

Spinoza and the a priori

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Scorned by analytic philosophers for much of the twentieth century, the *a priori* has been newly befriended in recent years.¹ This development is healthy but there is reason to be concerned about how it is unfolding. In particular, it is largely characterized by a certain historical myopia: contemporary philosophers are able to see back to Kant but not much beyond him. While it may be true that the *a priori* changed with Kant, this in itself provides us with a reason to go back before him. For other conceptualizations of the *a priori*, all but forgotten now, might help us to meet worries about it that Kant's familiar version cannot.

In this paper, Spinoza's views on the *a priori* are examined. Because Spinoza wrote before Kant (and even Leibniz, who arguably presaged Kant in key respects²), his statements on the *a priori* were not tainted by Kantian influences. Moreover, a particularly antiquated conception of the *a priori* was still extant in Spinoza's day and we can detect its traces in Spinoza's thought. Finally, there are two main conceptions of the *a priori* in Spinoza: learning how they co-exist might serve as a corrective to the tendency in contemporary writings to reduce all categories of the *a priori* to one.

1 Notable recent works include Lawrence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998); Albert Casullo, *A Priori Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003); Philip Hanson and Bruce Hunter, eds., *Return of the a priori* (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume 18 [1992]); Paul Boghossian and Christopher Peacocke, eds., *New essays on the a priori* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000).

2 See n. 19 below.

I The A Priori as Causal

'*A priori*' and '*a posteriori*' are adverbial or adjectival phrases translatable as 'from what is prior' and 'from what is posterior.' Notice that the Latin is silent on what, exactly, the prior and the posterior are supposed to precede and succeed. While it is customary nowadays to supply 'experience' as their complement, there is no grammatical reason for this construction: grammatically, it is possible for '*a priori*' to stand in relation to any number of words. Once the grammatical link between '*a priori*' and 'experience' is severed, it is evident that they must be bound by another kind of tie, the most likely of which is the theoretical. What theory might lead people to tie '*a priori*' to 'experience' may be uncertain but that is beside the present point. What matters for present purposes is that people customarily relate '*a priori*' and 'experience' because they are parties (witting or not) to a certain way of thinking about things. This is interesting if only because it raises the question of how others who think about things differently might conceive of the relation between '*a priori*' and 'experience,' and how they might more generally construe the *a priori*.

To answer these questions, we can begin with William of Ockham, the philosopher who apparently provided the canonical definitions of the phrases '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*' in his writings on demonstration.³ Because a demonstration is a syllogism that produces knowledge and there are different kinds of such syllogisms, Ockham argued that 'there must be different kinds of demonstration.'⁴ One kind of demonstration is that whose 'premises are absolutely [*simpliciter*] before the conclusion;

3 The reason for the caginess — that Ockham *apparently* deserves credit for the canonical account of the distinction — is that the earliest history of the *a priori* remains murky. Ockham is the earliest philosopher known to me to have given the terms their canonical medieval definitions, yet it is possible that he was merely repeating what had already been written by a predecessor. One certain point is that while Ockham may be given credit for having defined '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*,' he cannot be seen as having coined the terms or invented an entirely new topic. Instead, he defined them while working on traditional texts and topics. The central text is the Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, I.2. Although they did not explicitly define what they meant by '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*,' Aquinas and Buridan (among others) did use the words and were critical in establishing the topic with which Ockham was engaged. For Aquinas, see, e.g., *In Phys* II.15.5 and *In Post An* I.42.3; for Buridan, see, e.g., *Summulae de dialectica* VIII,8,1 (where the same example discussed by Ockham appears). Some discussion of the issues can be found in Eleonore Stump, 'Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge,' in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*, Richard Bosley and Martin Tweedale, eds. (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume 17 [1991]), esp. 154f.

4 *Summa Logicae*, III-2, cap.17 (all translations of Ockham are my own).

and this is called an *a priori* or *propter quid* demonstration.' A second kind of demonstration is that whose 'premises are not absolutely before the conclusion but nevertheless are known to the one building the syllogism, so that the one building the syllogism divines the conclusion through them. This kind of demonstration is called *quia* or *a posteriori*.' Ockham's definitions reflect the indifference of the Latin to the grammatical complement: in the definitions themselves, he specified neither what the *a priori* is before nor what the *a posteriori* is after. When he provided an example, however, it becomes clear what he took the complements to be. He said about *a priori* demonstrations,

For example, if someone did not know that the moon was now being eclipsed but did know the directions and motions of the planets, and if he considered these premises "When the moon is in such-and-such a position, then it is eclipsed; the moon is now in such-and-such a position," and from these propositions he divines the conclusion "The moon is being eclipsed" — such a person has an *a priori* or *propter quid* demonstration....

Conversely, Ockham explained,

If someone, seeing that the moon is eclipsed and not knowing that the earth is interposed [between the moon and the sun], argues that "when the moon is eclipsed, the earth is interposed between the moon and the sun; the moon is now eclipsed; so the earth is interposed" — that person makes an *a posteriori* demonstration....

According to Ockham, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* both involve demonstrative reasoning. The contrast between them lies in what is doing the demonstrating and what is being demonstrated. When we reason *a priori*, we reason from causes to effects; by contrast, when we reason *a posteriori*, we use our knowledge of effects to try to determine the causes of those effects. Thus, with the missing complements supplied, the full and literal translations of Ockham's conception of '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*' would be 'from what is prior to the effect' and 'from what is posterior to the cause.'⁵

While it seems to be the case that Ockham's terminology and definitions were not widely used at the dawn of the early modern period (ca. 1600),⁶ nevertheless, whenever they were used, it was exactly along the lines he prescribed. Two examples will show this: in his commentary on

5 This summary of Ockham's statements on the *a priori* is indebted to Ernest A. Moody, *The Logic of William of Ockham* (New York: Sheed & Ward 1935), 252-80.

6 For example, although this search was not exhaustive, neither '*a priori*' nor '*a posteriori*' were found in Bacon, Galileo or Suarez.

the *Posterior Analytics*, the Italian logician and philosopher Jacopo Zabarella (d. 1589) wrote that the 'ideal demonstration' is one which proceeds 'from what is prior and better known by nature [*a prioribus, & notioribus secundum naturam*].'⁷ From this passage and others, it is plain that Zabarella took the *a priori* 'by nature' to be the cause.⁸ The second example, which comes from Father Eustachio a Sancto Paulo, is even clearer. An important source for Descartes, Eustachio wrote in 1609, 'Moreover, demonstration can be divided again in this way: one is called the "*a priori*," which proves the conclusion through the cause; the other, however, is the "*a posteriori*," which proves the conclusion through the effect.'⁹

For reasons that remain obscure, between ca. 1600 and the 1630s, '*a priori*' came to enjoy wider use and at this point in its history, it was still used in mostly Ockhamite terms.¹⁰ For example, Descartes used '*a priori*' a number of times¹¹ and in most cases,¹² it was in Ockham's sense. Thus, in his 10 May 1632 letter to Mersenne, he argued for the utility of knowledge of the 'natural order' of the stars: 'if we possessed [such

7 *Commentarii in libros duos Posteriorum Analyticorum*, bound in Zabarella's posthumous *Opera Logica* (Cologne, 1597), 691e-f (Zabarella translations are mine).

8 For example, see 664f.: when we consider things 'without qualification and in accordance with their own natures, the causes are prior to their effects, because nature generates effects from causes....' For another example, see the passage from his *In libros Aristotelis Physicorum commentarii* discussed by Neal W. Gilbert, *Renaissance Concepts of Method* (New York: Columbia University Press 1960), Ch. 7.

9 *Summa philosophica quadripartita*, I, 224 (my translation).

