"Spinoza's Early Anti-Abstractionism"
Samuel Newlands (University of Notre Dame)
For *The Young Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed

Spinoza's surviving work spans only a decade and a half, which makes it difficult to divvy him up into neat chronological segments. Still, there is much to be learned about Spinoza's philosophy without jumping straight into the *Ethics* or *TTP*. In this essay, I focus on a fairly persistent topic in Spinoza's early writings, what I'll call his "early anti-abstractionism." Spinoza often used sharp rhetoric to discuss this issue, as if the very topics of abstracta and thinking abstractly touched a raw nerve. His anti-abstractionism also reinforces some of his most scathing critiques of late medieval Aristotelianism and sheds light on his own philosophical methodology. Spinoza's early attacks on abstractions also reappear in his more developed philosophy of mind and ontology. For example, when Spinoza dismisses realist theories of universals in the *Ethics*, he is merely applying a rejection of abstracta that he had been working on since his earliest extant writings.[1]

Spinoza usually expresses his anti-abstractionism as a severe warning. In *TIE*, he cautions, "the greatest deception…arises from the fact that [others] conceive things too abstractly."[2] He then encourages that "we shall not need to fear any such deception, if we proceed, as much as we can, in a manner that is not abstract".[3] In *KV*, Spinoza claims that having a false view of abstracta is "something a true philosopher must scrupulously avoid."[4] In *CM*, he admonishes us to be on guard against confusing abstracta with real

[1] For more on Spinoza's view of universals and a fuller discussion of these topics as they appear in the *Ethics*, see Newlands, "Spinoza on Universals."
[2] TIE 74-75, G II/28/16-30
[3] TIE 75, G II/29/1-2
[4] KV II/4, I/60/31-32

things, lest we "fall into great errors, as has happened to many before us"[5] – all of which sounds pretty worrisome, if he's right.

In the first part of the paper, I examine Spinoza's views on abstract objects in these early texts. In the second section, I turn to his account of thinking abstractly. In the third and final part, I look at how Spinoza applies his critiques in surprisingly wide-ranging ways.

1. On Abstracta

1.1 Spinoza's denials

Let us begin with the *objects* of abstract thinking: abstracta. Like many late Scholastics and early moderns, Spinoza classifies abstracta such as universals, numbers, and species among *entia rationis*, beings of reason.[6] Spinoza usually states his view negatively as a denial that abstracta are real, though the strength of such denials can be interpreted in different ways. Consider a very strong version, *strong-anti-abstractionism* (SAA):

(SAA): There are no such things as abstract objects.

According to SAA, abstracta do not exist, full stop.[7] This is a kind of *eliminitivist* position about abstracta. Admittedly, Spinoza sometimes says things which, when read in isolation, sound like endorsements of SAA. In *KV*, he writes, "for all and only particulars have a cause, not universals, *because they are nothing*."[8] A few paragraphs later, he claims that universals like good and evil are "not things, or anything that has existence."[9]

---

[5] CM I/1, I/236/4-5
[6] TIE 95, G I/35/4-5; KV I/10, G I/49/9-10; KV II/4, G I/60/20-21; CM I/1, G I/233/30-31; EIIp49s. Cf. Suarez DM VI.
[7] Joachim seems inclined towards this reading of Spinoza (Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 38 and 209).
[8] KV I/6, G I/43/7-8 (emphasis mine)
[9] KV I/6, G I/43/30-31

Spinoza appears to reach a similar conclusion about faculties like wills and intellects: "when I consider them attentively, they seem to me to be universals, and I cannot attribute anything real to them."[10] Spinoza also chides those who "say that a being of reason is not a mere nothing."[11] More indirectly, Spinoza denies that "abstractions and universals" provide causes or explanations,[12] and there are hints in these early writings that Spinoza thinks exercising explanatory and/or causal powers is a necessary condition for existence, a belief he explicitly endorses in the *Ethics*.[13]

Nevertheless, I think it is fairly clear that Spinoza does not endorse SAA, even though he does want to deny a certain ontological status to abstracta. Rather, Spinoza is trying to indicate the *mind-dependent* character of abstracta.[14] According to this more moderate position, abstracta are metaphysically dependent entities, namely, beings that depend for their existence on the activities of finite minds like ours. On this reading, instead of the stronger SAA, Spinoza intends a *weak-anti-abstractionism* (WAA), such as:

(WAA): Abstract objects are mind-dependent entities.

