Notes on Translating Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise
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Jan Hendrickz Glasemaker: The Addressee of Letter 84?
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Spinoza’s Holism: An Interpretation of the Relation of Modes to Substance
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Spinoza and Gödel: Causa Sui and Undecidable Truth
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I have been spending time translating Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), retranslating it, then translating it all over again.¹ I want to indicate how the difficulties I faced while trying to put the Treatise’s Latin into plain English are not simply grammatical.

Here is why.

Stated most succinctly: the Treatise is the philosophical founding-document of modern Judaism in particular and of modern liberal religion in general, by way of its being the philosophical founding-document, at one and the same time, of both and modern-scientific biblical criticism² and modern liberal democracy.³ The difficulties I faced in translating the Treatise turned out to be inseparable from this multi-level theologico-

1. Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, translated from the Latin, retaining Spinoza’s original Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Syriac citations, with Glossary, Indexes, and an Interpretive Essay by Martin D. Yaffe, Focus Philosophical Library, Newburyport, MA: Pullins, 2004. Much of what follows is adapted from the Glossary and Interpretive Essay to that translation; I am grateful to Ron Pullins for permission to recycle. In their present format, these remarks were first presented at the second Shoshana Shier Symposium on Judaism and Modernity on the topic of “Judaism and Jewish Modernity” at University of Toronto, September 2003.

Let me elaborate the foregoing as follows.

Spinoza’s Latin, while fairly straightforward in its sentence structure, is often subtle in its word choices. Throughout his argument, Spinoza imputes new meanings to old words or, what amounts to the same thing, relies on the double meanings of those words to convey his gist. On the one hand, then, his Treatise is like a routine political pamphlet in that he limits himself by and large to old fashioned theological and political terms whose meanings are more or less familiar to his intended reader from routine usage — e.g., sententia (“tenet”), consilium (“counsel”), to mention only two. On the other hand, the Treatise is like an academic textbook in that during his argument Spinoza endows many of those terms with newfangled scholarly meanings — sometimes explicitly (e.g., “prophet,” “law”), sometimes only implicitly (e.g., “worship,” “imperium”) — so as to support his innovative conclusions. I will return to each of these terms and a few others shortly, except that I will leave the terms “prophet” 4 and “law” 5 by and large for another occasion. My point here is that Spinoza invites or requires his reader to connect the old fashioned and newfangled meanings of the Treatise’s key theological and political terms, and this quasi-lexical feature of the Treatise is another way of describing its philosophical argument as a whole.

Differently stated: many of Spinoza’s key terms are deliberately ambiguous. At the outset of the Treatise, they seem to have a traditional or common sense meaning, especially those relating to theological and moral matters. But as the Treatise’s argument moves along, theology and morality are gradually shown to be a function of politics — or rather of what Spinoza understands politics to be, which we today might offhand call power politics. So the meanings of his key terms appear to shift in that direction, and their new, nontraditional meanings come to the surface as features or carriers of his overall argument. Inasmuch as the shift is


4. Cf., however, section VI, below. For the obvious meanings-in-use of the term “prophet” and its synonyms in the Treatise, see the Appendix, below, s.v. “prophet.”

5. See, however, my remarks in passing on Spinoza’s use of the term “law,” in the Appendix to the present paper; s.v. “reason” as well as in my remarks on the term “imperium” in section IV, below.
intended by Spinoza, we might say that the terms in question are like new wine in old bottles that still bear their original labels along with traces of their original contents. In practice, wherever I could not find a single English equivalent to convey the Treatise’s internal recycling of a given term, I tried — not always successfully — to translate the first occurrence of that term so as to give priority to its old fashioned exterior and let the new meaning that Spinoza has poured into it emerge in due course. Here and there, I was forced to supply a word’s alternate meaning in my translator’s footnotes, as if to acknowledge the ongoing abruptness, or reverberating shock, a reader might experience as he or she discovers more than once that the word’s new meaning may well jar or conflict with its old one even though both meanings were somehow present all along. I then added a Glossary to the translation, so as to indicate where an unsettled semantic conflict within a given word serves the purposes of Spinoza’s larger argument, though I left the reader to draw the fuller implications on his or her own with the possible help of an Interpretive Essay, which I also supplied. Finally, since I could refer in the Glossary to no more than a sample of instances of a given word for purposes of illustrating its full range of meaning, I located all the instances of that word and others in an Index of Terms, for the reader’s further consideration.

In what follows, I point out some of the more striking instances of what might be called the kaleidoscopic feature of the Treatise’s key terms, and their philosophical implications.

II

Embarrassingly enough, my translator’s difficulties started with the Treatise’s very first sentence:

If human beings could regulate all their affairs with certain counsel, or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would not be bound by any superstition. [P.1.1; \textit{italicization for emphasis — likewise throughout}].

What perplexed me about this sentence had to do with the meaning of its pivotal expression, “certain counsel.” Let me indicate something of my perplexity by first looking at each of these words separately.

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6. Four of the Glossary’s entries may be found in the Appendix below; others have been adapted to the argument of the paper itself.
As for the word “certain,” both its importance and its ambiguity are evident almost right away. Spinoza speaks of the need for “certain” counsel — or, alternatively, unfailing good luck — for human beings to free themselves from the grip of superstition.

But is he speaking here about counsel (or advice) that is “certain” in the sense of sure-fire, or “certain” in the sense of not yet specified, or what? As I pondered this ambiguity, I soon discovered that it seems to extend to the Treatise’s argument as a whole. On the one hand, the possibly sure-fire counsel the Treatise ends up giving may be summarized as liberal religion (including modern-scientific biblical criticism) and liberal democracy (cf. 20.7.1-7 with 16.6.1-19, 17.5.1-12, 19.1.10, 20.1.5, 6.3). On the other hand, and perhaps even more basically, the initially unspecified counsel the Treatise ends up giving has to do in addition with opening up human beings to minds like its author’s, i.e., to philosophical or scientific minds. Such minds are obviously the source of possibly sure-fire advice like liberal religion and liberal democracy; but they are something in their own right as well, and the Treatise aims at both protecting them, by advocating political tolerance, and encouraging them, by offering a timely argument that not only attracts its reader’s philosophical or scientific attention but also enhances his powers of observation and analysis.

At this point in my reflections, the thought occurred to me that perhaps the gap between the two possible meanings of the term “certain” — sure-fire? not-yet-specified? — might not be a simple blemish in the Treatise’s argument, but among its attractive features. Spinoza seems to have wanted readers to notice the ambiguity, be drawn to it, and experiment in their own minds as necessary in order to resolve it whenever it occurs, by examining the implications one way or the other on their own.8 Admittedly, he usually means by “certain” sure-fire; but not always, as the following example shows. In a chapter devoted to the calling or chosenness of the Hebrews,9 he says that reason and experience teach no more “certain” means for living securely and avoiding the wrongdoings inflicted by others than forming a society with “certain” laws and occupying a “certain” area of

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7. A note on my reference format: Spinoza’s Latin is characterized by paragraphs and sentences of often considerable length. To ease the burden on the English reader and to facilitate references to Spinoza’s text, I have numbered each Latin paragraph of Gebhardt’s edition, as well as each Latin sentence within that paragraph. I have then treated each numbered sentence as a separate paragraph and punctuated Spinoza’s Latin half-stops as English full-stops. As a result, the third Latin sentence of the second paragraph of Spinoza’s first chapter, say, is 1.2.3. An “A” instead of a chapter number in the citation refers to Spinoza’s Annotations, a “P” to his Preface, a “T” to a chapter title, and “TP” to the Title Page.
the world, etc. (3.4.5). Now perhaps, say, the laws that Spinoza has in mind for this purpose are said to be “certain” in that they are sure-fire, i.e., secure, well-established and well-enforced. But then again, although the immediate context of Spinoza’s remark is biblical, the Treatise’s final view is that the most secure laws generally speaking are those of a liberal democracy. Might not liberal-democratic laws then be the “certain” — i.e., as yet unspecified — laws that Spinoza ultimately has in mind here? Stumbling onto this last possibility could lead a reader, as it did me, to wonder more broadly how the biblical and other matters under discussion at the moment compare with those still to be discussed, and to ponder the alternatives and their larger implications as they unfold, by asking with reference to Spinoza’s larger argument, Which way of conceiving society is the “certain” (sure-fire? to-be-specified?) way to which we should look for guidance, the Bible’s or some other way?