10 Although the foregoing discussion has focused on Ockham (and his successors), this is not because he was the most important source of medieval philosophy for Descartes or Spinoza. Instead, the focus is on Ockham for conceptual reasons: namely, because he (apparently) was the philosopher who formalized the words, making them terms of art for philosophical discourse. While Descartes was widely read in the medievals (see Gilson's study, cited in the next note, for convincing evidence of this), Spinoza usually relied on more contemporary texts when he employed scholastic terminology and concepts. His two most important sources are the *Institutionum metaphysicarum libri duo* by Franco Burgersdijck (London, 1653) and the *Disputationes ex philosophia selectae* by Adriaan Heereboord (Leiden, 1650). Both books were in his library (see *Catalogus van de biblioteek der Vereniging 'het Spinozahuis' te Rijnsburg*, J.M.M. Alter, ed. [Leiden: E.J. Brill 1965]) and both contain the two main senses of the *a priori* that this paper finds in Spinoza.

11 Gilson records some seventeen appearances of '*a priori*' in Descartes' corpus; see the entry under '*démonstration*' in his *Index Scolastico-Cartésien* (repr. New York: Burt Franklin, no date), 66.

12 For the most important exception, see the next section.

knowledge], we could discover *a priori* all the different forms and essences of terrestrial bodies, whereas without it we have to content ourselves with guessing them *a posteriori* and from their effects.¹³ He wrote in his 22 February 1638 letter to Vatier, 'I cannot prove *a priori* the assumptions I made at the beginning of the *Meteorology* without expounding the whole of my physics; but the observational data which I have deduced necessarily from them, and which cannot be deduced in the same way from other principles, seem to me to prove them sufficiently *a posteriori*' (CSMK III: 87; A-T I: 563). Finally, in the 'Conversation with Burman' he said, 'the other argument in the Fifth Meditation proceeds *a priori* and does not start from some effect' (CSMK III: 337; A-T V: 153).¹⁴

This history provides a context for the interpretation of '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*' on the occasions when Spinoza actually used them.¹⁵ In the *Cogitata Metaphysica* he claimed to have demonstrated God's existence 'more than sufficiently, both *a posteriori*, from the idea which we have of

13 This and all translations of Descartes are from the respective volume of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I-III, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (with Anthony Kenny contributing to vol. III) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984-1991). References to this translation will be 'CSM' ('CSMK' for vol. III) plus the volume and page numbers, along with Adam and Tannery references. The quotation from the letter to Mersenne is CSMK III: 38 (A-T I: 250-1).

14 Here is as good a place as any to acknowledge a certain looseness in this paper's discussion. Sometimes it will be speaking about *a priori* demonstrations; at others, about *a priori* knowledge or *a priori* justification. There are no doubt important differences in the *a priori* of demonstration versus knowledge versus justification. While these differences would have to be reckoned with in a different sort of paper, they don't pose a problem for this one. That's in part because of the scope of this paper (which covers the macro-history of the *a priori*, in all its forms), in part because of the looseness in how Spinoza himself used and conceived of the *a priori*. Our sharp distinctions between demonstration, knowledge and justification were not made by him; it would be anachronistic to try to read them into him.

15 Whereas Descartes often used '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*,' Spinoza apparently employed them only four times: *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* Part I, Prop. 6; *Cogitata Metaphysica* Part II, Ch. I; *Ethics* IP11Sch; Letter 83. One explanation for why Spinoza used them relatively infrequently is that in his day, they still had their medieval causal connotation, a connotation in which he was for the most part uninterested. As stated below (n. 19), it was only with Leibniz that the medieval connotation was finally lost and a new one arose (though not the same one Spinoza would have wanted). (NB: The standard abbreviations will be used when referring to the *Ethics*: a Roman numeral for 'Part,' 'D' plus an Arabic numeral for 'Definition,' 'P' plus an Arabic numeral for 'Proposition,' 'Sch' (plus an Arabic numeral where appropriate) for 'Scholium,' 'Pref' for 'Preface,' 'App' for 'Appendix,' etc.)

him, and *a priori*, or from his essence as the cause of the existence.¹⁶ In a late letter, Spinoza paraphrased a question put to him by one of his more astute correspondents as asking ‘whether the variety of things can be demonstrated *a priori* solely from the concept of extension’ (Letter 83; G IV: 334).¹⁷ Finally, in IP11AltDem he provided a demonstration of God’s existence based on the existence of finite beings. Since ‘To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power...,’ if an infinite being did not exist, it would follow (according to Spinoza) that finite beings are more powerful than an infinite being and this, ‘as is known through itself, is absurd.’ In the Scholium to IP11, he called this demonstration ‘*a posteriori*,’ presumably because it opens with the existence — an effect — of finite beings. But he added that the same fundamental principle used in the demonstration — that being able to exist is power — could be used to construct an ‘*a priori*’ proof of the same conclusion: ‘For since being able to exist is power, it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers it has, of itself, to exist.’ Since *ex hypothesi* God has the most reality of all beings, he must be the most powerful, and he must have ‘of himself, an absolutely infinite power of existing.’

Now, as we have seen, ‘*a priori*’ and ‘*a posteriori*’ in Spinoza’s day were usually taken to mean reasoning from causes to effects and effects to causes, respectively. Given that his use of these phrases was in keeping with the dominant practice, it can be concluded that directional causal reasoning constituted at least part of Spinoza’s views on the *a priori*.

II Other Conceptions of the A Priori

It is worth pausing here for a moment’s reflection. Nowadays ‘experience’ is commonly taken to be the complement to ‘*a priori*,’ so knowledge that is justified *a priori* does not depend on experience for its justification — it is knowledge that is obtained prior to or independent of experience. But we know now that this hasn’t always been the case. According to

16 Part II, Ch. 1. Translation by Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985), 316 (G I: 250). Unless otherwise stated, this and all Spinoza translations will be Curley’s (with occasional changes). In-text citations will be provided to Spinoza’s texts and, where it is required to fix precisely the reference, Gebhardt’s critical edition (abbreviation: ‘G’ plus the volume and page number).

17 Translation by Samuel Shirley in *Spinoza: The Letters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1997).

Ockham and his followers, an *a priori* demonstration is one that takes causally basic principles as its premises, while an *a posteriori* demonstration begins with causally non-basic principles. This formulation of the *a priori* doesn't connect knowability *a priori* with non-factuality. Causal knowledge, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*, is factual knowledge: if it is possible to obtain *a priori* causal knowledge, then it must be possible to obtain *a priori* factual knowledge. In the words of one of Ockham's most eminent commentators, *a priori* knowledge is knowledge of the 'reasoned fact.'¹⁸ Whereas knowability *a priori* and non-factuality are correlated in our times, they weren't at the beginning of the early modern period.¹⁹

One reason that the first decades of the early modern period are so exciting from an epistemological standpoint is that there was a caldron brewing at the time of other ways of thinking about the *a priori* out of which boiled the opposition between *a priori* versus factual knowledge. This desire to conceive of alternate, non-causal formulations of the *a priori* is evident in Descartes. Although he did employ the causal *a priori*, we learn from the Second Objections and Replies that he did not take his method to be *a priori* in that sense. At the end of the Second Objections, Mersenne urged Descartes to recast his arguments in a 'geometrical fashion' (CSM II: 92; A-T VII: 128). In his Replies, Descartes eventually

18 Moody, *William of Ockham*, 251. While Moody's felicitous phrase nicely evokes the character of *a priori* knowledge for Ockham — it is both factual and rational — he infelicitously diminished the force of his argument by subsequently calling *a priori* demonstrative knowledge 'analytic in character' (258). The whole point is that for Ockham, we can possess knowledge that is both *a priori* and non-analytic in character, because we can possess knowledge that is both *a priori* and factual. See the next note for speculation on the actual origins of the type of knowledge that Moody wrongly attributed to Ockham.

