"Spinoza on Universals"
Samuel Newlands (University of Notre Dame)
For *The Problem of Universals in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Stefano Di Bella

Like many prominent early moderns, Spinoza espouses a brand of nominalism about "abstractions and universals," and he frequently warns against confusing universals with real things. While many of his conclusions about the status and origins of universals were increasingly common in the 17th century, Spinoza insists that the consequences of falsely reifying universals reach farther than his contemporaries recognized. Spinoza also tries to integrate his criticisms of reified universals into distinctive tenets of his own metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and even ethics. At the same time, however, Spinoza employs universal-like categories in very reifying-sounding ways, raising concerns about whether Spinoza fully abides by his own admonitions. This too is part of an increasingly common pattern in early modern discussions of universals: reject mind-independent universals in one domain while appearing to tacitly accept them in others.

In this paper, I will begin by looking at Spinoza's account of universals and focus on what he takes to be their ontological status (section I) and psychological origins (section II). Although Spinoza is not always clear on the metaphysical details, he is a kind of conceptualist (to use older terminology) and a resemblance trope nominalist (to use more contemporary terminology). I also examine Spinoza's more distinctive accounts of the confused origins of universal notions and the limited positive role they can play in our cognitive lives. In section III, I turn to Spinoza's critique of universals and highlight what he takes to be the dangerous and widespread consequences of falsely reifying abstractions. In the final section, I raise a worry about internal consistency. I focus on Spinoza's account of attributes and common notions, and I suggest ways to mitigate some

– but only some – of the tension between these doctrines and Spinoza's claims about universals.

I. The Ontological Status of Universals

In this section, I will present Spinoza's account of the ontological status of universals. In his early writings, Spinoza lumps universals together with other "abstractions" like species and numbers, and he categorizes them all as *entia rationis*, things whose existence depends on the existence and activity of a (finite) mind.[1] He contrasts these mind-dependent entities with particular or singular things, *entia reale*.[2] Spinoza claims that universals are nothing but modes of thought, the same conclusion that Descartes had reached in the *Principles*.[3]

While this rules out so-called Platonic or "extreme realist" accounts of universals, it leaves unclear which of the other traditional positions on universals Spinoza would have endorsed. After all, most prominent Scholastics agreed that universals were mind-dependent beings, but they thought such dependence was consistent with a kind of realism about universals.[4] Spinoza does not show much interest in the details of the long history of medieval disputes about universals in the Latin, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Like many other early moderns, Spinoza's occasional references to medieval sources on universals are vague and fairly general. Admittedly, classifications of medieval views on universals, including those made by later commentators, are themselves frustratingly inconsistent and ambiguous. Hence, it will probably be more illuminating to compare

[1] I discuss Spinoza's early views on universals and, more generally, abstracta and abstract thinking in much more detail in Newlands, "Spinoza's Early Anti-Abstractionism." Some of the material in that paper overlaps with parts of this one.
[2] For some examples, see TIE 99-100, G II/36; KV II/16, G I/82-83; CM I/1, G I/234-236
[3] CM I/1, G I/233-234; Descartes, *Principles*, I/58, CSM I/212, AT VIIIA/27
[4] For a survey of examples, see Suarez DM VI.ii.1, VI.vi.5, VI.vi.12, and VI.vii.2.

Spinoza's views to those of particular historical figures, rather than to employ amorphous categories like "nominalism," "conceptualism," "Aristotelianism," and the like[5] – with the caveat that there is little reason to think Spinoza actually knew or cared much about particular pre-modern views of universals.

Nevertheless, for those who value such classificatory schemes, there is a strong case to be made that Spinoza was a *conceptualist* about universals, that is, someone who believes that universals are only mental states (i.e., concepts that can denote multiple particulars) and are, at most, merely occasioned by mind-independent, particular things.[6] Spinoza claims in the metaphysical appendix to his book on Descartes that "there is no agreement [*convenientiam*] between an *ens reale* and the *ideata* of an *ens rationis*"[7], meaning that the representational content of these mental states does not directly correspond to the mind-independent nature of the represented objects. Spinoza also asserts that things like universals are not "in nature"[8], nor are they "inferred from anything real"[9]. Instead, they are "only our own work"[10]. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza adds that

[5] The term "nominalism" suggests a view according to which universals are only names or words, but it is very hard to find a pre-modern philosopher who endorsed that view. As it is more often used, "nominalism" is a catchall term that refers to the large range of views that reject realism about universals, though exactly what counts as "realism about universals" also varies across classification schemes. "Conceptualism" is often presented as a more moderate version of nominalism, one that accepts the existence of universal concepts but denies that universals exist in things. "Aristotelianism" is often presented as a form of moderate *realism* about universals, one that accepts universal names, concepts, and *universalia in rebus*, but denies the existence of *universalia ante res* (i.e., "Platonism"). However, depending on how one cashes out the difference between conceptualism and Scholastic Aristotelianism, it can easily seem like most Scholastic Aristotelians, including Aquinas, Ockham, and Suarez (not to mention Aristotle himself) are conceptualists – and therefore not Aristotelians! (On this classification, Scotus looks like the closest to an "Aristotelian" among the major Scholastics.) Even worse, when conceptualism is understood as a form of nominalism, the charge of conceptualism can become toxic, though often this is the result of terminological slipperiness and innuendo, rather than careful reconstruction of views.

[6] Like Spinoza himself sometimes does, I will set aside his doctrine of parallelism for ease of expression, but everything I say in this paper can be recast in parallel-friendly terms, if one wishes.

[7] CM I/1, G I/235/30-31

[8] KV I/10, G I/49/5

[9] TIE 99; G II/36/19

[10] KV I/10, G I/49/5-6

universals do not "indicate the nature of anything [real]"[11] and they "indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another."[12]

While these passages indicate Spinoza's distance from realists of all stripes, Spinoza also avoids going as far as some nominalists. He claims that *entia rationis* like universals are not "fictitious beings", which means that they do not "depend on the will alone, nor do [they] consist of any terms connected with one another."[13] I take this to be Spinoza's way of saying that universals are not merely verbal or "nominal" entities and that their content is not purely conventional. This rules out a position like the one endorsed by Hobbes (whom Leibniz famously called a "super nominalist") and places Spinoza in the company of virtually all other prominent early modern philosophers.[14]

Although this brand of conceptualism may seem like a sharp departure from pre-modern views about universals, it was already the predominant view among late Scholastics by the start of the 17th century. For illustration, consider the closeness of Spinoza's ontology of universals with that of Suarez, the great 16th century Scholastic metaphysician. Like Spinoza, Suarez accepts that "everything which is exists is necessarily singular and individual."[15] Universals, according to Suarez, exist only in the mind and universal natures are distinct from particulars only by a distinction of reason.