At any rate, what started out as unplanned reflections on the lexical meaning of Spinoza’s terminology soon drew me into a philosophical question at the heart of his argument. After repeated experiences of this sort, I was forced to wonder to what extent the lexical difficulties I kept facing were entirely my own and to what extent they were somehow intended by Spinoza himself. Let me return to my lexical starting-point in order to share something more of this last wonderment.

8. On more than one occasion, I have had to cover over a possibly instructive ambiguity for the sake of English idiom. Spinoza speaks repeatedly of possibly appealing to a “reliable” tradition (whether Jewish or Christian) to certify the Bible’s meaning on a disputed point (2.7.2; 7.5.23; cf. 7.11.14). As I indicate each time in a footnote, the actual word is “certain” (or the corresponding adverb): if it were to mean an unspecified tradition, it could well imply that the tradition in question may never, unfortunately, have been able to answer reliably to that appeal as such, but was simply a tradition that was in place — say, the Pharisaic tradition — and was merely believed by its adherents to be reliable (cf. 9.1.77). Here too Spinoza leaves it to the reader to examine the implications either way in each case.

9. Spinoza speaks of “Hebrews” in reference to either the Hebrew language or the biblical nation as a nation like any other (2.9.12; 3.3.8, 5.1-2, 58; etc.). In contrast, he speaks of the (biblical) “Israelites” almost exclusively in a theological context, in connection with either God or revelation (though cf. 14.1.10). The main exception is where he speaks of the “civil war [or wars]” between the “Israelites” and the “Judeans” (5.4.12; 18.3.2-3). “Judeans” and “Jews,” in turn, are the same word in Spinoza’s Latin — Judaei. Often Judaei is synonymous or else parallel with either “Hebrews” or “Israelites.” Often instead it means “Jews” as a post-biblical religious community. Often, too, it refers to more than one of the foregoing at the same time, and Spinoza leaves it to his reader to sort things out. I have preferred to translate Judaei as “Jews” except where the immediate context requires “Judeans.”
Like the word “certain,” the word “counsel” is also prominent in the *Treatise*’s first sentence, which, as I have said, speaks of the need for “certain counsel” — or else unfailing good luck — for human beings to free themselves from superstition. The word “counsel” likewise turns out to be ambiguous at least some of the time. The ambiguity is compounded when Spinoza uses the two words in their ambiguous meaning side by side.

As for “counsel” itself, its ambiguity becomes evident once the reader stops to consider whether, in speaking of the “counsel” that is the putatively certain corrective for superstition, Spinoza means the content of that counsel (ultimately, liberal religion and liberal democracy) or the mere openness to counsel (ultimately, the openness that characterizes the philosophical-scientific minds that Spinoza is cultivating). Spinoza’s first sentence by itself makes it hard to decide. That by “counsel” he means primarily the content of any given piece of counsel is evident in most, though not all subsequent instances. A striking exception occurs during a philological discussion of the meaning of the biblical expression *ruach YHVH* in Is. 11:2, *v’nachah alav ruach YHVH*, “And the Spirit of God will rest upon him” (Spinoza’s translation): by “Spirit of God,” Isaiah here is said to mean the virtue or force of wisdom, “counsel” and strength (1.17.17, 20.6); in Spinoza’s reading, Isaiah thus seems to have in mind the general effects of prudent counsel, or consultation, rather than any particular counsel, though the general effects may also be understood to depend on the particulars of the counsel itself. To cite another example of this ambiguity: Spinoza says, in reference to the Pharisees’ council10 that decided which biblical books were to be canonized and which were not, that whoever wants to be certain of the authority11 of all the biblical books should take “counsel” once more and investigate the reason for each (10.2.61): presumably he means that whoever wants that certainty should either deliberate on his own or else be open in general to the advice of someone like, say, Spinoza himself — though conceivably he could mean the particulars of the advice as well. Finally, in yet another example of this same ambiguity, during some rather Machiavellian remarks about the political usefulness of religious hypocrisy, Spinoza cites Alexander the Great’s wanting to be worshiped as the son of Jove and quotes Alexander’s ancient biographer Curtius Rufus to the effect that, as far as Alexander was concerned, emperor-worship was nothing more than a political ploy, i.e., was a matter of prudent “counsel” rather than Alexander’s own personal

10. See 10.2.60. In what follows, a misprint in the Latin could conceivably have defaced *consilium* [...] *ineat* (“let him take counsel”) into *concilium* [...] *ineat* (“let him enter into a council”).

11. Or authorship.
vanity (17.3.12); in Spinoza’s reading, Curtius’ emphasis is on Alexander’s openness to counsel, though he goes on to indicate as well the particular counsel on which Alexander then acted.

Now to return once more to the juxtaposition of the terms “certain” and “counsel.” Spinoza subsequently pairs them again when saying, during a philological argument casting doubt on the reliability of the received text of the Hebrew Bible, that the rabbis mistakenly conclude that, on “certain counsel,” the Bible’s original authors deliberately added variant readings to the text so as to signify profound mysteries (9.1.77, with 9.1.60, 71, 116). Apart from the ambiguity of the word “certain” here — which could mean either that the advice the authors are said to have followed was reliable or that it was unspecified, or both — the “counsel” in question could mean either the particulars of that advice or, alternatively, some general but unspecified mutual consultation. In any case, the overall ambiguity of the expression “certain counsel” remains unresolved. Even so, the ambiguity contributes to the flow of Spinoza’s philological discussion, rhetorically and more, by inducing his reader to think twice about the biblical text’s authorship or authority (the word is the same in Spinoza’s Latin). That is, insofar as that ambiguity catches the reader’s eye, it requires him to dwell an extra moment or two on historical evidence that, in Spinoza’s hands, is designed to shake his confidence in the philological integrity of the Bible and, with that, its theological authority as well.

In short, I began to suspect that the aforementioned ambiguities, and others, led in two complementary directions — to the Treatise’s particular practical proposals, biblical criticism and liberal democracy, and to the Treatise’s general undermining of old fashioned theological and political orthodoxies in favor of modern philosophical and scientific enlightenment. (These two directions were complementary, I gathered, in that from Spinoza’s viewpoint philosophical and scientific enlightenment could flourish only alongside a liberalized religion that would incorporate biblical criticism and a liberalized political society that would incorporate democratic institutions.)

III

The foregoing suspicion was corroborated when I stumbled on a term even more intimately embedded in Spinoza’s theologico-political argument: sententia, a word I ended up translating, for the most part, as “tenet.” In Latin, sententia means, to begin with, a “sentence,” the grammatical unit of thinking. By extension, it means whatever may be expressed in a sentence — a judicial sentence, for example, or some other pronouncement. In addition, it means a “sentiment,” that is, a statement
that conveys either a privately conceived opinion (or feeling) or, alternatively, a publicly shared one. I found all these meanings in the *Treatise*. They are joined together, and at the same time offset, by the peculiar drift of the theological argument in which the word first and mostly occurs.

The *Treatise* starts with the — ironic — assumption that the Bible is the necessary and sufficient teacher of morality and that it presents its teaching in the form of articles of faith, or dogmas, which correspond to specific biblical statements (or “sentences”). These, then, are the Bible’s “tenets” in both the theological and the grammatical senses of the term. The *Treatise* goes on to argue that, in order to resolve politically troublesome disagreements about the meaning of the Bible’s theological “tenets,” we need only acquire philological clarity about the meaning of the Bible’s grammatical “sentences.” Such is the task of Spinoza’s newfound biblical criticism and of the biblical theology that he bases on it.

Yet there is more; for the same word, *sententia*, which starts out with an emphatically theological meaning, ends up with an emphatically political meaning. Let me indicate how I came to understand that transition, by citing the first and last two of its 72 instances in the *Treatise*, and then citing another, pivotal instance somewhere in between.

The term first shows up in Chapter 1, in Spinoza’s refutation of the traditional view, endorsed by Maimonides among others,\(^\text{12}\) that what the Israelites heard during the revelation of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai was not the Hebrew words themselves but only a wordless sound (or voice), during which the Israelites perceived the words of the Decalogue purely with their minds. The evidence prompting Spinoza to doubt this view is the variant wording in the two versions of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-14, Dt. 5:6-18): “From this it seems to follow,” he says, “(since God only spoke once) that the Decalogue does not mean to teach God’s words themselves, but only the tenets.” (1.9.2b) “Tenets” here thus means theological teachings. On the other hand, the same word shows up twice in Chapter 20, the *Treatise*’s last, in the context of Spinoza’s political argument in defense of freedom of opinion, where he argues that it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between the mere statement of an opinion, however seditious, and any possibly seditious action that might follow from that opinion.

