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Olivér István Tóth

Is Spinoza's Theory of Finite Mind Coherent? – Death, Affectivity and Epistemology in the *Ethics*¹

*Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
Shakespeare: Hamlet. Act V, Scene 1.*

According to most interpretations, one of the central features of Spinoza's philosophy of mind is that ideas are at the same time logical and psychological entities. Ideas receive their logical, as well as psychological roles in the same way: both are defined by the causal history of the idea. While it is certainly true that Spinoza's philosophy of mind admits only one kind of thing, namely modes of thought (Renz forthcoming), conflating the logical and psychological roles of ideas naturally leads to identifying epistemology with affectivity. On its face, this identification seems to be a natural consequence of Spinoza's philosophy of mind. Every conscious idea that has a psychological role is related to the conatus of the subject and thereby qualifies as affective (Marshall 2014; Malinowski-Charles 2009). Also, knowledge by definition is an action of the mind and thereby an active affect. If the affective aspect of an idea and the knowledge claim of that idea are simply different descriptions of the same thing, it means that ultimately, truth is just a special kind of feeling.

This identification of truth and affectivity can be reconciled in either of two ways. First, by emphasizing that truths are cognitive counterparts of the affective working of our mind. There is no mind-independent truth; what we hold to be true is what we feel to be beneficial for us or for our social community (Lenz 2013). Alternatively, by emphasizing that

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affects are confused expressions of knowledge claims, wise passions, so to speak. Agreeing on reasons for actions entails having the same affective functioning (Sangiaco 2015a, 2015b). Therefore, a successful political project can be achieved by aligning our feelings just as well as by deliberating about the right policies.

Sangiaco has argued that this identification of psychological and logical aspects of the idea results from Spinoza's identification of will and intellect entailing the identification of certainty and truth: if having an idea and believing the idea is the same thing, then error is nothing else than having a confused and obscure idea. In his reading, the ethical intellectualist project of the young Spinoza failed because this identification cannot be maintained (cf. Renz 2015): akratic behavior shows that sometimes knowledge does not guarantee virtuous action. Therefore, Spinoza revised his philosophy of mind in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*, where ideas have their own power independent of their epistemic status, and therefore, inadequate but powerful ideas can defeat less powerful rational ideas (Sangiaco 2015c). Spinoza describes this power of an idea in affective terms (cf. Della Rocca 2003): the power with which an idea affects our affective life is the same as the power of the idea with which it affects our deliberations and reasoning. This revision of Spinoza's philosophy is what prompted the identification of the psychological and logical aspects of the idea, whereas in Spinoza's early works, ideas were representations automatically qualifying as beliefs and reasons for action, where a change in belief entailed a change in representation. In his mature works, ideas are representations and reasons for actions, of which the most powerful qualify as beliefs.

In this paper, I argue that accepting this interpretation of Spinoza's mature philosophy on its own does not solve the problem generated by the identification of will and intellect. I claim that even if for Spinoza, affectivity and epistemology are the same, and representations qualify as beliefs, not simply because of their being representations, but because of their being the most powerful representations, the problem of ethical intellectualism is preserved. Given Spinoza's identification of epistemology and affectivity reflected in his identification of ethical good with usefulness for persevering in being, this ethical intellectualism is markedly different from its usual forms. Since virtue is self-preservation for Spinoza, what is necessary and sufficient for virtue (i.e. having the right kind of ideas) is also necessary and sufficient for self-preservation. Although I am not sure that we can only have the right kind of ideas by having knowledge, by having knowledge we necessarily can have the right kind of ideas. Given that nothing can follow from our nature that destroys us and that knowledge follows from our nature alone, knowledge is always conducive to self-preservation.

