be considered a product of the body.¹⁴ But can we not dismiss this reference to a subject if we were to focus on the relation between ideas and their object? In my view, nothing prevents us from inquiring into the object of our ideas, while setting aside the

11. C I, 449; G II, 87.

12. For example, consider 2p9c or 2p20.

13. "By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing" (C I, 447; G II, 84).

14. See Part II, Chapter 5, § a.

question of who or what it is that has these ideas—in fact, I find this perfectly legitimate. Many passages in the *Ethics* that refer to the idea of this or that thing only make sense if we read them as responding to the problem of the intelligibility of the assumed objects; they inquire into the possibility of there being an idea of a given thing, without claiming that some epistemic subject actually has this idea.

But is it really Spinoza's intention to abstain from positing an epistemic subject that actually has the idea of God? And, even more importantly, could he do so if he wanted to? To solve this question, we must take a closer look at 2p3d, which is where, in marked contrast to the proposition itself, Spinoza does seem to address God as an epistemic subject. Harking back to 2p1, 2p3d reformulates the claim that thought is an attribute of God by stating that God can think infinitely many things in infinitely many modes. This quite clearly refers to the concept of an infinite agency, with God as the only conceivable infinite agent.

But this idea, instead of being a theological statement in the strict sense, can also be applied to the question of whether being itself is intelligible. Consider what we do when we ask ourselves whether something—for instance, the sum total of all casualties at the Battle of Waterloo—can be discerned? In those cases, we tend to prescind from any empirical circumstances that might limit our understanding and make it impossible to provide a definite answer to the query. Instead, we may ask ourselves whether the matter at hand is actually of the kind that any statement about its being knowable (or unknowable) can be meaningful. In 2p3, we encounter this same procedure, albeit on a more generalized level. The proposition does not simply deal with the issue of how a particular object can be known (provided we prescind from this or that empirical restriction); rather, it seeks to answer the question of how the entire spectrum of intelligible being can be determined, disregarding any and all empirical limitations. To that purpose, Spinoza evokes the notion of a thinking thing whose cognition knows no empirical limitations of any kind; this thing, he says, has an idea of the essence of everything that is, including everything that follows from this essence. Thus, he indirectly maintains here that the spectrum of all intelligible being is coextensive with being in general. In other words, the notion of divine agency is meant to present the proof that, from a universal point of view, everything is intelligible.

Two objections could be made against this interpretation. On the one hand, it could be considered problematic from an exegetical point of view that the self-referentiality alleged in the idea of God is lost. As a matter of fact, 2p3 describes the *idea Dei* not merely as an idea of the essence of everything that is but as an idea God *has* of his own essence. If we look at 2p3d, however, we realize that this self-referentiality is simply an implication of Spinoza's substance monism, not an independent feature of thought itself. The other objection is more serious, being

concerned with the difficulties raised by our reference to an absolute or divine point of view. To talk of an absolute point of view is rather bizarre, given that viewpoints, standpoints, or perspectives are by definition tied to specific places.¹⁵ One could therefore object that it is actually impossible to abstract from any and all empirical restrictions and still adopt a viewpoint. This objection would surely have merit—if it were truly the case that 2p3 talked about *adopting* this point of view. But Spinoza does something else here: he does not attribute the idea of God to any subject, but he merely says that there is an idea of God *in* God, which in my opinion amounts to a statement about general intelligibility and not about factual knowledge. From a purely procedural point of view, this is very plausible: let us assume that we are in an epistemically precarious situation, trying to justify that something can in principle be known. Would we not, in one way or another, have to take recourse to the idea of a subject untethered from any empirical limitations?¹⁶ Thus, when Spinoza talks of what God can think by virtue of the attribute of *cogitatio*, his primary goal is to justify the assumption that being is universally intelligible—that is, that being can, in principle, be known.¹⁷ His goal is not to establish God as an omniscient epistemic subject who is factually endowed with knowledge.

This interpretation has several advantages. First, it is compatible with Spinoza's radical critique of anthropomorphism—more compatible than the claim that 2p3 features a divine epistemic subject. It is not by accident that the scholium to 2p3 contains yet another vehement denial of any anthropomorphic understanding of God's power.

This interpretation also sheds some light on later applications of 2p3¹⁸; it is especially useful for understanding the arguments in 2p20 and 5p22. Proposition 2p20d evokes 2p3 in support of the notion of the human mind's self-knowledge. According to my interpretation here, this proposition does not yet address the issue of the mind's actual self-awareness. On the contrary, 2p23 makes it clear that the mind does not know itself unless it perceives the ideas of the affections of the human

15. It is no accident that Thomas Nagel, in a similar context, has coined the metaphor of a "view from nowhere." See his remarks in Nagel 1986, 5 and 9.