To be sure, Suarez repeatedly claims that although the unity of a universal across particulars "arises through the activity of the intellect," nonetheless "the *ground or*

[11] EIapp, G II/83/12-13
[12] EIVpref, G II/208/8-11
[13] CM I/1, G I/237/13-16
[14] See Hobbes, *Leviathan* IV and Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters,* 128, and other essays in this volume.
[15] Suarez, DM VI.ii.2

occasion is taken from the singular things themselves [ex ipsis rebus singularibus *fundamento seu occasione*]."[16] This appeal to an *in rebus* ground for universals might sound more realist than Spinoza's position, but the italicized phrase hints at just how deflationary this grounding is for Suarez. Universality is grounded in things in the sense of being *occasioned by* things, a very weak kind of dependence that early modern conceptualists like Descartes and Spinoza could accept.

Furthermore, when Suarez spells out what it is in things that ground or occasion the mind's creation of universals, he claims, "there is merely something in this [particular nature] to which something is similar in the other nature; however, this is not real unity but similarity."[17] As Suarez emphasizes a little later, "they are grounded in the things themselves, not insofar as the nature has any universality in the things, but insofar as there is in the individuals themselves agreement and similarity in essence and its properties."[18] In other words, objective similarities among particulars are that which, in things, ground the content of universal concepts. Hence for Suarez, universals, as mental concepts, succeed in denoting the natures of individuals only *extrinsically*, in virtue of "the non-repugnance of the singular things themselves to having it possible that other things be like them."[19] As we will see, this sort of resemblance-based conceptualism is the position that Spinoza adopts as well. Not for nothing does Suarez admit, "the nominalists…speak otherwise, although in reality they do not differ much from us."[20]

---

[16] Suarez, DM VI.v.1, emphases mine. For other passages in which Suarez emphasizes the grounding [*fundamentum*] of universals (as well as common natures and genus/species) in things, see DM VI.ii.8, VI.iii.7, VI.v.3, VI.ix.8, and VI.ix.21. For the most conceptualist sounding passage in Suarez, see DM VI.vii.2

[17] Suarez, DM VI.ii.13

[18] Suarez, DM VI.v.3

[19] Suarez, DM VI.v.3; Spinoza makes a very similar claim about the universals good and evil in EIVp37s2, G II/39.

[20] Suarez, DM VI.v.3; see also Suarez, DM VI.ii.1

However, even within the family of conceptualists, Spinoza stands on the more deflationary and radical end of the spectrum. Spinoza claims that only finite minds use universals. God directly knows only singular, concrete things, though God can know universals in virtue of knowing the representations of finite minds.[21] And while Spinoza believes that universals are just confused finite mental states, he denies that universals are even *ideas*.[22] From this Spinoza infers that predications of universals 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."[23] This is one reason why Spinoza concludes that universals are not the proper objects of scientific investigation, *pace* even conceptualist-leaning Scholastics like Suarez.[24] In later sections, we will see Spinoza distancing himself even further from mainline conceptualism.

If it is difficult to map Spinoza's scattered and elliptical claims onto historical camps, it is even more difficult to situate him in the expansive array of contemporary positions on universals. I do not think Spinoza's texts provide enough to detail to give us much confidence here, but if forced to speculate, I would put Spinoza's ontology of universals close to that offered in D.C. Williams' resemblance trope nominalism.[25] I say this because I think that, for Spinoza, (a) properties, or modes, exist; (b) all modes, including modes of modes, are *tropes* (i.e., particularized properties); (c) universals are nothing but modes of modes (i.e., modes of a mind, which is itself a mode); and (d) similarities between modes constitute the *in rebus* ground of universal concepts. I take (a)

[21] CM II/7, G I/262-263; KV I/6, G I/43; Suarez makes a similar point (Suarez, DM LIV.ii.23).
[22] CM I/1, G I/234/29-30
[23] CM I/1, G I/235/17-19; Hobbes makes a very similar point (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV.11).
[24] Cf. TIE 99, G II/36 and Suarez, DM VI.v.3
[25] D.C. Williams, "The Elements of Being," *Review of Metaphysics*, 7 (1953), 3-18 and 171-192. Spinoza would surely deny the bundle theory of substances attached to Williams' trope theory, but that is distinct from Williams' account of universals in terms of resemblance among particularized properties, which I think Spinoza could/would/should affirm.

to be obvious, (b) to have been aptly defended by John Carriero,[26] and (c) to be clear from the preceding. The interpretive point most in need of defense is (d), and I offer the following thin textual reed on its behalf.[27]

According to Spinoza, universals like "man, horse, dog, etc." are formed when the mind distinctly considers "only what [a group of particulars] all agree [*conveniunt*] in".[28] Admittedly, this might sound like Spinoza is positing some additional thing, a property or universal, that several particulars all *share* in common, *pace* his overarching conceptualism about universals. However, Spinoza often uses "agreement" in a thinner sense that does not require literal sharing or multiple instantiation.[29] On this reading, singular things agree with one another in the sense of having highly similar particularized properties or modes.[30] They agree in virtue of resembling one another.

In a similar vein, Spinoza claims that we employ universal notions when we "recall something else familiar to us, which *agrees with it*, either in name or *in reality*."[31] I think we should again understand "agreement in reality" in terms of *resemblance*. In the very next sentence, Spinoza appeals to collections of such resembling things as the true

---

[26] Carriero, "On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics."
[27] Descartes offers a similar account of universals in terms of resemblance in *Principles* I/59, and it isn't too much of a stretch to think that Spinoza intentionally echoes Descartes on this in CM and in the *Ethics*. As Michael Istvan helpfully pointed out in correspondence, Leibniz sometimes offers a similar analysis (Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, III/iii/12-14).
[28] EIIp40s, G II/121/13-23
[29] See esp. EIIp13L2, G II/98; EIIp37, G II/118; and, more controversially, EIVp18s, G II/223. Suarez also used the language of agreement to denote mere similarity: "the natures which are denominated universals should be in singulars and the singulars themselves should have among themselves something in which they agree or are alike [*conveniant vel similia sint*] and something in which they differ or are distinguished" (Suarez, DM VI.ii.1). Much more difficult for my reading are passages like EIIp31, in which Spinoza appeals to a "common property of singular things," and EIIp39d, in which Spinoza claims that something may be common to multiple bodies in a way that it is "equally in the human body and in the same external bodies".
[30] To make this consistent with Spinoza's earlier claim that "there is no agreement" between singular things and the *ideata* of universals and other *entia rationis* (CM I/1, G I/235/30-31), we should understand him in CM to be denying that the content of universal concepts represent real things as they are in themselves (as literally sharing properties), not that real things are objectively similar to one another.
[31] CM I/1, G I/234/5-7, emphasis mine

bases of pre-modern universals: "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."[32]

In short, some of the particular aspects of singular things more exactly resemble aspects of other things, and collections of such similar aspects or things are the basis of universal concepts – which is just to attribute (d) to Spinoza. In contemporary metaphysics, admitting that the content of universals rests on objective similarities among tropes commits Spinoza to a *nominalist* position. In the minds of some late medieval Aristotelians, the same admission would commit him to a more *realist* position. This again says more about the plasticity of these categories than it does about the looseness of Spinoza's views.