This, however, generates an unwelcome consequence for Spinoza: his adherence to universal intelligibility combined with this peculiar form of ethical intellectualism rules out the necessity of death. This is shown by the difficulties Spinoza faces when trying to demonstrate the necessary finitude of human life. As I will show at the end of this paper, problems related to this identification are not novel to Spinoza's philosophy: in the scholastic tradition they were part of the problem of material intellect. Since Spinoza was aware of this tradition (Nadler 2001; Klein 2014; Adler 2014), comparing his solutions to the traditional ones can help us better understand the genesis and the program of Spinoza's philosophy, and in it the role of what Sangiaco calls the temptation of the intellect.

My argument, in short, is that Spinoza embraced all four of the following inconsistent claims:

- (1) Life is the preservation of one's essence; death is the destruction of this essence brought about by a harmful external cause.
- (2) Everything is intelligible: there is no such thing – and therefore no such external cause – which an actual human mind cannot, in principle, form an adequate idea of.
- (3) Ethical intellectualism: of which we form an adequate idea cannot be harmful.
- (4) It is necessary that human individuals die.

Claims (1)–(3) imply that knowledge can always avert death, while claim (4) is simply the denial of this implication. Since accepting the identification of the logical and epistemological aspects of the idea leads to this contradiction, these two aspects of the idea have to be determined independently, and therefore they both provide independent sources of knowledge (Boros 1997).

In section 1, I introduce Spinoza's definition of death according to which it is the disruption of the body's essence by a harmful external cause. In sections 2 and 3, I argue that Spinoza indeed embraced universal intelligibility and ethical intellectualism. In section 4, I present Spinoza's demonstration of the necessity of death and argue that he is unable to prove it. In section 5, I argue that Spinoza cannot easily reject either ethical intellectualism, or universal intelligibility. Therefore, this incoherence is not just the result of the careless acceptance of a superficial statement, but rather a deeply embedded feature of his philosophy of mind. In section 6, I will place this incoherence in a historical context and argue that a similar problem existed in the Medieval philosophy of mind which influenced Spinoza.

1. Definition of Death: Death is the destruction of the body's essence by a harmful external cause

The most famous treatment of life and death in Spinoza's *Ethics* comes in E4p39,² where Spinoza defined good and evil by the influence external causes have on the proportion of motion and rest with which parts of the human body communicate. This proportion is, by the definition of the Physical Digression, the essence of the human body: those external

2 All references to the English translation of works by Spinoza are from Curley's edition with the usual abbreviation: prae – preface, a – axiom, p – proposition, s – scholium, c – corollary, app – appendix, d – definition if it is immediately after the number of the part and demonstration in all other cases. TTP to the *Theological-Political Treatise* followed by the number of chapter and paragraph (Spinoza 1988, 2016).

causes are good which preserve this essence, or even enhance its power in order to be capable of doing many things at the same time (cf. Sangiacomo 2013). On the other hand, external causes bringing about a radical enough change in this proportion, alter the essence of the human body. Since by changing essence the human body loses its identity and is thereby destroyed, the external causes bringing about this change are evil. Thus, preservation of the essence of the human body is life, which is good, while destruction of this essence is death, which is evil.

In the scholium to the proposition, Spinoza elaborates on his definition of death. Since death is the loss of identity due to change in essence, the death of one individual is the birth of another. This definition of death is a revisionary and not descriptive one: as the famous case of the Spanish poet shows, the circulation of blood and other features of the body by which the layman identifies the poet as still living is maintained, yet since he has changed essence he has died and a new person has been born. It must be noted that however perfect and powerful is the resulting new individual born from the death of the previous one, for the previous individual its death is always evil. For a horse, it is equally evil to change into an insect or into a man (E4prae).

Since the essence of the human body, the persistence of which is life, is the conatus (E3p9s), death, the destruction of the conatus, cannot come about by a cause internal to the human body, only external to it (E3p10). As Spinoza explains in E4p20s, this external cause could destroy the essence of the body in many ways: by directly destroying it (e.g.: when a sword is plunged in one's chest), by affecting its imagination through hidden external causes changing its nature (e.g.: when someone believes that it is better for her to be dead than alive), or by creating such an environment that a quick death is preferable to dying slowly (e.g.: when Nero orders the suicide of Seneca).

