Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy Hamilton College
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Spinoza, *Ethics*

0. More Nietzsche on Spinoza

In last notes, I quoted Nietzsche's harsh criticism of Spinoza's formal style.
But, in class, I mentioned that Nietzsche loved Spinoza.
Here's what I meant:

> I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a *predecessor*, and what a predecessor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now* was inspired by "instinct." Not only is his overall 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 differences 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 (Letter to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881).

I. Background

Spinoza's work comes largely as a response to Descartes's philosophy.
One helpful way to look at Spinoza's project is to see it as attempting to find a middle path between Descartes's mind/body dualism and Hobbes's materialist monism.
Also, as I mentioned in class, Spinoza believed that Descartes relied on a common, perhaps anthropomorphic understanding of God.
Spinoza pursues a purer, rational understanding, one which emphasizes the omnipresence of God over attributes, like perfect goodness or will, which seem to ascribe human characteristics to an infinite being.

Spinoza's work is difficult and obscure, and resists easy analysis.
It is arranged in a synthetic, or geometric, mode of presentation, based on the structure of Euclid's *Elements*.
Today, we would call the structure formal, or axiomatic.
The most fundamental mathematical and logical theories are, or can be, presented axiomatically.
Physical theories, too, may be presented axiomatically.
Spinoza starts with a list of definitions and fundamental axioms, and proceeds to derive, in some sense, a series of propositions expounding his philosophy.
The proofs are intended, presumably, to justify each proposition.
As I mentioned in the Hobbes notes, they are often difficult to follow, and do not seem to work the way they should.
In the scholia, comments located after the proofs of selected propositions, Spinoza relaxes from the formal structure and tries to explain what he means, and how propositions are related.
The Appendix to Part One is similarly informal, and helpful.
Even focusing on the propositions themselves, the scholia, and the Appendix, it is often difficult to see the central claims that Spinoza wants to make.
Normally, in philosophy, we want not merely to understand a claim, but also to understand the argument

for that claim, so that we may critically evaluate it.
In the case of Spinoza, and sometimes in this course more than in others, we are more concerned with understanding the picture of the world that a philosopher draws.
Our critical analysis may apply more usefully to the big picture than to the detailed arguments.

Some secondary reading for Spinoza will be essential.
Melchert mainly avoids Spinoza, except for a helpful five paragraphs on p 438.
The Tlumak is useful, and I have found Bennett's collection to be invaluable.
Both Tlumak and Bennett engage the secondary literature in a sophisticated way.
These notes, relying in large part on the expositions in Tlumak and Bennett, will be more basic.

You may notice that Spinoza's work is called *The Ethics*.
His claim is that a proper understanding of metaphysics leads one both to right behavior, a kind of eternality of the mind, and proper worship of God.
We will focus on three aspects of Spinoza's philosophy:

1. Monist metaphysics;
2. The relationship between mind and body; and
3. Freedom of the will and the problem of error.

While Spinoza holds views that often do violence to common sense, he is not a mystic.

> His parallelism debars him from treating any aspect of the mental as 'occult' or 'queer'... and his naturalism debars him from treating anything as occult or inexplicable (Bennett 196).

When trying to figure out what his views are, one does well to try to interpret him charitably, as difficult as you may find the task.
One final suggestion: Isaac Bashevis Singer has a wonderful short story, "The Spinoza of Market Street."

II. Monism - an overview

Spinoza thinks that there is just one thing: the most real being.
Mostly, he calls this thing God, though one also can call it nature, or Nature.
Spinoza's catchphrase is 'Deus sive Natura': God, in other words Nature.
Individual bodies and minds are attributes of this single substance.
We, and all the things around us, are ways of God/Nature to be.

One way to understand Spinoza's monism is to consider the oddity of thinking about two things: God and a world.
If God were separate from the world, then God would not be omnipresent.
Consider Spinoza's argument, from his work on Descartes that we are not reading, that there can not be two Gods.
(This version of his argument comes from Bennett.)

> If there are two Gods, then either God A knows about God B or he does not. If he does not, he is not omniscient and so is not a God (in the Christian sense). If he does, then he is partly passive - acted upon - because he is in a state of knowledge of God B which must be caused in him by God B - and so again he is not a Christian God (Bennett 119).