II. The Origins of Universals

Spinoza provides a two-fold account of the origin of universals that clarifies and reinforces his deflationary ontology. In the first part, Spinoza explains the causal source of universals, understood as finite modes of thought. In the second part, Spinoza explains how universals nonetheless play an important role in our cognitive lives, despite their lowly ontological status and disreputable origin. In both parts, Spinoza retains some pre-modern claims, but he uses them to reach novel and fairly radical conclusions.

In very general terms, Spinoza thinks the content of universals arises from mental activities of abstraction and comparison. This is certainly not an original idea. Hobbes, Gassendi, and Descartes make very similar claims, and the role of intellectual abstraction

[32] CM I/1, G I/234/8-10; see also Ep12, G IV/57/3-6 and CM I/1, G I/235/22-26: "But [Plato] 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."

and comparison in forming universal concepts has a rich heritage since at least Aquinas.[33] For example, according to the influential Thomistic account, when forming universals the active intellect extracts *intelligible* species from *material* species (the "phantasms") by stripping away individuating information from sensory representations via selective attention. This combined effort of the senses and the intellect, when habitual, produces a concept in the intellect whose content is non-individuating, i.e., general or "universal." Three details of this account are worth highlighting. (1) For humans, universals are ultimately abstracted from sensory input, in accordance with general Scholastic empiricism. (2) Abstraction is an act of giving selective attention to features of singular things that are only conceptually distinct from the singular thing itself.[34] (3) Although the resulting universal concept exists only in the intellect, it is nonetheless grounded in the natures of mind-independent, singular things.[35] As the slogan runs, universals are *formaliter in mente*, but *fundamentaliter in re*.

Spinoza rejects many aspects of the Thomistic account, from the general form/matter empiricism to the more specific appeal to intelligible species and phantasms (which Spinoza calls "bits of nonsense").[36] More radically, Spinoza also came to reject Aquinas' view that universals are formed through the activity of the *intellect*, and claims that they arise solely from the *imagination*. They are, Spinoza writes, "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."[37]

---

[33] See especially Aquinas, ST I, q85 and Descartes, Principles I/59, CSM I/212-213, AT VIIIA 27-28. For an early version of this in Spinoza, see KV I/1, G I/16-17, note c. For Hobbes and Gassendi, see the previous essays in this volume.
[34] Aquinas, ST I, q85, art 1, ad 1 and ad 2
[35] Aquinas, ST I, q 85, art 2, ad 2
[36] Ep 56, G IV/261/34-35, translated by Samuel Shirley
[37] EIapp, G II/83/15-16; see also EP 12, G IV/57

In the previous section, I claimed that Spinoza also rejects (3), at least on a suitably strong reading of "founded in" – though I also claimed that some late Scholastics deny (3) as well on such a strong reading. (I also indicated a very weak sense that Spinoza could accept: universals are grounded in things in the sense that objective similarities between particulars occasion the formation of universal notions by the mind.)

Spinoza does accept both (1) and (2) from the Thomistic account, though he draws very different conclusions from them. Spinoza thinks that the mind forms universal notions from bodily impressions caused by singular things. The mind abstracts from the particulars by paying selective attention to what a collection of those singular things "all agree in", i.e., their objective similarities.[38] But whereas Aquinas presents this activity as an ennobling feature of humans, Spinoza takes the generation of universals to be inevitably full of confusion and error.

> These notions they call *Universal*, like man, horse, dog, etc. have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining – not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [things]…and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body.[39]

Spinoza thinks that when the body is so bombarded with sensory images of individual bodies that it lacks the ability to process them distinctly, the mind compensates by ignoring slight differences and focusing selectively on perceived similarities. In other words, our mind represents this confusing array by abstracting away from particular features of individuals and representing their similarities as a single, more distinct image, e.g., humanity.

[38] EIIp40s1, G II/121
[39] EIIp40s1, G II/121/13-20

Spinoza also believes that the representation of similarities of individuals is always more powerful and distinct than the representation of their respective differences. He thinks this based on a somewhat crude mechanistic principle: "For the body has been affected most [NS: forcefully] by this [viz. what is common], since each singular has affected it."[40] In other words, when I see ten cups that are similar in color but very different in sizes, my abstracted representation of their color will be more affecting than my representations of their individual sizes, since I have *ten* sensory impressions of a nearly identical color but only *one* of each size.

Spinoza concludes that universals are a kind of mental crutch, a way of coping with the fact that "there are many things in nature whose difference is so slight that it almost escapes the intellect."[41] Linguistically, we "express this [confusion] by the word 'man' and predicate it of infinitely many singulars."[42] So although universals are formed through abstraction from sensory impressions, the confused nature of all such bodily impressions means that universals will be only slightly more clear and distinct versions of confused representations. Hence, not only are universals mind-dependent for Spinoza, they are also the products of confused and inadequate images and representations. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza singles out *good*, *evil*, *confusion*, *warm*, *cold*, *beauty*, *ugliness*, *will* and *intellect* as examples of universals formed in this way, a list that indicts not only Aristotelian science, but also moral realism, traditional theism, and even Cartesian philosophy of mind. In Spinoza's hands, what had seemed like a fairly standard starting point about the role of abstraction in forming universals turns into a wide-ranging critique of several central 17th century beliefs.

[40] EIIp40s1, G II/121/20-21
[41] TIE 76, G II/29/9-11
[42] EIIp40s, G II/121/22-23

Although Spinoza thinks false accounts of universals have given rise to a host of philosophical and theological errors, he admits that they play an ineliminable role in our cognitive lives. Spinoza emphasizes that, in addition to helping us avoid cognitive overload, universals are important mnemonic devices:

> That there are certain modes of thinking which help us to retain things more firmly and easily, and when we wish, to recall them to mind or keep them present to mind, is sufficiently established for those who use that well-known rule of memory, by which to retain something very new 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.[43]

This explains how universals can be "good or bad" without being true or false: some mnemonic devices work better than others. For example, grouping things together by color is a better aid to recollecting particulars than grouping them by distance from the sun.