For example, [he says,] if someone shows that some law conflicts with sound reason and argues on that account

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\(^\text{12. Guide of the Perplexed II.33.}\)
that it is to be repealed, if at the same time he submits his tenet to the judgment of the highest power (whose job alone it is to set down and repeal laws) and meanwhile does nothing against the prescription of that law, surely he deserves well of the republic, like any very good citizen. [20.4.7a]

Here “tenet” means a political opinion. Still, this meaning is hardly disconnected from the word’s earlier, theological meaning; for, using that same word shortly afterward in its subsequent and final appearance, Spinoza admits as possible counter-evidence against the defense of freedom of opinion which he has just uttered, “that there are some tenets [...] which, although they seem to turn simply on what is true and false, are yet proposed and divulged in an inequitable spirit” (20.4.13b); and yet to blunt the force of this potentially damaging admission, he at once refers his reader to an earlier discussion about how to identify and deal with just such politically subversive tenets, in Chapter 15 — a Chapter whose focus is however on theological rather than political tenets! What, I wondered, is going on here?

Facing this question prompted some second thoughts about the purpose and method of Spinoza’s entire tenet-centered biblical hermeneutic as adumbrated in Chapter 7 of the Treatise. Spinoza describes its — literally — central feature as follows: “it has to gather the tenets of each book and reduce them to overall headings, so that we can have at hand all those that are found to be about the same matter.” (7.3.1a) That is, the point of analyzing the biblical text.
Letter 84 (according to the usual numbering in recent editions) was not contained in the original publication of Spinoza’s correspondence in the Opera Posthuma (1677) but only used by its editors to preface in this book the unfinished Tractatus politicus. Carl Gebhardt (IV 374-376) discusses the possibility that an anonymous “Rector im Haag,” mentioned by Rieuwertz junior to the German travelers Stolle and Hallmann, might have been its receiver.\(^1\) An exception among modern editors/translators of the correspondence, Altilano Domínguez pays some attention to the question and seems to support the Gebhardt’s suggestion.\(^2\) But he, at least, sees a difficulty: why should Spinoza write a letter to a good friend living nearby in the same small city? His hypothetical explanation of the hypothetical ascription is that Spinoza might have done so for being sick or having fear of being discovered in visiting his friend.\(^3\) But would the dispatch of a letter with the announcement of a book on politics and its eventual discovery not have been much more risky than a casual visit? And weak health cannot be a plausible reason either since the contents and tone of the letter show much energy and include plans for the near future. In the case of sickness, one might have expected an allusion to it.

In this note, I will point to Glasemaker as the foremost candidate for having been the receiver of the letter on account of a couple of arguments, that each by itself is surely not strong enough though together they collectively may have some weight. A first thing to focus on is the form of address of this letter: amice dilecte (dear/beloved friend). This form be-

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1. J. Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's aus Quellenschriften*, Leipzig, 1899, 224. This person, who also died in The Hague would have been a close friend (*guter Freund*) and a protector.


3. “Por estar ya enfermo o por temor […], Spinoza le habría escrito, en vez de visitarle, pese a vivir en la misma ciudad” (*ibid.*)
trays familiarity. Spinoza was always very concerned in choosing accurately the appropriate form of address for his letters. He also mostly keeps to his choice once he has made it. Oldenburgh was first addressed as **Vir clarissime**, later as **nobilissime et clarissime domine**. Simon de Vries, the young and gifted student, read **amice colende** on the letters from his friend Spinoza. The learned and highly respected Lodewijk Meijer, who much co-operated with Spinoza in his work, was called **amice singularis**. Pieter Balling, the rich merchant who supported him but was also his intimate, enjoyed the title **dilecte amice**, as did the addressee of letter 84. Blijenbergh was first **amice ignote** for Spinoza and became later **mi domine et amice**. Hudde, the burgomaster of Amsterdam, was correctly approached as **amplissime vir**, just like the pensionary H. Boxel. Another political authority, Van der Meer, was comparably approached as **ornatissime vir**. Bouwmeester, partner of Meijer in science and arts, has the same prerogative: **doctissime vir, amice singularis**. The old and very modest comrade Jelles is four times kindly treated as **humanissime vir**. Naturally Leibnitz has a high score, although with a certain distance: **eruditissime nobilissimeque domine**. The learned baron Tschirnhaus was greeted as **nobilissime vir**, his assistant Schuller as **expertissime vir**. Velthuysen was finally addressed as **præstantissime clarissimeque domine**.

It will be clear from the above list that the title Spinoza gave to his correspondents was certainly not without a meaning. Can we, therefore, draw a conclusion about the profile of the addressee of Letter 84. Yes. He must have belonged to the circle of Spinoza’s close and confidential friends with whom he was on an equal footing for quite some time. Simon de Vries, Adriaan Koerbagh, and Pieter Balling had died. Jarig Jelles had already been denoted by his initials “I. I.” and, moreover, he did not know Latin. The “special” friends Meijer and Bouwmeester were both too busy with theatrical work in the art society *Nil volentibus arduum*. They had likewise already been identified by their initials. Schuller was not really a friend, and Van Gent (Dr. Petrus van), mentioned by Spinoza in Letter 63, was more of a learned relation, belonging to the intimates of Tschirnhaus as did Schuller himself.4 Who remains? We have to search in Amsterdam, because this city, the place of Spinoza’s birth, youth, education, and philosophical development, functioned also as the matrix of his lifelong friendships. The *summus amicus* of his latter days in The Hague, Abraham Cuffeler, cannot be considered precisely for this reason and also because he

was above all a learned admirer on a high social level. The same must be remarked about Burchard de Volder, professor at the university of Leiden, who in his correspondence with Leibnitz denied to be a Spinozist (like Peter denied to be a friend of Christ).

Why should we not consider as a candidate his publisher, Jan Rieuwertz? We do know that he belonged to the category of Spinoza’s intimates. Not only does he denote himself as a participant of this group by naming as friends Balling, Spinoza, and Jelles in his publication of the latter’s 1684 Belijdenisse, but Spinoza, in his turn, also called him “our friend J. R.” in letter 58 to Schuller who had sent him a letter indirectly via Rieuwertz. He is greeted in the name of Rieuwertz by this same Schuller in letter 63. It is also known that he had intellectual communication with Spinoza. This is demonstrated by Spinoza’s declaration in 1674 to Schuller that he formerly (olim) sent a paper of his with a logical/epistemological content to his friend Rieuwertz. Discussing an objection of Tschirnhaus against the freedom of the will he writes, “This is true if he means that the two men, while using the same words, nevertheless have different things in mind. I once sent some examples of this to our friend J. R., and I am now writing to him to let you have them.” This seems to prove that Rieuwertz was himself a philosopher who asked Spinoza questions and that he was not only interested in his contributions in his role as a publisher.

Yet also Rieuwertz has to be excluded as a possible addressee of letter 84 for the simple reason that he did not know Latin (just like Jarig Jelles). This information is given in an important passage of Stolle’s and Hallmann’s reports about their meetings with Spinoza that was not printed and divulged by J. Freudenthal. Apart from its pivotal summary of a certain Dutch manuscript in Rieuwertz’ possession which throws new light on Spinoza’s relation to Bouwmeester and his own philosophy, one also finds in the left out fragment of the manuscript the confession of Rieuwertz junior, “daß sein Vater noch weniger Latein als Er verstanden” (that his father was even less capable of reading Latin than he himself). The argument that maybe the letter was written by Spinoza in Dutch and


afterwards translated into Latin in order to insert it in the Opera Posthuma cannot survive criticism. Its style betrays Spinoza’s pen in the last years of his writing. This is marvelously substantiated by Omero Proietti in a contribution about classical crypto citations (from Petronius, Horace and Vergilius) in the letters 76 (to Albert Burgh, 1675) and our letter 84.8

Who else, then, might be the “dear friend”? The Amsterdam network partly originating from Van den Enden — becoming a non-conformist reading and discussion group in the sixties and then also strongly activated by many vital contacts in Rieuwertz’ unorthodox publishing shop — also counted, certainly from the beginning, the “professional” translator Glasemaker among its participants. This is indisputable since I discovered the famous passage in Borch’s journal in which he reports about the circle. “Here are atheists, mainly Cartesians like Van den Enden, Glasemaker etc. who teach their ideas to others. They do not profess openly their atheism — they often speak about god — but by God they understand nothing else than this whole universe. This is also clearly confirmed by a certain artificially and recently composed Dutch writing whose author is kept secret.”9 The educated Glasemaker (1620-1682) was the lifelong “scientific” partner and colleague of Jan Rieuwertz who translated for his publishing house all the works of Descartes, Spinoza and many other controversial books and pamphlets.10 Glasemaker also must have been an intimate and old friend of Spinoza, a candidate to address with amice dilecte.