More specifically, Spinoza thinks abstracta are confused representations of a finite mind. In Spinoza's preferred ontology, abstract objects are the representational content of certain finite modes of thinking, a conclusion that Descartes had already reached in his *Principles*: "In the same way, number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in

[10] KV II/14, G I/81/18-20
[11] CM I/1, G I/235/10-11
[12] TIE 99, G II/36/14-20; see also TIE 92-93, G II/34; KV I/6, G I/43; and KV II/16, G I/83
[13] TIE 99, G II/36; EIp36, G II/77/14
[14] See, in addition to the texts cited below, TIE 72, G II/27

general and not in any created things, is merely a mode of thinking, and same applies to all the other *universals*, as we call them."[15]

If this reading is correct, then Spinoza's denials of reality or existence to abstracta should be read as compressed denials of *mind-independent* existence rather denials of existence *simpliciter*. This becomes clearer in *KV* when Spinoza treats the non-existence of abstracta like goodness and evil as equivalent to their being merely modes of thought: "good and evil, or sins, are nothing but modes of thinking, not things or anything that has existence."[16] Likewise, in several other passages concerning abstracta, Spinoza contrasts mind-independent and mind-dependent existence, being an *ens reale* vs. being an *ens rationis*, rather than existence and non-existence *simpliciter*.[17] Indeed, Spinoza criticizes those who would infer non-existence *simpliciter* from mind-dependence:

> For if anyone looks outside the intellect for what is signified by those words [*ens rationis*], he will find it to be a mere nothing. But if he means modes of thinking themselves, they are indeed real beings. For when I ask, what is a species, I seek nothing but the nature of that mode of thinking, which is really a being and distinguished from another mode of thinking.[18]

Of course, the history of medieval disputes over universals makes it clear that mind-dependence comes in a wide variety of forms. As far as I can tell, Spinoza shows little interest in (or even awareness of) the rich details of these historical disputes. Spinoza tends to paint the conceptual landscape with pretty broad strokes. For instance,

---

[15] Descartes, *Principles* I/58, CSM I/212, AT VIIIA/27
[16] See also EIp4, in which Spinoza (notoriously) equates "nothing exists in reality" with existing "outside the intellect."
[17] KV I/10, G I/49/5; KV II/16, G I/825-15; CM I/1; G I/234-236, Ep12, G IV/57/18-19
[18] CM I/1, G I/235/11-16

he lumps moderate and extreme realists about universals together in spirit, even if not letter:

> But this objection arises from ignorance, from the fact that men have formed universal ideas…They maintain, then, that these [universal] ideas are in God's intellect, as many of Plato's followers have said, viz. that these universal ideas (such as rational animal, etc.) have been created by God. And though Aristotle's followers say, of course, that these things are not actual, but only beings of reason, nevertheless they very often regard them as things.[19]

As it stands, however, WAA (applied to universals) could have been accepted by Aristotelian realists, conceptualists, and nominalists alike. For this reason alone it would be nice to get a bit clearer on precisely which form of mind-dependence Spinoza would accept for abstracta.

Here is one avenue for comparison. While medieval Aristotelians could have accepted WAA, most – virtually all prior to the 14th century – would have claimed that abstracta like universals are *fundamentaliter in re*, despite being *formaliter in mente*.[20] I think Spinoza would deny that abstracta are *fundamentaliter in re*, as this qualification was usually understood. For Spinoza, abstracta are modes of thinking whose grounds are *not* found in mind-independent things.[21] I infer this from Spinoza's claims that abstracta are neither "infer[ed] from anything real"[22] nor "in nature".[23] More decisively, Spinoza explains, "there is no agreement [*convenientiam*] between an *ens reale* and the *ideata* of

[19] KV I/6; G I/42/26-35
[20] Suarez provides a helpful historical overview (DM VI.ii).
[21] Suarez comes close to endorsing this very position when he claims, "the universal unity arises through the activity of the intellect, granting that the *basis or occasion* is taken from the singular things themselves" (DM VI.v.1, my emphasis). But the sense of "basis" in Suarez is stronger than mere occasion; the things themselves ground or "provide the basis" for (potential) universality (DM VI.ii.8).
[22] TIE 99; G II/36/19
[23] KV I/10, G I/49/5

an *ens rationis*,"[24] which I take to be sufficient for denying that abstracta are *fundamentaliter in re*. Spinoza writes that such abstracta are "only our own work,"[25] adding in the *Ethics* that they "do not indicate the nature of anything [real]".[26]

While these remarks place Spinoza outside the so-called moderate realist camp, Spinoza also makes it clear that he does not go as far as some more extreme nominalists. He claims that *entia rationis* neither arise from "a sheer act of the will alone" nor consist in "terms connected with one another."[27] This rules out a more staunchly nominalist position of the sort one finds in Hobbes (whom Leibniz famously called a "super-nominalist"), and places Spinoza in the family of conceptualists, for whom abstracta are modes of thought occasioned by but not grounded in mind-independent things.[28]

Regardless of the territorial mapping, Spinoza holds an especially deflationist view of abstracta. He restricts their representations to finite minds, from which it follows that abstractions always involve *confused* representations: "We, on the contrary, attribute a knowledge of singular things to God, and deny him a knowledge of universals, except insofar as he understands human minds."[29] Spinoza also claims in these early writings that, strictly speaking, abstractions are not *ideas* at all. (This is why I have refrained from phrasing Spinoza's views in terms of "abstract ideas.") Although they are confused representational modes of thought,[30] they are "not ideas of things, and cannot in any way

[24] CM I/1, G I/235/30-31. One reason the slightly later Spinoza might cite for this lack of agreement is the general independence of anything mental from anything non-mental, but he isn't relying on that here.
[25] KV I/10, G I/49/5-6
[26] EIapp, G II/83/12-13
[27] CM I/1, G I/237/13-16
[28] See Hobbes, *Leviathan* IV and Leibniz, L 128.
[29] CM II/7, G I/263/6-9
[30] I take it that for Spinoza, all mental modes are representational, though here I rely on the weaker claim that *ens rationis* are all representational, a point supported by Spinoza's claim that they have *ideata*, though they are not ideas.

be classed as ideas."[31] Perhaps most striking of all, Spinoza believes that abstractions are neither true nor false: "Still these modes of thinking cannot be called ideas, nor can they said to be true or false, just as love cannot be called true or false, but [only] good or bad."[32] (I will return to this point later).