One can replace God B in this argument with anything, though.
As Bennett points out, the argument rules out not only another God, but also any other reality.
If we think of ourselves as individuals separate from God, we are limiting an infinite God.
So, on the basis of just the infinitude of God, Spinoza derives his monism.
God just is the world, and we are not individuals separate from God.
We are part of God, modes or attributes of God, ways for God to be.

Spinoza's monism earned him excommunication from his Jewish community, and derision as everything from an atheist to a pantheist.
It is clear that Spinoza rejected traditional religious views; it is not clear that he was an atheist.
Despite corresponding with many of the scholars of his day, Spinoza preferred to avoid established universities, and worked as a lens grinder, living meanly, and writing.

III. Monism - the dirty work

Tlumak presents a helpful sketch of Spinoza's argument for monism in Part One of the *Ethics*, which I tweak in this section, taking it in steps.
First, I discuss the argument that substance exists (E); then that it is infinite (I); lastly that it is unique (U).
Let's start with the claim that there is substance, or a substance.

E E1. Substance is independent.
E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.
E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.
E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.
EC. So substance exists.

E1 follows from Spinoza's definitions, most saliently:

> By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed (*Ethics* 1D3,[1] AW 144).

This claim may be obscure to us, but there is a fairly easy way to understand his point.
Remember that Descartes distinguished, as we do in ordinary language, between objects and properties.
Another term for 'object' is 'substance'; other terms for 'property' are 'mode', 'attribute', and 'affection'.
It is also traditional, and not particularly contentious, to argue that properties depend on objects in a way that objects do not depend on properties.
That claim is just the general principle from which the particular claim that for redness to exist, there must exist red things follows.
Properties need to be properties of something.
Things need to have properties of course, but do not depend on particular properties for their existence.
The red car can be painted yellow without ceasing to be what it is.
Spinoza's claim that substance is independent is just that things are prior to their modes, with the caveat that there may not be more than one thing.

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[1] Note: references to *The Ethics* are typically written, for example, as 1D3 (Definition 3 in Part 1) or 2P7 (Proposition 7 of Part 2).

Spinoza would have seen E2 as following directly from E1.
And E3 follows from E1 and E2 directly (by modus tollens, for you logicians).

E4 is more problematic.
Spinoza is relying on an interpretation of 'cause' that would have been easily understood by his scholastic contemporaries, but which has disappeared with the modern concept of causation.
Spinoza's understanding of cause is connected to questions about the existence of a first cause, and related arguments for the existence of God, the uncaused, or self-caused, cause.

Plato and Aristotle, and other ancients, discussed an uncaused cause.
Cosmological arguments for the existence of God, understood as the uncaused cause, trace to Aquinas
Definition 1 of *The Ethics* indicates Spinoza's view, and alludes to an ontological argument right away.

> By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing (*Ethics* 1D1, AW 144).

Spinoza's arguments for the existence, and necessary existence, of God, and his characterizations of God, proceed through Proposition 15 of Part 1, but I will not pursue them in detail, here.
The point we need to understand is how Spinoza understood 'cause' in such a way that anything which is its own cause must exist.

Notice that the very notion of an uncaused cause is pretty much completely unintelligible, on a contemporary understanding of 'cause'.
For the contemporary reader, a cause must be temporally prior to its effect, by definition.
(Put aside worries from quantum mechanics and relativity theory about backwards causation, for now.)
Thus, Spinoza is clearly using a different interpretation.

We can start to understand Spinoza's notion of 'cause' by thinking of it as related to explanation.
A cause of something may explain its existence.
The cause of an event might be its explanation, even on a contemporary understanding.
If you ask why I am tired, I can explain that it is because I did not get much sleep last night.
Asserting the existence of an unexplained cause, or an unexplained explanation, or a phenomenon which explains itself, is not as repugnant as asserting the existence of an uncaused, or self-caused, cause.
And it is only a very short step from saying that God is an unexplained cause to saying that God's existence needs no explanation, or that something which is self-caused could not be conceived of as not existing.

That last claim is E4.
E4 and E3 entail EC, that substance exists.
The claim that substance exists is slight.
It is manifest that *something* exists.
Spinoza does a lot of work for a little claim.
I have spent time on it because of the characterizations of substance, cause, and independence we have examined along the way.
In particular, notice that the derivation of the existence of substance makes no reference to how many substances there are, or whether we can differentiate among them.