Are there other arguments for the hypothesis that Glasemaker was the receiver of Letter 84? Yes. First of all, as a kind of co-director in the enterprises of Rieuwertz, who did not know Latin and yet published the most important and subversive Latin texts of the age, he must always have been involved in planning activities, the negotiations with authors and the preparation of manuscripts for the press. Rieuwertz was not only a man

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who brought to light the output of authors, he was also “a great organizer of books,”

"inventive in stimulating and funding new productions. When we did not already realize this on account of his publishers list, it becomes now evident in a recently discovered letter, which was published by Piet Visser. In the letter, dating from 1 April 1672 and directed to the Haarlem collegiant Anthony van Dale, Rieuwertz asks him for his cooperation in writing part of a political treatise. He tells him that they are preparing a treatise about the “Triple Alliantie” (the well known pact between France, England and The Republic). “Glasemaker has already extracted materials from Aitsema, has ordered them and formed to a logical whole [...]. But since Aitsema does not write further than 1668, Glasemaker is not able to continue and to connect the subject with our time in order to publish the work as a complete history [...]. You are a good friend of Abraham Castelein; he might know something, that could serve our purpose.”

One year later, Glasemaker’s work appeared anonymously on the market under the title “Story of State Affairs, showing the Formation of the Triple Alliantie.”

Apart from Glasemaker’s deep involvement in the enlightening activities of Rieuwertz, the discovered letter demonstrates a second point, namely his strong political motivation and activity as a writer. How could it be different in a philosophical comrade of the “doctor politicus” Van den Enden and the translator of his friend’s TTP? This, in fact, provides us with a third reason to consider Glasemaker the happy receiver of Spinoza’s communication. Spinoza proudly reports in the letter the great things he has recently perpetrated in writing a political treatise te auctore (on your advice and stimulation). The word “auctor” seems to include a bit more than advice. An active pushing of Spinoza in this direction in the year 1675 fits well in the context of the Rieuwertz enterprise. In that year, Spinoza had arrived at a deadlock. Warned by his friends not to publish the Ethica

12. Who composed a history on Saken van Staet en Oorlogh (things of state and war).
13. O. c. p. 16. The letter is to find in the manuscript department of the University Library of Amsterdam (under the signature I 48). Further in the letter, Rieuwertz writes that he will also defray the costs in case Van Dale can acquire the information elsewhere against money.
on account of the many rumors about his atheism and the real danger of
forfeiting his life in case it would become available, he wrote that he was
afraid and uncertain. “The situation seems to worsen day by day, and I am
not sure what to do.” The great thing (the Ethica) was finished, but its
possible influence blocked. What now? There was a plan, probably also
stimulated by Rieuwertz and Glasemaker, to prepare a new edition of the
TTP and add to it many annotations, elucidations, and answers on
accusations and refutations. Letter 69 to his former detractor Lambert van
Velthuysen amply testifies to this.

Let us now read the opening sentences of Letter 84:

Dear friend. Your welcome letter yesterday was delivered
to me yesterday. I thank you most sincerely for the
considerable trouble you take on my behalf. I should not
let pass this opportunity [hanc occasionem], etc., if I
were not engaged in a certain matter which I believe to
be more important, and which I think will be more to
your liking, namely, in composing a Political Treatise,
which I began some time ago at your suggestion.

What is to be guessed about the word “occasio”? In my view, this half
sentence must have contained some kind of a concrete proposal for the
execution of Spinoza’s own plan for an extended and improved publication
of the TTP, for which he had already prepared materials and about which
he had already corresponded with Van Velthuysen. But now was not the
right moment. The energy was spent, and indeed his own hand was already
at work full speed at another project which was rapidly approaching the
finishing line. This project, he felt, was most urgent, more urgent at least
than adding clarifications to a work that was already clear enough and was,
moreover, completely rejected by the learned world and those who were in
power. In so far he had last year made the impression on his good friend to
feel something for the TTP project, he had now changed his mind. It was
high time, he now thought, to lay his cards on the table and to analyze
political life to its bones and so to show its irresistible mechanisms. This
was not in order to sit down in depression but in order to profit from this
knowledge for the architectural construction of the best possible forms of
every kind of political system: monarchy, aristocracy, democracy.

It would have been a tricky thing to write so openly about his political
work to persons outside the circle of his intimates. The detailed

16. Ep68.
information about the titles and contents of various chapters is precisely the thing an author is inclined to reveal confidentially to his prospected editors who are for so many years already on the same dangerous tract with the author and cultivate parallel plans for the future. No wonder that the addressee is concerned for the well-being of his friend (curam quam pro me geris).

When Spinoza’s death came, some months later, not quite unexpected, his manuscripts were already for a great part in the safe of the publishing house, and what was still in The Hague was rapidly brought to the city. Letter 84 was already there too and could easily be included in the “opera,” prepared already during a long period. Everything put together and reckoned onto one account, I think that this is the best possible solution of our riddle.
Spinoza’s Holism: An Interpretation of the Relation of Modes to Substance

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As long as the holistic character of Spinoza’s thinking is neglected [...] no adequate understanding of his metaphysics is likely to be gained.¹

Reviled and dismissed as an atheist in his lifetime, Spinoza was nonetheless called by the German poet Novalis “a God-intoxicated man.” I am inclined to side with Novalis. The task, however, of examining Spinoza’s notion of God in full is beyond the scope of this paper. It seems clear, however, that the claim that Spinoza is an atheist requires that substance — for Spinoza — is nothing more than the infinite chain of finite modes. On this view, the one substance is reducible to its modes. I intend to show, against this position, that Spinoza’s God, the one substance, cannot be reduced to a mere aggregate² of its modes and that there is a sense in which substance is not merely the totality of modes. My argument turns on reading Spinoza’s metaphysics as holistic rather than reductionistic.³ In other words, substance as the all-inclusive whole has a certain unity that cannot be explained in terms of the ‘parts’ of that whole, and in this sense what we call ‘parts’ can only be understood in terms of the whole.⁴ As ‘God’ refers to a unified entity and not an aggregate or multitude, the non-reducibility of substance to modes allows Spinoza meaningfully and appropriately to apply the term ‘God’ to it. In arguing

¹. Quotation by Errol E. Harris. My thanks to Errol Harris, Lee Rice, and Michael Wreen for their considerable assistance with early drafts of this paper.

². By ‘aggregate’ I mean a collection of parts, what Spinoza calls ‘multitudo.’

³. That Spinoza should be read as a holist has been argued by Errol E. Harris. My position has affinities with his position. The difference, however, is that Harris interprets this holism in a Hegelian direction; I have no such Hegelian reading of holism and mean by the term something slightly different. Nevertheless, my agreement with Harris is substantial. Michael Della Rocca also reads Spinoza holistically.
for this holistic reading, I hope to contribute to further inquiry into Spinoza’s notion of divinity.

I begin my analysis with a clarification of some key concepts. By ‘holism,’ I mean the view that individual things can be understood as individual things existing ‘in’ a larger structure or whole. These individual things, though diversified, cannot be separated from that whole. In other words, what exist are wholes which are diversified (actually there is — for Spinoza — only one whole) not parts the aggregates of which are dubbed ‘wholes.’ By ‘reductionism’ I mean the contrary of ‘holism.’ A reductionist maintains that what ultimately exists are not diversified wholes but a plurality of things. In other words, for the reductionist what we call ‘wholes’ are simply aggregates of parts. The issue is whether diversified wholes are ultimate or aggregating parts are ultimate.

I now turn to Spinoza’s discussion of the nature of substance. Spinoza defines ‘substance’ as follows: “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of some other thing” (E1def3). In other words, substance is an independent, self-contained, unified being. This conception of substance is derived from the Scholastic and Cartesian traditions, but the conclusions which Spinoza draws from it differ radically from these traditions.

Spinoza’s claim that substance must be understood in terms of itself and cannot be understood in terms of anything else is particularly important for the attribution of holism to him. Essential to any ontological reductionism is that a whole just is the sum of its parts added together (Davies 61). If Spinoza thought of substance as a collection of parts and only that, then

4. ‘Parts’ and ‘whole’ for Spinoza are really just aids to the imagination (Ep32); his holism — I argue below — is so strong, that finally the ideas of ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ are not satisfactory.

5. By ‘structure’ I mean that which accounts for the organization of and relation among all things which are part of that structure. I explain this more fully below.