Beginning around 1663, Spinoza deflates the status of abstracta yet further. He writes to Lodewijk Meyer, "Measure, Time, and Number are nothing but modes of thinking, or rather, of imagining." Such abstracta are instead "only aids of the imagination."[33] In the *Ethics*, Spinoza is more explicit about this downgrade, claiming that universal notions like good, beauty, and blame are "only modes of imagining [that] do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination…I call them beings, not of reason, but of the imagination."[34] No longer fit even to be *entia rationis*, abstracta are consigned to the realm of *entia imaginationis*, a status that helps explain our tendency to be confused and wrong about them, as we will see shortly.

1.2 Spinoza's positive account

For all his denials and deflations, Spinoza does think that abstractions play important roles in our cognitive lives. In these early writings, Spinoza stresses that abstracta are cognitive crutches that assist our limited mental abilities, things that "help us more easily retain, explain, and imagine the things we have understood."[35] In particular, they often work as mnemonic devices:

> That there are certain modes of thinking which help us to retain things more firmly and easily…to recall them to mind…is sufficiently established for those who use that well-known rule of memory, by which to retain something very new

[31] CM I/1, G I/234/29-30
[32] CM I/1, G I/235/17-19; Hobbes makes a very similar point (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV.11).
[33] Ep 12, G IV/57/7-8
[34] EIapp, G II/83/15-16
[35] CM I/1, G I/233/30-32; see also Ep12, G IV/56/10-14; cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV.3

> and imprint it on the memory, we recall something else familiar with it, which agrees with it, either in name or in reality. Similarly, the Philosophers have reduced all natural things to certain classes, to which they recur when anything new presents itself to them. These they call genus, species, etc."[36]

Spinoza's idea is that abstracta like biological kinds help us recall particulars through mental associations. They help in the same way that it often helps, when you first meet someone, to associate their name with someone you already know who has the same name. Spinoza's point about associative memory isn't very striking. That the great Porphyrian tree, versions of which had formed the cornerstone of medieval biology for centuries, mostly reflects a helpful memory trick was a far more provocative claim.

Lest we think Spinoza did not intend anything so strong, he makes the same point again a few paragraphs later, now dismissing historical squabbles over real definitions:

> When Plato said that man is a featherless biped, he erred no more than those who said that man is a rational animal…he referred man to a certain class so that when he wished to think about man, he would immediately fall into the thought of man by recalling that class, which he could easily remember.[37]

Far from being a paradigmatic disagreement over deep philosophical anthropology, Plato and Aristotle's disagreement over the real definition of human beings merely points to how their memories worked a bit differently from each other.

This explains why Spinoza thought that abstractions are not true or false so much as better or worst. After all, some mnemonic devices work better than others. In fact, as Spinoza goes on to point out, how well they work depends partly on our individual physical and psychological makeup. Hence the usefulness of particular abstractions might vary from person to person, which undermines the bite of disagreement over them. After all, who would go to the mat over whether thinking of Sally your roommate or Sally your

[36] CM I/1, G I/234/1-10
[37] CM I/1; G I/235/19-26

first-grade teacher is a better way to remember Sally your new student's name? Here we also see why Spinoza might not have had much interest in the history of theories of universals and other abstract-laden metaphysics. Studies of those turn out to be studies of how human memories and imaginations work and differ. Fascinating for psychologists perhaps, but hardly limning the depths of reality.

Spinoza concedes that we should use something like *ersatz* universals in philosophy. In a much discussed passage in *TIE*, he writes, "So although these fixed and eternal things are singular, nevertheless, because of their presence everywhere, and most extensive power, they will be to us *like universals*, or genera of the definitions of singular, changeable things".[38] According to this passage, the "fixed and eternal things" – however one tries to map them onto Spinoza's later ontology – are concrete particulars that are nonetheless diffused across changeable things in a way that is analogous to the way that universals are traditionally thought to be one over many. Spinoza asserts the need for some sort of one-in-many, identity-amid-diversity in his metaphysics, so long as all the objects involved are particulars. (Herein lies the interpretive puzzle, however, as attributes seem ready-made to satisfy the one-over-many condition, whereas certain modes seem to best satisfy the particulars-only condition. Not for nothing has this passage attracted considerable attention.)

