Ideas, Affects and Causality: Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza

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Salvation in a Naturalised World: The Role of the Will and Intellect in the Philosophies of Nietzsche and Spinoza

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Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza
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In *Ethics* 2P40S2 Spinoza tells us what he thinks is the nature of intuitive knowledge or what he calls knowledge of the third kind.¹ He says “This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things.” He repeats this with slightly different wording in ESP25D: “The third kind of knowledge proceeds from the adequate idea of certain of God’s attributes to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things. . . .” According to these statements we must have intuitive knowledge of God or his attributes (the attributes constitute the essence of God) before we can have intuitive knowledge of other things.² But is this the only way intuitive knowledge proceeds? Can’t we start with ourselves or even other things before we proceed to the attributes of God?³ Spinoza does address this question. Major parts of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the *Ethics*, I believe, are devoted to answering this question. For example, in TIE 25 he says that in order to choose the best mode of perceiving we are required “To have an exact knowledge of our nature which we wish to perfect, and at the same time to know as much of the

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2. This view is suggested in the writing of Guttorm Floistad, Herman De Dijn, and J. Thomas Cook (the latter I will discuss later). Floistad in “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge and the Part-Whole Structure of Nature,” in *Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind*, ed. by Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 42, states that the mind’s intuitive knowledge of itself and its body and of things in general is given. He says: “The primary object of the mind’s power of intuition is the mind itself. . . . in understanding the essence of something under a species of eternity, it [the mind] primarily understands, or reflects upon, itself under the species of eternity.” De Dijn in “Spinoza’s Logic or Art of Perfect Thinking,” in *Studia Spinozana* 2, 1986, p. 18, states that we cannot have knowledge of God without having knowledge of the nature and power of the intellect.
nature of things as is necessary.” When we know these things, he thinks that we can attain our highest degree of knowledge. In E5P31 he answers this question even more sharply: “The third kind of knowledge depends on the mind as its formal cause in so far as the mind is eternal.” This means that the mind insofar as it is considered as being eternal is the adequate or formal cause of the third kind of knowledge. In this case the cause would be an adequate idea in our mind, and the effect would be the idea of God. I take him to be talking about the human mind here because in the proof to that proposition he says that the mind conceives the essence of the body under a form of eternity, and insofar as it does this, it has knowledge of God. In a number of other places in the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Ethics Spinoza tells us that the more knowledge we have of ourselves and of other things the more knowledge we have of God (TIE 39&40, E2P39C, E5P15, E5P24, E5P30, E5P31S).

It is obvious that Spinoza proceeds both ways — from the essence of God to the essence of other things including the human mind and from the essence of the human mind to the essence of God. In this paper I will be concerned primarily with the second way. The first way begins with Ethics 1 and continues through Ethics 2 and to a lesser extent through the other

2. Spinoza does not say that in the procedure of intuitive knowledge that there is no reasoning or inference involved. What he is saying here is that with the third kind of knowledge we have an adequate idea of the essence of certain attributes of God before we have an adequate idea of the essence of other things. Curley in “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge” in Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 58, states, but does not accept the rationalist interpretation, that reason always involves an inference from a premise, and the ultimate premise is supplied by intuition. Intuition itself is noninferential. G. H. R. Parkinson and Filippo Mignini disagree with this interpretation. They think that intuition or a certain kind of intuition involves inference. Parkinson, in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge (Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 183-184, says that intuitive knowledge involves inference because it proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things. Mignini in “In Order to Interpret Spinoza’s Theory of the Third Kind of Knowledge: Should Intuitive Science Be Considered Per Causam Proximam Knowledge?” in Spinoza: Issues and Directions, ed. by Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 137-138, thinks that deducing the essence of particular things from the essence of God involves inference, but knowing the essence of things directly does not. Reason or the second kind of knowledge proceeds from effect to cause. Intuition or the third kind of knowledge proceeds from cause to effect. Knowledge of God is immediate, but knowledge of other things is not.
books of the Ethics. The second way begins with the TIE and continues with Ethics 2-5. I think that the second way is more fruitful because it reveals the various ways Spinoza uses intuitive knowledge and the different kinds of things we can know by this way of knowledge. Spinoza uses the second way in the following places. In the TIE he starts with intuitive knowledge of a true idea and then uses reason to advance his knowledge. In Ethics 2 he also starts with intuition, in this case with an adequate and true idea, and then uses reason. In Ethics 3 he starts with intuition (an adequate cause and activity), before he uses reason. In Ethics 4 he starts with intuition (virtue and power), and uses reason both independent of and related to sense experience. In Ethics 5 he relates reason to sense experience, but then he uses reason independent of sense experience to arrive at intuitive knowledge. If this is the case I would like to see if intuition as a form of knowledge and its objects are the same or different in each of these cases. I will begin my investigation of intuitive knowledge with The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (hereafter TIE) and then move on to the Ethics (hereafter E).

In the TIE Spinoza mentions four modes of perception. Two of those modes, perception from hearsay or sign and perception from casual experience, pertain to sense experience. A third, inferring a cause from an effect but not adequately, pertains to reason. A fourth, perceiving a thing through its essence or through knowledge of its proximate cause, pertains to

4. In the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Chap. 1, Spinoza uses the words “pure intuition” to describe a mind that surpasses the human mind. The human mind operates from the basic principles of cognition and what can be deduced from these. This includes intuition and reason. The only person who has or had pure intuition was Christ. As opposed to other prophets, Christ did not use words or images. He communicated directly with God. Revelation transcend the bounds of natural knowledge. It does not depend on our natural powers of reason and intuition but on a vivid imagination. Here we must remember that Spinoza is talking about revelation which is outside the realm of intuition and reason.

5. Curley, “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” op. cit., p. 58, takes the view that intuition depends on reason.