The content of universal notions will also vary from person to person, given the variability of our cognitive structures and circumstances. "But it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has been more often affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily."[44] In slogan form, "each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body".[45]

From subject-variability Spinoza infers that apparent disagreements over universal notions and real definitions aren't actually disagreements at all:

---

[43] CM 300, G I/234/1-10; see also TIE 82, G II/31; Ep12, G IV/56-57; and CM I/1, G I/233. Hobbes makes a similar point (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV.3).
[44] EIIp40s1, G II/121/24-27
[45] EIIp40s1, G II/121/33-34

> So when Plato said that man is a featherless biped, he erred no more than anyone else who said that man is a rational animal. For Plato was no less aware than anyone else that man is a rational animal. But 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.[46]

Spinoza repeats this example in the *Ethics* and concludes, "Hence it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things."[47]

This is an easy point to overlook, but it highlights one of Spinoza's deepest interests in the topic of universals. Spinoza thinks that once we see the confused source of most predications of universals, we can correctly interpret what had *seemed* like substantive disagreement over, say, the nature of God and human beings as really just differences in the particular constitutions of our bodies – a difference hardly worth mob violence, war, and institutionally-sponsored sanctioning, to name some of Spinoza's more pressing practical concerns.

> 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.[48]

Realizing that universals do not carve the joints of reality but instead describe the contours of different physiological and psychological persons helps rob them of their power over us and promises a way of discussing divergent scientific, religious, and philosophical opinions in the congenial spirit in which physicians discuss pathologies. Here we find is a vivid example of just how tightly Spinoza intertwines his ethics and metaphysics.

---

[46] CM I,1; G I/235/19-26
[47] EIIp40s1, G II/121/31-35
[48] EIIp47, G II/129/3-8

III. The Dangers of Universals

For Spinoza, the main danger of universals is that we tend to forget their true ontological status and origin, and we reify them in ways that lead to all sorts of confusion, misunderstandings – and worst. In his early writings, Spinoza repeatedly warns against confusing universals and other *entia rationis* with real things. The failure to do so, he claims, "interferes with the true progress of the intellect,"[49] leads to "great errors, as has happened to many before us"[50] and is "something a true philosopher must scrupulously avoid."[51] Spinoza warns that even Aristotelians who admit that universals are *entia rationis* are guilty of confused reification in practice:

> 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.[52]

Spinoza offers three reasons why reification is common and easily done. First, we are prone to reify abstractions like universals because they "arise from the ideas of real beings so immediately that they are quite easily confused with them by those who do not pay close attention."[53] That is, the process of abstraction from confused sensory representations is so easily missed that we readily treat these mental constructions as real things:

> 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

[49] TIE 99, G II/36/19-20
[50] CM I/1, I/236/4-5
[51] KV II/4, I/60/31-32
[52] KV I/6, G I/42/26-35
[53] CM I/1, G I/234/31-33

> it almost escapes the intellect, it can easily happen, if they are conceived abstractly, that they are confused.[54]

The second reason is that, as we saw in the previous section, confused bodily representations based on similarities often stand out more clearly and vividly than do the representations of the discrete individuals. Third, Spinoza points out that natural language easily misleads us into thinking that the referent of universal terms like "man" have the same ontological status as the referent of singular terms like "Peter," since both terms seem to function in syntactically similar ways. This is one reason to avoid reading ontology off of our predications, a practice Spinoza denounces as "judg[ing] the things from the words, not the words from the things."[55]

Spinoza is hardly alone in warning against reifying abstractions like universals, of course. Descartes concludes a letter about universals 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."[56] Still, Spinoza's rhetoric far surpasses that of his contemporaries. He claims that failing to heed this warning leads one to "absurd fantasies", "the most absurd absurdities" and "nonsense, not to say madness".[57] More importantly, Spinoza takes the consequences of treating universals, species, and other beings of reason as real things to be far more wide-ranging than Descartes and others appreciated.

Spinoza claims that a wide range of philosophical, theological, and scientific views arise from confused reification of abstractions. Many of these views were widely

[54] TIE 76, G II/29/7-11
[55] CM I/1, G I/235/8-9; see also EIIp40s1, G II/121; EIIp49s, G II/132; and EIapp, G II/83
[56] Descartes, CSMK III/280, AT IV/349
[57] 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, respectively

held by his fellow early moderns, all of whom claimed to affirm something close to Spinoza's conceptualist position. Spinoza offers a challenge to his fellow nominalists. They claim to accept the mind-dependent, conceptualist status of universals and to heed the warnings against reifying them. And yet, in other domains, they tacitly accept the very same reification of abstractions. Spinoza's challenge is this: either reject *all* such reified abstractions, even if that means rejecting popular and entrenched views, or else admit to being inconsistent. In other words, Spinoza's fellow early moderns claim to avoid reifying universals and abstractions, but Spinoza thinks they do not do so consistently, or else they would have rejected far more than the "easy cases" such as Platonism about species and numbers.

Here is a list of the philosophical problems and positions that Spinoza explicitly names as arising from false and confused reification of abstractions, starting with more specific mistakes and moving to more general views:

- materialism about the soul[58]
- Zeno's paradox[59]
- privation theory of evil[60]
- misunderstandings of infinity[61]
- realism about secondary qualities[62]
- incorrect views of Divine providence and knowledge[63]
- false mechanistic physics[64]
- libertarian accounts of human freedom[65]

[58] TIE 74, G II/28
[59] Ep 12, G IV/58-59.
[60] Ep 19, G IV/91-92
[61] Ep12, G IV/59
[62] EIapp, G II/81
[63] KV I/6, G I/42-3; CM II/7, G I/162-3
[64] Ep 12, G IV/55-56
[65] KV II/16, G I/82; Ep2, G IV/9; EIIp49s, G II/135

- false views of perfection and imperfection[66]
- the problem of evil[67]
- forms of theological anthropormorphism[68]
- faculty psychology[69]
- blame, praise, sin and merit[70]
- objective aesthetics[71]
- divine and natural teleology[72]
- moral realism[73]
- skepticism[74]

The most striking thing about this list is how wide-ranging it is, applying to central positions in science, theology, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics. Spinoza is rightly regarded as a systematic philosopher, someone who uses a small set of principles to generate a comprehensive account of the world. Here we see another aspect of his systematicity: he also tries to show how many alternative philosophical views stem from violating a core set of principles.

Spinoza makes many of these charges in passing, so for the sake of space and interest, I will focus on one of his more developed examples.[75] Spinoza claims that those who, like Descartes, postulate real and distinct faculties of will and intellect often do so on the basis of a confused reification akin to what we are prone to do with universals:

---

[66] EIVpref, G UU/207
[67] KV I/6, G I/43; EIapp, G II/83; EIVpref, G II/206
[68] EIapp, G II/79
[69] KV II/16, G I/81-3; EIIp48s, G II/129; E Iip49sMeyer picks up on this point in his preface to Spinoza's PP (G I/132)
[70] EIapp, G II/81
[71] Eiapp, G II/82
[72] EIapp, G II/81-82; EIVpref, G II/206
[73] CM I/6, G I/248; KV I/10, G I/39; KV II/4, G I/60; KV I/6, G I/43; EIVpref II/208
[74] Eiapp, G II/82
[75] This appears in both *KV* and the *Ethics*. The *KV* version is considerably more detailed, but the arguments are otherwise so similar that I will cite them interchangeably.