1.3 Questions of consistency

This last point invites questions about whether Spinoza's deflationary view of abstracta in these early writings is consistent with his own ontology, especially as it appears in full bloom in the *Ethics*. Of particular concern are Spinoza's categories of

[38] TIE 101, II/37/5-8

attributes, (formal) essences, and common notions, since it is not clear how these categories escape his own early anti-abstractionism.

There is much to be said here, but due to space and topic constraints, I can only sketch each concern and offer a brief remark in reply.[39] Spinoza claims in *CM* that the distinction between a substance and its attributes is only a distinction of reason.[40] However, if *distinctions* of reason, like *beings* of reason, are not *fundamentaliter in re*, then the case for the subjectivist interpretation of attributes in these early texts becomes quite strong, even though it is very difficult to reconcile attribute subjectivism with other Spinozistic claims. As Wolfson acutely puts this point, "what is true of universals is also true of attributes."[41] Spinoza also insists in these early texts that, except in the case of God, the essence of a thing is non-identical with its existence, and that these essences have reality "outside the intellect."[42] One might wonder how such apparent Platonism about essences is consistent with his conceptualism about universals and abstracta.[43] Thirdly, although Spinoza denounces making inferences using abstractions and universals, Spinoza comes to think by the time of the *Ethics* that philosophical progress can be made using common notions that reflect "those things which are common to all."[44] He even admits that these common notions form "the foundation of our reasoning."[45] How do such common notions and their representations of shared properties in the *Ethics*

[39] For a fuller discussion of these concerns and possible replies, see Newlands, "Spinoza on Universals," from which some of the basic points made here are drawn.
[40] CM I/5, G I/258/1-4 and CM I/3, G I/240/6-9
[41] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 153.
[42] CM I/2; G I/238/27-30
[43] For additional discussion on this point, see Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 209.
[44] EIIp38, G II/118/20; see also EIIp38c, G II/119 and EIIp39, G II/119
[45] EIIp40s, G II/120/16

avoid being confused representations of the imagination, as his earlier blanket critiques suggest?

I will mention three possible avenues of reply and then draw a more general lesson for contemporary Spinoza interpreters. To the first concern, note that distinctions of reason come in two flavors for Suarez, Descartes, and, one might think, Spinoza. According to Suarez, a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis* (distinction of *reasoning* reason) has no foundation in extra-mental reality and arises "exclusively from the reflection and activity of the intellect." By contrast, a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantae* (distinction of *reasoned* reason) *is* founded in things and arises from incomplete or partial concepts of things.[46] If one wishes to preserve the role of the intellect in Spinoza's theory of the attributes without embracing the subjectivist interpretation, one might argue that the distinctions among attributes and between substance and its attributes is, for Spinoza, a distinction of reasoning reason, one that is *fundamentum in re*, as opposed to the distinction of reasoned reason that holds among abstracta and universals.

With respect to essences, Spinoza is clear in these early works that the formal essences of finite things are contained in God's essence, and so in that sense, unlike "abstractions," finite essences *are* grounded in extra-mental reality, namely God's own.[47] Furthermore, and again echoing Descartes, Spinoza does not claim that the essence and existence of finite things are *really* distinct, whatever that might mean.[48] His point is that they are *conceptually* distinct, a distinction that does not obtain between God's essence

[46] Suarez, DM VII.i.4; see also Descartes CSMK III/280, AT IV/349. For a fuller discussion of Suarez's distinction and its relation to Spinoza's theory of attributes, see Newlands, "Spinoza on Universals."
[47] KV Appendix II, G I/119; CM I/1, G I/239/1-4
[48] Descartes, CSMK III/280-1, AT IV/348-9

and existence.[49] Hence, one might argue, Spinozistic essences always have an existing, concrete ground, after all: either God (in the case of the essences of non-existing things) or the things themselves (in the case of the essences of existing things).

To the last concern, Spinoza claims that his "common notions or axioms" are not derived from the imagination, nor do they exhibit the sort of variability across persons we see in universals and abstractions. Instead, they are grasped by the intellect as ideas and possess an invariant content. One might argue that this alternative *source* of acquisition vouchsafes the clarity and distinctness of these ideas in a way that is consistent with the confusion and variability of abstractions and universals acquired via the imagination. Admittedly, this imposes a division among abstractions that is not present in these early writings, but perhaps by the time of *Ethics*, Spinoza realized that not all abstractions are bad, *pace* his earlier sweeping rejections.

None of these replies suffice to remove all concerns, of course. For instance, does Spinoza have a convincing account of why "common notions" of bodies do, in fact, vary across minds? (His examples are ideas of properties like relative and absolute motion[50], but 17th century physics itself shows that there was tremendous variability across such ideas and that they are not, in fact, "common to all men."[51]) Does he have an independent argument showing that his carving up of good vs. bad abstractions lines up with a distinction of sources? How does Spinoza's own distinction among these sources of acquisition – intellect vs. imagination – avoid the charge of faculty reification that he levels against others in the case of the will and intellect (see section III below)?