Let's move to the infinitude of substance.

I I1. Substance exists and is its own cause.
I2. No finite thing is its own cause.
I3. An infinite substance must have all attributes.
IC. So, substance must be infinite, and have all attributes

I1 comes directly from the prior argument, E.

For I2, consider Spinoza's definition of finite.

> A thing is said to be finite in its own kind when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature. For example, a body is said to be finite because we can always conceive of another body greater than it (1D2, AW 144).

If a thing is finite, then there are other things that limit it.
Explanations about the first thing are going to appeal to its relations to other things.
Remember, Spinoza's notion of cause is tied to explanation.
If we want to explain why I am typing, we have to appeal to the keyboard, the computer, my students, parents, my family, and more.
Since explanations about any finite thing will depend on other things, finite things can not be their own causes.

As an aside, 1D2 leads us to wonder whether substance (or a substance) can be limited by another thing of the same nature.
Spinoza denies that this is possible.

> In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute (*Ethics* 1P5, AW 145).

Attributes are how substances are individuated: different properties, different substance.
If there were two or more substances with the same attributes (or nature) those things would be indistinguishable.
Leibniz later invokes a principle of sufficient reason to block such a possibility: God would have no reason to create two substances with the same attributes.
Spinoza does not appeal to that claim, but, understood correctly, it is actually fairly uncontroversial.
Take any two things; there must be some difference between them.
Even if they were the same internally, they would have to differ in spatio-temporal location.
That's all that 1P5 says, properly speaking.
Its oddity is that Spinoza is taking it to show that there is only one thing.
Two bodies might limit each other, as he explains in 1D2, but that only shows that bodies are not substance (or substances).

I3 is implausible, on the surface.
Some infinite collections omit some things.
A line can travel in one direction without containing all points.
But, Spinoza's claim is clear once we take Spinoza not to distinguish between 'infinite' and 'complete'.
Spinoza thinks of God as not just infinite, but as encompassing everything.
This conception is part of his rejection of Descartes's common, anthropomorphic conception.

Lastly, let's derive Spinoza's monism, the uniqueness of substance

U U1. Substance is infinite, and has all attributes
U2. There can not be two substances with the same attribute.
U3. So, at most one substance exists.
U4. Substance exists.
UC. So, there is exactly one substance; we can call it God, or Nature.

We have seen both U1 and U2 in the argument I; U3 follows from them.
And U4 is the conclusion of the first argument E; UC follows from it.
The argument is complete.

Some interpreters of Spinoza's work argue that we limit ourselves by thinking of substance as an individual thing.
They suggest that we think of it as the order of things, or the realm of nature.
That approach might be useful, psychologically, but it does not do justice to Spinoza's actual words.

In the Appendix to Part One, Spinoza clarifies his reasons for thinking that everything is God.
Spinoza thinks that everything is explicable.
God could not be separate and isolated from the world; that would limit God's power.
If God were separate from the world and interacting with it, then explanation would cease to be possible.
We would have to know God's mind, know God's reasons.
If God interacted with the world, we would have to impute to God will and desire, all properties of finite beings, but only anthropomorphically ascribed to God.
One should not think of God in the image of a human being.

> He who loves God will not try to get God to love him back (*Ethics* 5P19, not in AW).

Explanations which appeal to God's will, seem to Spinoza to be unsatisfactory.

> If a stone falls from a roof on to some one's head and kills him, [those who make God separate from the world] will demonstrate...that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for, if it had not by God's will fallen with that purpose, how could so many circumstances (and there are often many concurrent circumstances) have all happened together by chance? Perhaps you will answer that the event is due to the facts that the wind was blowing, and the man was walking that way. "But why," they will insist, "was the wind blowing, and why was the man at that very time walking that way?" If you again answer, that the wind had then sprung up because the sea had begun to be agitated the day before, the weather being previously calm, and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will again insist: "But why was the sea agitated, and why was the man invited at that time?" So they will pursue their questions from cause to cause, till at last you take refuge in the will of God - in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance (*Ethics*, 1 Appendix; AW 162a-b, but in an alternate translation).