6. Curley, ibid., p. 29, says that there is no difference in the object of cognition when we go from reason to intuition. I must contend that the intended object, e.g., God, may not be different but what we know about the object is. Reason tells us the common properties of bodies and that all bodies share in one and the same attribute. Intuition identifies the attributes as being the essence of God.
intuition. The first two modes involve considerable uncertainty and give us no knowledge of the essence of a thing. The third mode tells us nothing about the cause except what we perceive in the effect. We infer the cause from the effect. The fourth mode comprehends the adequate essence of a thing. In this case we know the thing or cause directly. After making these distinctions he says that he is going to proceed with the fourth mode.

In the TIE Spinoza begins his discussion of the fourth mode or intuitive knowledge with the inborn power of the intellect. The intellect has the power to form a true idea. He says that we know what it is to know something (TIE 22,34,35). In order to form a true idea we must have the power to distinguish true ideas from other ideas. This is the first part of his method which he explains in TIE 37-38. Method is not reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things nor is it the understanding of the causes. Method is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from other ideas. Method is reflexive knowledge or an idea of an idea. But there must be an idea first. A good method directs the mind according to the standard of a given true idea. How do we know when we have a true idea? A true idea reveals itself and cannot be doubted. It is self-evident and intelligible through itself. It is different from its object, such as a circle or sphere, but it can be the object of another idea. A circle, for example, is different from the idea of a circle. We know we have a true idea when we comprehend the essence of a thing. This is intuition or the fourth mode of perception. Spinoza gives us other clues. He says that a true idea is a simple idea, such as an idea of a circle or square, or is recognized as a component of a complex idea. One can have a true thought of an object even if that object does not exist or correspond to anything. He gives an example of an architect having a true idea of a building even if that building does not exist. The object of a true idea is not the cause of the idea. The true idea depends solely on the power of the intellect. It does not need anything other than itself in order to be true. It is true by its intrinsic nature, but it also can be related to an object. The mind has the power to make a true idea which in turn can produce other ideas thus increasing our power for further investigation. So after we have a true idea we can through reason proceed to other true ideas. Reason is concerned with understanding the causes of things. All of this can be done independently of external

7. In Ep 37 Spinoza says that our clear and distinct ideas depend only on our nature and power.

8. In E1Ax6 Spinoza says that a true idea agrees with its object.
circumstances. So in the TIE we start with intuitive knowledge or the essence of a true idea and then proceed by reason to other true ideas. A true idea may be of ourselves, other things in nature, or substance. More specifically he mentions a circle, a sphere, a building, Peter, a semicircle, motion, the union of mind and body (the mind being the idea of the body), quantity, and a perfect being. These ideas are not independent of one another, for the more the mind understands of nature the more it understands itself (TIE 39,40), and the more it understands itself the more it understands nature (E5P15). All ideas which are not true arise not from the power of the mind but from external causes.

In E2 he begins in Definition 3 and 4 with defining an idea, an adequate idea, and a true idea. An idea is a conception of the mind, and an adequate idea is one which when considered in itself without relation to an object has all the properties of a true idea. A true idea is one which is adequate but is related to and agrees with its object. He goes on to say in E2P13S that just as an object of one idea may be more excellent than another, so one idea may be more excellent than another. By this he means that the object of one idea may be greater than another idea. This shows differences among adequate ideas. In E2P29S he talks about internal determination of the mind whereby we can have adequate knowledge of ourselves, our body, and external bodies. In these passages, I believe, he is using intuition because these ideas reveal the essences of things. They are not preceded by reason and are taken to be true starting points. In other passages he is using reason. For example, in E2P18S he mentions that there is an ordering or linking of ideas according to the order of the intellect whereby the mind perceives things though their first causes. Perhaps he means first cause here because there is only one first cause, although there are many other causes which precede our ideas. But he does not mention reason or intuition explicitly until E2P40S2. In this passage he says that reason gives us common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of

9. I agree with Yirmiyahu Yovel who says in “The Second Kind of Knowledge and the Removal of Error,” in Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind, op. cit., pp. 93-110, that the organism has a history of residence in the world and that there is no free-floating cogito which is disembodied and worldless. But I disagree with him when he says that ratio is essentially the correction of error. It also has another role to play. I believe he confuses reason with intuition. Intuition is the inborn capacity to create truths. Reason connects these truths together.

10. In E1P15S and Ep12 Spinoza says that we can conceive quantity by the intellect to be infinite, one, and indivisible.
things, and intuition gives us knowledge of the essence of things. When he talks about a true idea after that he does not say explicitly whether he is using reason or intuition. He does state, though, in E2P43D that a true idea is self-evident and in E2P43S that to have a true idea means to know a thing perfectly or to the highest degree, and one who has a true idea knows that he has a true idea because a true idea involves absolute certainty. A true idea is part of the infinite intellect of God (E2P11C), and if all God’s ideas are true then our ideas which are part of God’s intellect are also true. All of this implies intuitive knowledge, but in E2P44 he talks about reason. Reason, he says, regards things as necessary and eternal, and the basic principles of reason are common notions. Common notions do not constitute the essence of any particular thing (E2P37). Motion and rest are common notions or immediate infinite modes under the attribute of extension. The infinite intellect is the immediate infinite mode under the attribute of thought. These modes do not constitute the essence of a particular thing but reveal what is common to particular things. Through intuition we then find out that every true idea involves the eternal and infinite essence of God (E2P45), and that the human mind has such an idea (E2P47). So we see that Spinoza vacillates between reason and intuition, though each plays a different role.

What we can conclude from this is that in E2 Spinoza proceeds somewhat similarly to the TIE in that he does not use experience or inadequate ideas to arrive at knowledge. He does not always clearly say when he is using reason or intuition to arrive at a true idea, but because he says in E2P43S that a true idea is self-evident, is known to the highest degree, and involves absolute certainty, we can conclude from this that he is using intuition to arrive at a true idea, although reason plays a strong role after that. Reason and intuition occur here independent of sense experience. He uses reason and intuition both before and after E2P40S2. He uses intuition for arriving at a true idea, and reason for linking true ideas together and arriving at common notions. In other propositions in E2 he is talking about imagination or the first kind of knowledge.