19 We can ask — when did *a priori* knowledge come to be knowledge acquired independently of experience? The credit for this development is usually given to Hume, who distinguished between matters-of-fact and relations-of-ideas and insisted that relations-of-ideas alone can be known *a priori*. Robert Merrihew Adams, however, has recently argued that the innovation was due to Leibniz (*Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), esp. 109-10). In my opinion, Adams is right to attribute to Leibniz 'a crucial role in the transformation of the meaning of "a priori"' (110), though he doesn't portray this role quite correctly. Whereas Adams just sees Leibniz as changing the meaning of an *a priori* demonstration, he actually accomplished much more: he also was instrumental in creating a whole new category of knowledge that may be called '*a priori*.' For evidence of this claim, see, e.g., §13 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and the 1686-87 correspondence with Arnauld.

obliged Mersenne but first, he tried to explain why he had chosen the method of demonstration that he did and why he thought it superior to the geometrical one proposed by Mersenne. In this passage, Descartes told Mersenne that the 'method of demonstration ... divides into two varieties,' synthesis and analysis (CSM II: 110; A-T VII: 155). The geometrical method proposed by Mersenne falls under the rubric of synthesis: it 'employs a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems' to demonstrate that the conclusion is 'contained in what has gone before...' (CSM II: 111; A-T VII: 156). Interestingly, Descartes called such a method 'as it were, *a posteriori* [*tanquam, a posteriori*]' (CSM II: 110; A-T VII: 156). Plainly, it is not *a posteriori* in a causal sense: insofar as the synthetic method is the geometrical method, then since geometry does not involve causal relations, neither can synthesis.²⁰ Instead, it seems that synthesis is *a posteriori* because it begins with data that are posterior in the order of knowledge. The conclusion that is shown to be contained in the premises is clearly epistemically posterior: it is posterior to both what contains it and the rules of inference that establish its containment. Before we can know the conclusion, we must previously have known those other things. Of synthesis, Descartes said that while it may have its value, it is ultimately not 'satisfying ... since it does not show how the thing in question was discovered' (CSM II: 111; A-T VII:

20 Paolo Mancosu has shown that the causality of geometry was subject to debate in the early modern period (*Philosophy of Mathematics and Mathematical Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996), esp. Ch. 1). Though it is not possible here to defend fully the assumption that Descartes did not take geometrical relations to be causal relations, some remarks are needed to render it at least plausible. Let me make two points. First, Descartes' views on causation were heavily influenced by the new mechanistic science, which in turn heavily favors the efficient over the other three traditional causes. Because it is very hard to see how the efficient cause can enter into the production of geometrical entities (as Mancosu argues, even those who conceived of geometry as causal did so in terms of the formal and material causes, not the efficient or final), it is very hard to see how geometrical relations could be causal for Descartes. The second point is textual. In his *Géométrie*, Descartes rarely or never described geometrical relations in causal terms. Conversely, in the chief texts where he talked about causation (such as the so-called causal principle of the Third Meditation [CSM II: 28; A-T VII: 40] and his most general statement of a cause in the Fourth Replies [CSM II: 166; A-T VII: 238]), he never employed geometrical language. This is empirical evidence supporting the inductive inference that causation and geometry were separated in Descartes' thought. For more texts as well as valuable critical discussion of Descartes' broader theory of causation (including arguments that he had a theory), see Kenneth Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy, 1637-1739* (New York and London: Routledge 1999), esp. Ch. 2.

156). This seems true: demonstrating by geometrical proof that the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180° may establish that this must be so but it will shed no light whatsoever on how we come to know it in the first place. To learn that, Descartes argued, we need the method of analysis.

In contrast to synthesis, analysis starts with a basic item of knowledge and, examining it fully, allows the attentive reader 'to make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself' (CSM II: 110; A-T VII: 155). Not every object is suitable for scrutiny by analysis; Descartes restricted the scope of analysis to basic truths or, as he called them, 'metaphysical subjects' (CSM II: 111; A-T VII: 156). Further, Descartes excluded 'many truths' on the grounds that 'they are transparently clear to anyone who gives them his attention' (CSM II: 110; A-T VII: 156). But those truths that are, for Descartes, both absolutely primary in the order of knowledge and sufficiently complex as to require meticulous investigation in order to be fully understood — such truths are ones that can be examined by the analytical, 'as it were, *a priori* [*tanquam, a priori*]' method (ibid.).²¹

So, the synthetic method is the geometrical method; it is *a posteriori*, though not in the causal sense of reasoning from effects to causes, and it is not Descartes' method in the *Meditations*.²² The analytic method is not geometrical; it is *a priori*, though not in the causal sense, and it is Descartes' method. Without wanting to overemphasize the use of a single word, the placement of *tanquam* before *a priori* is telling. As we discovered in the last section, Descartes was fully aware of the traditional Ockhamite definitions of '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*.' In the passage of the Second Replies that we have just been considering, he cautiously but deliberately deviated from those definitions, supplying new ones that detach entirely the notion of causation from *a priority* and *a posteriority*. It is appropriate to call the method of the *Meditations* '*a priori*' since in that work he reasoned from the prior to the posterior but the data are

21 Much has been written on this passage. Among the more helpful commentaries are Willis Doney, 'The Geometrical Presentation of Descartes's A Priori Proof,' in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, Michael Hooker, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978), and Edwin Curley, 'Analysis in the *Meditations*: The Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas,' in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1986).

22 Whether Descartes used the synthetic method in some of his other works (especially the *Principia*) is a matter of scholarly dispute. For texts and discussion, see Curley, 'Analysis in the *Meditations*,' 155 and 172 n.7.

very different from the data of the traditional *a priori* arguments.²³ For that reason, Descartes called his method 'as it were, *a priori*.'

While close examination of the Second Replies reveals an epistemic *a priori* in addition to the causal *a priori* found elsewhere in Descartes' corpus, it is perhaps dangerous to place too much confidence on a single text, especially one that has proven so elusive²⁴ and that is relatively insignificant in the philosopher's larger *oeuvre*. We might be made more certain of Descartes' acceptance of an epistemic *a priori* by stepping back from the texts and viewing his epistemological project from afar. In the *Meditations* and elsewhere, Descartes demanded a small set of truths for use in leveraging a larger set of conclusions. As he famously remarked at the beginning of the Second Meditation, 'Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable' (CSM II: 16; A-T VII: 24). The connection between the leveraging and the leveraged truths is not causal in nature: that is, his argument is not that since certain truths are causally basic, they can be exploited to ground other causally non-basic truths. Instead, the connection is conceptual: it is because of the way that basic concepts are related to non-basic ones that he could use the former to establish interesting points about the latter. For example, in the Fourth Meditation Descartes used the concept of God's perfection to establish the true source of error. Or, to cite another familiar example, he used the concepts of mind and body in the Sixth Meditation to show that they are really distinct. There is no attempt in these and other similar passages to draw lines between causes and effects in the way that Descartes sometimes did elsewhere. Instead, he proceeded by an analysis of concepts to show how epistemically privileged ones may be used to ground the epistemically non-privileged.