7. >From a holist perspective a whole can never be a collection of parts, for parts only exist as diversification of a whole. In short, wholes have ontological priority.

8. In what follows, I briefly summarize Spinoza’s argument for substance monism and his identification of God with substance. I do this in a cursory and terse manner as I do not intend to prove that Spinoza is correct or to work out the details of his argument. My aim is merely to clarify what Spinoza means by substance and why God and substance are one and the same thing.
substance could only be understood as a name for an aggregate of parts, and this is precisely the opposite of something that must be conceived in itself and cannot be conceived through anything else. For, if what ultimately exists are individual modes which added together are substance, then modes would be primary.

But this is the exact opposite of Spinoza’s position:

What I say that I mean by substance that which is conceived through itself and in itself [...]; and by modification or accident I understand that which is in something else and is conceived through that in which it is. Hence it is clearly established, first, that substance is prior in nature to its accidents; for without it these can neither exist nor be conceived. [Ep4]9

Substance is primary, and modes are derivative. In and of itself this means that we ought not to interpret Spinoza’s substance as an aggregate of modes. For now, however, clarification on the natures of substance and mode is needed.

Returning to the argument for substance monism in the Ethics, we find that Spinoza spends the first fourteen propositions arguing that substance is independent and self-contained and cannot be predicated of something besides itself because it is a causally independent being. He argues further that a being which is causally independent cannot act or act upon something outside or apart from itself. It follows that there must be either a plurality of finite substances that do not casually interact (this is the position Leibniz takes) or that there must be one infinite substance in which all things move and live and have their being.

Spinoza rejects the first of these alternatives on the grounds that if a plurality of substances were to exist, then they would have to be finite (since they are at least limited by not being other substances); but if a substance were finite, then some other substance would have to produce it. The problem with this is that Spinoza takes it as axiomatic that things either exist “in themselves or in something else” (E1ax1), and that substance is that which is in itself (E1def3). This means that “substance cannot be produced by anything else” (E1p6cor), for to be produced by

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9. Additional support for this reading is found in Spinoza’s other correspondence: “each part [of substance] can neither be nor be conceived without it” (Ep32). Again we see the stress on the primacy of substance over modes not the reverse, which is what reductionism would require.
something else precludes independence. In other words, if there were a plurality of substances, their existence would contradict the definition of substance. This argument makes the postulation of a plurality of substances self-contradictory.

In E1p14, Spinoza comes to a radical conclusion: “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God.” Spinoza generates this identification by means of an analysis of the very definition of ‘God.’ This definition is stated at the beginning of the Ethics: “By God I mean an absolutely infinite being” (E1def6). To be absolutely infinite is, by definition, to have no limitations whatsoever.10

If anything existed outside of or apart from God, Spinoza argues, then God would be limited insofar as a part of reality would be independent of God, thus limiting God. Reality would then be made up of God and other things; there would be the power of God and other powers. But if all power and all things do not exist in God, then God does not exhaust all the power and reality that there is and is thus not absolutely infinite. Now, since God is absolutely infinite and substance is absolutely infinite and nothing can exist outside of God, and since there can only be one substance, God and substance must be identical.

Spinoza neatly sums up his conception of God/substance in the following words:

    I have now explained the nature and properties of God: that he necessarily exists, that he is one alone [...] that all things are in God and are so dependent on him that they can neither be nor be conceived without him,11 and lastly, that all things have been predetermined by God [...] from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power. [E1app]

In short, Spinoza’s one substance — God — is an infinite, eternal power in which all things exist and apart from which there is nothing. But this simple definition — though a crucial clarification — does not answer the question of this paper, how does substance relate to its modes?

10. Spinoza has a very complex position on the infinite, which he articulates most clearly (though it is not at all clear) in Ep12. His basic position is that there are different kinds of infinity, an endless series, infinity in kind, and absolute infinity. I will restrict myself here to the use of “absolutely infinite” meaning by it “fullness of being without any limitations whatsoever.” For further detail, see Gueroult.

11. Again, Spinoza’s holism is hard to miss: things depend on God and exist in God; God is not said to be the name for a collection of modes.
It is important to realize that Spinoza’s substance does not exist as an undifferentiated static oneness. Substance expresses itself in modes: “Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God: that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way” (E2p25cor). Modes are finite expressions of infinite substance. Substance is infinite power (E1p34), and finite things are limited and imperfect “parts”12 of that power.

The preceding summary does not greatly clarify the relation between substance and modes. There are two possible ways that modes express God’s power: either God/substance is not reducible to the infinite series of finite modes, or God/substance simply is that series of modes (for the latter reading all that we mean by ‘God’ or ‘substance’ is the sum total of things and their relations to each other). If the latter view were correct, then the distinction between substance and modes would be merely conceptual; if the former, then substance would in some way transcend its modes.13

Now, Spinoza does tell us what the distinction between substance and modes is, namely the distinction between Natura naturans and Natura naturata. This passage is so crucial that I shall quote it fully:

Before I go any further, I wish to explain at this point what we must understand by ‘Natura naturans’ [nature naturing] and ‘Natura naturata’ [nature natured]. I should perhaps say not ‘explain,’ but ‘remind the reader,’ for I consider that it is already clear from what has gone before that by ‘Natura naturans’ we must understand that which is itself and is conceived through itself; that is, the attributes of substance that express eternal and infinite essence; or [...] God in so far as he is considered as a free cause. By ‘Natura naturata’ I understand all that follows from the necessity of God’s nature, that is, from the necessity of each one of God’s attributes; or [sive]14 all the modes of God’s attributes in so far as they are considered as things which are in God and can neither be

12. By ‘parts’ I mean only that modes exist within substance. They are not conceivable apart from that infinite reality in which they dwell.

13. ‘Transcend’ is a highly loaded term. I do not mean to indicate that substance is separate from modes, for that is obviously not what Spinoza maintains. I mean only that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, in a sense to be explained below. Substance transcends modes only in that it is not reducible to the infinite series of modes.
This passage is deceptively simple. *Natura naturans* is simply the self-activity of substance or God, the infinite, self-caused, eternal, source of all things; *Natura naturata* comprises all things which are finite, durational, and causally dependent. Yet when we look more closely at this passage, we find that the exact nature of Spinoza’s distinction is not entirely clear.

Curley argues that the distinction is a rather strong division between attributes and modes. According to Curley, substance is identical with its attributes, and the issue of the relation between *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata* is the issue of the relations of modes to the attributes in which the modes exist (*Geometrical Method* 36-37).

Curley also argues for a particular understanding of modes and their relation to substance. In particular, he argues against the view that modes are not predicates of a subject (substance being the subject) on the grounds that Spinoza nowhere states such a view, and — more crucially — on the grounds that Spinoza’s analysis of the relation of modes to substance is conducted in causal terms. Substance “is what is causally self-sufficient [...] a mode is something which is not causally self-sufficient and that the relation of mode to substance is one of causal dependence, not one of inherence in a subject” (Curley, “Bennett’s Interpretation” 37).

Given Spinoza’s repeated insistence that things depend on God and are caused by God, in addition to the fact that he nowhere speaks of modes as predicates of a subject, I side with Curley on the issue of what modes are — namely, things — and that they are caused by, rather than inhere in, substance.15 As Richard Mason notes, Curley’s position “seems undeniable to the point of self-evidence in the light of Spinoza’s insistence on causality in the early propositions of the *Ethics*” (Mason, *God* 31). Nevertheless, Curley’s position that modes are things, not predicates of a subject, does not require that we read Spinoza’s metaphysics as holistic. On the other hand, Curley’s particular understanding of modes and their relation to substance favors holism in making modes causally dependent on substance in a non-inherent sense. For if Curley’s reading is correct,

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14. The Latin “*sive*” ought to be translated as “that is” or “in other words.” This does not mean that attributes are only modes; rather, as Spinoza states, it means that all modes follow necessarily from some attribute.

15. I do not mean to say that my position on the nature of modes and their relation to substance is identical to Curley’s only that I agree with him that the relation is not one of a predicate to its subject.
substance cannot possibly be an aggregate of modes.

One who accepts Curley’s causal reading of the relations of substance to its modes could argue for the irreducibility of substance to modes on the grounds of such causality, particularly on the grounds of Spinoza’s understanding of the causality of God. This is bolstered by a careful look at Spinoza’s cosmological argument. That argument shows that substance cannot be the infinite series of modes but must be ontologically prior to its modes and therefore cannot be reduced to them. But, the argument can only work if it is argued on holistic rather than reductionistic grounds.