Compare this passage to the question of why the big bang occurred.
Scientific explanations that trace back to the big bang seem to leave open that question, and can never thus be fully satisfying.
But, we might find a more satisfying answer if we altered the way in which we thought about explanation.
I am not clear about how Spinoza's monism provides more satisfying explanations.
But, Spinoza thought that it did.

IV. Mind and body

Given that there is just one substance, we are naturally led to wonder if that substance is material or ideal, if it is body or mind.
Descartes posited both minds and bodies; that makes him a substance dualist.
Hobbes tried to explain everything with just bodies; he is a materialist monist.
Spinoza claims that the one substance is both mind and body.
That is why I called him a weirdo monist.
There is only one substance, one object, properly speaking.
What we ordinarily think of as objects (e.g. trees, persons, Wankel rotary engines) for Spinoza are properties, or attributes, of God.
There are mental properties, and there are physical properties.
Thus, Spinoza is both a substance monist and a property dualist.

Property dualism, in Spinoza's sense, should be distinguished from a current use of that label, though it will be useful to compare them.
Let's take a moment to understand property dualism.
Recall Descartes's master argument for substance dualism.

SD D1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
D2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
D3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.
DC. So, my mind is distinct from my body.

If we are unconvinced by D3, we can weaken it, and the conclusion.

PD D1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
D2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
D3*. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, are really distinct concepts.
DC*. So, my mind is conceptually distinct from my body. I.e. mental properties are distinct from physical properties.

The new argument gives up on substance dualism, and establishes property dualism.
Contemporary property dualists claim that mental properties, like those that compose our conscious states, are not completely explicable in terms of physical properties.
The claim that a conscious sensation just is the firing of neurons in the brain, seems difficult to defend.
Still, we might argue that mental states supervene on physical states: for every mental state, there is a corresponding physical state.
Then, instead of looking for the conscious experience in our brains, we look for the neural correlates of consciousness.
Thus substance monism (there are just physical bodies) is compatible with property dualism (mental properties are irreducible to physical properties).

I alluded to property dualism in criticizing Hobbes's account of mental properties.
Hobbes says that pain, or sensation of red, or taste of a mango, is just the firing of neurons in my brain.
The property dualist claims that such identifications are category errors: they are different properties, and the one can not be reduced to, or explained in terms of, the other, even if there really are only bodies.

Spinoza's property dualism shares some of the characteristics of contemporary property dualism.
In particular, Spinoza agrees that there is a sharp separation of mental and physical attributes, as we will see.

Let's start with the mental properties, and again let's consider an argument from Descartes to get started.
Recall Descartes's argument that bodies or machines, like animals, can not think.
He appeals to two characteristics of people: our language use and our behavioral plasticity.
Our bodies are essentially similar to those of animals, perhaps a bit more complex in places.
Yet we can think.
This alone shows Descartes that there must be minds independent of bodies.

> For while reason is a universal instrument that can be of help in all sorts of circumstances, these organs require some particular disposition for each particular action; consequently, it is for all practical purposes impossible for there to be enough different organs in a machine to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the same ways as our reason makes us act (*Discourse* Part Five, AW 33a).

Descartes claims that the number of thoughts that we have could not be instantiated in a physical body.
It would be like trying to run Windows 7 on a 1960s mainframe computer.
It just doesn't fit.

Spinoza, like the contemporary substance monist/property dualist, rejects Descartes's claim that there is an incompatibility between minds and bodies.

> 2P7, the order and connection of ideas is the order and connection of things.

2P7 is key for understanding Spinoza's solution to the mind-body problem, which we call parallelism.
Here is the basic overview:

Talk of minds and bodies is misleading, since they are not individual, independent substances.
Still, it will be easier to talk like normal people, and just remember that we are referring to attributes, rather than things.
Spinoza rejects Descartes's substance dualism, as we have seen.
But he maintains a dualism among attributes: there are mental attributes of the one substance and there are physical attributes of the substance.
Since everything is God, and there are minds and bodies, these must be properties of God.
Notice that this means that God is, at least in one attribute, material.
Descartes's argument that the bodies are insufficient to support minds is thus moot; these are properties of an infinite substance.
Nevertheless, the argument for property dualism still holds, so that there is a problem of interaction between these properties.