So, in addition to the causal *a priori*, we also find in Descartes an epistemic *a priori*. The radical change that Descartes effected by keeping the *a priori-a posteriori* dichotomy but completely altering the nature of the poles, while rarely noted, is nonetheless important. Before him, the

23 As Curley writes, 'though Descartes no doubt understands [*a priori* and *a posteriori* in the traditional causal way]..., it is hard to see that the *Meditations* exemplify a procedure that is, in that sense, *a priori*. The *Meditations* begin, on the face of it, with a proof of the existence of the self, proceed to proofs of the existence of God, and then move on to a proof of the existence of the world, that is, they go from effect to cause and back again to effect' ('Analysis in the *Meditations*,' 155).

24 Cf. Doney, 'Descartes's A Priori Proof,' 13f., and Curley, 'Analysis in the *Meditations*,' 153.

dichotomy was conceived in causal terms: that which is prior is the cause, and the posterior is the effect. This conceptualization of the dichotomy inevitably affected the orientation of philosophers' thinking and the problems with which they grappled. In pre-Cartesian philosophy, because *a priori* demonstration began with basic causes, and because *a priori* demonstrations were held to be superior to *a posteriori* demonstrations,²⁵ the search for causes that are suitably basic was one of the main foci of philosophy. With Descartes, however, the causal *a priori* was set aside in favor of an entirely different *a priori*: with him, philosophy must begin to search for basic items of *knowledge* in order to construct the most desirable kind of demonstration. Even though Descartes' success in reorienting philosophy to the new meaning he gave the actual terms was only partial,²⁶ he fully succeeded in reorienting philosophy to the new epistemic prerogative for which he argued.

This is very plainly the case with Spinoza, as we learn from the Spinozistic text with the most extensive direct discussion of method, the preface to his commentary on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*. There the author (not Spinoza but a friend writing under his supervision) argued that philosophical systems must commence with 'things known certainly beforehand' and from these things derive 'a certain and firm knowledge...' (G I: 127). When philosophical systems do not start with epistemically basic truths, 'The result is that none of the things they produce are demonstrated by conclusive reasonings...' (G I: 128). When they do not conclusively demonstrate their conclusions, they can at best demonstrate them probabilistically. And when 'the mind' is presented with probabilistic demonstrations about philosophical matters, extreme mental turmoil results (*ibid.*).

Any philosophical system, then, if it is to be satisfactory, must begin with what is epistemically basic. At the same time as Spinoza agreed with Descartes on the importance of the epistemic *a priori*, he disagreed with the other's characterization of it. In particular, he rejected the contrast Descartes drew between the analytic/non-geometrical method

25 A constant between pre- and post-Cartesian philosophy was the valuation by many philosophers of *a priori* demonstration as the superior kind of demonstration; what changed was the conception of this kind of demonstration.

26 As we have seen, his followers like Spinoza continued to use the words '*a priori*' and '*a posteriori*' in the traditional causal sense. The causal sense is also the official one defined by Arnauld and Nicole in the *Port-Royal Logic*, IV.1, published in 1674. It is not surprising that the official meaning should linger even after philosophy had moved on: there is often a lag between the occurrence of conceptual developments and their appearance in language.

and the synthetic/geometrical one, and his argument that only demonstrations that proceed in the analytic fashion are truly *a priori*. While Descartes argued that the geometrical method is suitable only for derivative truths, Spinoza applied it equally to the demonstration of both derivative and basic truths. The motivation behind this move will be discussed in the next section.²⁷

III Control

The argument of this paper is that Spinoza's main method of philosophical justification and demonstration is roughly describable as epistemically *a priori*. Such a description, however, is vague and not very informative. In this section and the next, it will be refined. As a first step in that direction, more needs to be said about the inadequacies, in Spinoza's opinion, of *a posteriori* justification and demonstration. To make this point, it will be helpful to contrast Spinoza with a prominent contemporary epistemologist.

In the opening pages of *In Defense of Pure Reason*, BonJour offers three main reasons or arguments why the 'venerable idea' of a *a priori* epistemic justification 'should still be taken seriously' (2). The first of these is that there are 'putative examples of knowledge whose justification, it is alleged, can only be construed as *a priori*' (ibid.). The examples BonJour cites are familiar ones: propositions of logic and mathematics, such as commonplaces as 'nothing can be both red and green all over at the same time,' and 'alleged truths of metaphysics such as "a physical object cannot be in two places at the same time" or "every event must have a cause"' (ibid.). Few people dispute that we have knowledge of these kinds. BonJour argues that since such knowledge is possible only if we

27 While no explanation was provided in this section for the transition from the causal to the epistemic *a priori* that occurred in the early modern period, it should not be inferred that the change was arbitrary. To the contrary: a number of possible reasons suggest themselves, including one having to do with changing theories of perception. According to standard scholastic and Aristotelian accounts of perception, the data of experience represent the world by *resembling* it. The resemblance requirement was set aside in the early modern period, which favored mechanistic views where our experiences are produced by unknown causes that have nothing to do with the appearance of the effects. Because of this view on the origins of experience, the early moderns would have held that any argument based on experience would be *a posteriori*, since the perceptual data are effects of hidden causes. For more, see Martial Gueroult, *Etudes sur Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche et Leibniz* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim 1970), 16f.

have *a priori* insight, we must have *a priori* insight. Second, BonJour argues that if our beliefs about the past or the future, our beliefs that are general in nature (say, about universals), and our beliefs about things that are not directly observable are to be justified, their justification must rely 'on premises or principles of inference that are at least partially justified *a priori*' (4). If these beliefs do 'genuinely go beyond the content of direct experience, then it is impossible that [they] could be entirely justified by appeal to that same inference' (ibid.). If justification of a different qualitative order — *a priori* justification — is not available, then 'skepticism of the most radical kind' will result, because beliefs about anything but what is directly presented to us by the senses will be totally unjustified (3). The third argument BonJour puts forward as motivation for his project is that ratiocination itself depends on *a priori* justification. To evaluate the validity of an instance of reasoning, we look its form. This mode of evaluation abstracts entirely from the content of the propositions involved: we don't need to know whether or not they are true in order to know whether the reasoning itself is valid. Because it abstracts from all content, formal reasoning cannot be said to rely on empirical content at all. Because it is non-empirical, it is *a priori* (4-6).

These are the sorts of considerations that a prominent contemporary epistemologist offers in favor of the *a priori*. They are recounted here in order to contrast the motivation behind the contemporary revival of the *a priori* with what was driving seventeenth-century rationalist theories of knowledge. To put the matter bluntly, none of the problems bothering BonJour and his allies were of concern to seventeenth century rationalist philosophers. They rarely or never cite our knowledge of logic and mathematics, for example, as evidence of the need for *a priori* justification. Instead, they take the need for *a priori* justification to be obvious and indeed they significantly expand the scope of propositions that are *a priori* justified. Again, while they were keenly aware of the threat of skepticism — if anything, it loomed larger in the seventeenth century than it does today — they formulated that threat in distinctly different terms from BonJour. While BonJour is worried about how we could get past the immediate present — past the world as it is portrayed to us right now by our senses — seventeenth century rationalist philosophers were worried about how we could get past our ideas, about how our ideas can be proven to connect up in the right way with the world. Finally, seventeenth century rationalist philosophers would not have been convinced by the argument that reason itself necessarily involves *a priori* inferences. After all, they thought that reasoning from effect to cause — a species of *a posteriori* reasoning — is properly called an action of reason but they denied that its patterns of inference are *a priori* in any way.

Although the forces propelling the current attempt at reviving the *a priori* are not found in seventeenth-century rationalist epistemology, it

doesn't follow that the latter was unmotivated. Far from it: there were a number of problems it was trying to solve, including how to assess conflicting testimony, how to deal with the limitations and distortions of the senses, and how to address the challenge of skepticism. All of these were problems in the seventeenth century and they resonated very loudly, not just in what we now call 'epistemology' but also in metaphysics and morals. Somehow, beginning with what is epistemically basic and working towards what is epistemically non-basic was supposed to resolve these problems.