In E3 Spinoza proceeds in much the same way as he did in E2 and the TIE. He starts off in E3Def1&2 with defining adequate cause and active and goes on to discuss adequate ideas. An adequate cause is one whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through its cause, and to be active is to be the adequate cause of something which follows from our

11. In E1Def4 Spinoza says that the intellect can perceive the essence of substance.
nature. Active states are caused by adequate ideas. But then he gets more specific. In E3P6&7 he says what the essence is. It is the internal drive or conatus of a thing. It is separate from any external influence. In E3P53 we find that there is a type of pleasure or good which arises from the self. The essence or internal drive is, like a true idea, given. We do not need reason to arrive at it, though we can use reason after we have it to arrive at other true ideas.

E4, I argue, is a different story. Instead of just making a distinction between true and false ideas, adequate and inadequate ideas, active and passive emotions, which is the first part of his method in the TIE, Spinoza uses reason both independent of and along with sense experience. He does not mention intuition, but he uses it when he says that the essence or conatus of the individual equals virtue or power (E4Def8). Other things follow by reason from this. For example, true knowledge of good and evil follows from our essence insofar as we are active (E4P15D). The rules of reason are spelled out in E4P18S. They follow the conatus or laws of our own nature. They involve preserving ourselves, increasing in power, and desiring that others increase in power. If we follow the conatus we seek what is good and avoid what is evil. According to reason what is good is what is to our advantage or understanding (E4P26&27), and our highest good is knowledge of God (E4P28). Whatever is in agreement with reason is good (E4P31). Those who follow reason agree with one another (E4P35), and those who are virtuous have the highest good in common (E4P36). Self-contentment which arises from reason is the highest form of self-contentment (E4P52). So now we have two highest goods — one pertaining to God and one to the self. Reason leads us to the highest understanding of ourselves and the highest understanding of God. The free person then is one who is guided by reason. All these passages pertain to reason independent of sense experience or knowledge of the first kind, but reason does not give us knowledge of the essence of things.

Does Spinoza say anything about reason which is dependent on or arises from sense experience? We should note a difference between applying reason which is independent of experience to sense experience and

12. Guttorm Floistad thinks that in some cases it is difficult to decide whether a proposition belongs to reason or intuition. See his “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge Applied to the Ethics,” in Studies in Spinoza, ed S. Paul Kashap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, p. 266. This seem to occur in the case of the conatus. But I argue that the conatus is given or known intuitively in Spinoza. What follows from the conatus is arrived at through reason.
reason arising out of sense experience. Does Spinoza use reason both ways? I believe he does. First of all, acting from reason is doing what follows from our nature (E4P59D). Our nature is given. If reason, like intuition, is concerned with true ideas, it seems like we cannot get true ideas from sense experience, inadequate ideas, or external causes. He specifically tells us that in E2P41-42. 13 Secondly, in E4 he talks about the power reason has and does not have over the passive emotions. Reason arises from the power of the self. Passive emotions are caused by external influences, so they depend upon images or words (sensations). Except for cases of agreement between ideas or active emotions there is a struggle between the power of the self and the power affecting it from outside. We are often acted upon by powers which are greater than ourselves. Our desire that arises from our true knowledge of good and evil can be overcome by passive emotions. For example, one who is guided by fear and does good so as to avoid evil is not guided by reason (E4P63). But this desire or reason can also overcome passive emotions (E4P59). Reason instead of passions can determine our actions. For example, reason tells us to pursue the greater of two goods and the lesser of two evils (E4P65); and with reason we seek a future greater good in preference to a lesser present good, and a lesser

13. In Ep10 Spinoza does say that experience is needed for those things which cannot be deduced from the definition of a thing, such as the existence of modes. Experience does not teach us the essences of things, but it can determine our minds to think about certain essences. For further discussion on this see Curley, “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” op. cit.; Wim Klever, “Anti-falsification: Spinoza’s Theory of Experience and Experiments,” in Spinoza: Issues and Directions (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990); C. De Deugh, The Significance of Spinoza’s First Kind of Knowledge, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966); and Amihud Gilead, “The Indispensability of the First Kind of Knowledge,” in Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994). The view I am defending is much different from De Deugh and somewhat different from the others. De Deugh argues that imagination is of more value than intuition, and that reason based on sense experience is most important. Curley holds that intuition depends on reason and both reason and intuition depend heavily on experience. Klever believes that the Ethics is a strong rationalistic work in which reasoning is not detrimental to experience but draws upon it. I argue that intuition and reason which are independent of experience cannot be contradicted by experience, but reason which arises from experience can be. One must remember what Spinoza says about experience teaching him the hollowness and futility of everyday life in the first sentence of the TIE. Experience in the sense of a search for wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure is based on hearsay and casual experience. In the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (p. 120), Spinoza says that experience (historical narratives) can give us no knowledge of what God is and how God directs all things.
present evil in preference to a greater future evil. In E5P2,P3,P6,P9,P14 Spinoza gives us a number of techniques reason uses to overcome passive emotions.

My conclusion here is that reason that stems from true ideas does not arise from sense experience but from intuition. This reason can be applied to sense experience and agree with sense experience, such as in certain kinds of love. In other cases, such as hate, sense experience disagrees with reason. Sometimes the inner force has more power; other times the external force has more power. Any other use of reason arises from sense experience and does not involve truth or certainty.

In the first part of *Ethics* Spinoza talks about applying reason with its ideas of inner cause, clarity and distinction, necessity, diversification, and God (most of which originate in intuition) to the passive emotions. To be consistent with the earlier books of the *Ethics* he is using reason independent of sense experience because reason or knowledge of the second kind which is necessarily true cannot arise from knowledge of the first kind as he states in E2P41. In other places he talks about reason without applying it to the passive emotions. For example, in E5P20D he says that the love of God is the highest good we can aim at with reason. This highest good does not originate from the various images we have of God.