So, propositions E4p39 and E3p10 together provide the definition of death, which is: *the destruction of the essence of the human body brought about by a harmful external cause.*

2. Universal intelligibility: there is no such external cause of which we cannot form an adequate idea

It is a general feature of Spinoza's philosophy that he is committed to universal intelligibility, which was noted by scholars emphasizing his use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (Della Rocca 2008), as well as his commitment to realist rationalism (Renz 2010). This strong commitment is the most evident in E1a1–2: here Spinoza states that everything is either in itself, or in another (E1a1), which allows for its understanding either through itself or through another (E1a2). Since we have an adequate idea of what is in itself – God's essence – (E2p47) we are able to know everything that depends on and follows from God's

essence, which is of course everything there is (E1p25c and its use in E5p24d). Therefore, we can form in principle an adequate idea of any modification of the body (E5p4) and of external bodies (E5p14).

These propositions together imply the principle of universal intelligibility: since we understand an effect through its cause (E1a2), and we have an adequate idea of God's essence (E2p47), and that everything follows from God's essence (E1p25) – including external causes – *there is no external cause of which we cannot form in principle an adequate idea*. Of course, the question remains whether we actually form adequate ideas, but this question is independent of whether we have epistemic access to the idea.

3. Ethical intellectualism: that from which we form an adequate idea cannot be harmful

Spinoza states in E5p3 that as soon as we form an adequate idea of a passion – because something being a passion entails having an inadequate idea of it (E3d2–3) – it ceases to be passion and becomes an action. An action follows from our nature and therefore is always useful and not harmful (E4p38–39, E4app3, E4app6). What is harmful is evil and is the result of inadequate ideas (E4p64). These propositions together imply ethical intellectualism: whatever *we have an adequate idea of cannot be harmful* or evil.

If we take these three claims together the following conclusion seems inevitable: if an individual y has x as its cause of death, x has to be an external cause to y (by 1), y has to be able to form an adequate idea of x (by 2) and therefore y has to be able to turn x into an action (by 3) which rules out x as a cause of death (by 1). Since this can happen to any x , it is not necessary that y dies.

4. It is necessary that human individuals die

The problem is that according to Spinoza humans necessarily die. That he wants to maintain this claim is evident from E2p10, which states that the being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, and from E2p31c, which states that all particular things are contingent and corruptible. However, Spinoza does not state clearly that it is necessary to die. I assume that the general line of argument shows that in Spinoza's view, humans necessarily do die. I will consider the option that he thought that humans are contingent particulars capable of an indefinitely long life in section 6. His unwillingness to state the necessity of death might be the consequence of his views that the free man should not think about death (E4p67), and that the mind strives not to imagine those things that diminish the body's power of acting (E3p12–13). More probably, this can be the consequence of his

inability to prove the necessity of death with the resources of his system. He comes close to proving it in E4p4:

It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause. Dem. [...] if it were possible that a man could undergo no changes except those which can be understood through the man's nature alone, it would follow (by III P4 and P6) that he could not perish, but that necessarily he would always exist. [...]

Here Spinoza wants to demonstrate precisely the impossibility of the scenario presented at the end of the previous section, i.e.: that humans can avert death indefinitely. According to the demonstration humans could avert death either by their own power, or because it follows from the common order of nature as a kind of "accident". The refutation of both options is problematic.

The refutation of the second option goes as follows:

...if it were possible for a man to undergo no changes except those which could be understood through the man's nature alone, so that (as we have already shown) he would necessarily always exist, this would have to follow from God's infinite power; and consequently (by IP16) the order of the whole of Nature, insofar as it is conceived under the attributes of extension and thought, would have to be deduced from the necessity of the divine nature, insofar as it is considered to be affected with the idea of some man. And so (by IP21) it would follow that the man would be infinite (E4p4d).