> [T]here is in the mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, etc. From this it follows that these and similar faculties are either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings or universals, which we are used to forming from particulars. So intellect and will are to this or that idea, or to this or that volition as 'stone-ness' is to this or that stone, or man to Peter or Paul.[76]

His basic point is clear. There exist singular volitions, desires, and so forth, just like there exist singular bodies. These particular volitions have similarities to each other, and they are often so similar that it is easy for the mind to form a representation of their perceived similarities. These representations constitute universal notions like Will and Desire. Philosophers then attribute causal powers to these reified universals, which remain mere *entia rationis*.

> For 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. And because he does not sufficiently distinguish real beings from beings of reason, it comes about that he considers the beings of reason as things that are truly in nature, and thus posits himself as a cause of some things… For if you ask someone why man wills this or that, the answer is: because he has a Will.[77]

This is nonsense, according to Spinoza.

> But since, as we have said, the will is only an idea of this or that volition (and therefore only a mode of thinking, a *being of reason*, and not a *real being*), nothing can be produced by it. *For nothing comes from nothing.* So I think that when we have shown that the Will is no thing in Nature, but only a Fiction, we do not need to ask whether it is free or not.[78] (KV 124, emphases in original).

Herein lies the origin of faculty psychology, Spinoza thinks. While engaging in a perfectly good inquiry about the source of particular volitions, philosophers confusedly reify a mere concept, ascribe to it causal powers and even a capacity for freedom – all while forgetting that, *extra mentem*, there is no such thing as a will in the first place.

---

[76] EIIp48s, G II/129/20-26
[77] KV II/16; G I/82/8-I/83/2
[78] KV II/16; G I/83/2-8

The most interesting thing about this argument against faculty psychology is that it isn't really an argument at all, at least in the sense of having premises that are antecedently more convincing than is the denial of the conclusion. It is highly unlikely that Descartes, for instance, would accept Spinoza's premises that the faculty of willing is posited because he reifies an abstraction, or that we should be more confident in our lack of freedom than in the real existence of a source of causal power within us. The whole thing reads more like a declaration of Spinoza's views rather than a defense of them.

This is a general feature of Spinoza's charges of reification: they are wielded as *diagnoses*, rather than as *conclusions* of an argument. Spinoza does not try to prove that reification occurs in these cases; instead, he tries to show that a range of positions that disagree with his own systematic conclusions plausibly originate from a confused reification like those committed by realists about universals. However, if one does not already agree with Spinoza that, for example, "the particular willing [of] this or that…must proceed from some external cause,"[79] one will not find his charge very worrisome nor his diagnosis very convincing.

This may sound like a veiled criticism of Spinoza, but I do not intend it that way. Spinoza's approach here is precisely what we should expect from a systematic philosopher. Very often, the plausibility of individual pieces of Spinoza's views require accepting other, controversial claims he makes, which are themselves plausible only if one accepts yet further controversial claims, and so on. (Coherence is no substitute for correspondence, but it's certainly a move in the right direction!) While there may be some basic and *prima facie* plausible entry points into his system – the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the contours of metaphysical perfection, and perhaps a denial of *extra*

[79] KV II/16, G I/82/1

mentem reality to universals – many of Spinoza's claims and criticisms come as a package. It should be unsurprising that Spinoza's charges of reification are no exception.

Furthermore, although Spinoza does not put the matter quite this way, he does raise an interesting challenge for his fellow early moderns. As I noted above, many would have cheered his rejection of mind-independent universals. Spinoza points out, however, that the very same sort of reification error may lie behind other, more cherished doctrines. For those who want to preserve such doctrines, Spinoza issues the following sort of challenge: just try to defend, say, moral realism without tacitly reifying goodness in the same way that Platonists reify numbers.

IV. Questions of Consistency

Spinoza's challenge in the previous section highlights a worrisome pattern in discussions of universals by prominent early moderns. When 17th century philosophers focused explicitly on the general topic of universals, or on certain instances of universals such as species and numbers, they were quick to denounce even moderate realist accounts. Yet in other contexts, when their focus is elsewhere, they appear to implicitly endorse a mind-independent realism about entities that seem very similar, such as transcendentals (e.g., goodness, being, thing), geometrical forms, essences, "true and immutable natures," and so forth.

In short, early moderns do not treat all mind-independent universals equally: some appear more acceptable than others. One reason for this uneven tendency is that by and the large the most prominent early moderns were not especially interested in the traditional problem of universals, especially in comparison to earlier Scholastics or 20th century analytic metaphysicians. Often an attack on realist accounts of universals seems

merely instrumental, performed in the service of advancing a new mechanistic physics, for example. This is one reason why their attacks on realist theories of universals often focus on examples like *natural kinds* and *infima species*, essential elements in the superstructure of Aristotelian science. There is also little evidence that these early moderns fully grasped the difficulties of embracing an exceptionless form of nominalism, difficulties that arguably were not fully appreciated until the 20th century revival of questions about universals. It turns out that thorough going nominalism is *very* difficult to maintain, and so perhaps it is unsurprising that when their philosophical energies were directed elsewhere, 17th century philosophers regularly slipped back into more realist mindsets.

While that might help explain, even if not excuse, the tacit division of "good" vs. "bad" universals in philosophers like Descartes and Hobbes, what about Spinoza? After all, he was well aware of potential inconsistencies on this topic, and he tried to use it as leverage against rival views. So if it turns out that he too is inconsistent, if he fails to abide by his own universal admonitions against reifying "abstractions and universals," if he too tacitly accepts some realist universals as "good" without argument – that would be especially problematic.

Unfortunately, Spinoza sometimes looks guilty of the same sort of inconsistency he scorns in others. At times, he is even upfront about this. For example, in his early treatise on philosophical method, Spinoza claims that we should investigate nature "in such a way that we do not pass to abstractions and universals, neither inferring something real from them, nor inferring them from something real."[80] Just two paragraphs later, however, Spinoza confesses that he needs something *like* universals after all. "So

[80] TIE 99, G II/36/17-19

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, and the proximate causes of all things."[81] In other words, Spinoza admits that his own ontology contains singular, concrete things that function *like* reified universals and that can be legitimately used in philosophical and scientific inquiries. In short, he appeals to *ersatz universals*.