Such is the general appraisal of *a posteriori* knowledge in the seventeenth century. Let us now turn to Spinoza in particular and try to determine what he thought was right with knowledge that might be called '*a priori*' and wrong with the '*a posteriori*.' To do so, a longish passage from the *Ethics* (IIP40S2) needs to be quoted:

From what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:

- I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience [*experientia vaga*²⁸].
- II. from signs [*ex signis*], e.g., from the fact that having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.
- III. [sic] from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, P40). This I shall call reason [*rationem*] and the second kind of knowledge.
- IV. In addition ... there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge [*scientiam intuitivam*]. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.

Here Spinoza divides our knowledge into three kinds, with the basis for the division being the justification or warrant available to each kind. Knowledge of the first kind — which Spinoza calls 'opinion or imagination' — derives from *experientia vaga* and *ex signis*. Knowledge of the

28 For an excellent discussion of the difficulties involved in rendering this phrase in English, see Alan Gabbey, 'Spinoza's Natural Science and Methodology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Don Garrett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 170-5.

second kind — ‘reason’ — derives from our common notions and adequate ideas, and knowledge of the third kind (‘intuitive knowledge’) derives from our knowledge of God.

The first distinction to draw among the three kinds of knowledge places ‘opinion or imagination’ on one side, and reason and intuition together on the other. Although Spinoza did not use this vocabulary (as we have seen, he only deployed it in the traditional causal context), the first kind of knowledge is describable as ‘*a posteriori*’ and the latter two as ‘*a priori*.’ Opinion or imagination is derived from ideas that are clearly posterior in the order of knowledge; the ultimate sources of opinion or imagination are representations and signs that are given to us haphazardly, without any principle of ordering or notion of where they belong in the scheme of things. By contrast, rational and intuitive knowledge start from what is basic: in the case of reason, common notions and adequate ideas; in the case of intuition, certain aspects of God’s nature. Now, Spinoza obviously devalued the first kind of knowledge and preferred the latter two; he called the former ‘mutilated’ and ‘confused’ and mere ‘opinion’ whereas the latter are praised as ‘adequate’ and connected with the ultimate object of all true philosophical reflection, God. The question to ask is — why? Why is the first kind of knowledge necessarily inadequate and the second and third kinds, adequate?

Starting with the first kind of knowledge, when we form this kind of knowledge, we do so on the basis of signs and our sensory experiences. For formation of this kind of knowledge to occur, however, we must have some prior acquaintance with what the signs signify and what our senses sense. Because of the necessity of this prior acquaintance, knowledge of the first kind presupposes other kinds of knowledge. This relationship of dependency privileges other kinds of knowledge over the first kind. For it may be possible to form knowledge of the second and third kinds without drawing at all on the first kind of knowledge, but it is manifestly impossible to form knowledge of the first kind without drawing at all on higher kinds of knowledge.

Turning now to the second and third kinds of knowledge, one reason why they are necessarily adequate has just been given: because they are not necessarily dependent on other, more basic kinds of knowledge. In addition, we can make two other points, one requiring Spinozistic presuppositions, the other not. First, the world itself is essentially rational for Spinoza, so that when we reason correctly, our cognitions are isomorphic to the logical structure of the world. Because the world constitutes that which is the case, there is no danger of error when we reason in the true sense. Because there is no danger of error, our rational deliberations are necessarily adequate. Second, both reason and intuition are transparent: that is, we can detect and describe the steps involved in the acquisition of rational and intuitive knowledge. As a result, we can test our

knowledge and assure ourselves that it is correct. There is no such transparency with the first kind of knowledge, which relies on data that are beyond our ken.²⁹

Now, much more will be said on the nature of reason and intuition in the next section. Before we get to them, consider briefly the distance Spinoza's desire for control may place between him and us. Whereas in Spinoza's day the new science was struggling to figure out how to incorporate what Spinoza called '*vaga experientia*' into its method, modern science has had more than three centuries to decide the issue. It has devised rigorous techniques for experimentation that are designed to impose order on random experience, an order that Spinoza occasionally despaired about ever finding. To the extent that this is so, it may seem that Spinoza's problem — the problem of control — is not ours. Or is it? To this, some might reply that the desire exhibited by modern science to organize random experience is largely the same as Spinoza's desire to submit random experience to the control of reason and intuition. Such order as modern science has purchased on random experience through its sophisticated and expensive methods of experimentation has been paid for by reason, just as Spinoza thought would be the case.

IV Two Senses of Epistemic A Priori

Be that as it may, we should now consider the two main and true senses of *a priori* knowledge and demonstration found in Spinoza, the rational and the intuitive. Rational and especially intuitive knowledge have caused Spinoza scholars endless trouble. Because an interpretation with novel elements is going to be advanced here, it will be useful to begin by stating it briefly, so that it can be before us as the detailed textual and argumentative work of supporting it is undertaken.

The contrast between rational and intuitive knowledge is the contrast between logical and ideational knowledge. Now, both the logical and the ideational must be construed in their distinctively Spinozistic senses. As we shall see, the logical in Spinoza's system amounts to the nomological, so that rational knowledge is knowledge gained from the correct use of certain natural laws. The character of the ideational is harder to state in precise terms: roughly speaking, the ideational consists in ideas and their relations, so that intuitive knowledge is knowledge gained from the

29 See note 27 for one reason why the data of opinion and imagination are ultimately incomprehensible.

successful use of our ideas. Both kinds of knowledge have epistemically basic roots, so both are fully *a priori* in the epistemic sense.

That, in a nutshell, is this paper's reading of rational and intuitive knowledge. Now it will be expanded on, beginning with the rational.

Return to IIP40S2. To illustrate the three kinds of knowledge, Spinoza showed how it is possible to solve a mathematical problem — the so-called problem of the fourth proportional — using either opinion/imagination or reason or intuition. Suppose one is given 'three numbers and asked to find a fourth which is to the third as the second is to the first' (IIP40S2). One could answer the question in different ways. One could peek at a neighbor's test. Or one could mimic, without understanding, a technique taught in class. An answer obtained in either of these ways, if correct, would be knowledge gained from imagination or opinion. A more scrupulous and brighter individual might recognize that a theorem or rule covers the problem and derive the solution from that theorem or rule. Knowledge gained in this way would be, in Spinoza's parlance, rational. Finally, if the numbers are simple enough, or if one has extensive training and ability in mathematics, one might be able to perceive the relations among the numbers without reference to a general theorem and, as a result of this direct insight, solve the problem. Such a person would have intuitive knowledge.

As the example shows,³⁰ the difference among the three kinds of knowledge is not to be explained by the truth of the proposition known: in each case, the answer could be true and yet there would be different kinds of knowledge, according to Spinoza. Instead, the difference is entirely due to *how* the agent got the answer. With his emphasis on the justificatory source of our knowledge, Spinoza was interested in precisely the same issue as contemporary rationalists: namely, where and how we get our knowledge.

Now, it was just said that the rational solution involves the application of a mathematical theorem or rule to the numbers of the problem. On closer inspection, Spinoza might have said that there are actually several steps in this process. First, one must know an appropriate theorem or rule (such as that the product of the extremes is equal to the product of

30 How good an example it is has been the subject of discussion, with some scholars arguing that it offers at best an *analogy*, what the different kinds of knowledge are *like*, and not an exact illustration of what they really are (see, e.g., E.M. Curley, 'Experience in Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge,' in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Marjorie Grene, ed. [Garden City, NY: Anchor Books 1973]). Since the interpretative claims of this paper don't require it to be either a literal or a figurative illustration of the three kinds of knowledge, it doesn't matter to the present argument which way it is to be taken.

the means). Then one must recognize that the problem is covered by the theorem or rule. Next one must correctly substitute the numbers of the problem for the variables in the theorem or rule. Finally, one will have to perform the right calculations. Of these steps, the first two — having a certain body of general knowledge and recognizing that the problem is covered by one part of this body of knowledge — are the critical ones from an epistemological standpoint. Here the focus will be on the former.