The claim is that if someone would not have any passions because of the common order of nature, then the common order of nature would be deducible from her nature and therefore would be an infinite mode.

This argument has two shortcomings. First, E1p21 does not say that the whole order of nature can be deduced from infinite modes, even less so the claim that only from infinite modes can the whole order of nature be deduced. The entailment of the common order of nature by infinite modes is itself a hotly debated topic (cf. Garrett 1991; Curley–Walski 1999).

Second, this move implies that the practically impossible ideal of the free man who has only adequate ideas (E4p66cs) is also theoretically impossible. Since the free man has only adequate ideas he would be free of passions and would not be acted upon. This is problematic because given Spinoza's treatment of modal terms, impossibility implies either contradiction in essence (e.g. square circle), or unactualized possibility. Spinoza does not seem to allow for unactualized possibilities (E1p17c2s). But then the only option left is that the free man, our ethical ideal, is an inconsistent concept, like a square circle! But even if we accept that the free man is an unactualized possibility, he could hardly serve as an ethical ideal,

since he would be of a different metaphysical category. We humans are finite modes, while he would be an infinite mode.³

The first option, that a human being by her own power could avoid passivity, is refuted by appealing to E4p3 according to which “The force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes”. The problem with this proposition is that its demonstration refers back only to E4a1 which, being an axiom, is not argued for, and simply states that however powerful a mode, if enough other modes join together they can be more powerful. So Spinoza is not able to provide systematically grounded reasons for ruling out this option.

There is a further concern: the proposition says that “it is impossible that a man [...] be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” (E4p4). Making the claim this way only rules out the possibility that one is absolutely free, namely that one has no passions at all. However, it leaves open the possibility that while one always has some mild passions and is saddened here and there, one never suffers from such a dramatic external effect that would bring about her death. That is, even if Spinoza’s demonstration would be successful, the best he could demonstrate is that it is necessary that humans have passions.

5. Could Spinoza reject universal intelligibility or ethical intellectualism?

So far I have argued that Spinoza embraces claims that together imply that he cannot account for the necessity of death. Also, his account for the necessity of death suffers from three main shortcomings: (1) it does not demonstrate the necessity of death, only the necessity of passivity, (2) the refutation of the option that one does not die because of the common order of nature implies that the ideal of the free man is inconsistent, (3) the lack of refutation of one’s potential option to avert death indefinitely by way of one’s own power. I argue that this shows that accepting universal intelligibility and ethical intellectualism when combined with the identification of the logical and psychological aspects of the idea, results in Spinoza’s inability to explain the necessity of death. In this section I argue that both doctrines are central tenets of Spinoza’s philosophy and therefore he could not give them up without giving up Spinozism.

(1) Giving up ethical intellectualism would give us the following picture: an individual can know her cause of death, but knowing does not allow her to avert it. This view might

3 To be fair, this would be an intended result in the Medieval context, since there the ethical ideal is the conjunction with the active intellect (Black 1999) which has the same metaphysical category as the infinite modes in Spinoza. Yet, the free man and the active intellect play quite different ethical roles: in conjunction the subject becomes identical with the active intellect, while the free man as an ideal only helps to align our actions with our rational interests (Kisner 2010).