Now, what about intuition? Can it be derived from reason which is related to sense experience or reason which is independent of sense experience? Reason tells us that love towards God is the highest good (E4P28, E5P20D). But in E5P25 he says that our highest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge. Does intuition give us a higher good than reason? One way to answer this question is to say that reason gives us the highest good reason can give, but intuition gives us a still higher good. In the case of reason we are proceeding as we did in TIE, E2, E3, and E4 from one true idea to another, but in the case of intuition we are already at a true idea, at least a first true idea. Reason does not give us a true starting point. Reason makes use of what is given in intuition. To arrive at intuition we do not necessarily need the reasoning process. Intuition may or may not be preceded by reason. Spinoza says in E5P28 that the conatus to know things by the third kind of knowledge arises from the second kind of

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14. In E3P28 Spinoza tells us that there are many things we experience which agree with reason. In fact, the more things affect us with pleasure, i.e., cause us to increase in power, the more they agree with reason. Certainly his experience of the various emotions must have given him insight into the propositions he makes about them.
knowledge. It cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge because that kind of knowledge is the source of falsity (E2P41). It arises from the second kind of knowledge in the sense that when we reason from one true idea to another, each true idea can be known intuitively. There are intuitions that we have mentioned that do not depend on reason. But reason, if properly conducted, must be preceded by intuition, a first true idea. Reason itself cannot establish a true idea. Self-contentment that arises from reason may be the highest self-contentment that reason can establish, but the self-contentment that Spinoza talks about in E5P27 is that which arises out of our knowledge of God. This love of God is the same love that God has of himself insofar as this love is expressed through the human mind (E5P36). This is certainly different from reasoning from various objects in nature to God or from God to various objects. Intuition does not do the job of advancing from one true idea to another, and while we have intuitive knowledge we cannot be overcome by passive emotions, though we may lose such knowledge.

Intuitive knowledge of God then arises from reason independent of sense experience, images, or words. It is different from reason because it is part of God’s love of himself. This knowledge is eternal (E5P33) rather than knowledge of what is eternal. When Spinoza says that intuition arises from reason in E5P28 he means that intuition is a more powerful drive than reason or is the highest expression of the conatus.

Can we have intuitive knowledge of God prior to having any other true ideas? I cannot say no to this question because the answer depends on where we start. If we start with Ethics I and understand Spinoza’s definition of substance, we may have intuitive knowledge. But we may also have intuitive knowledge of other things without having such knowledge of God, though, intuitive knowledge of these things, as Spinoza says, can lead to intuitive knowledge of God.15

A different view of intuitive knowledge is presented by Yirmiyahu Yovel.16 He says: “Without the third kind of knowledge, Spinoza would be as crippled throughout as Plato would be without the Ideas.”17 According to Yovel the third kind of knowledge differs from other kinds of knowledge both by its mode of cognition and by its object of cognition. There is a cognitive gain. What is known by external causality is interiorized, but the

17. Ibid., p. 155.
internal viewpoint depends on the external as a necessary condition. The third kind of knowledge is a form of self-knowledge, but it is not direct self-awareness. It is not an immediate grasp of oneself but mediated self-knowledge. It is added after scientific knowledge. Direct awareness is a distorted idea of my body affected by external causes. It is knowledge of the first kind. True self-knowledge begins by objectivizing the cogito, the idea of the body, and referring it to the causal order of nature. One has to first investigate oneself from the outside through the mechanistic laws of nature. Gathering more and more knowledge of my body and my mind through the various sciences sets the ground for intuitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge occurs when all this scientific knowledge is synthesized. This synthesis gives a new and deeper perspective on myself and the world. It is the grasping of particular essences as they issue immanently from God. Also my idea of God is no longer general and abstract. It becomes particular and concrete.

The problem with this view is that it ignores some crucial passages from the TIE and from parts of Ethics 2,3 and 4. It ignores what Spinoza calls the “inborn power of the intellect” in the TIE, the self-evidence and absolute certainty of true ideas in E2, the internal drive or conatus in E3, and the virtue or power of the individual in E4. The starting point for true knowledge in Spinoza is always intuitive knowledge either of oneself or some other thing. Scientific knowledge, no matter how much we have, never gives us certain knowledge. If we are to have any certain knowledge, it must begin with intuitive knowledge and build upon that, not upon uncertainty.

If we do start from the point of view of intuitive knowledge of the self, a problem may arise with how we interpret the self. One such...

15. H. G. Hubbeling in “The Third Way of Knowledge (Intuition) in Spinoza,” in Studia Spinozana 2, 1986, 227-229, argues incorrectly, I believe, that Spinoza’s philosophy is presented in the second way (reason). He thinks that the third way does not belong to the geometrical method. But it is obvious that Spinoza makes statements involving intuitive knowledge in the Ethics and he tries to prove these by reason. Guttorm Floistad, in “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge Applied to the Ethics,” op. cit., pp. 249-275, says that no occurrence of the first kind of knowledge occurs in the Ethics. The main part of the Ethics is conducted on knowledge of the second kind, but knowledge of the third kind which mostly occurs in the definitions and axioms of Ethics 1 plays an important role in the Ethics. In fact, he believes that intuitive knowledge is a necessary condition for framing the ontology, epistemology, psychology, and moral and social philosophy of the Ethics.
problem is presented by J. Thomas Cook. According to him Spinoza held that every individual endeavors to persevere in being. This endeavor is the source of virtue, and self-preservation is the good which we all seek. Knowledge including self-knowledge is necessary for achieving this preservation. Knowing oneself is actively preserving oneself and the endeavor to persevere in one’s being is identical with one’s endeavor to understand. Cook interprets the claim that the effort to persevere in being is identical with the effort to understand as meaning that “…one might come to think of oneself in a way which makes no mention of effort, conflict, struggle, or perseverance.” To understand what Spinoza means by self-knowledge involves understanding what he means by knowledge of the essence of one’s body under the aspect of eternity. “To come to know the essence of one’s body is to come to know one’s body as a manifestation of these ways in which Nature eternally acts. In achieving this knowledge, one’s mind is becoming the ideas which are the mental expressions of these very same ways in which nature acts extendedly. One’s mind is becoming a constellation of those ideas, immanently present in every idea, which are the ways in which God eternally thinks. To the extent that one knows in this way, one’s mind is a finite eternal participant in, as manifestation of, God’s infinite and eternal thinking. To know oneself in this way is for one’s mind to be that idea in God which is the mental expression of the essence of one’s body sub specie aeternitatis.” When one knows oneself in this way one knows nothing of conflict (internal or external), struggle, effort, or purpose. No effort is involved in God’s or nature’s activity. We come to be effortlessly active participants in the active power of nature. What this amounts to, according to Cook, is that Spinoza offers no account of the self. One comes to know oneself as a finite and eternal manifestation of the infinite and eternal activity of God. The consequence of this is that the notion and problem of self-preservation does not arise. When one reaches self-knowledge one is no longer concerned about preserving oneself.