[49] CM I/1, G I/238/27-30
[50] EIIp14L2, G II/98
[51] EIIp38c, G II/119/6

Rather than pursue these issues deeper into the Spinozistic thicket, let me draw a more general lesson for contemporary interpreters. It is tempting to rephrase Spinoza's views in categories familiar to contemporary analytic metaphysics, a discipline that once again abounds in appeals to abstracta. But we should be cautious in doing so, at least if we want to respect Spinoza's own anti-abstractionism when presenting his views. Hence, those of us (myself included) in the habit of paraphrasing Spinoza's views in terms of *propositions*, *facts*, *states of affairs*, and so forth should also offer either an account of how such paradigmatic abstracta can be reconciled with Spinoza's anti-abstractionism or an explanation of those contemporary categories solely in terms of singular concreta. To be frank, either is much harder to do than is usually acknowledged.[52]

2. On Thinking Abstractly

Discussions of thinking abstractly often focus on how the mind comes to have and use abstractions. For example, according to an influential Thomistic account, abstract thinking involves the active intellect extracting a *form*, the *intelligible species*, from *phantasms*.[53] A bit less exotically, thinking abstractly on this account is the process in which the mind extracts conceptual content from representations of distinct particulars, representations that have been acquired through sense-experience. The resulting conceptual content contains only general, i.e., universal or non-individuating, information.

Like most progressive early moderns, Spinoza had little patience for the underlying Aristotelian form/matter empiricism behind that philosophy of mind, much

[52] To cite but one example, Curley is surely right in his criticism of Wolfson's identification of substance with the *summum* genus on grounds that it is inconsistent with what I'm calling Spinoza's anti-abstractionism (Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 34-35), but it is left unclear how Curley's own preferred categories of facts and propositions aren't similarly inconsistent with Spinoza's anti-abstractionism.
[53] See Aquinas, ST I, Q 85

less for "bits of nonsense" like intelligible species and phantasms.[54] As Descartes had done, Spinoza limits thinking abstractly to the mental process of giving selective attention to particular aspects of things for the purpose of comparison, association, and retention.[55]

According to Spinoza, we often engage in this process when we are bombarded with more images of individual things than we can distinctly track, a kind of sensory overload in which the mind compensates by ignoring minor differences and focusing on "what they all agree in," i.e., on objective similarities.[56] In other words, abstract thinking is a mental crutch; we do it because we lack the ability to represent every bodily impression distinctly. This is another reason why abstractions involve confusion and error, according to Spinoza: they are usually generated from indistinct impressions.[57]

For the most part, however, when Spinoza refers to thinking abstractly, it is in the context of a warning: avoid it as much as possible while doing philosophy.

> From this we can see that above all it is necessary for us always to deduce all our ideas from physical things, or from real beings, proceeding, as far as possible, according to the series of causes, from one real being to another real being, in such a way that we do not pass over to abstractions and universals, neither

[54] Ep 56, G IV/261/34-35, translated by Samuel Shirley
[55] See TIE 76, G II/29; EIIp40s1, G II/120-121; and IIp48s, G II/129-130; cf. Descartes, *Principles* I.59, CSM I/212, AT VIIIa27-28; and CSMK III/280, AT IV/350. (A nice discussion of Descartes' view is found in Murdoch, "Exclusion and Abstraction in Descartes' Metaphysics".) Aquinas acknowledges that selective attention and comparison is at least a *part* of abstract thinking (e.g., ST I, Q 85, art 1, ad 1; art 1, ad 4; and art 5, ad 1).
[56] EIIp40s1, G II/121/19; see also TIE 76, G II/29. Spinoza's decision to focus mostly on these cases reflects another point of distance from medieval Aristotelianism, for whom intellectual abstraction was a perfection reserved for rational beings like humans, angels, and God.
[57] TIE 55, G II/20; TIE 75-6, G II/28-29; CM I/1, G I/234; EIIp40s1, G II/121

> inferring something real from them nor inferring them from something real. For to do either interferes with the true progress of the intellect.[58]

Spinoza's main concern is that thinking abstractly while "investigating nature" often leads to a confused reification of abstracta. Like the Platonists and Aristotelians, we are liable to treat them as mind-independent beings rather than as merely modes of our thought. "From this it is easy to see how carefully we should be on guard in the investigation of things, lest we confound real beings with beings of reason."[59] He repeats this warning in many places, including his earliest *TIE*: "so long as we are dealing with the investigation of things, we must never infer anything from abstractions, and we shall take very great care not to mix up the things that are only in the intellect with those that are real."[60]

Spinoza thinks we are liable to make this confusion for the same reason we think abstractly in the first place: some of the differences between concrete particulars are almost too subtle for our limited minds to notice.