seem plausible given Spinoza's necessitarianism (cf. E4app32). Also, the common sense implausibility of the claim that pain ceases as soon as we form an adequate idea of it has been stated (Alanen 2012, 250). Given Spinoza's formulations, he could modify his system in two ways: either by claiming that the set of actions and adequate ideas are not coextensive, or by giving up the claim that actions are never harmful. The first would make the definition of action meaningless (E3d3), since then there would be no distinction between action, passion and affect. Also, this could not be reconciled with the parallelism doctrine (E2p7). In this doctrine, for every mode of thought there is an extended mode, with which it is identical. Therefore, for every adequate mode of thinking following from the essence of the human mind alone there will be an extended mode following from the essence of the human body alone. Because of the conatus doctrine, these extended modes cannot be harmful and thus have the same systematic role as action on the official theory. Therefore, the distinction between action and passion follows from parallelism, the conatus doctrine and the identification of epistemic value with epistemic autonomy. The second option, namely, admitting harmful actions, might have some plausibility given Spinoza's account of rational suicide and the wording of E4p59 (Nadler 2016). But this option entails giving up the conatus doctrine, since in this case something would follow from our nature alone that is harmful to us (Grey 2016). That is, Spinoza's ethical intellectualism is entailed by his conatus doctrine, his parallelism doctrine and his identification of epistemic value with epistemic autonomy.

(2) Spinoza could give up universal intelligibility. This would give us the following picture: an individual can know everything except her cause of death. Spinoza could argue for this restriction of universal intelligibility in two ways: first, by restricting the scope of possible objects of understanding; and second, by restricting the time-frame of understanding. The first option would be that some objects are by definition unintelligible for the subject. A good candidate for such a restriction would be objects of the idea which excludes the existence of the subject's body. The second option might be called the Epicurean solution: death is such a violent disruption of the essence of the body that we do not have time to understand it; once it is here we are gone.

The problem with these proposals is twofold. First, they are hard to reconcile with the textual evidence. E5p4 states that we can form adequate ideas of every modification of the body. Since death was defined as a disruption of the essence of the body, it qualifies as a modification of the body. Also, in E4p59 Spinoza states that "To every action to which we are determined from an affect which is a passion, we can be determined by reason, without that affect". Here action could not mean the technical term "what follows from our nature alone". Rather, it must refer generally to an event happening in or outside of us (cf. E3d2). Since death is a bodily modification, it is an action in this sense and therefore we can be motivated to it by reason, i.e. adequate ideas. (This is also compatible with Spinoza's analysis of different types of suicide, see: E4p20s.)

Second, there is the more general problem that restricting intelligibility would introduce a brute bifurcation in the system. Although the exact role of the Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza is debated, the debate is not about the question of whether Spinoza admitted a brute bifurcation in his system, rather, about what qualifies as a brute bifurca-

tion (Della Rocca 2008, 2010; Renz 2010; Melamed 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). Restricting the scope of intelligibility this way could qualify as a brute bifurcation and would certainly disqualify Spinoza from being a rationalist (Renz 2010, 14–15).

To sum up, in this section I have argued that Spinoza's inability to account for the necessity of death comes from his acceptance of universal intelligibility and ethical intellectualism, together with the identification of the logical and psychological aspects of the idea. In my view, the doctrine of universal intelligibility is so fundamental to Spinoza's project, that giving it up would entail giving up Spinozism. Ethical intellectualism, especially when coupled with the identification of the logical and psychological aspects of the idea, does not seem to be either very plausible or necessary for Spinozism. In fact, as I have shown in the introduction, Sangiacomo has argued that it is not even part of the philosophy of a mature Spinoza. While it is true that the intellectual aspect in Spinoza's mature thinking is affective and not purely conceptual, in this section I have argued that giving up ethical intellectualism is only possible by abandoning either the conatus doctrine, or the identification of epistemic value with epistemic autonomy. And both are fundamental tenets of Spinozism.

6. Analogous problems in the medieval philosophy of intellect

The relationship of intellect and imagination – that is, the relationship of epistemological values and the psychological states in which they were embodied – was also a relevant problem for the Arabic and Hebrew philosophy that partially constituted Spinoza's philosophical context. These philosophers – Maimonides (Nadler 2014), Gersonides (Klein 2003; Melamed forthcoming; Harvey 2012; Klein 2014), Shem Tov ben Shem Tov (Adler 2014), Elijah Del Medigo (Licata 2013; Fraenkel 2013, 2011) – tried to solve the problem generated by the seemingly inconsistent claims of Aristotle's *De anima*.⁴ There Aristotle distinguished two types of intellect: the active and the material intellect. The material intellect does not have a nature but can become anything (DA III.5 430a10–15). That is, the material intellect can be informed by every form and thus it can potentially understand anything. In contrast, the active intellect is distinct, unaffected, unmixed and in essence, activity: the giver of those forms which inform the material intellect (DA III.5 430a15–20). Aristotle elsewhere also claimed that unqualified intellect alone can survive death (DA I.4. 408b20, II.1. 413a5–10, III.5. 430a20–25), and that it is unmixed and unaffected (DA III.4 429a18–20).