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19. Ibid., p. 199.
20. Ibid., pp. 204-205.
21. A similar view is presented by Herman De Dijn in Spinoza: The Way to Wisdom (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1996), pp. 254-255, where he says that the striving of a person of reason is such that if one becomes free one no longer has this desire, one no longer cares about the future, and all longing is forgotten.
My problem with this view is first of all Spinoza does have a view of the self. This is evident when he defines the essence of the individual in E3P7 and when he says that the essence of the mind is composed of both adequate and inadequate ideas (E3P9). The self does not disappear, negate itself, or become absorbed into the whole. Secondly, his view is unrealistic. The individual is part of the environment and never escapes the environment. In E4P4 Spinoza says that it is impossible for one not to be a part of nature and not to undergo changes other than those of which one is the adequate cause. Activity involves using energy. When we are active it may seem that we are not using energy, effort, etc., but our effort is really consonant with nature. We work in harmony with the laws of nature, and when we do, our use of energy, effort, etc. is very efficient. We can’t be both active and effortless. Self-preservation may not be a problem, but we are definitely preserving ourselves.

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Recently, there has been an increasing interest in studying the philosophies of Spinoza and Nietzsche in relation to each other. Nietzsche scholars are slowly beginning to take note of Spinoza’s importance as a precursor to Nietzsche. Spinoza scholars are beginning to see Nietzsche as a key to understanding the enormous but sorely neglected impact of Spinoza’s legacy on Western thought. Such a trend could not come too soon. I am of the opinion that it would not only greatly enrich both areas of scholarship, but would also provide a much needed examination of some residual issues of modernity. This paper could not hope to handle such a weighty task. Instead, I hope to indicate how fertile such study would be by focusing on the role of the intellect and the will in the paradox that is the Spinoza-Nietzsche relationship.

It is clear that the intellect plays a fundamental role in the philosophy of Spinoza and that will is a central concept for Nietzsche. However, what may not be as clear is that Spinoza’s intellect and Nietzsche’s will play a very similar role in their respective attempts to achieve a higher form of human existence. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche explain and advocate a movement from passivity or reactivity to activity in terms of an egoistic, psychological drive to increase one’s power. In this sense, their project is the same: to achieve human freedom within a completely naturalized world by capitalizing on a very basic drive that we humans share with the rest of existence. However, there are some obvious differences between Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s philosophies. In fact, they seem as different as two philosophies can be. In the following, I hope to show that their projects are in fact the same, while, at the same time, accounting for some of their major differences.

The heart of Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s project is an egoistic drive to increase one’s power of activity.1 Spinoza calls this drive the conatus while Nietzsche calls it will to power. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche believe that a higher form of human existence is achieved by capitalizing on this drive.
For this reason, both philosophers produce a substantial psychological account to be used for this purpose. However, Spinoza gives this account in terms of the intellect, while Nietzsche gives it in terms of the will. As we will see later, this difference in approach accounts for many of the major differences in their philosophies. This difference might lead us to believe that Spinoza considers the intellect more important than the will, and that Nietzsche considers the will more important than the intellect. However, one of the things that makes Spinoza and Nietzsche different from most other philosophers is the fact that they do not distinguish between the will and the intellect. And so we are left with two important questions. What do Spinoza and Nietzsche have to gain by collapsing the will and the intellect into one? And, if the will and intellect are ultimately the same thing, then how is it that their different approaches yield such different looking philosophies?

Traditionally, modern philosophers have made a distinction between the will and the intellect in humans. It is this very distinction that has allowed modern philosophy to separate humanity from a transcendent, more powerful being. For example, Descartes considers God to have infinite will and intellect and therefore considers will and intellect to be the same thing in God. However, in humans, while will is infinite, the intellect is not. And so what distinguishes humans from God is this separation of will and intellect. On the other hand, what makes humans more like God than other creature is that they have will and intellect.

And so the distinction of will and intellect serves two basic functions: to distinguish humans from a more powerful God, and to distinguish humans from a lesser physical world. Since, as I will show in the next section, Spinoza and Nietzsche both reject a transcendent God and the idea that humans have a place above the rest of nature, they must also reject the distinction between the will and the intellect.