Actually, as an aside, Spinoza claims that there are more than merely two kinds of attributes.

> Each entity must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality or being it has, the more are its attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. Consequently, nothing can be clearer than this, too, that an absolutely infinite entity must necessarily be defined (Def. 6) as an entity consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a definite essence (*Ethics* 1P10, AW 147b).

Imagine that there were aliens with an extra capacity for sense perception.
Suppose they had our five senses, but antennae with a sixth kind of receptor in addition.
We perceive the world in only five modalities; the aliens perceive the world in six.
We have absolutely no idea what it would be like to have a sixth sense, like this, but there is no reason to think that there couldn't be such a thing.
So it is with the attributes of God, for Spinoza.
We only know the worlds of minds and bodies, but there could be additional attributes perceivable by God, other aspects of nature hidden from us.
In fact, since God is infinite, there is some reason to believe that there are other such attributes.
This is not a central claim, and affects very little in the rest of Spinoza's work, though.

Returning to the nature of minds and bodies and their relation, I mentioned that the problem of interaction reappears even within Spinoza's monism.
Spinoza is clearer about this claim in Part Three, which is not in our reader:

> The body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else). Proof: All modes of thinking have God for a cause, insofar as he is a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by another attribute (by 2P6). So what determines the mind to thinking is a mode of thinking and not of extension, that is (by 2D1), it is not the body. This was the first thing. Next, the motion and rest of a body must arise from another body… whatever arises in the body must have arisen from God insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of extension, and not insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of thinking (also 2P6), that is, it cannot arise from the mind, which (by 2P11) is a mode of thinking. This was the second point. Therefore, the body cannot determine the mind, and so on (*Ethics* 3P2).

Given that a monist metaphysics might be motivated by the problem of interaction, it is disappointing that the problem reappears for Spinoza at the level of properties.
Nevertheless, Spinoza has a unique and compelling solution.
He claims that though the mind and body do not interact, they move parallel to each other in such a way as to give the appearance of interaction.

Here is how Spinoza's parallelism works.
Let's say your sweetheart gives you a kiss, which makes you feel happy, which in turn makes you hug your sweetie back.
It looks like a physical event caused a mental event which in turn caused another physical event.
Whether these events are made of interacting substances or properties is immaterial.
The point is that there seems to be causation moving from the material to the mental and back.
What is really happening, according to Spinoza's parallelism, is that there are two independent causal sequences.
In the physical chain, the kiss, p_1, causes a second physical event, p_2, which causes the hug, p_3.
In the mental chain, a mental event, m_1 causes the happiness, m_2, which causes a third mental event, m_3.
m_1 is the mental correlate of the kiss, and m_3 is the mental correlate of the hug; we are unaware of those ideas.
Similarly, there is a physical correlate, p_2, of the mental state of happiness.
There is no interaction between the p_is and the m_is.
But, it appears as if there is, since the two chains are aligned just right.

Spinoza's parallelism solves the problem of interaction by explaining how the appearance of interaction can arise from a system in which there is no interaction.
That solution comes at a cost of positing extra mental and physical states.
There must be a mental state corresponding to every physical state, and a physical state corresponding to every mental state.
The contemporary defender of supervenience might subscribe to the latter claim.
The former claim is much more foreign, and difficult to understand.
There seem to be lots of physical states with no corresponding mental state.
What mental state is the correlate of, say, the tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it?
Still, the cost of his profligacy is small, since Spinoza is already committed to the broadest possible infinity of states, in God.

Moreover, in favor of Spinoza's account, we have to remember that the way we have been speaking, of interaction, is really derived from a view of the world as containing independent substances.
In fact, strictly speaking there is just the one substance.
So, talk of interaction between the body and mind should, strictly speaking, be understood more like talk about different properties of the same substance.
Perhaps the difference between the mind and the body is more like the difference between perceiving an object with two different sense modalities: the taste and the look of the apple, say.
Just as we can perceive the wax with our different senses, so we have mental and physical aspects of ourselves.

This way of bringing together both the monist and parallelist doctrines of Spinoza can be edifying.
It helps explain Spinoza's claims that the mind is always thinking about the body.