There are two ways in which these claims can naturally be understood (Davidson 1992). The first way was proposed by Alexander of Aphrodisias (Aphrodisias 2014a, 2014b). He focused on the metaphysical implications of Aristotle's claim about the unmixed nature of the intellect. In Aristotle's physics, if something is unmixed with and distinct from matter,

⁴ References to Aristotle's work is to this edition with the usual abbreviation (Aristotle 1993).

it is an incorporeal and eternal form. Given its eternity, this interpretation goes along well with Aristotle's claim that this is what survives death. However, it faces the problem that in Aristotle's metaphysics, instances of the same species are individuated by matter. Given that this eternal intellect is unmixed, it cannot be individuated, thus it is one of a kind. But there are multiple epistemic subjects in the universe, and something has to distinguish their mental operations. Therefore, in Alexander's view, the intellect that is unmixed and eternal is the active intellect only, which he identifies with God. And the material intellect, which does not have a nature, is in his view, the disposition of the corruptible soul to accept the intellectual forms provided by the active intellect.

The alternative view was proposed by Themistius (1990). In Alexander's theory the intellect that remains after death is the active intellect, which is actually God, and therefore the human soul is corruptible. Themistius wanted to avoid this conclusion and therefore he focused on Aristotle's claim that the unqualified intellect is unmixed and therefore eternal. This solves one problem: if the material intellect, as well as the agent intellect is eternal, then everyone has a unique immortal soul. But then he has to explain how is potentiality possible in an eternal substance and what individuates the numerically different intellects.

These two interpretations also have bearings on the question of the mind's ability to understand. Aristotle clearly linked the unmixed character of the intellect to its ability to understand everything. In Aristotle's theory of knowledge, understanding something is to become identical with it: just as the eye becomes red when perceiving red, the intellect instantiates the (intellectual) form of apple when understanding the apple. Therefore, in the same way as the eye must lack color in order to be able to perceive all colors, the intellect cannot have any form in order to be able to know all things, i.e. to acquire any possible form. The problem is that neither of the two interpretations can account for this formless pure potentiality, which constitutes the problem of the material intellect that generated much of the discussion in the scholastic philosophy of mind, in both Arabic (Davidson 1986) and Hebrew (Visi 2012). Themistius cannot explain how something purely potential can be eternal, while Alexandros cannot explain how a disposition of a corruptible being can lack nature.

I have argued elsewhere that Spinoza's distinction of intellect and imagination was influenced by his Medieval predecessors (Tóth 2016a, 2016b). Here I would like to argue that Spinoza's problem stems from a problem similar to the one of the material intellect. Although, as we have seen, he tried to solve the difficulties of his early ethical intellectualism by turning concepts into affects (Lenz 2013); this did not rule out ethical intellectualism, but only gave it an affective twist.

Originally, the problem was that Spinoza identified intellect and will, and therefore he could not explain error: as we have seen in section 2, everyone has the source of knowledge (i.e. the idea of the essence of God) which is sufficient for knowing everything. So why are people mistaken? Why are we not omniscient? This problem was solved by turning ideas into affects: their epistemic status, i.e. their role in our web of belief and our reasons for action, became a function of their power. But this solution came at a high price. Now Spinoza could explain the source of error with the power of ideas, i.e. with affectivity: the

powerful inadequate idea can defeat the less powerful adequate idea. However, he could not explain how we can understand everything. Since ideas ceased to be mere representations, a class of ideas became the wrong kind of ideas: those ideas that represent harmful objects are just the wrong kind of idea to have. And those ideas that represent lethal objects are just the kind of ideas that one cannot have.