Spinoza’s cosmological argument depends on the claim that infinite existence is a necessary feature of the world. It follows that an account of the world restricted to the finite would not be complete. Indeed, it would leave out the most basic ontological fact about the nature of reality, the primacy of the infinite. As Spinoza puts it:

So if what now necessarily exists is nothing but finite entities, then finite entities are more potent than an absolutely infinite Entity — which is absurd. Therefore, either nothing exists, or an absolutely infinite Entity necessarily exists. [E1p11dem3]

The importance of the above argument is that it draws a clear distinction between finite things and an absolutely infinite entity. The argument implies that finite things are many and the infinite entity is one (by definition). Furthermore, if only finite entities exist, then an absolutely infinite entity does not exist, which — because if true requires that finite things are more potent than an absolutely infinite being — is self-evidently absurd. If we interpret Spinoza’s one substance as reducible to the infinite series of finite things, then the above reasoning does not make sense. For all modes are finite things and if only modes exist, then the infinite — that is, the absolutely infinite — does not exist.

That substance is no mere aggregate of parts is also supported by an analysis of Spinoza’s conception of infinity and *multitudo*. Ep12 is the key text for this matter. Here Spinoza argues that there is a sharp distinction between that which is absolutely infinite and an aggregate or multitude of finite things. In fact, Spinoza argues that the two categories are mutually exclusive: “it is not from the multitude of parts that an infinity of parts is

16. The argument I refer to is actually a form of the ontological argument as will be clear from its exposition below, but I call it ‘cosmological’ because of its emphasis on causality.
inferred” (Ep12). He supports his claim with an example: “in the entire space between two non-concentric circles we conceive there to be twice the number of parts as in half that space, and yet the number of parts both in the half as well as the whole of this space is greater than any assignable number” (Ep12). As Mason explains, “Spinoza understood the complete difference between an infinity and ‘multitude of parts’” (32). Much is confusing about this account, but commentators are agreed that that which is infinite cannot be made up of parts; it cannot be an aggregate.

Admittedly, Ep12 is not entirely clear (the example of concentric circles is certainly less than illuminating), but returning to Ep32, we find Spinoza’s position made more clear with the example of the worm in the blood stream:

 believable? Imagine [...] a tiny worm living in the blood [...] that worm would be living in the blood as we are living in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not a part, and it could have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood. [Ep32]

The key emphasis is that the inter-relation of the parts of the blood is determined by the overall nature of the whole as they are not wholes — in the robust sense — in themselves. When we extend this thinking to the ultimate whole which is facies totius universi, it follows that all things are dependent on and understood through and in their place in the whole. But importantly, if modes are the parts in the whole, then that the whole and not the parts is primary and therefore the whole cannot be a mere aggregate of the parts; just as the worm and everything else in the bloodstream exist because the bloodstream exists (as one individual) and are determined by it: they do not determine it.\(^\text{17}\)

All modes, then, are causally dependent\(^\text{18}\) on substance, and substance is ontologically prior to its modes. No matter how many modes are added together, causal independence can never be reached; zero plus zero plus zero is still zero. As Alan Donagan argues, “since finite modes are not self-caused, their totality cannot be self-caused either” (Donagan 90). In short, if Donagan is correct, substance cannot be reduced merely to the

\(^{17}\) As they would have to if the whole were only an aggregate.

\(^{18}\) Just as the organs of my body are caused by the structure that is the whole organism, or as Spinoza is inclined to put it, the measurements of a triangle are caused by its triangularity.
Many critics have pointed out that Donagan’s argument is less than convincing without a clarification of “caused” and “self-caused” which supports his claim. I concede the point. Even though individual things cannot be self-caused, their totality very well could be. A partial response to this is that although there must be an explanation for each individual thing in the infinite series of finite things, a cause is needed and there need not be a cause of the series itself, since being infinite simply is and needs no further explanation for its existence.

Curley’s reading of modes as individuals rather than predicates helps to further support for Donagan’s position. If there is a real causal distinction between substance and its modes, then obviously the totality of modes as causally dependent cannot be identical to substance as causally independent. If Curley is right, then Donagan’s claim is substantiated. This solution remains unsatisfactory — or at least incomplete — for it is still not clear what substance is and how it causes modes. For Curley, substance is “the most general order exemplified by things” (Geometrical Method 42), that is, the primary laws of nature. But this cannot be correct, because laws of nature are, for Spinoza, the infinite modes which are as Curley recognizes (Ibid. 45), not the attributes of substance or substance itself. Rather, substance (or its attributes) is better described as the structure which gives rise to the infinite modes, just as the organs of an organism are not simply heaped together but operate as parts of the whole organism (which is the structure which explains the function of and relation between the organs).

Curley’s interpretation avoids reducing substance to merely the totality of modes, but it does not seem accurate. An alternative interpretation, which also avoids reduction is proposed by Errol Harris. According to Harris, “Spinoza’s substance is to be conceived as an infinite process of differentiation of a primal principle of structure, each differentiation (or mode) expressed in an infinite diversity of ways, corresponding to the infinite attributes” (Harris, Spinoza’s Philosophy 32). For Harris, substance is a single, undivided individual unity, which expresses itself in and through an infinite series of finite modes. On this view, substance exists as modes and laws of nature, but is not only the modes and the laws

19. I emphasize that substance is not only the totality of modes, because it is also the totality of modes given that modes are expressions of substance and not something beside substance.

20. This is the very point of the distinction between all the modes (both finite and infinite) as Natura naturata and substance/attributes as Natura naturans.
of nature, as substance is also the context that gives rise to the both modes and laws, as well as the unique individual thing that diversifies as modes. This captures the essence of a holistic reading of Spinoza. What exists is substance diversified, not modes collected together.

To establish this holistic reading of Spinoza, I will argue first that there is in Spinoza a very real sense in which the whole cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts; namely, the infinite individual (see below) has properties that none of its parts nor the sum total of them have. I will then argue that at the level of substance there are no parts at all. At that level, the distinction between whole and parts disappears. Now if the whole is not reducible to the sum of its parts, then Donagan’s claim that the aggregate of finite things is not substance is vindicated.

Consider E2p13lem7schol. In this scholium, Spinoza claims that “a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature.” This is possible because an individual is not simply its parts but specifically an individual by means of its formal structure, that principle by which an individual remains an individual even though its parts change drastically. Spinoza also says in this scholium that complex individuals are made up of simpler individuals and that “If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts — that is, all the constituent bodies — vary in infinite ways without change in the individual as a whole.”

The standard interpretation of this passage is that it refers to the extended world as an infinite individual and not substance itself but rather the infinite mode that is immediately produced by the attribute of substance (in this case the attribute of extension). Since the infinite individual has parts and substance (as I will argue below), this distinction is valid. This passage shows, however, that even though all the parts of this infinite individual actually do vary in infinite ways, there is absolutely no change of the individual qua individual. But, if all of its parts change in infinite ways while it remains unchanged, then the infinite individual has a property that none of its parts (nor even the sum total of its parts) has.

This claim that wholes have properties which there parts do not is a central tenet of any form of holism. As Paul Davis notes, holism entails that some things must be understood as wholes which cannot be understood as mere collections of parts. For example, a jigsaw puzzle cannot be completely understood in terms of its parts but only as a unity; the unity cannot be contained in the parts nor in their mere collection but exists only as a

21. Curley, Geometrical Method 46; Mason, God 34; and Harris, Spinoza’s Philosophy 28 agree on this point.
unified whole. “The picture on a jigsaw, like the speckled newspaper image of a face, can only be perceived at a higher level of structure than the individual pieces — the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Davies 61). Holism is employed by Spinoza to explain the relation of the infinite individual and its parts. The individual exists as a unified whole, not simply as a collection of things.

Such a consideration of the infinite individual strongly supports attributing a holistic metaphysics to Spinoza. But it does not in itself indicate how substance relates to its modes. Since there is a distinction between substance and the infinite individual we cannot simply explain the relation of substance and modes in terms of the relation of the infinite individual and its parts. To find the relation of substance and modes, we must look deeper.

In Ep12, Spinoza bluntly declares that “it is nonsense, bordering on madness, to hold that extended Substance is composed of parts or bodies really distinct from one another.” Now the first thing to note is that since the infinite individual has parts and substance does not, they cannot be the same. As Richard Mason says, “What [Spinoza] calls finite modes — for practical purposes, individuals — together make up what he calls infinite modes” (32). Mason immediately — and I think correctly — tells us that these infinite modes are the infinite individual of E2p13 and the infinite intellect. But what, then, is the relationship of substance to these infinite individuals?