> For when things are conceived abstractly, as all universals are, they always have a wider extension in our intellect than their particulars can really have in nature. And then, since there are many things in nature whose difference is so slight that it almost escapes the intellect, it can easily happen, if they are conceived abstractly, that they are confused.[61]

---

[58] TIE 99, G II/36/14-20; see also TIE 75, G II/28-29; TIE 93, G II/34; KV II/4, G I/60; CM I/1, G I/235-6
[59] CM I/1; G I/235/31-34; see also TIE 93, G II/34; KV II/4, G I/60; KV II/16, G I/82-3; Ep12, G IV/56-58
[60] TIE 93, G II/34/15-18. Joachim suggests that the main errors involved in abstract thinking will be falsely ascribing properties to real things (Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 159), but I take the errors to be more radical than that: we falsely ascribe mind-independent existence to mental entities. That is, we aren't just wrong about the natures of mind-independent things wrong; we are wrong about which mind-independent things there are in the first place.
[61] TIE 76, G II/29/7-11

Furthermore, Spinoza suggests, because people use words like "Peter" and "man" in similar ways, they often assume – incorrectly – that the referents have the same ontological status. This is yet another reason why natural language is a very unreliable guide to ontology, according to Spinoza.[62]

Admittedly, there isn't anything terribly novel in Spinoza's warning against reifying abstractions. Descartes, for example, concludes a letter about universals and beings of reason with a similar warning: "It seems to me that the only thing which causes difficulty in this area is the fact that we do not sufficiently distinguish between things existing outside our thought and the ideas of things, which are in our thought."[63] As we'll see in Part 3, Spinoza's more original contribution lies in just how many philosophical errors he thinks have arisen from failing to distinguish abstractions from things.

2.1 Spinoza's alternative

Before turning to his wider diagnosis, let us consider briefly Spinoza's proposed remedy in these early texts for "conceiv[ing] things too abstractly."[64] His remedy is not to simply avoid thinking abstractly altogether – that's a psychological impossibility for limited beings like us. Rather, his remedy is to pursue a methodology that, as he describes it in *TIE*, has two main safeguards against the confusions arising from abstract thinking. First, the starting point of our investigation should be an *ens reale* that is so singularly unique and comprehensive that it simply *cannot* be grasped abstractly. Fortunately, there is such a being:

> But since…the origin of Nature can neither be conceived abstractly, or universally, nor be extended in the more widely in the intellect than it really is and

[62] EIapp, G II/83/14-17; CM I/1, G I/234/34-I/235/3; IIp49s, G II/131-32
[63] CSMK III/280, AT IV/350
[64] TIE 75, G II/28/30

since it has no likeness to changeable things, we need fear no confusion concerning its idea…for it is a unique and infinite being.[65]

Secondly, we should move from our idea of the "origin of Nature" to other real things in such a way that "we never infer anything from abstractions."[66] In other words, "we ought to seek knowledge of particulars as much as possible."[67] In philosophy, we do this by making deductive inferences from "particular, affirmative essences or from true and legitimate definition[s]."[68] In the case of *essences*, we should seek only what follows from them "according to the series of causes, from one real being to another real being."[69] In the case of *definitions*, we should avoid the traditional, abstract-laden method of seeking a *genus* and *differentia* to discover an individual's *infima species* and instead use Spinoza's new method for giving real definitions.[70]

Interestingly, Spinoza also claims that we should not examine the "series of singular, changeable things," which "offer us nothing but extrinsic denominations [and] relations", and instead we should study "the fixed and eternal things and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things." And as noted above, when we study the fixed and eternal things, we are exploring entities that "will be to us like universals".[71] In other words, Spinoza offers a methodology that at once avoids abstractionism while still employing *ersatz* abstracta – the best of both worlds, as it were.

2.2 Spinoza's argument

---

[65] TIE 76, G II/29/11-18
[66] TIE 93, G II/34/16
[67] TIE 98, G II/36/3-4; see also EVp36s, G II/303
[68] TIE 93, G II/34/19-20
[69] TIE 99, G II/36/16-17
[70] TIE 96-97, G II/35-36; for critical discussion, see Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione,* 36-38.
[71] TIE 101, G II/36/30-II/37/8

I have been sketching Spinoza's anti-abstractionism, but we might also wonder whether he has much by way of argument for his view. Unfortunately, in these early writings, there is much more declaration and accusation than argument and proof. (This is not an uncommon feature of these texts, in my view.) The closest I have found to an independent argument for anti-abstractionism occurs in KV:

> So the question now is whether good and evil should be regarded as beings of reason or as real beings. But since good and evil are nothing but relations, they must, beyond any doubt, be regarded as beings of reason. For one never says that something is good except in respect to something else that is not so good, or not so useful to us as something else. So one says that an apple is bad only in respect to another that is good or better. None of this could possibly be said if there were not something better, or good, in respect to which [the bad] is so called.[72]

Generalizing a bit, Spinoza's argument runs something like this:

For any entity *x* (where being the subject of predication suffices for being an entity),

> (1) If all the non-trivial properties of *x* are relational, then *x* is a mind-dependent entity.[73]
>
> (2) All the non-trivial properties of certain abstracta ("the *A*s") are relational.
>
> (3) Therefore, the *A*s are mind-dependent.

Although there is a fair bit of tinkering we could do to this argument on behalf of Spinoza, for the sake of space I will stick to a few general observations.

---

[72] KV I/10, G I/49/9-20

[73] Spinoza claims in this passage that "good and evil are nothing but relations," which suggests that the entities in question must have *only* relational properties. I am interpreting this as a sufficient, but not necessary condition. This allows him to grant that an entity might have some uninteresting non-relational properties, such as being self-identical (cf. TIE 101, G II/36).