First, a distinction must be introduced between justifying and justified knowledge. This distinction is familiar: one thinks, for example, that one is justified in believing the person across the room to be a friend because one knows her or him. Here, there is a body of knowledge doing the justifying — the knowledge one has about one's friend (what she looks like, the sound of her voice, the sort of clothing she tends to wear, the places she frequents, etc.) — and a separate body of knowledge being justified — the knowledge that *that* person is one's friend. This distinction is crucial to Spinoza's views on both rational and intuitive knowledge: in both cases, he distinguished sharply between those ideas that are doing the justifying and those that are being justified.

When it comes to rational knowledge, Spinoza argued that it is justified by a very specific body of knowledge: he wrote in IIP44Cor2Dem, 'the foundations of Reason are notions (by P38) which explain those things that are common to all....' Now, by 'things that are common to all,' he did not mean universals in the traditional sense. In his opinion, universals (such as 'Man') are inherently confused: they arise 'because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining — not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the Mind can imagine neither slight differences of the [individual] men ... nor their determinate number' (IIP40S1). By contrast 'common notions' (*notiones communes*³¹) are formed on the basis of uniform agreement across all bodies (IIP39). For example, if all bodies agree in tending to travel in straight lines in the absence of interfering causes, a common notion would exist as the mentalistic counterpart to this bodily behavior. Or, should it turn out that extended objects exhibit certain relationships to each other, there would be a common notion —

31 Some commentators have linked Spinoza's common notions to the Stoics' common notions or *ennoia* (see, e.g., Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza II — L'âme* [Paris: Aubier-Montaigne 1974], Appendix 12). This can't be right. For one reason, the Stoics' *ennoia* emerge from sensory experience whereas Spinoza's common notions are innate. In addition, *ennoia* serve as criteria for truth; not so for Spinoza. So the Stoics and Spinoza clash over such basic matters as the status of common notions in our cognitive constitutions and their contribution to the justification of our knowledge. A better interpretation of common notions in Spinoza will be offered below.

an axiom of geometry — formed on the basis of these relationships. The origins of common notions lie in parallelism: if all bodies agree in a certain respect, then since the mind parallels the body, it must possess the mental counterpart — the idea or notion — of this agreement (IIP38Cor).

In the last paragraph, principles of physics and geometry were chosen as examples of common notions. This was because they illustrate particularly well what common notions are supposed to be. Principles of physics and geometry govern the actions and relationships among natural phenomena. What governs the actions and relationships of natural phenomena, according to Spinoza, is the laws of nature (see, e.g., IIPref [at G II: 139, 14-16]). Since laws of nature govern the actions and relationships of natural phenomena, and our common notions are mental representations of what governs natural phenomena, it follows that the common notions forming the basis of our body of rational knowledge are the laws of nature.³²

By identifying common notions with laws of nature, Spinoza's psychological naturalism is being upheld. According to Spinoza, human nature is to be understood as essentially the same in form (though not in content) as the nature of all other beings. He famously decried other philosophers for separating humans from other natural beings and treating 'man in nature as a dominion within a dominion' (III Pref). The fundamental error of those philosophers was that they took human thought and action to be free from 'the common laws of Nature' (ibid.), some of them even going so far as to argue that humans are subject to no laws whatsoever. By contrast, Spinoza insisted that humans are subject to the same 'laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen' (ibid.). Humans are subject to such laws because they are part of nature; like all other parts of nature, they have laws internal to their natures through which their behavior must be analyzed.

That having been said, a qualification is in order: not all laws of nature are common notions though all common notions are laws of nature. The most important basis for excluding some laws from common notions is that only those laws that are part of the constitution of the human psyche can be included in the set of common notions. The thought is that we use *our* laws — the laws of our minds — to form *a priori* knowledge of

32 For others who have interpreted common notions as being in some sense laws of nature, see H.A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1934), 162; G.H.R. Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1954), 164; and Margaret D. Wilson, 'Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge,' in *Cambridge Companion*, Garrett, ed., 113f.

ourselves and the world around us. Any laws that are not part of the contents of our minds cannot be relied on to form such knowledge. Relatedly, another basis for excluding laws from common notions is the epistemological irrelevance of some laws. If there are laws governing the behavior of natural phenomena that never figure in our acquisition of new ideas, then those laws would not be included in the set of common notions that make possible rational knowledge. This qualification notwithstanding, it is not a misleading anachronism to label common notions 'laws of nature' — not least because Spinoza himself used this language (see, e.g., *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (TdIE) §102) — and understood in the idiosyncratic Spinozistic sense, laws should be counted as his correlation for common notions.³³

Having described the nature of the body of knowledge that is productive of rational knowledge, a few words should be said about the body of knowledge it produces — i.e., about the rational *a priori* itself. The first point is perhaps the most crucial: common notions are extremely useful for understanding the world but only in a certain respect. In IIP44Cor2Dem Spinoza said that common notions 'do not explain the essence of any singular thing.' Common notions allow us to identify what is common to individuals. For example, from the common notions of motion we can predict how bodies are going to act and react in different situations — we can, say, predict that bodies will tend to travel in straight lines in the absence of interfering causes. But what is common to individuals cannot be part of their essences (IIP37). This is because something can be a part of the thing's essence if and only if it can neither be nor be conceived without that thing (IID2). *Ex hypothesi*, however, common notions *can* be and be conceived apart from individuals; that is what is intended by calling them 'common.' Since common notions provide us with knowledge of what is common to individuals, it follows that common notions do not provide us with knowledge of what is essential to individuals. Instead, Spinoza told us in VP12Dem, 'Things we understand clearly and distinctly [from common notions] are either common properties of things or deduced from them....' Setting aside the Spinozistic jargon, we can make sense of the idea that common notions

33 Spinoza's views on laws of nature remain understudied. Although it has been validly criticized in a number of ways, the most important general study is still E.M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1969). For an introduction to the relevance of the laws to his epistemology, see Wilson, 'Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge.' A more recent study is Jon Miller, 'Spinoza and the Concept of a Law of Nature' (*History of Philosophy Quarterly* 20 [2003]).

don't provide knowledge of essences by reflecting on what laws of nature are good for. Laws of nature are good for learning about the behavior of individuals and their causes.³⁴ On the assumption of even a moderately robust conception of an essence, neither a thing's behavior nor its place in the sequence of causes belongs to its essence. So, laws of nature reveal much about things and the world around us but they do not teach us about essences.

Moving on, a second point about the truths that are known *a priori* by common notions concerns their modal status. Given the way common notions are supposed to be used — as 'premises' in arguments from which conclusions about individual truths are deduced³⁵ — the results of any process of knowing that relies on them will also be necessary. This is because the common notions are necessary (IIP38Dem) and, in the arguments in which they appear as premises, the necessity of the premises is transferred to the conclusions.³⁶ So, we might say, rational *a priori* justified truths are always necessary. As Spinoza said, 'It is of the nature of Reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent' (IIP44). On this point, Spinoza was in agreement with some but not all of his successors. Kant famously declared, 'Experience teaches us that a thing is so and so, but not that it cannot be otherwise. First, then, if we have a proposition which in being thought is thought as *necessary*, it is an *a priori* judgement.... Necessity and strict universality are thus sure criteria of a

34 As Spinoza said in the chapter on law in the *Political-Theological Treatise (TTP)*, 'a universal law governing all bodies' allows us to know that 'all bodies colliding with smaller bodies lose as much of their own motion as they impart to other bodies,' and a law that 'necessarily follows from the nature of man' predicts that 'a man, in remembering one thing, forthwith calls to mind another like it, or which he has seen along with it' (*TTP* Four [G III: 57-8]; this and all translations of the *TTP* are by Samuel Shirley [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1998]). As to causality, see his official definition of a law, also in the *TTP*: 'The word law, taken in its absolute sense, means that according to which each individual thing ... [acts] in one and the same fixed and determinate manner' (*TTP* Four [G III: 57]).