1. Some might object to considering the conatus a drive to increase one’s power of activity. However, I think it is an accurate description of what the conatus does. Spinoza defines the conatus as that with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being (E3P7). Since, according to Spinoza, nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause (E3P4), the way to preserve oneself is to be as resistant as possible to destructive outside forces. In other words, the conatus strives to be as active, as opposed to passive, as possible. To be active is to be the cause of one’s ideas and actions. Therefore, activity is power, the power to be determined by one’s own essence rather than by that of other things. Hence, it is fair to consider the conatus as a drive to increase one’s power of activity.
By making the will and the intellect one, Spinoza and Nietzsche naturalize the universe and human existence within that universe. Humans are part of nature and are subject to the necessity of the world in the same way as all other natural beings and objects. In naturalizing human existence, both Spinoza and Nietzsche reject several tenants of traditional modern philosophy, for example, the belief in freedom of the will, teleology, a moral world order, an unegoistic perspective, and the existence of good and evil. In fact, it is these similarities with Spinoza that comforted Nietzsche from his philosophical loneliness, as he expresses in the following postcard to Overbeck:

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just now was inspired by ‘Instinct’. Not only is his over-all tendency like mine — making knowledge the most powerful affect — but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself, this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science. In summa: my solitude, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is at least a dualitude.²

As Nietzsche suggests, both he and Spinoza deny freedom of the will. In other words, they think that human beliefs and choices are not determined by some mental or spiritual entity separate from the physical world. Rather, they are determined by the world itself. For Spinoza, the soul, or mind, is nothing more than an awareness of the body.³ In being so, the order and connection of ideas is the same as that of things.⁴ One idea is determined by another idea in the same way that one body is determined by

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⁴ Ibid., E2P7, 451.
another. Ideas are not separate, autonomous entities. Rather, they are part of the interconnected world understood through the mode of thought. As he says in Part 11 of *The Ethics*:

> In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the Mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity.\(^5\)

Nietzsche also naturalizes the soul. He rejects the traditional concept of a soul as a non-physical entity separate from the world and free to act on and in the world as it so chooses. Such a view is a mere superstition that arises out of the troublesome subject and ego superstition.\(^6\) Nietzsche denies the individual a special subject/object relationship to the universe. People are not discoverers of the universe in itself, rather, they are creators of worlds within a chaotic universe. As humans, we create world views. However, the world views we create determine our will. Our ideas, beliefs, desires, and fears within our world view determine what we believe, disbelieve, or even fear. In other words, just because humans create world views does not mean that humans are free to affirm or deny as they please. There is a necessary relation between all parts within each world view. We, as beings incapable of living outside our own created world view, are also subject to that necessity.

At this point, some readers may become concerned and point out that Spinoza understands a rational world to determine the will while Nietzsche understands a perspectival, constructed world view to determine the will. I do not in any way wish to downplay this difference. It is extremely important and will help us understand the role of the intellect and will in their respective philosophies. However, we must not let these differences obscure the fact that both thinkers see the individual as part of nature; a part that has no special status over the other parts within nature.

The second consequence of naturalizing human existence is the denial of teleology. Both philosophers reject the view that a benevolent creator made the universe for human use. As Spinoza explains in the Appendix of Part I of *The Ethics*, the universe is indifferent to the wants of

\(^5\) Ibid., E2P48, 483.

humans.

For the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men’s senses, or because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature. 

The reason people tend to attribute teleology to the universe is because they are born ignorant of the causes of things. People are aware of their wants and desires. However, they are unaware of the causes of these wants and desires. For this reason, humans always act with an end in view, that end being their advantage. Further, they notice that many things in the natural world can act towards their advantage. Because they did not provide these things for themselves, but found them in nature, they assume that nature provided them for their advantage.

Nietzsche agrees that we should not measure or describe the universe in relation to humanity. As he says in section 109 of The Gay Science:

But how could we reproach or praise the universe? Let us beware of attributing to It heartlessness and unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things; it does not by any means strive to imitate man.

Not only do Spinoza and Nietzsche say that the universe is not ordered for or in the image of humanity; they also claim any order found in the world is a human construct. Nietzsche maintains that the universe is chaotic. It is only out of our need to survive that we create orderly worlds:

The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos — the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.

7. Spinoza, E1App, 446.

Spinoza also thinks order is a human construct.

And since those things we can easily imagine are especially pleasing to us, men prefer order to confusion, as if order were anything in nature more than a relation to our imagination.\(^\text{10}\)

As will become clear in the later discussion of reason, Spinoza also views this construct as a means of survival or self-preservation.

At first, readers may be concerned with the difference in Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s characterizations of the universe. Nietzsche is associated with an order-less universe, while Spinoza tends to be associated with rationality and order. However, Spinoza makes it clear that the universe as Natura naturans, i.e., nature conceived through itself, is not ordered, nor can we ascribe any characteristics to it. In this sense, Spinoza’s Universe is somewhat like Nietzsche’s, it is beyond human description and knowledge.

Although both Nietzsche and Spinoza deny order in any ontological sense, they both allow for an order of necessity on a different level. When considering Nature from the point of view of a particular, singular mode, Spinoza invokes an elaborate order involving necessary relationships of cause, containment, and entailment. For example, there are certain necessary relationships between human emotions. However, we must refrain from thinking that these relationships exist somewhere in nature. In reality, the necessary relationships between human thoughts, emotions, etc., have nothing to do with the universe itself and everything to do with a perspectival relationship that humans have with the rest of nature as a particular mode within that whole.

In a similar way, Nietzsche allows for necessity within created world views. On Nietzsche’s view, there is no order to the universe itself. However, for humans to survive, they must create order. Therefore, through an act of will, each person creates her own world view. Necessity exists as fate within these world views. Every event, thought, desire, etc., is necessitated by the one that preceded it, and so on. In other words, one could not change anything in the past without changing what one is today. Nietzsche sums up this concept in his challenge of the eternal return. Completely

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Spinoza, E1App, 444.
affirming one’s fate requires the ability to desire to repeat one’s past over and over again to infinity. In other words, to affirm what one is now, one must affirm their entire world view. Such affirmation requires the understanding that one’s past states completely determine one’s present states. Nietzsche is similar to Spinoza in that they both allow for necessity on the level of singular perspectives within the universe.