Mason offers a proposal for this as well: the distinction between infinite modes and substance just is the distinction between Natura naturans and Natura naturata discussed above. Mason moves beyond this, however, to claim that Natura naturans and Natura naturata are two ways of conceiving one and the same ultimate reality. This means that insofar as we are thinking modally, nature is one infinite individual made up of finite individuals, but at the level of substance there are no parts at all and substance is indivisible. In short, we are dealing with two ways of thinking of the same thing.

What is of central importance to my claim that substance cannot be simply

22. Some readers might reject this reading. Since Spinoza is arguing about a constant level of motion and rest, he many only mean that motion and rest is constant in the universe. This protest seems to me incorrect in that Spinoza is concerned to speak of the infinite individual as the same individual. Now, since that individual remains numerically the same individual even though it is made up of constantly changing parts, it has a property, being unchanging. In one sense, it seems to be the case that for Spinoza the whole has a property that its parts even all collected together do not have.
the sum total of its modes — that the whole is here greater than the sum of its parts — is that on either of the above two views, substance must not be understood as an aggregate of modes. Substance, according to Spinoza, is not made up of parts, and even if that is just a way of thinking about the infinite individual, the infinite individual must be understood holistically and not in a reductionist manner. It follows that the relationship of substance to modes must be a holistic relationship.

If substance cannot be reduced to the infinite series of modes, it follows that substance is (in a sense) transcendent. Substance transends its modes simply by the fact that the infinite series of finite modes does not exhaust the reality of substance. For substance is not to be understood as a collection of finite parts but as the infinity through which finite parts are to be understood. Nevertheless, it is not the case that substance transcends the modes by existing apart from them or by existing in some supernatural realm ‘out there’: it is simply that substance is more than the sum of its modes.

But if substance does not exist in some supernatural realm beyond its modes, if there is, so to speak no gulf between substance and modes, one may wonder why substance is not reducible in some sense to its modes. I suggest the following: substance is that which orders, structures, generates, maintains, and pervades the infinite series of modes. Spinoza’s substance — his God — is that which, borrowing the words of Stephen Hawking, “breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for [us] to describe.”23 In other words, God is the dynamic formal structure which makes the universe to be and makes it to be that which it is.24

I conclude as I began. Spinoza equates God with the one substance in which all things move and live and have their being. This view led many of his contemporaries to view Spinoza as an atheist. This charge could be true if Spinoza’s substance were reducible to the aggregate of the infinite series of modes.25 But Spinoza’s God cannot be an aggregate because the infinite aggregate of finite modes is neither self-caused nor absolutely infinite. This means that there is a transcendent element to Spinoza’s deity.

23. Hawking 190. While Hawking was not specifically referring to Spinoza, his remark is applicable to my point.

24. This tentative suggestion requires a real distinction between substance and the infinite modes, but as we have seen, there is good reason to believe that Spinoza makes that distinction, even though I don’t have the space to argue for it in detail here.

25. But even then it may not be. It is by no means clear what the word ‘God’ actually means, and it certainly cannot be restricted to one univocal meaning.
Spinoza’s God does not only exist as modes but also as the infinite power which is responsible for the form of the universe. Spinoza’s God is ultimately that formal structure, that ultimate ground which generates the being and structure of all that is and not merely the sum total of all the finite things that there are. I have said nothing about the religious significance of Spinoza’s God nor even much about this God’s nature or relation to us. That is the work of another project, but for those who wish to read Spinoza as the philosopher who was “drunk with God” the first step is a proper understanding of the relation of substance to its modes. If my argument is sound, if Spinoza’s metaphysics is actually holistic in the sense which I claim, then my discussion has some value for a more extensive analysis of Spinoza’s God.

Bibliography


Spinoza and Gödel:
Causa Sui and Undecidable Truth

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Spinoza distinguishes between causation that is external — as in A's causing B where A is external to B — and causation that is internal — where C causes itself (causa sui) — without any involvement of anything external to C. External causation is easy to understand, but self-causation is not. This note explores an approach to self-causation based upon Gödelian undecidability\(^1\) and draws upon ideas from an earlier study of Gödel's proof and the quantum measurement problem (Zwick, 1978).

Spinoza often explains causation with mathematical — especially geometrical — examples, since for Spinoza physical entailment is equivalent to logical entailment. That is, the order of things is the same as the order of ideas. This might be similar, in Aristotelian terms, to saying that material cause is equivalent to formal cause, the two being the same but under different attributes, material cause being under the attribute of extension and formal cause being under the attribute of thought.

How can something be self-caused? Spinoza give at least two explanations:

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1. Deep thanks to Hugo DuCoudray, Patrick Dinsmore, Doug Donkel, John Hammond, Richard Hartman, Palmer Pardington, and Kirke Wolfe, of the Portland Philosophy-Religion group for many enormously stimulating, instructive, and enjoyable discussions, without which this note would never have been written, and for the happy anticipation of many future gatherings.

2. The “ontological proof” which both Spinoza and Gödel had distinctive versions of is not of concern here. Also, the link between Spinoza and Gödel proposed in this note differs from the connections between the two developed by Fraser-Simser in his paper, “Spinoza, Gödel, and the Incompleteness of God: Spinoza’s Transcendental Arguments in the TdE.” Fraser-Simser’s argument is that Gödel's proof implies that “our system for knowing God must be inherently incomplete.” Any human conception of God is incomplete just as NT is incomplete; were this not so, God’s infinite status would be denied. Or, to express the argument positively, “Spinoza's God is a concept that outstrips itself.”
(1) the self-causation of C is possible if C’s essence necessarily involves its existence; (2) self-causation is possible if C is the totality of what exists, so there is nothing external to C that could be its cause or the cause of things happening within it. Argument (1) is not immediately convincing. One might challenge it by denying that there is anything whose essence necessarily involves existence, or one might insist, with the existentialists, that existence precedes essence. Argument (2) is more plausible. In systems-theoretic terms, systems (Spinoza’s modes) have environments, so events in systems always reflect at least partially the influence of the environment. Although events also reflect internal conditions and thus all systems are partially *causa sui*, external causation predominates since the environment is greater and more powerful; as Spinoza notes, no system is the equal of its environment. One might challenge this second argument by denying the coherence of speaking about the totality of everything, but if this is allowed, then such an infinite system has no environment, and all that happens within it can be affected only by itself and not by anything external to it. This is Spinoza’s argument.

The connection to Gödel is via the equivalence, for Spinoza, of causal and logical entailment, which is impacted by Gödel’s discovery of the limitations of logical entailment. Gödel showed that in formal systems of sufficient complexity, i.e., that encompass arithmetic and thus necessarily also a notion of infinity, there are propositions (“well-formed formulae”) that are not decidable. (Technically, these propositions are outside the formal system, but they obey its rules for syntactic correctness.) Gödel proved this by constructing such a proposition. This proposition — call it G — can be interpreted at two different levels: at the “base” level of number theory (NT), G is about numbers, but at the “meta” level of meta-number theory, G is about the provability of a particular proposition in NT. The particular proposition is G itself, that is, G is self-referential. Its meta-NT meaning is “G is not provable (decidable) within the formal system.” This self-reference is not paradoxical, as is the idea of a class of all classes that are not members of themselves or of a barber who shaves everyone who doesn’t shave himself. These other instances of self-reference are paradoxical because one runs into trouble if one asserts either their truth or their falsity. By contrast, one is blocked from asserting the falsity of G but not from asserting its truth. If G is false, one obtains a contradiction: if false, G is decidable and thus true. But if G is true, it is undecidable, and this does not lead to a contradiction, only to the separation of the ideas of

2. For example, the idea of a set of *all* sets — call it S — is a well-known paradoxical notion, since P(S), the power set of S (the set of all subsets of S) is necessarily larger than S and thus cannot be included in it.
truth and decidability. This separation was the revolutionary discovery of Gödel, since prior to his work it was assumed that anything that is true must be provable within the formal system in which it is a well-formed proposition. But the separation of truth from provability which follows from Gödel’s proof is logically acceptable once one gets over the shock of it. (It is like the separation of determinism from predictability implied by the mathematics of chaos.) The self-reference involved in Gödel’s construction of \( G \) is not vicious or paradoxical but instead resolves itself satisfactorily. Its resolution is simply that \( G \) must be true, since otherwise one would obtain a contradiction. This demonstration that \( G \) is true is not a proof within the formal system NT; it is a proof at the meta-NT level. Within NT, \( G \) is undecidable.