Spinoza accepts that there is a conformity of causes and effects: the same object produces the same kind of effect in the same subject with the same constitution. The same music will always be delightful to the same subject, unless the constitution of the subject has changed, e.g. she begins to mourn (E4prae).

Spinoza also accepts that causes can be beneficial or harmful depending on their effects on the human body. This is, of course, to a large extent determined by the current state of the human body. That is, based on how the human body is constituted, the potential causes can be categorized either as harmful, or as beneficial.

Some of the harmful causes produce such effects that they exclude the existence of the human body. These are the lethal effects. Perhaps the lethal nature of some of these effects are contingent on the condition of the human body, and therefore can turn into beneficial effects by appropriately modifying the state of the human body. This could happen in a similar manner to the change that occurs when the mourning person turns into a melancholy person and therefore the music that was previously harmful turns into music that is beneficial.

One might argue that all of the lethal effects are such. One way in which this change in the body's constitution may come about, is by acquiring knowledge. Thus, one could say that with knowledge, all lethal effects can be mitigated. The problem with this reading is that it implies that we do not necessarily have to die. Also, it seems implausible that there are no effects that are actually contrary to human nature: when the big fish eats the small fish (TTP 16.2), it is not the result of a terrible misunderstanding; the big fish has a nature that is actually contrary to the nature of the small fish.

To be fair, it is not obvious that this option was all that counter-intuitive for Spinoza. As we have seen in section 4, he might not have stated explicitly that human individuals necessarily die because he really thought that all lethal actions can be mitigated by knowledge. He might have embraced the claim that in a perfect world, big fish do not eat small fish and humans do not necessarily die.⁵ In religious thinking neither of these claims is unheard of. Maimonides asserts in a much-discussed place of his *Guide* that intellectual knowledge saves the sage even on the battlefield.

If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him. When he does not meditate on God, when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only that intellectual link with

5 I would like to thank Ursula Renz for raising this objection.

God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents. [... if] you should happen to pass on your way a widely extended field of battle and even if one thousand were killed on your left and ten thousand on your right, no evil at all would befall you (Maimonides 1974 III. 51; cf. Nadler 2014).

Also, in the Scripture, end times are often characterized by the metaphor of carnivores and herbivores living together peacefully. E.g.:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (Isiah 11:6–7).

Therefore it might be the case that Spinoza took these claims literally and developed a philosophy according to which acquiring knowledge really has such wonderful consequences. But in my view this is not the case: since contrariety and agreement in nature correlate with similarity and dissimilarity, the cow and the bear should cease to be two different species in order to live peacefully together (cf. Wilson 2002).

The other option is to accept that some lethal effects are generated by causes that will always generate lethal effects in humans no matter what. But then the human body will always strive against these effects and the human mind will strive against having their ideas. And since we know external bodies by the ideas of their effects (cf. Lenz 2012), the human mind will strive not to know them. That is, the fact that the human body has a particular nature – on the basis of which natures with beneficial effects and natures with harmful effects on the human body can be distinguished – makes it impossible for the human mind to acquire ideas of those natures which have lethal effect on the human body. In fact, the human mind will do everything in its power not to know them.

I claim that this problem is analogous with the problem of the material intellect. In scholastic philosophy, the material intellect had to be free of any nature in order to be able to know everything; and then, no one was able to account for this pure potentiality. In Spinoza's philosophy, the mind had to be able to conform to all natures in order to know them, but only something devoid of nature can conform to any nature. In both cases the determinate nature of the subject precludes universal intelligibility. This problem, because of the identification of epistemology and affectivity, manifests itself in Spinoza's system through his inability to demonstrate the necessity of death.

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