On the other hand, Spinoza’s account differs from Nietzsche’s in an important way. The order that is discussed in terms of Natura naturata follows from the nature of the particular mode whose perspective is in question, that nature being its conatus. Since all humans need the same things to survive, in that we share the same basic physical make-up, we have the same conatus. In contrast, Nietzsche takes an existentialist approach to human nature. He believes that individuals create their own essence. For this reason, Nietzsche’s philosophy allows for limitless world views, or interpretations of the universe. Spinoza, on the other hand, is limited to one correct understanding of the universe from the human perspective, which is achieved through reason. He views any other human interpretation as errors stemming from the imagination.

The fact that Spinoza and Nietzsche naturalize the universe has important consequences on their moral views as well. Morality does not follow from any moral world order inherent in the universe. After all, there is no such order. When philosophers claim to discover natural moral law what they are actually doing is imposing the laws of their doctrine onto nature.11

Instead, Nietzsche and Spinoza understand morality in terms of power. Since everything has the drive to increase its power, every individual seeks what is to her advantage. If a person perceives something as advantageous, she calls it good. If she perceives it as harmful she calls it evil. In this way, nothing is good or evil in itself. The universe as a whole is devoid of moral content. In other words, both Spinoza and Nietzsche reject the unegoistic perspective. The terms good, bad, and evil do not reflect anything about the object to which they are applied. Rather, they describe a relationship between the object and the speaker. Let us summarize up to this point. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche naturalize human existence by denying free-will, teleology, the moral world order, unegoistic perspectives, and the existence of good and evil. In doing so they differ from most modern philosophers who have traditionally placed humans between a

11. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, #9,15-16.
transcendent God and its material creation. This view is traditionally supported with the idea that the will and intellect are distinct in humans. Therefore, denying the distinction between will and intellect will be helpful to their project of naturalization. We are now ready to ask the second question: if the will and intellect are ultimately the same thing, then how is it that their different approaches yield such different looking philosophies? To answer this question, it will be helpful to look at the second part of their overall project: to find a higher form of human existence within a naturalized world. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche use psychology to describe human activity within a naturalized world as well as to give a normative account for how some humans might achieve a higher form of existence. In this way, psychology becomes a way of understanding and achieving a type of salvation within a naturalized world. As mentioned earlier, Spinoza characterizes his psychology in terms of the intellect.

A good deal of The Ethics is concerned with defining, describing, and cataloguing the affects or passions. In doing so, Spinoza is doing much more than providing a handbook of the human psyche. He is also providing a method of becoming a more powerful human being. Through becoming aware of the causes of the emotions, meaning the way one mental event necessitates another mental event, humans can become relatively more active and self-determined, i.e., more powerful. Our ideas naturally become more adequate, thus increasing the power of the intellect, as we attain a higher awareness of our motives and desires.

Spinoza’s emphasis on knowing the cause of the affects is one of the things that truly makes him stand out in the history of Western Thought. We can definitely see him as an early precursor to Freud’s concept of the unconscious mind. As Spinoza himself points out, his treatment of the emotions is strikingly different from his predecessors and contemporaries.

Most of those who have written about the Affects, and men’s way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside of nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself. And they attribute the cause of human impotence, not to the common power of nature, but to I know not what vice of
human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. And he who knows how to censure more eloquently and cunningly the weakness of the human Mind is held to be Godly . . . . But no one, to my knowledge, has determined the nature and powers of the Affects, nor what, on the other hand, the Mind can do to moderate them.\textsuperscript{12}

The moderation of the affects is extremely important to Spinoza because it is a necessary condition for making the intellect more active, and therefore for human liberation. In fact, he defines human bondage as the lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects.\textsuperscript{13} In order to understand what the moderation of the affects has to do with human freedom, we must first understand Spinoza’s distinction between active ideas and passive ideas. Active ideas, or what he also calls adequate ideas, follow from the necessity of our nature alone, that is our conatus. In this sense, we are the proximate cause of these ideas and therefore active. Passive ideas are not related to our nature except insofar as we conceive things inadequately. They are not defined by human power, but by the power of things that are outside us.\textsuperscript{14} By replacing our passive ideas with active ones, we become more powerful. Hence, the perfection of the Intellect is the road to human freedom.

In life, therefore. It is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, or reason. In this one thing consists man’s highest happiness, or blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God. But perfecting the Intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature. So the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., his highest Desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things that can fall under his understanding.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Spinoza, E3Pref, 491.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., E4Pref, 543.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., E4App, 588.
>From this passage it is clear, that Spinoza considers reason to be a desire. Reason is nothing other the most active striving to preserve one’s being. Further, reason is the Intellect itself, and therefore the win itself; for reason is the desire by which we strive to adequately understand necessity, and as the following passage suggests, that by which we strive to affirm and identify with necessity.

For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied with anything except what is true. Hence, insofar as we understand these things rightly, the striving of the better part of us agrees with the order of the whole of nature.16

In the final stage of human freedom, one both understands and wills the necessity of the universe because one realizes that our own existence is tied up in it. In doing so, one unites to Nature in that one unites to Nature’s essence, or conatus, and wills its preservation. This unification with Nature is what Spinoza means by intellectual love of God. It is the highest blessedness that a human can attain and the only way a human can hope for eternity. Spinoza rejects any idea of an afterlife. The mind dies when the body dies. However, by understanding and willing necessity, humans can grasp eternity during their life. Spinoza offers an immanent philosophy. Eternity is here and now and the best we can do is to understand and affirm that.