What has Gödel’s proof to do with Spinoza’s ideas about causation? If one accepts Spinoza’s equivalence of physical entailment and formal (logical) entailment, then a physical system, a mode of substance under the attribute of extension, when viewed instead under the attribute of thought is a formal system, where causation maps onto proof. That is, \( A \)’s causing \( B \) in a physical system (external causation) is the same as \( A \)’s being the proof of \( B \) in an equivalent formal system.

There are at least two differences, however, which might be noted between physical entailment and formal entailment. One difference has to do with origins; the other with time; the two are related. The first is this: if one inquires about the proof of \( A \), one regresses back to the axioms and definitions of the formal system, but there one stops, since axioms and definitions are not externally justified; formally, they are \textit{causa sui}. By contrast, for events that occur in substance, according to Spinoza, there is no first cause. Substance is not only infinite but eternal; it has no “starting point.” One presumes that Spinoza needs this to be true of substance also under the attribute of thought. This suggests a question: given Spinoza’s geometrical analogies, which are conceived under the attribute of thought, what corresponds to geometry’s definitions and axioms under the attribute of extension? One can imagine physical entailment without a beginning, but one cannot imagine formal entailment without a beginning. Perhaps this poses a problem for Spinoza’s equivalence between the order of things

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3. There is a third difference in that formal entailment, specifically the sequence of steps in the proof of a theorem, is discrete, while physical entailment is commonly seen as continuous. Yet formal entailment could be continuous, as in the dynamics of differential equations, and there are those who hold that physical reality is ultimately discrete. The properties of discrete and continuous systems are quite different from one another, but, to borrow an expression of Gregory Bateson, this is a difference that does not make a difference to the essence of the argument presented in this note.
and the order of ideas.

The second difference arises from the fact that causal events flow in a unidimensional time, but there is no unidimensional path from the axioms to the theorems. The paths from axioms to theorems are like multiple dynamic trajectories that coexist. Or, one could regard all the theorems of a formal system as coexisting simultaneously “under the aspect of eternity.” There is actually no difference here between physical and formal systems. In the physical realm also, the simultaneous existence of multiple paths of causal entailment reflects a perspective under the aspect of eternity. Such a view is found in physics in the idea of a 4-dimensional space-time in which all possible trajectories can be represented, and in the idea of a vector field, defined in space-time, which represents all potential dynamical behaviors of a system, and in which a particular path represents a single trajectory actualized in time. The iterative graph of a discrete automaton, which displays all potential states and their transitions and not merely one particular temporal trajectory that is realized, is also a view of dynamics under the aspect of eternity.

To summarize the discussion so far: the equivalence for Spinoza of physical and formal entailment means that external causation in physical entailment is equivalent to proof in formal entailment. Just as causation is the action of laws of nature, proof is the action of rules of inference. Further, and this is the radical and critical step: the existence of a physical entity or condition corresponds to the truth of some proposition. Finally, invoking G"odel, an entity or condition (C) that is causae suis, i.e., that does not result from external causation, is like a proposition (G) that is true but not decidable. This schema is summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realm of extension</th>
<th>Realm of thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>physical entailment</td>
<td>formal entailment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laws of nature</td>
<td>rules of inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external causation</td>
<td>proof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical existence</td>
<td>truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>causa sui (C)</td>
<td>true but not provable (G)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

G"odel constructed a proposition G that is true but not provable, which is equivalent to a physical condition C that is causa sui. Similarly, in the realm of thought, G is logically self-entailed. Its “essence” (its meta-NT meaning) requires its “existence” (its truth). However, the difficulty mentioned above must not be forgotten: axioms, which are assumed to be
true, do not have a physical equivalent since substance is eternal. So one might ask: must every true proposition have a physical equivalent? Given G, must some equivalent C necessarily exist? Spinoza’s parallelism of physical and formal entailment plus his view that infinite Substance contains all possibilities suggests that the answer should be “yes,” so G not only could be equivalent to some C that is causa sui, but some such C must in fact exist.

Of course, for Spinoza, it was totality that is causa sui. Neither G nor its equivalent C qualifies as such. G is a singular thing — a mode perhaps. It is far from the totality of what is. It has an environment that includes all of the theorems. But perhaps the matter is not so simple. There is a sense in which the entire formal system is “in” G. Since G says at a meta-NT level that it is not decidable, the definitions, axioms, and rules of inference of the system must somehow be included in it, at least implicitly, in order that what is decidable is fully defined. If definitions, axioms, and rules of inference are included in G, all theorems are also at least implicitly included. So from one perspective, G is just a single proposition, but from another perspective, it embodies the whole. The whole of what is decidable is infinite, and to the extent that G embodies this whole, it is an incarnation — or whisper — of the infinite. To use a mundane analogy, it is like a part of a hologram which in a limited sense includes the whole. This analogy is imperfect: all parts of a hologram reflect the whole, but all propositions do not. G was constructed in a special way. Its self-reference is critical to its capacity to reflect the whole, and not all propositions exhibit such self-reference.

One might say that G is not really causa sui since it reflects, hence requires, the entire formal system. Still, G is not entailed in the way that theorems are entailed by axioms, definitions, and rules of inference. In this sense, G stands alone. If “the whole” is taken to be the definitions, axioms, rules of inference, and theorems of the formal system, G is not a part of this whole, but is outside of it. And yet, paradoxically, G is completely dependent on this whole — indeed is conceivable only in its context. Like a Leibnizian monad, G is at once solitary and a mirror of everything outside itself. By contrast, the theorems of the system, which are decidable, are very different: as Spinozistic modes, they depend utterly on their

4. The names of Spinoza and Gödel are sometimes linked in the observation that Einstein and Gödel, who were good friends, had different philosopher heroes, namely Spinoza and Leibniz, respectively. Spinoza and Leibniz have been presented most recently in Matthew Stewart’s The Courtier & the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World, New York: W. W. Norton, 2006, as being poles apart; perhaps the work of Gödel brings them a little closer together.
environment. And, although G is outside the formal system, it is not isolated, not only because it presupposes and mirrors the system, but also because it is generative, i.e., has consequences in new theorems derivable from it. Equivalently, in the realm of extension, facts that are causa sui causally entail additional facts. Formal system and physical reality are infinite in thought and extension, respectively, yet each is still infinitely augmentable. This augmentation is implicit, so immanence implies transcendence.\(^5\) If, instead, one internalizes the full extent of this augmentation, i.e., if one sees eternity as comprising all that is true, not merely all that is provable, then one returns to the perspective of immanence. G and its consequences are part of eternity, an infinity incommensurably greater than the lesser infinity of the merely decidable.\(^6\)

Given such a G which presupposes the whole despite being a mere proposition, perhaps Spinoza’s system could be augmented with the idea of such a possibility. If one also takes seriously the criticality of self-reference for G, and thinks about Spinoza’s analysis of modes as less or more complex, and hence less or more potent and free, perhaps one might conceive of a mode being sufficiently complex, especially in its self-reference, that it reflects the whole. Like Hegel but well before him, Spinoza’s project was also the subsumption (incorporation and transformation) of religion by philosophy, and like Hegel he regarded mythic religion as an inferior form, appropriate only to the masses. Perhaps, armed with Gödel’s finding, Spinoza might have seen in the possibility that a part could reflect the whole a philosophical echo of the Biblical statement that man was made in the image of God. G is causa sui by virtue of its exploitation of the laws of entailment. This calls to mind Spinoza’s idea of salvation which requires mastery of the second kind of knowledge — knowledge of the laws of entailment in the equivalent realms of extension and thought. Rising to the third kind of knowledge via an intuitive grasp of the whole, a system can step out of the realm of these laws, into a meta-level domain, and thereby gain freedom. This step, in turn, has consequences within the causal realm.\(^7\)

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5. This is a kind of opposite of panentheism, in which immanence is subsumed by a prior and more encompassing transcendence. Here, immanence (for Gödel, NT) is prior to transcendence (meta-NT). To deploy the notions of immanence and transcendence in another way, related but more mundane, one might say that truth is to provability as transcendence is to immanence.

6. This is reminiscent of Cantor’s hierarchy of Alephs (different gradations of infinities).

7. The narrative here associates G with human modes, but one could alternatively adopt the conception of Fraser-Simser, who applies Gödel’s proposition to conceptions of God.
Fraser-Simser, Ben, “Spinoza, Gödel, and the Incompleteness of God: Spinoza’s Transcendental Arguments in the TdIE.” Presented at the American Philosophical Association meeting, Jan. 2004. (Article gratefully received, courtesy of F-S.)
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