> That which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing (*Ethics* 2P11, AW 168b).
>
> Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind is bound to be perceived by the human mind; i.e., the idea of that thing will necessarily be in the human mind. That is to say, if the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind (*Ethics* 2P12, AW 169a).
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> The object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body - i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else (*Ethics* 2P13, AW 169b).

Recall Descartes's claims that knowledge of the wax brought him even more knowledge of himself.
Spinoza is claiming that the wax and one's body and mind are all part of the same whole.

> The human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God...has this or that idea (*Ethics* 2P11 corollary, AW 169a).

The union of the parallelist and monist aspects of Spinoza's work also allow us to see the relation between Spinoza's monism and Hobbes's monism.
Just as Hobbes's had only a material world with which to work, Spinoza has one, united world.
There are different aspects, or attributes, of this world.
But, they are not to be differentiated and separated; they hang together.

Spinoza's rationalism may obscure his other affinities to Hobbes.
While Spinoza's physics purports, like Descartes's, to be based in truths of reason, it adopts the new science's anti-Aristotelian view about inertia, and other anti-scholastic claims.
Spinoza, of course, adds a modal twist to the claim (i.e. that it is necessary)!

> A body in motion or at rest must have been determined to motion or rest by another body which likewise has been determined to motion or rest by another body, and that body by another , and so *ad infinitum* (*Ethics* 2P13, AW 170b).

Despite his odd approach, and his weird metaphysics, Spinoza's physics is essentially Cartesian.
Bodies are not independent, and self-subsisting, of course.
The very notion of motion probably has to be altered.
We ordinarily think of motion in terms of objects changing their places.
It is hard to see how attributes could move.
Even if we came up with an account of the motion of attributes, since attributes depend on a substance, and all bodies are part of one substance, the relations among those attributes does not seem to follow directly from our ordinary conception of the relations among bodies.
That is, bodies can move relative to one another, but the relative motion of attributes is less clear.
Spinoza tackles the question in the physical interlude, the discussion following 2P13.
I reproduce here a long section because it is useful to see how Spinoza turns from his account of motion to a further characterization of monism.
He uses 'individual thing' to refer to particular bodies and minds, recognizing that they are not really objects, but needing a term for them.

> We have conceived an individual thing composed solely of bodies distinguished from one another only by motion-and-rest and speed of movement; that is, an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies. If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many other ways while still preserving its nature. For since each one of its parts is composed of several bodies, each single part can...without any change in its nature, move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed. Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual thing composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in its form. 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 any change in the individual whole (*Ethics* 2P13 Lemma 7 Scholium, AW 171-2).

Bennett suggests an analogy for understanding motion in the single substance: consider how a thaw might, in a sense, move across a region.
There are difficulties with this analogy, but I will not pursue them.
The interactions of bodies, however conceived, are governed by laws, and appeals to final causes and purposes are banished.
These laws govern the behavior of both bodies and mind, making all of our decisions determined.

> Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way (*Ethics* 1P29, AW 156).

This strict determinism, for both bodily and mental attributes, will cause difficulty in Spinoza's account of human error, as we will see.

We have looked at Spinoza's metaphysics and his philosophy of mind.
There is just one substance, call it God or Nature, and we are just aspects of that one thing.
Our minds and bodies work in parallel.
They may even be just two different ways of describing the same properties.
The last question we will ask, about Spinoza's work, is how his picture of the world can be compatible with our manifest ability to err.

V. Freedom and error - an overview

At the beginning of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes confronted a serious puzzle in the problem of error.
Once he had established that we are both created and preserved by an infinitely good God, the possibility of error, despite appearances, seemed unlikely.
Descartes's solution was constrained by the need to avoid ascribing imperfections to God, while admitting that God's creation was imperfect and prone to error.
Descartes solved that problem by showing how we could act independently of God.

Turning to Spinoza, the problem of error appears even more intractable.
For, not only are we created and preserved by God, for Spinoza; we are God!
Descartes availed himself of our independence, at some level, from God: our free will.
But, Spinoza denies that we have such freedom, as we have seen.
Descartes can sneak out the window to go to the party; Spinoza is stuck inside the house.
Since we are, in substance, God, it seems that there can be no false ideas; all ideas are true.