16. Here, it is helpful to cast a side glance at Michael Dummett, who describes the distinction between realism and antirealism as follows: the realist thinks that states of affairs are intelligible, even if the knowledge-seeking subject is merely a hypothetical one, whereas the antirealist recognizes intelligibility only if something can be known by us (Dummett, 1978, 24 and 155). If we consider 2p3 in this context, its realist intention becomes apparent.

17. In this claim—that being is universally intelligible—Spinoza's realist rationalism differs from Nagel's approach, which concedes not only that there are things of which we have no concept but also that there are things of which we *cannot* have any concept. See Nagel 1986, 90 ff.

18. Namely, the proofs of propositions 2p5, 2p9c, 2p20, 2p24, as well as 5p22 and 5p35.

body, which means that our actual self-awareness may be limited. What Spinoza says in 2p20, then, is that we must *in principle* be capable of forming a reflexive idea of the human mind—or, in general terms, of all the ideas we have.¹⁹ Thus, 2p20 presents an epistemological option that constitutes a fundamental possibility of human thought—an option that may never be fully instantiated in anybody's thought. Proposition 2p3 plays a similar role in 5p22d, which maintains that in God there is an idea *sub speciem aeternitatis* of the essence of the human body. This idea, too, is presented merely as an epistemological possibility and not as an actual, psychically instantiated process. In both cases, the claim that there is an idea of God is used to assert the intelligibility of objects—objects that are not simply known or with respect to which it is not even clear *how* they could be known.²⁰ Thus, Spinoza's claim that ideas of objects such as these are part of the *idea Dei* enables him to insist that things and facts are knowable even in cases where we have a hard time fully realizing this knowledge.

In summary, we can state that, when Spinoza proclaims an idea of God, he has something different in mind from divine self-consciousness. He merely exposes the ontological preconditions for insisting, even in the face of epistemological difficulties, that the things we want to know can in principle be known. Thus, the role played by the idea of God could almost be called transcendental, seeing that it ensures the possibility of knowledge on a very fundamental level. Yet, whereas Kant's anchoring device is epistemological, Spinoza's is ontological.²¹ In other words, Spinoza does not rely on the notion of a transcendental subject or the way it constitutes the objects of thought; he shows that, given the framework of his ontology, all being can in principle—that is, discounting all empirical restrictions

19. See also Part IV, Chapter 14, § b.

20. The other references to 2p3 largely work in a similar way. An exception is 5p35, which says that "God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love"—a claim that strikes me as incompatible with a strictly ontological reading of the concept of God. This poses no real danger for an ontological reconstruction. Part One of the *Ethics* does not—at least in terms of proof—depend on 5p35; moreover, the theological notion of God's love is apparently based on ethical concerns: it forms the basis for identifying virtue and happiness. Even Spinoza's ethics is affected only in one aspect, namely the question of human happiness or, more to the point, the possibility of blessedness. The conception of a rational way of life remains unaffected, as does the problem of human freedom. Thus, if Spinoza can be accused of something, it is only that he promises too much by opening up the prospect of blessedness (see the Conclusion).

21. In this regard, my reconstruction differs from Bartuschat's, who also—implicitly—seems to read the *Ethics* along the lines of a transcendental approach, while placing more emphasis on the human ability to be rational (see Bartuschat 1992a, esp. X). In his review, Kisser (1995, 237) draws attention to this transcendental–philosophical dimension of Bartuschat's approach, and he criticizes it by saying that the concept of substance must be understood as a theory of an absolute object. Note that this does not contradict our assumption that the idea of God fulfills a quasi-transcendental function.

that impose themselves on concrete subjects—be known. If Spinoza's assumption of an *idea Dei* addresses a question, it is not “how do we have to conceive of epistemic subject to allow for the possibility of knowledge?” but rather “what does the ontological scope of knowledge have to be if we want to prevent someone from evoking our factual ignorance in order to drown us in skepticism about the possibility of knowledge?”

c) Necessity, Infinity, Uniqueness: From the Notion of Intelligibility to the Concept of Knowledge

As the previous remarks have shown, Spinoza's rationalism does not revolve around the commitment to a specific concept of rationality; it revolves instead around the assumption that everything that is or that happens is universally, comprehensively, and thus completely intelligible. This assumption prevents any kind of skepticism and thus any kind of *asylum ignorantiae*. In other words, we are dealing with a conception of being as something that is in principle intelligible. Despite its ontological props, however, this kind of rationalism still requires certain assumptions as to how actual knowledge of being should be conceived. What is needed, in other words, is a concept of knowledge that would be compatible with the claim that being is intelligible.