35 Cf. *TTP* Seven: 'Now in examining natural phenomena we first of all try to discover those features that are most universal and common to the whole of Nature, to wit, motion-and-rest and the laws and rules governing them which Nature always observes and through which she constantly acts; and then we advance gradually from these to other less universal features' (G III: 102).

36 For a couple of texts where Spinoza endorsed the notion that a modal or intensional property of the premises of an argument is transferred to any conclusion drawn from those premises, see the preface to his commentary on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* and IIP40. For discussion, see Richard Mason, 'Concrete Logic,' in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, Olli Koistinen and John Biro, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).

priori knowledge.³⁷ Among more contemporary rationalists, BonJour agrees with Kant that propositions known *a priori* must be necessary³⁸ while Boghossian and Peacocke argue, 'Examples, and reflection on the nature of properties, both show that there are *a priori* propositions which are not necessary.'³⁹ There is a sense, however, in which the modality of rational *a priori* truths is trivial for Spinoza in a way that it is not for Kant, BonJour, or Boghossian and Peacocke. Since all truths are necessary in Spinoza, it must be trivially true that all *a priori* truths are as well. Thus the modal status of *a priori* truths is much less important to Spinoza's epistemology than it is to non-necessitarians'.

As a third point, it should be noticed that the range of truths known by our common notions is not limited to just the most simple or self-evident ones. This is apparent from the very aim of the *Ethics*, which is to teach us how we can rationally understand God, natural processes, human nature, and human happiness. These are not simple matters, as Spinoza himself recognized; it is only through patient and tiring study that we will come to know them. Because he set such wide parameters on the range of truths that can be known rationally, Spinoza is in conflict with many contemporary rationalists. For example, BonJour writes, 'a proposition whose necessity is apprehended [by rational insight] ... may be correlatively characterized as *rationally self-evident*: its very content provides, for one who grasps it properly, an immediately accessible reason for thinking it is true.'⁴⁰ While Spinoza would have agreed that self-evident truths can be known rationally, he also that many non-self-evident truths are derivable from the laws of nature and so can be rational *a priori* justified.

Finally, BonJour can be used to illuminate the actual process by which we accumulate new instances of rationally known knowledge. BonJour thinks the proposition 'Nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time' is true and furthermore can be known to be true by *a priori* means.⁴¹ He thinks that his acceptance of this proposition involves two steps: first, he *understands* the proposition; second, he 'sees or grasps or

37 *Critique of Pure Reason*, B3; trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press 1965), 43

38 See, e.g., *In Defense of Pure Reason*, 102.

39 Paul Boghossian and Christopher Peacocke, 'Introduction,' in Boghossian and Peacocke, *New Essays*, 3

40 *In Defense of Pure Reason*, 102

41 *In Defense of Pure Reason*, 101

apprehends in a direct and seemingly unmediated way that the claim in question cannot fail to be true' (ibid.). Setting aside the second step, BonJour takes 'understanding' the proposition to mean:

that I comprehend or grasp the property indicated by the word "red" and also that indicated by the word "green," that I have adequate conceptions of redness and greenness.... Similarly, I understand the relation of incompatibility or exclusion that is conveyed by the rest of the words ... together with the way in which this relation is predicated of the two properties by the syntax of the sentence. (ibid.)

Although BonJour possibly states the steps involved in the formation of rational knowledge more clearly than Spinoza, both analyze this process in roughly the same terms. In both cases, they think that agents who possess knowledge that is rationally justified have general or common knowledge, that they use this knowledge to recognize the particulars as instantiations of it, and that their understanding includes a grasp of the conceptual or logical relations among the relevant ideas or events.⁴²

In the foregoing respects, Spinoza's first kind of epistemic *a priori* is probably familiar to a contemporary audience. Before moving on, a more exotic aspect ought to be stressed. It is true that Spinoza conceived of reason in instrumentalist or functionalist terms: he did think that reason involves the drawing of inferences from general rules. But according to Spinoza there is more to reason than ratiocination: it is also endowed with a substantial range and amount of content. We have already encountered some evidence of this, for as we have seen, reason is characterized as a kind of *knowledge*: it contains what Spinoza called common notions and the ideas that we obtain through the application of common notions. As noted above, common notions are innate; they constitute an essential part of our minds. And here we find another way in which reason is substantive: Spinoza thought that part of the essence of the mind is reason (see IIP11, IVAppIV, VP36S, VP38Dem, etc.). A third way in which reason is substantive is perhaps most striking. Spinoza wrote in one of the texts just alluded to, 'the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., his highest Desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and

42 This takes BonJour to be denying that one directly intuits the relation of exclusion between the particular ideas 'red' and 'green' without recourse to a more general rule of which this particular antipathy is a specific case. If this is not the correct reading of BonJour but instead he should be understood to hold that the inference is direct, then he couldn't be an ally of Spinoza's at this juncture. The possible ambiguities of BonJour's views on whether the *a priori* involves general rules will be critically evaluated in the final section below.

all things that can fall under his understanding' (IVAppIV). Here we find a fairly explicit rejection of a Humean-type conception of action, where reason merely selects the best means for attaining an end provided by non-rational desire. To the contrary, Spinoza thought that our most important desires are precisely those that reason generates. In at least these three ways, then, Spinoza thought of reason as being more than an instrument or tool; it is also responsible for why we know, what we know and how we ought to live.

Now, Spinoza's substantive and robust conception of reason, which may appear bizarre to many post-Humean philosophers,⁴³ is important for present purposes. For it provides significant grounds for distinguishing the rational *a priori* from the intuitive *a priori*. As we have seen with the rational *a priori* and as we are about to discover with the intuitive *a priori*, the truths or propositions that are known *a priori* are justified by appeal to a specific body of knowledge. Because the rational *a priori* is justified by appeal to reason, its justificatory basis is distinctive and unique. Criticisms of rational *a priori* claims of knowledge must take into account this justificatory basis; it would do no good, for example, to criticize these claims by asserting that they do not take into account sufficient sensory evidence, since sensory evidence is entirely irrelevant to their (alleged) status as knowledge items. Similarly, when we turn to the intuitive *a priori*, we need to know about the body of knowledge that allows us to know truths or propositions intuitively in order to understand and evaluate the intuitive *a priori* proper. As we shall see, that body of knowledge is significantly different from the body of knowledge that Spinoza calls 'reason.'

With that in mind, we can now proceed to intuitive knowledge or, as Spinoza called it, '*scientia intuitiva*.' As was the case with the rational *a priori*, the body of knowledge that allows us to form this knowledge will be expounded before getting to the truths themselves that we can know intuitively.

43 Lest one object that Spinoza's view is too bizarre to be taken seriously, it may be pointed out that he is not the only one to have held it; at least since the ancient Stoics, philosophers have also argued for a substantive conception of reason according to which the rational person must not only be able to draw correct inferences but also must know a certain minimal number of truths or propositions. For discussion of the philosophical issues, see Dagfinn Føllesdal, 'The Status of Rationality Assumptions in Interpretation and in the Explanation of Action,' reprinted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1994), esp. 300f., and Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002), 1-17.