It is to Spinoza's credit that he admits his need for something that is (a) one-over-many, (b) distinct from existing concrete singulars, and (c) legitimately used in the investigation of the world. However, these were among the very roles that universals played in Scholastic accounts! In the *Ethics*, Spinoza invokes three categories that correspond to these traditional functions for universals: (a) attributes, (b) formal essences, and (c) common notions. However, to maintain consistency, Spinoza needs to show either that the reification of these categories is consistent with his anti-reification, conceptualist framework for universals, or else that he can capture the *functions* of reified universals without actual reification. For the sake of space, I will focus on two of these examples, one metaphysical and one methodological.[82]

IV.1. Attributes

Spinoza's theory of attributes has been subjected to centuries of interpretive puzzlement and debate. I will only take up a small subset of these issues here. One

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

[82] For a bit on the concern with formal essences and a line of reply on behalf of Spinoza, see Newlands, "Spinoza's Early Anti-Abstractionism." These are not the only points of tension. In section I, I pointed to similar concerns about common natures/properties of bodies. Additionally, in Part Two of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's physics seems inconsistent with anything like non-conventional natural kinds, yet in Part IV, Spinoza invokes what look like realist versions of natural kinds, forms, and natures (see esp. EIVPref, EIVp29, EIVp36d, and EIVp37s1). Also in Part Two, Spinoza claims that notions like *being* and *thing* "signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree" (EIIp40s1, G II/121/11-12). Yet the metaphysics of Part One is *full* of appeals to these transcendentals. For other points of concern, see Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 417-422 and, more unevenly, Haserot, "Spinoza and the Status of Universals."

concern is that Spinoza's attributes function very much like universals. They are fundamental ways of being that characterize multiple singular things. But if Spinoza rejects realist theories of universals, it seems like he should also reject realist theories of attributes. As Wolfson acutely puts it, "what is true of universals is also true of attributes."[83] Spinoza either needs to distinguish universals from attributes or accept the mind-dependence of attributes as well.

Wolfson famously accepts the latter option, and uses Spinoza's theory of universals to motivate his subjectivist reading of the attributes.[84] Most recent interpreters reject the subjectivist reading of the attributes, though without giving as convincing a defense of the difference between universals and attributes in Spinoza as one might like.[85] Steven Nadler, for example, argues *pace* the subjectivist interpretation, "Spinoza regards the attributes as real and essential features of Nature. They represent objective kinds or categories of things, and not merely phenomenal or subjective ways of regarding things."[86] That's true, but the trickier question is whether Spinoza is *entitled* to such mind-independent, objective categories, given his conceptualism about universals. In this section, I will suggest one line of defense that also respects the mind-dependent passages emphasized by Wolfson and other subjectivist interpreters.

There can be little doubt that Spinoza links his theory of attributes to the intellect. He defines an attribute as "what an intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence."[87] He later claims, "*outside an intellect* there is nothing except substances and their affections. Therefore there is nothing *outside an intellect* through which a number of

[83] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 153.
[84] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 142-156
[85] The locus classicus of the non-subjectivist reading is Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 428-461.
[86] Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 130
[87] EId4, G II/45/17-19

things can be distinguished from one another except substances, *or what is the same*, their attributes, and their affections."[88] The connection is even more explicit in a letter from 1663: "I understand the same by attribute [as I do by substance], except that it is called attribute in relation to an intellect, which attributes such and such a definite nature to substance."[89] This suggests at a minimum that intellects play a role in distinguishing a substance from its attributes. Independent of the mind, a substance and its attributes are not distinct, though they can be distinguished by an intellect. That is, to borrow terminology from Suarez and Descartes, the distinction between a substance and its attributes is a distinction of reason, and not a real distinction, for Spinoza.

The intellect also appears to play a role in distinguishing attributes from each other. In EIp10, Spinoza claims that each attribute is conceived through itself, which means it is conceptually and explanatorily independent of every other attribute. He claims in EIp10s that the conceptual independence of attributes does not *entail* that there is a real distinction between any attributes. But given his substance monism, Spinoza must also accept the stronger claim that *there is* no real distinction between any attributes. If attributes are not really distinct from each other, yet are distinct enough to be conceived independently of one another, then perhaps attributes are distinguished from each other only by a distinction of reason as well.

Spinoza explicitly accepts these conclusions in CM.[90] He writes, "that distinction is said to be of reason which exists between substance and its attribute."[91] Several

[88] EIp4d, G II/47/25-II/48/2, emphasis mine
[89] Ep9, G IV/46/22-23; in all these, I have rendered the article in front of "intellect" as indefinite, whereas Curley renders it as definite.
[90] Gueroult is surely right that we should be careful in projecting too much of what Spinoza says in CM onto him (Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 446), but as I tried to show, these points are have a textual basis in the *Ethics* and correspondence as well. I should emphasize that I do not mean to collapse what Spinoza says in the

paragraphs later, he adds, "And from this we can now clearly conclude that all distinctions we make between the attributes of God are only distinctions of reason – the attributes are not really distinct from one another."[92] There is nothing especially remarkable about this view. Descartes makes the same claims in the *Principles*, and it was commonly held that God's attributes are distinct from each other and from God's essence only by a distinction of reason.[93]

However, within Spinoza's system, this admission seems to make the plurality of God's attributes too mind-dependent, especially if one also thinks that, according to Spinoza, God lacks an intellect altogether (EIp17s). Tying the diversity of attributes to intellects appears to transform their distinctness and multiplicity into a mental projection onto what is, in itself, a homogenous and indistinct divine nature. Indeed, this mental projection looks very much like what Spinoza decried as the psychological projection of unity across distinct singulars that occurs when we reify universals – exactly as Wolfson had charged. The mind-dependent character of attributes, in turn, seems to imply that substance, in itself, does not have any attributes at all, much less a multiplicity of attributes, a conclusion that would make Spinoza a kind of attribute *nihilist*.[94]

What's a non-subjectivist interpreter to do? Here is one way to proceed while still admitting that (a) distinctions between a substance and an attribute and distinctions among attributes of a single substance are merely distinctions of reason for Spinoza and

---

Ethics about conceptual dependence into Suarez/Descartes' "conceptual distinction"; these are somewhat orthogonal categories, a point Tad Schmaltz helpfully pressed me on in discussion.

[91] CM II/5, G I/258/1-2; see also CM I/3, G I/240/16-18

[92] CM II/5, G I/259/3-5; see also KV I/22, G I/23/14-16

[93] See Descartes, *Principles* I/62-63 and Suarez, DM VI.i.4-5.

[94] In Newlands, "Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza," I explain the havoc this conclusion would wreak elsewhere in Spinoza's metaphysics. Note that nothing I have said here turns on whether the distinction is made by a finite or infinite intellect. There are good textual reasons to think that Spinoza had the infinite intellect in mind in EId4, but the problems with mind-dependence remain even if a *finite* mode is not the ground of attribute multiplicity.

(b) Spinoza's appeal to an intellect in his discussions of attributes is his way of capturing (a). Suarez and Descartes both recognize that distinctions of reason come in two varieties: *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis* (usually translated "a distinction of reasoning reason") and *distinctio rationis ratiocinantae* ("a distinction of reasoned reason"). A distinction of reasoning reason is a mental distinction that lacks any basis in mind-independent things.[95] As Suarez explains, "it arises exclusively from the reflection and activity of the intellect."[96] This is the sort of purely projectionist/constructivist distinction that non-subjectivist interpreters rightly decry as inconsistent with Spinoza's other claims about attributes.