The most interesting thing about this argument is that it relies on the more general point that extrinsic relations are mind-dependent. Spinoza claims just this a little earlier: "Some things are in our intellect and not in Nature; so these are only our own work, and they help us understand things distinctly. Among these we include all relations, which have reference to different things."[74] This draws Spinoza closer to Leibniz and Bradley, both of whom explicitly use the famed Principle of Sufficient Reason to reject the real existence of extrinsic relations. Unfortunately, Spinoza himself offers nothing further in support of the first premise linking extrinsic relations with mind-dependence.

The way that Spinoza tries to establish the second premise is more worrisome. He appeals in this passage to the predication patterns of competent speakers ("one never says that…"). In other places, he appeals to facts about disagreement: if two people disagree about whether *x* is F, or if the same person claims that *x* is F at t1 and that *x* is not F at t2, then if *x* is F, F is a relational property of *x*.[75] Needless to say, this is a remarkably bad inference. More charitably, perhaps Spinoza appeals to disagreement as the *explanandum* for an abductive argument for anti-abstractionism, rather than as a premise in a deductive argument. His inference might be something like, *people disagree about goodness, the best explanation of which is that goodness is mind-dependent*. Unfortunately, none of these approaches to justifying premise (2) is very promising. Even more worrisome, it isn't clear how Spinoza's own attempts to read ontological conclusions off of our predication patterns is not itself an instance of "judg[ing] the things from the words, not the words from the things," an approach he summarily rejects when others do it.[76]

[74] KV I/10, G I/49/5-8; see also TIE 101, G II/36-37
[75] In addition to the *KV* passage, see also EIapp, G II/82-83 and EIIp40s1, G II/121
[76] CM I/1, G I/235/8-9

Those looking for an independent and cogent argument for Spinoza's anti-abstractionism in these early texts will probably be disappointed. At the end of the next and final section, I will suggest one way to mitigate that sense of disappointment.

3. Anti-Abstractionism Applied

I noted earlier that Spinoza's warning against reifying abstracta is not very novel in the 17th century. What I think *is* more original is how wide-ranging Spinoza takes the consequences of this confusion have been. He stands out among his peers for the sheer range of views that he thinks arise from confusions over abstracta. In fact, one way he might try to motivate his anti-abstractionism is to rehearse the many consequences of violating it. And to his fellow anti-abstractionists who *accept* some of those consequences, Spinoza offers a sharp challenge: how can one consistently reject abstractionism in some cases, but tolerate it in others?

In addition to his general warnings that abstract thinking leads to "great error," "the most absurd fantasies," and "the most absurd absurdities" and "nonsense, not to say madness,"[77] Spinoza claims in these early writings that the following have arisen by confusing abstract objects with real objects: materialism about the soul[78], the problem of evil[79], privation theory[80], moral realism[81], faculty psychology[82], libertarian accounts of freedom[83], confusions about infinity[84], falsehoods about God's providence and knowledge[85]; false mechanistic physics[86], false accounts of human psychology[87] –

[77] In order of citation: CM I/1, G I/236/5; CM II/7, G I/263-2; Ep12, G IV/57/12; and Ep 12, G IV/55/13
[78] TIE 74, G II/28
[79] KV I/6, G I/43
[80] Ep 19, G IV/91-92
[81] CM I/6, G I/248; KV I/10, G I/39; KV II/4, G I/60; KV I/6, G I/43
[82] KV II/16, G I/81-3; Meyer picks up on this point in his preface to Spinoza's PP (G I/132)
[83] KV II/16, G I/82; Ep2, G IV/9
[84] Ep12, G IV/59
[85] KV I/6, G I/42-3; CM II/7, G I/162-3

indeed, it turns out that even Zeno's paradox arises from this confusion![88] Spinoza's implicit criticism here is a familiar one: Descartes and others accept principles like anti-abstraction which, when applied consistently, also rule out other of their more cherished beliefs. Going *all the way* with anti-abstractionism is something previous philosophers were unwilling or unable to do, according to Spinoza.

I will focus on just two of these cases to convey how Spinoza typically applies his anti-abstractionism. One of the theological issues is fairly straightforward. Spinoza criticizes those who claim that God's providence and knowledge extends only to universals. However, since independent of human mental activity, there exists only singular things, the different positions of Jewish and Islamic medievals, such as Averroes, Avicenna, Maimonides, and, most importantly in this context, Gersonides must all be incorrect. Of course, there is an indirect way in which God has knowledge (non-homonymously) of universals, namely "insofar as he understands human minds".[89] But from God's perspective, there exists only singular things. Abstract thinking is distinctive to finite minds, though that makes us "special" only in the way that needing to tie a string to our finger to remember to take out the trash makes us special.