Nietzsche also considers the understanding of our psychological drives as a means to achieving power. In this way, Nietzsche’s account of psychology is very similar to Spinoza’s. However, Nietzsche characterizes his psychological account in terms of the will. Nietzsche’s discussion of master and slave moralities serves much the same purpose as Spinoza’s discussion of active and passive ideas. Slave morality is when one’s beliefs and desires are caused by something other than the self. In fact, it is when, the self is defined in terms of the other. Master morality is when one is self-defined, when one’s desires stem from an active will to power, rather than being a reaction to others. Like Spinoza, Nietzsche advocates a move from reactivity to activity. However, for him the move is not one of thought or reason, but one of a will that creates and affirm oneself and one’s world. One should move from the state in which one reactively accepts the

15. Ibid.
creations of others (society, religion, etc.) to a state where one actively creates one’s own world view. The final stage in human freedom is complete affirmation of the necessity of one’s being and world. Nietzsche calls this state love of fate. Such affirmation includes the understanding of necessity for what it is: a necessary interconnection of ideas that represent the world view that we created.

The fact that Spinoza and Nietzsche characterize their psychologies in terms of the intellect and the will, respectively, accounts for some major differences between their philosophies. For example, Spinoza and Nietzsche take radically different approaches towards the emotions. Spinoza advocated a moderation of the passions. He saw the affects of hatred, envy, etc., as limitations of one’s activity. Therefore, Spinoza advocated that we destroy such affects through rationally understanding their cause. Nietzsche, on the other hand, saw affects as a necessary condition of life. In fact, he specifically criticized Spinoza for “laughing-no-more and weeping-no-more” in his attempt to destroy the affects through analysis and vivisection. Another difference in their approaches to psychology is the status they give to conscious thought. Nietzsche believes that the decisive value of an action is what is unintentional about that action. In other words, there are unconscious motivations and desires and they are more informative about an action than the conscious ones. Further, Nietzsche understands consciousness as a trait in humans that has recently evolved and is therefore “the most unfinished and unstrong.” He therefore sees consciousness as the least vigorous type of thought. By being conscious of the true origins of the affects, we are no longer passively acted on by unknown causes, but increase our power by acting out of the necessity of our own nature.

Both of these differences in Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s psychologies are due to their difference in choosing the intellect or will as the basis of their psychology. Because Spinoza understands the primary drive to power

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., #198, 109.
19. Ibid., #32, 43.
21. Ibid., #333, 261.
in terms of the intellect, he conceives of the soul as nothing more than ideas about the body. In contrast, Nietzsche characterizes the primary drive to power in terms of will, and so he conceives the soul as nothing more than a social structure of drives and affects. In this light, it only makes sense that Spinoza considers conscious thought, or active ideas, to be the most powerful state, while Nietzsche considers the unconscious desires, or active affirmations, to be the most powerful state. This view explains why Nietzsche considers the affects necessary for life. After all, each living thing is nothing more than affects. At the same time, Spinoza views the affects as limitations to life because they make the intellect passive rather than active.

However, we are still left with the question: if will and intellect are the same thing, why are Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s characterizations of psychology in terms of the will and intellect so different. The answer is to be found in the process of becoming active itself. Notice that both Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s accounts end with the realization that will and intellect are one. For Spinoza, once one fully understands that her preservation is tied up in the necessity of Nature, she automatically wills that necessity. For Nietzsche, once one completely wills the necessity of the world that she created she also affirms the fact that she is the creator. In other words, she now understands that the nature of the universe is chaos and her role in that universe is as a creator of an ordered world. In conclusion, the very achievement of intellectual love of God and love of fate occurs at the moment that one realizes that will and intellect are one. Here we find our answer.

The road to activity starts in passivity or reactivity, a state in which one misunderstands the true nature of things; a state in which, for example, one might think themselves to have free will, to belong to a world designed by a benevolent creator, etc. In other words, one begins the road to activity from a point in which she distinguishes between the will and the intellect. Therefore, new travelers to the destination of activity choose a road, will or intellect, not realizing that they are actually the same. Spinoza and Nietzsche were no different in their journeys. They had to begin somewhere. Spinoza chose the intellect, the road that looked most fruitful in his time. Nietzsche chose the will, more than likely as a reaction to what he perceived as the modern period’s failure to navigate the road of reason.


Therefore, many apparent differences surface. However, if we look back at those differences, with the realization that will and intellect are the same, we will see that the differences are not so deep after all.

First, let us consider Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s different approaches to consciousness. We must remember that when Spinoza advocates active ideas, or what we earlier called consciousness of the causes of one’s ideas, he is advocating having active drives and affects. For that is what ideas are. Active ideas are drives for power that are self defined. Passive ideas, in contrast, are affects in which one is confused about their true origin. For example, one may believe that something is good because it agrees with an objective moral code rather than understanding the event’s goodness to be completely defined in terms of one’s relation to it. Active ideas are necessitated by our nature which is will in so far as it is a striving or desire to increase power. In this way, Spinoza’s view really is not as different from Nietzsche’s as it appears.

Secondly, Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s treatment of the affects does not differ as much as it first appears. Spinoza is not interested in destroying all of the affects, only the passive ones. In other words, he only wants overcome what he calls the passions because they are not caused through our nature alone. For example, the affects of pity, humility, and shame are confused ideas that are caused not by our nature, but unconscious desires for external things, such as others having a good opinion of us. It is these types of affects that Spinoza wants to get rid of. Such affects limit one’s power of activity. However, Spinoza praises the virtues of other affects such as joy. Therefore, when Spinoza advocates replacing inadequate ideas with adequate ones, he is advocating that we make the transformation from a passive intellect to an active intellect, and therefore, to an active will. Nietzsche also makes this connection. He defines consciousness as “a certain behavior of the instincts toward one another.”

In conclusion, a very useful approach to the Spinoza-Nietzsche

25. Ibid., #179, 203.
paradox is a study of the role of the will and intellect within their philosophies. This approach successfully points out some of their fundamental agreements while explaining some of the divergences in their thought. Further, such an approach provides a helpful framework for understanding how these two lonely thinkers fit into the modern picture. We can now understand the seventeenth century indictment of Spinoza's materialism and the nineteenth century controversy of Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God as the modern reaction to the unification of the will and intellect, an ideal for which both Spinoza and Nietzsche strove.
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