By contrast, a distinction of reasoned reason is one that has some "basis" or "foundation" in mind-independent things. Suarez emphasizes that while this distinction is still mind-dependent – "actually and formally it is not found in reality, but has its origins in the mind" – it nonetheless has an important ground in reality such that "it arises not entirely from the sheer operation of the intellect, but from the occasion offered by the thing itself on which the mind is reflecting."[97] When a thing is the foundation for this kind of distinction of reason, Suarez claims the thing must have a special "eminence" over the *relata* in two ways: "Although the same object is apprehended in each concept [of the thing], the whole reality contained in the object is not adequately represented, nor is its entire essence and objective notion exhausted."[98] First, the essence of the thing itself

[95] The stock example is the distinction between Peter and himself in the claim that Peter is identical to himself (Suarez, DM VII.i.4 and DM LIV.vi.5). Descartes mentions the two kinds of distinction of reason in correspondence, only to put the category of reasoning reason aside: "I do not recognize any distinction made by reason *ratiocinantis* – that is, one which has no foundation in reality – because we cannot have any thought without a foundation" (CSMK III/280, AT IV/349).
[96] Suarez, DM VII.i.4
[97] Suarez, DM VII.i.4
[98] Suarez, DM VII.i.5; Suarez describes these incomplete concepts as "inadequate," but we should not understand inadequacy to entail falsity in this case. It is inadequate in the sense of being incomplete.

is more real or perfect than the reality expressed by any one of the relata. Second, the concept of each relata does not exhaustively capture everything that is contained in the concept of the thing itself. And the most prominent example Suarez has in mind is the distinctions among the divine attributes and between the divine attributes and the divine essence itself.[99]

Suarez also emphasizes that distinctions of reasoned reason are not made only between *entia rationis*. That is, a reason-dependent distinction does not require reason-dependent *relata*. This helps alleviate the worry that attributes and substances would somehow become *beings* of reason in virtue of being only rationally distinct. "As is clear from the instances cited [including God's attributes], things said to be [rationally] distinct are real entities, or rather, a single real entity *conceived according to various aspects*."[100] Suarez's last phrase nicely summarizes what I take attributes to be for Spinoza: ways of conceiving the essence of substance, each of which is an extensionally adequate expression of God's essence (EIp10) but no one of which expresses that essence exhaustively (EId6).[101] On this analysis, Spinoza's God has the kind of eminent perfection required to ground distinctions of reasoned reason without admitting of any distinctions among attributes independently of being distinguished by an intellect.

Spinoza accepts that although extension is a way of conceiving the essence of God that is wholly self-contained and extensionally adequate, it does not exhaustively represent the full essence of God, a being with infinitely many attributes (EId6; EIp9).

[99] Suarez, DM VII.i.5; Suarez, DM LIV.vi.5; Descartes, CSMK 280. One interesting question is whether Spinoza would agree with Suarez's further claim that the different attributes "in an ineffably eminent manner are found united in the absolutely simple virtue of God," a point that turns on Aquinas' doctrine of analogy that, to my knowledge, Spinoza nowhere discusses. Certainly Spinoza's rationalism seems at odds with any sort of Divine "ineffability," and he is critical of appeals to eminent containment in other contexts (e.g., EIp15s).

[100] Suarez, DM VI.i.6, emphasis mine.

[101] For more on Spinoza's attributes as ways of conceiving, see Newlands, "Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza."

Although Spinoza never distinguishes these two types of rational distinctions, I think he surely intends the latter type when he claims that substance and its attributes are distinct only *in intellectu*. This can help break the worrisome link between universals and attributes. I claimed in section one that Spinoza thinks universals are only very loosely grounded in mind-independent things, in the sense of being merely occasioned by their interaction with our bodies. However, Spinoza can consistently claim that, unlike universals, distinctions among attributes *do* have a stronger ontological foundation in mind-independent things and so do "indicate the nature" of something real, namely God's essence. Admitting that God's attributes are distinguished only by a distinction of reason neither undermines the mind-independence of substance nor eliminates a real, mind-independent basis in substance for these differences. In other words, whereas Spinoza rejects moderate realism for universals, he could accept something close to it for attribute distinctions: *formaliter in mente*, *fundamentaliter in re*.

This is only a partial solution, however. For if Spinoza accepts that *attributes* are robustly grounded *in re,* even if only distinguished *in mente*, one wonders why other universals couldn't be assigned a similar status. Put differently, why are attributes like extension and thought grounded in the essence of substance and only rationally distinct from substance and each other, while traditional universals like *man* and *good* are dismissed as merely occasioned products of a confused imagination? Rather than eliminating the tension between "good" and "bad" universals, this account seems to highlight it all the more clearly!

Spinoza's reply turns on his case for *why* thought and extension are attributes in the first place, whereas *man* and *good* cannot be. Although it would take us too far afield

to pursue this much further here, the key point rests in Spinoza's claim that "there belongs to God an attribute whose concept all singular thoughts involve, and through which they are also conceived."[102] This occurs in the middle of Spinoza's proof that thought is an attribute of God. Spinoza claims that attributes are explanatorily prior to particular finite things, that "through which" these singular things are conceived.[103] This, I take it, is not the case with universals for Spinoza. The universal *man* does not explain the nature of particular men, much less everything else that exists. The explanation runs in the opposite direction, in fact.[104] Unsurprisingly, the demonstration of *that* relies on yet more Spinozistic claims about the natures of thought, extension, and men.

IV.2. Reasoning via Common Notions

Instead of philosophizing based on "abstractions and universals," Spinoza claims in his early treatise on method that we should "deduce all our ideas from physical things, or from the real beings, proceeding, as far as possible, according to the series of causes, from one real being to another real being."[105] In the *Ethics,* Spinoza devotes the bulk of EIIp40s to showing how transcendental universals, like *being* and *thing*, as well as less abstracted universals, like *man* and *dog*, arise from confused bodily impressions.[106] We expect Spinoza to repeat his earlier methodological admonition. Down with reasoning based on abstractions and universals! On to the real things!

---

[102] EIIp1, G II/86/15-16

[103] Descartes makes a similar claim about attributes being the "principle property" of a substance "to which all its other properties are referred" (Principles I/53, CSM I/210, AT VIIIA/25)

[104] Spinoza sometimes cites the disagreement over the concept of *man* as evidence for why being a man is not an explanatorily fundamental way of being of a thing (e.g., CM I/1, G I/235; EIIp40s, G II/121), though this line of argument is not very convincing. Furthermore, by the same reasoning, Spinoza should admit that 17th century disagreements over the nature of extension provide evidence that extension is not an attribute.

[105] TIE 99, G II/14-17

[106] As mentioned above, I do not know how to reconcile Spinoza's claim that "being, thing, etc." are terms that "signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree" with his own prolific use of such terms throughout the *Ethics*, including in the very scholiums of EIIp40!