In the case of faculty psychology, Spinoza claims in *KV* that "because man has now this, now that volition, he forms in his soul a universal mode which he calls the will, just as he forms the idea of man from this and that man."[90] In the *Ethics*, Spinoza is more explicit: "[T]here is in the mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving,

---

[86] Ep 12, G IV/55-56
[87] CM I/1, G I/235-236
[88] Ep 12, G IV/58-59. As I point out in "Spinoza on Universals," in the *Ethics*, Spinoza adds the following to this list of confusions: divine and natural teleology, theological anthropomorphism, theological voluntarism, the occurrence of miracles, notions of sin, blame, and merit, objective aesthetics, and skepticism.
[89] CM II/7,G I/263/8-9
[90] KV II/16, G I/82/8-11

etc…these and similar faculties are either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings or universals, which we are used to forming from particulars."[91] Hence, according to Spinoza, faculty psychology stems from our tendency to compare particular mental states, notice and name similarities for convenience, and forget that those names – "will," "intellect," etc. – refer only to our mental constructs.

Although Spinoza is quick to wield his anti-abstractionism to undermine all manner of what he took to be unpalatable metaphysical and theological views, I believe he has an even more sweeping application in mind. Earlier, I cited the passage in *CM* in which Spinoza claims that Plato and Aristotle's disagreement over the definition of "man" doesn't run very deep. "So when Plato said that man is a featherless biped, he erred no more than those who said that man is a rational animal. For Plato was no less aware than anyone else that man is a rational animal."[92] Instead, Spinoza thinks, Plato was just using a mnemonic device that worked better for him than Aristotle's did. Spinoza emphasizes that this aptness for retention and recollection varies from person to person, meaning that arguments over such definitions is akin to arguments over whether associating faces with colors or with sounds makes it easier to recall people's names.

This is the seed of an analysis of philosophical disagreement that Spinoza extends further in the *Ethics*.[93] After repeating the point from *CM* about conflicting definitions of human beings, Spinoza concludes:

> And similarly concerning the other [universals and abstractions] – each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. *Hence it is not*

[91] EIIp48s, G II/129/20-24
[92] CM I/1; G I/235/19-26
[93] The next two paragraphs closely approximate material in Newlands, "Spinoza's Theory of Universals."

> *surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers*, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things.[94]

Spinoza's even broader idea is that once we see the confused source of most predications of universals and abstractions, we will be more inclined to interpret what had *seemed* like substantive disagreements as really just signs of differences in the constitutions of people's bodies and imaginations – differences hardly worth institutionally-sponsored intolerance and suppression.

This points to a broader, moral-political upshot of his anti-abstractionism:

> And most controversies have arisen from this, that men do not rightly explain their own mind, or interpret the mind of the other man badly. For really, when they contradict one another most vehemently, they either have the same thoughts or they are thinking of different things so that what they think are errors and absurdities in the other are not.[95]

That is, when we realize that abstractions like good and evil do not carve the joints of reality, but merely describe different physiological and psychological traits, we rob such notions of their power over us and we discover a way of to discuss competing scientific, religious, political, and philosophical opinions in the congenial spirit in which physicians discuss pathologies. Here we find a fine example of how tightly Spinoza interweaves his ethics and metaphysics.

This also suggests that, like much else in Spinoza, accepting his early anti-abstractionism may be part of a package deal. That may blunt the force of some of my earlier criticisms of Spinoza's anti-abstractionism. I claimed that many of Spinoza's

[94] EIIp40s, G II/121/33-35; for a somewhat similar sentiment, see Descartes, CSMK III/281, AT IV/350
[95] EIIp47, G II/129/3-7

remarks on abstracta and abstract thinking are not very novel, historically sensitive, or carefully made. I also pointed out that Spinoza offers few, if any, independent arguments for his anti-abstractionism. A lack of novelty, clarity, and argument: that sounds more like the sort of thing one writes on the back of bad undergraduate papers than what one should say in a paper about one of the great minds of Western philosophy.

However, as I have urged in this last section, whatever philosophical vices plague Spinoza's early anti-abstractionism, I think we catch an insightful glimpse of what will become one of Spinoza's greatest philosophical virtues: his systematicity. As Spinoza moves through these early works and into the *Ethics*, he sees more and more philosophical, theological, scientific, and moral-political errors stemming from a smaller and smaller set of common sources. One common source that he continues to cite is the sort of abstractionism that he has been warning against all along. And for those who *are* convinced by Spinoza's anti-abstractionism, it is worth keeping in mind that within contemporary metaphysics, a field rich in reified abstracta, targets for the young Spinoza's criticisms are abundant once again.

Works Cited

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948. [ST]

Curley, Edwin. *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1969.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Translated by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.

Joachim, H.H. *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd edition. Edited and translated by Leroy E Loemker. Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969. [L]

Murdoch, Dugald. "Exclusion and Abstraction in Descartes' Metaphysics," *Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (170), 38-57.

Newlands, Samuel. "Spinoza on Universals." In *Early Modern Theories of Universals*. Edited by Stefano Di Bella. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming

Suarez, Francisco. *On Formal and Universal Union*. Translated by J.F. Ross. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1964. [DM VI]

_____. *On the Various Kinds of Distinction*. Translated by Cyril Vollert. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1947. [DM VII]

Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of Spinoza*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934.