Let us now consider Spinoza's account of an *idea Dei* against this background. Three points strike us here:

1. We must assume that the acts by which we come to know any fact or thing are subject to *the same necessity* as the causal generation of other events. In other words, the process of knowing is just another determined and conditioned event. This is not of merely psychological importance. Its real significance lies in ensuring that knowledge is not an arbitrary result of cognitive activities. According to Spinoza, there is no fundamental difference between the act of knowing and the falling darkness after sunset. On the contrary, if the relevant conditions are met, we must assume that someone really has a specific insight. Now, like so many things in the *Ethics*, this claim appears in the guise of Spinoza's ontological terminology. In concrete terms, the assumption that knowledge is necessary is couched in the claim that the idea of God is itself subject to God's power. That is why this idea is “merely” a mode. Thus, the idea of God is not an absolute entity but is itself a conditioned entity.
2. The claim that being is universally intelligible implies that, in principle, our knowledge has no limitation. Knowledge must be potentially infinite—just as being itself is potentially infinite. This property, too, derives from the ontological status of the idea of God—in just the same way as knowledge is subject

to natural necessity. This is expressed by the notion that the idea of God immediately follows from the attribute of thought, which makes it an unlimited entity—an *infinite* mode. That is not to deny that *our* knowledge is *actually* limited. We have already seen that the universal intelligibility of being does not preclude the possibility that certain things are unknown at certain times or if considered from a certain viewpoint. By the same token, the claim that knowledge is potentially infinite does not preclude the possibility that human knowledge is actually limited. Spinoza, therefore, does not deny that there are many things we do not know yet and—depending on the situation—simply cannot know yet. What he does deny is that these kinds of situations should be the yardstick for measuring the possibility of human knowledge. In this sense, the idea of God represents the universal intelligibility of being and thus sets a norm for our epistemic quests—and it fulfills this purpose regardless of the actual extent of our knowledge.²²

3. If we insist that—empirical difficulties that hamper our epistemic efforts aside—everything can, in principle, be known, we will not be satisfied with just our being able to understand certain aspects of things; we will also assume that every question has only one correct answer. This means that every object has one, and only one, complete, distinct, and true idea that corresponds to it. Later on, in my discussion of Spinoza's epistemology, I will discuss what this means for the evaluation of factually given ideas.²³ At this point, I just want to show that even this implicit norm is anchored in the idea of God or, more specifically, in the notion established in 2p4 that the idea of God must be unique. Interestingly, this proposition has its roots in the substance monism of Part One—and thus in the claim that there can only be one reality. In 2p4, Spinoza attributes the very same property that qualifies reality—uniqueness—to the idea of God. When defending substance monism, this property was maintained on an ontological level—that is, it was meant to describe a structural feature of reality. And now, when applied to the idea of God, it is being used to set a norm. This move makes perfect sense: if we assume that there is only one reality, then we also commit ourselves to the view that there is only

22. For Brandom (1994, 93), the “order and connection of ideas” has a normative character, which plays a role in conceptual questions; and he complains that classical rationalism fails to assess this normative character correctly. In my view, this is because he misjudges what Spinoza (and, to an extent, Leibniz) means when he talks about divine knowledge. On the other hand, it is true that classical rationalism does not provide a fully fledged theory of the emergence of epistemic normativity. With regard to Spinoza, there are good reasons for that: as I have shown in Renz 2009a, Spinoza considers epistemic normativity to be irreducible—as opposed to moral normativity, for which he does indeed provide a genetic explanation.

23. See Part IV, Chapter 14, § a.

one correct notion of reality. That is not to deny that there are various epistemic approaches to reality. It merely denies that there are various, substantially different, complete instantiations of knowledge about any given object.

Thus, it is in more than one respect that the idea of God forms the basis for Spinoza's subsequent discussion of the principles of human knowledge. By asserting that being is in principle intelligible, it provides the *ontological* ground for any knowledge. It also motivates the possibility of a *descriptive* approach to human understanding, by proving that knowledge is governed by necessity. Finally, because it embodies (so to speak) the universal and complete knowledge of being, its purpose is to *set a norm*. It remains to be seen how Spinoza's epistemology combines these different perspectives. We can already suspect, however, that he will not restrict his inquiry to one of them; he will not be satisfied with the analysis of the formation of ideas alone, nor will he content himself with the evaluation of the epistemic validity of our ideas.

That said, we can already emphasize one crucial aspect related to these coexisting different perspectives: as the idea of God expresses Spinoza's commitment to a realist *rationalism*, this commitment does not imply any statement about the contents of any actual process of human cognition. Thus, Spinoza's realism is a version of neither a direct nor an indirect realism, as we would call it today. In other words, while acknowledging that all our ideas express some reality and thus have a minimal epistemic value,²⁴ he withholds judgment about the veridicality of our actual cognitions. Thus, by positing a unique idea of God in 2p3 and 2p4, Spinoza does nothing more (but also nothing less) than to translate the implicit ontological and normative preconditions underlying our epistemological expectations into his ontological language. In other words, Spinoza does not say that our ideas correspond to reality; his point is merely that, when seeking to understand something, we are—and have to be—epistemological realists, at least when it comes to the object at hand.

24. See Chapter 5, § b, of this part, as well as Part IV, Chapter 12, §§ b and c. In those sections, we will see how Spinoza provides support for the assumption that our factually given ideas have a minimal reality content. He does so not by referring to the idea of God but with the aid of 1ax4.