At the start of EIIp40s, just before he provides his discrediting account of the origins of universals, Spinoza admits that "the foundations of our reasoning" rest on "notions which are called common."[107] A bit later, Spinoza adds, "we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things…this I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge."[108] Reasoning based on the common affections of bodies (as per EIIp13L2 and EIIp37c) sounds like reasoning based on abstractions from the bodily impressions made by distinct singular things, the sort of universals-based reasoning Spinoza previously rejected. Spinoza even acknowledges that common notions are based on ideas that neither constitute nor explain the essence of any singular thing.[109] So we should avoid them at all costs, right?

Not according to Part Two of the *Ethics*. Far from challenging this method of reasoning, Spinoza emphasizes how it is guaranteed to be adequate and true! Although he admits in passing that there is a better form of knowledge in the offing (intuitive knowledge), nothing he says in Part Two suggests that there is a deep flaw in using this method to study the world.[110]

The puzzling feature here *isn't* that Spinoza admits that we have common notions, understood as ideas of exactly similar bodily properties (EIIp13L2). Being a conceptualist about universals, Spinoza already accepts that we have universal notions or concepts. Nor is the concern that Spinoza seems to admit that things have "common" or shared properties. I claimed in section I that the sense of "common" here is consistent

[107] EIIp40s1, G II/120/15-16; see also EIIp44c2d, G II/126
[108] EIIp40s, G II/122/12-13
[109] EIIp37, G II/118; IIp44c2d, G II/126
[110] See also TTP VII/6, G III/102 for another seemingly pro-universal statement of methodology.

with his resemblance nominalism (though I also noted some passages in tension with this.)

Rather, the puzzle surrounds Spinoza's proposed methodology in the *Ethics*. He seems to admit that progress can be made via the use of *some* abstractions from bodily impressions, contra his earlier blanket warnings against inferring anything from "abstractions and universals." In fact, Spinoza opens his attack on universals in EIIp40s by saying that he will examine "which notions are more useful than others, and which are of hardly any use at all."[111] Is Spinoza now conceding that reasoning via some abstractions can be useful and appropriate, after all?

In reply, one might note that Spinoza eventually points out the *limits* of reasoning based on common notions. The reasoning that Spinoza describes as providing a "second kind of knowledge" prepares the reader to make the leap to intuitive knowledge in Part Five.[112] This intuitive, third kind of knowledge moves directly from God's essence to the essences of singular things in just the way TIE prescribed, proceeding from one real thing to another.[113] Hence, Spinoza's endorsement of reasoning via common notions in Part Two might be understood as merely provisional, much like the provisional morality in the early part of TIE or the provisional model of the "free man" in Part Four.[114] Perhaps Spinoza thought he needed to send a methodological ladder down to his readers in the early parts of the *Ethics*, even if he ultimately kicks that ladder away.

There is surely something correct in that reply, but I remain puzzled by Spinoza's about-face in EIIp40s itself. Once again, we are left wondering why some universal

[111] EIIp40s, G II/120/18-19
[112] See EVp25 and following.
[113] EIIp40s2, G II/122; TIE 99, G II/36
[114] I am grateful to Michael LeBuffe for the expression "provisional morality."

notions are even *provisionally* better than others, even if intuitive knowers avoid them all. Spinoza hints at one answer: the "bad" universal notions are acquired only via the senses and imagination, whereas the "good" universal notions are acquired via reason, even though all are occasioned by bodily affections.[115] This difference in *source* helps explain differences in the representational features of these different classes of universal notions: those drawn only from the senses and imagination are confused and mutilated, whereas those drawn from rational insight are adequate and guaranteed to be true.[116]

Spinoza's interpreters often stop here, as if showing that Spinoza *claims* that common notions are distinct from traditional universals because they are acquired through different sources suffices for showing that Spinoza is *entitled* to his division.[117]

But once again, this just pushes the bump in the carpet back a bit. Why should we accept Spinoza's claim, for instance, that abstracted ideas like "being" can be acquired only via the imagination and bodily impressions? Why accept his groupings of "good" and "bad" universals in the first place? More generally, why accept Spinoza's account of the different sources of universal notions and the corresponding representational clarity or confusion he attaches to them? As usual with Spinoza, whether one thinks he has satisfying answers will depend in large part on whether one accepts a host of other Spinozistic claims whose scope extends well beyond the topic of universals.[118]

---

[115] See esp. EIIp44c2d, G II/126

[116] For the first class, see EIIp28-29, G II/113-114; for the second, see EIIp38, GG I/118-119.

[117] For examples, see Gueroult, *Spinoza*, vol. 2, 581-2 and Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 124-5.

[118] I would like to thank audience members at the 2011 "The Problems of Universals in Modern Philosophy" conference in Pisa, Italy for their helpful suggestions and questions. I am also grateful to Michael Istvan for a series of written comments on an earlier draft. Thanks as well to Colin Chamberlain, Richard Cross, Stefano Di Bella, Liz Goodnick, Marcy Lascano, Tad Schmaltz, Eric Stencil, and Aaron Wells for helpful discussions of these topics.

Abbreviations

Frequently cited works have been identified by the following abbreviations, which are grouped by author:

Spinoza

C *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). The following abbreviations and citations to Spinoza's works are used: TIE=*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (by paragraph number); KV=*Korte Verhandeling* (by part/chapter); CM=*Cogitata Metaphysica* (by part/chapter); Ep=*Epistolae* (by letter number in G); TTP=*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (by chapter/paragraph number); E=*Ethica* (by the standard PartTypeNumber of the *Ethics* itself).

G *Opera*, 4 vols., ed. by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925). Cited by volume/page.

Aquinas

ST *Summa Theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948. Cited by part/question.

Descartes

AT *Oeuvres des Descartes*, 12 vols., ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–76). Cited by volume/page.

CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Cited by volume/page.

CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Cited by volume/page.

Suarez

DM *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, 2 vols. (Hildensheim: Georg Olms, 2009 reprint). Cited by disputation/section/paragraph.

DM VI *On Formal and Universal Unity*, trans. by J.F. Ross (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1964).

DM VII *On the Various Kinds of Distinction*, trans. by Cyril Vollert (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007 reprint).

Works cited

Carriero, John. "On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995), 245-273.

Gueroult, Martial *Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968 and 1974)

Haserot, Francis S. “Spinoza and the Status of Universals,” *The Philosophical Review* 59 (1950): 469-492

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, trans. by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994). Cited by chapter.

Leibniz, Gottfried. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Cited by book/chapter/paragraph

_____. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, second edition, trans. and ed. by Leroy E Loemker, (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969).

Nadler, Steven. *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Newlands, Samuel. “Spinoza’s Early Anti-Abstractionism,” in *The Young Spinoza*, ed. by Yitzhak Melamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

_____. “Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94:1 (2012).

Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).