> All ideas are true insofar as they are related to God (*Ethics* 2P32, AW 178a).
> There is nothing positive in ideas whereby they can be said to be false (*Ethics* 2P33, AW 178a).
> Every idea which in us is absolute, that is adequate and perfect, is true (*Ethics* 2P34, AW 178a).

Spinoza's solution, in brief, to the problem of error is that while there is no falsity (i.e. every idea is true to some degree) there are clearer ideas and more confused ideas, and the clearer ones are closest to the truth.
At a limit, there are even adequate ideas.
In particular, there are geometric ideas which do not admit of any confusion.
But, since we are just one attribute of God, we only have ideas from a particular perspective, and this limitation prevents full apprehension of truth, generally.

V. Freedom and error - the dirty work

Spinoza's account of human error involves his determinism, and his interpretation of human freedom.
We'll start, as usual, by contrasting his position with that of Descartes.

Spinoza denies what appeared to be an uncontroversial assumption of Descartes's, that ideas, in themselves, could not be false.
In contrast, as we have seen, Spinoza thinks that all of our ideas are true.
Spinoza argues that every idea contains within itself an affirmation.
Ideas are not mere representations, but carry beliefs with them.
Descartes's view was that an idea is like a picture.
For sensory ideas, we have an image; for non-sensory ideas, we have a non-sensory representation.

We can either affirm or deny that our representation holds in reality.
Descartes's claim was that truth and falsity do not apply to ideas; they are matters of judgment.
Spinoza's claim that all our ideas are true is thus not Descartes's claim that they can not be false.

While Descartes's assumption appeared uncontroversial, it does lead to the odd claim that we are free to choose whether or not to affirm a given belief.
In contrast, many philosophers hold what has come to be known as doxastic involuntarism: we can not choose what to believe.
('Doxa' is Greek for beliefs.)
Doxastic involuntarism is a compelling thesis: just try to believe that, say, your roommate is an alien from Venus.
Even if you are promised a reward for believing such a fact, or threatened with severe punishment, you can not believe it.
You can pretend to do so, but you can not sincerely do so.

Spinoza, rejecting Descartes's view, claims that our ideas are not neutral, but come with built-in beliefs.

> I deny that a man makes no affirmation insofar as he has a perception. For what else is perceiving a winged horse than affirming wings of a horse? For[2] if the mind should perceive nothing apart from the winged horse, it would regard the horse as present to it, and would have no cause to doubt its existence nor any faculty of dissenting, unless the imagining of the winged horse were to be connected to an idea which annuls the existence of the said horse, or he perceives that the idea which he has of the winged horse is inadequate (*Ethics* 2P49 Scholium, AW 186b-187a).

Thus, the default belief attached to any idea is an affirmation.
To deny that there is a winged horse, there must be another positive idea which crowds it out, which overrides our initial affirmation.
Spinoza's view that our ideas come with intrinsic beliefs gives us a reason to reject Descartes's claim that truth and falsity do not apply to ideas.
His claim is that even the most confused and inadequate idea has some measure of truth in it.
Even a fantastic idea, like the chimera or a hallucination, reflects a change in a mode of the one true substance, and so has at least a small measure of truth to it.
Thus, Spinoza believes that truth comes in degrees, and that our less-true ideas are, ideally, over-ridden by the more-true ones.

> To begin my analysis of error, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error; i.e., the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack the idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to itself (*Ethics* 2P17 Scholium, AW 173b).

Spinoza's view of beliefs puts the problem of error in a stark light.
But, the distinctions between levels of truth among our ideas get his solution started.
He has recast the problem from one of accounting for how we make mistakes to one of describing why some ideas are more true than others.

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[2] Bennett makes a convincing argument for reading the Latin *enim* here as 'thus', instead of 'for'.

Another aid for Spinoza relies on a distinction between passive and active ideas, and the freedom we have in our active minds.
As long as we are passive, we are receiving ideas from outside of us.
Those ideas are of bodies, as we saw above, and in 2P11, 2P12, and 2P13.
Ideas of bodies are inadequate, or mutilated, or confused.
They are confused especially because they are caused by the interaction of my body and other bodies.
Recall Descartes's discussion at the end of the Second Meditation: the wax brought him more knowledge about himself than it did about the wax.
The inadequacy of our understanding of wax and other objects outside of ourselves prevents us from excluding those overriding ideas which block them out.
The inadequate ideas are not false, exactly; how could they be?
But, they are less true than the adequate ones.
They are governed by psychological associations, rather than by logical ones.

The distinction between my active and passive ideas mirrors Spinoza's distinction between two ways to conceive of substance: *natura naturans*, or active nature, as God conceives himself; and *natura naturata*, or passive or generated nature, God as conceived through modes.
Spinoza has removed as much of the anthropocentric view of God as he could from Descartes's metaphysics.
But, there are limits.
We are finite, and any account of the world and its structure will have to include us.
Spinoza includes us by making us part of God, considered in a finite mode.

So, Spinoza claims both that all ideas have some truth, and that the ones that are active are more true than the ones that are passive.
Let's take a particular example of an idea which might be thought to contain an error.
Descartes considered two ideas we have of the sun: a sense idea and one derived from reason.
He determined that the former is false, and the latter is true.
Spinoza, in contrast, thinks that both are true, to different degrees.
We do make an error, when we affirm that the sun is small, or not so far away, as it appears.
But that error is, properly speaking, just inadequacy, not falsity.

> When we gaze at the sun, we see it as some two hundred feet distant from us. The error does not consist in simply seeing the sun in this way but in the fact that while we do so we are not aware of the true distance and the cause of our seeing it so. For although we may later become aware that the sun is more than six hundred times the diameter of the earth distant from us, we shall nevertheless continue to see it as close at hand. For it is not our ignorance of its true distance that causes us to see the sun to be so near; it is that the affection of our body involves the essence of the sun only to the extent that the body is affected by it (*Ethics* 2P35 Scholium, AW 178b).

On the other hand, there are some stronger, clearer, and more adequate ideas.

> Those things that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole can be conceived only adequately (*Ethics* 2P38, AW 179a).

Common ideas are those that come from the use of reason, which is one of three kinds of knowledge Spinoza describes in 2P40 Scholium 2.
The other kinds are sensory, which Spinoza calls opinion or imagination, and intuition, which Spinoza says is the highest kind of knowledge (5P25, AW 189).

In this case, we can see Spinoza aligning with Descartes.
Where Descartes claimed that what I called the Class III beliefs were free from errors of reliance on sense experience (the resemblance hypothesis), innate and so secure, Spinoza claims that the common ideas are the result of reasoning, which does not rely on inadequate ideas received passively from outside of us but, rather, on active ideas we discover ourselves.
Those active ideas are the ones that are most secure.
They are governed by logical necessity, and they allow us to engage God.

> The human mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God...and thus it is as inevitable that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are true as that God's ideas are true (*Ethics* 2P43 Scholium, AW 182).

Primarily, the common notions concern pure geometry and philosophy, and knowledge of God.

It looks as if Spinoza is encouraging us to spend our time focusing on the adequate ideas, those which Descartes would have called clear and distinct.
Unfortunately, the situation can not be quite that simple.
According to Spinoza, we just lack the freedom to choose other than the way in which one chooses; everything is determined.
Spinoza criticizes Descartes for using the method of doubt, in part because he says that such doubt is impossible.
If it is impossible, then no counsel against it could be effective or even appropriate.

Still, Spinoza defends a kind of freedom which arises from focusing on the active ideas.
For Spinoza, freedom is having a greater proportion of adequate ideas, so that one is more fully self-determining.
Since we can never have only active ideas, purely adequate, freedom, like truth, is a matter of degrees.
Even though our actions are determined, we can still strive (in some sense) to be free of our passions, our base desires.
Such striving leads us to a kind of eternality.
We can strive to be free by contemplating ourselves as finite modes in Nature.

> The mind's intellectual love towards God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the minds intellectual love towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself... From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God (*Ethics* 5P36, and Scholium, AW 191-2).

Spinoza, in the end, is urging us to give up the commands of the passions, to free ourselves from our confused understanding, and to contemplate the eternal as a route to happiness.
He has derived how to live from the metaphysical and physical realities he has described.
While he phrases that advice in the language of love of God, the advice itself is not particularly religious.
Indeed, it echoes Plato's counsel away from the constraining and never-satisfying pleasures of the body, and toward philosophy and the love of knowledge.