In the *TdIE* Spinoza said, ‘we have a true idea’ (§33). His substance monism provides the basis for this statement: since there is only one substance, then insofar as we exist, we must exist as part of this substance (IIP10Cor). This substance is conceivable in terms of thought and so we are, too (IIP1 and IIA1). When conceived as thinking beings, we are thought of as minds. Our minds in turn are not simple but rather are composed of many ideas (IIP15). While we have many false ideas, these ideas are false insofar as they lack reality (IIP17S). Insofar as our ideas possess reality, they are true. And so, insofar as we possess reality or exist, we have (at least one) true idea; or better (because this captures the tight relationship between ideas and our essences as mental beings), we *are* a true idea.

Concerning the ideas that are said to comprise our minds, a couple of points must be made. The first is that, as the official definition of an idea makes plain (IID3), they are inherently active:

By idea I understand a concept [*conceptum*] of the Mind that the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing.

Exp.: *I say concept rather than perception [perceptionem], because the word perception seems to indicate that the Mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems to express an action of the Mind.* (his italics)

There are two senses of activity here. The first and more obvious is that ideas are active insofar as they are actual instances of thought, acts of mental labor. That sense will be ignored in favor of the second. To grasp it, take a sample idea — say, the idea of God. Someone who forms the idea of God will find herself engaged in a series of thoughts: of an infinite being, of a being that necessarily exists, of this being’s inability to deceive, etc. It is not possible, Spinoza believed, to form the initial idea of God without also forming (at least in theory) these other ideas; the one idea naturally leads to the others in such a way that it cannot be stopped without contradiction. Now, what is true for the idea of God is true of all ideas: as Spinoza said, ‘the Mind, from considering one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another — [this is] because the images of these things are connected with one another, and so ordered that one follows the other’ (IIIDefAffectIVExp; see also *TdIE* §99). It is not the mind that brings about the move; it is the idea itself. The second sense of activity, then, is purely conceptual: ideas are active insofar as they produce other ideas in the minds of those conceiving them.⁴⁴

44 For other important texts on the innate activity of ideas, see IIP43S, P48S and P49S2.

The second point about ideas follows close on the heels of the first: Spinoza thought that all of our ideas — just as all the parts of our bodies — are connected to one another (cf. *TdIE* §104, *Ethics* IP36). Here a comparison is possible to Leibniz's monad. From both the Spinozistic idea and the Leibnizian monad, it is possible to obtain all other ideas about the entire universe — past, present and future. The key difference between Spinoza's ideas and monads is that monads are thought to *contain* all true propositions about the universe within themselves, whereas Spinoza's ideas are related to all other ideas about the universe but do not contain them within themselves (with the exception, of course, of the idea of God [IIP4]).⁴⁵

Now, these two features of Spinoza's theory of ideas — the inherent activity of ideas and their interconnectedness — combine in the following way to produce a new means to knowledge. Our minds are composed of ideas. These ideas are inherently active. Because of the activity of its ideas, the mind comes to form new ideas. Furthermore, because of the interconnectedness of ideas, it is not necessary for the mind to take an indirect route to its new ideas — say, via the common notions. Instead, the first idea leads directly to the second without a third one mediating between them. For example, the idea of God immediately *entails* (this word is used advisedly — see below) the idea of an absolutely perfect being; just by thinking of God we will come to think of a perfect being. When we form new ideas in this manner, we are forming new knowledge. The justificatory basis for this knowledge, Spinoza would have said, is not *vaga experientia* or reason; it is intuition.

As illustration, return to the problem of the fourth proportional. Spinoza thought it possible to 'see' the answer 'in one glance' (*uno intuitu*) solely on the basis of the individual numbers already known. In the Dutch edition of the *Ethics*, he attempted to clarify this type of solution by contrasting it with the rational one: 'given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one neglects to see that the fourth proportional is 6 ... we must only think of the particular ratio of the first two numbers, and not of the universal property of proportional numbers.' The reason that some but not all people will be capable of solving the problem intuitively is that some but not all people possess the requisite ideas. Those who do not possess the requisite ideas in all their robustness — the ideas of the

45 Corresponding to Spinoza's views on the interconnectedness of ideas are his views on the interconnectedness of bodies. For discussion of the interconnectedness of bodies and its relationship to the interconnectedness of ideas, see Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994), 10f.

numbers, of their ratios, of all that follows from these things — must have recourse to some other means; they must employ Euclidean theory or look at their neighbor's test. People who do possess those ideas will find that the answer emerges directly from the present content of their minds.

This conception of justification is analogous to one discussed by Peacocke. He writes, 'there is a substantive explanation of why it is a way of coming to know that has a priori status, an explanation which involves the nature of the concepts in the given content.'⁴⁶ Peacocke thinks that it is possible for us to extract new content from our currently existing store of concepts. We might, for example, find that new propositions containing our concepts are rational and so come to accept those new propositions. Such knowledge does not rely on random experience; nor is it obviously indebted to anything like laws of thought. Rather, it seems to be formed in roughly the same manner as Spinoza thought intuitive knowledge is formed: simply and immediately from our store of certain concepts, we come to know other concepts.⁴⁷

In sum, then, there is a twofold contrast between the body of knowledge that is the source of intuitive knowledge and that which is the source of rational knowledge. First, the content of the two justifying bodies will differ: intuitive justification is provided by ideas of individuals (numbers, humans, God) whereas rational justification comes from common notions. Second, the two bodies have fundamentally different structures: because it consists only of individuals, the body forming the basis of intuitive knowledge is not lawful (neither is it un-lawful, how-

46 'The Programme of Moderate Rationalism,' in Boghossian and Peacocke, *New Essays*, 260

47 This conception of justification also bears some resemblance to one discussed by Descartes in the *Regulae*. In rule four of the *Regulae*, Descartes distinguished between two 'modes of knowing,' deduction and intuition (CSM I: 15; A-T X: 369). The chief difference between deduction and intuition is that the former justifies conclusions on the basis of distant premises which 'we cannot take in at one glance' whereas intuition draws its inferences solely from immediately adjacent 'single propositions' (CSM I: 15, 14; A-T X: 369-70). There are undoubtedly affinities between what Descartes said here and Spinoza; just as Spinoza held of reason and intuition, Descartes said that deduction and intuition are the two 'most certain routes to knowledge that we have' (CSM I: 15; A-T X: 370). Yet the affinities should not be pressed too far. For one thing, the *Regulae* was published after Spinoza died, so it is unlikely that he read and was influenced by it. More importantly, there are major conceptual differences between Descartes and Spinoza. For example, while Descartes argued that intuition can justify only self-evident truths and deduction only the non-self-evident, according to Spinoza, both ways of coming to know can justify either self-evident or non-self-evident truths.

ever — rather, it is a-lawful); by contrast, because it consists of common notions, the rational is essentially lawful.

With these points made about the body of knowledge that makes intuitive knowledge possible, we can now proceed to intuitive knowledge proper.

The most important point about intuitive knowledge proper or, simply, the intuitive *a priori*, has already been telegraphed: it is knowledge of essences, not properties (cf. IIP40S2). While Spinoza did provide an official definition of an essence (IID2), it is not especially enlightening in the present context. More helpful is his discussion of the *conatus* at the beginning of *Ethics* III. There we are told that a thing's essence consists in its non-purposive endeavors to remain in and enhance its existence (IIIP7). Central to this conception of an essence is the idea of power or activity: ultimately, it holds, we (and all other beings) are the *efforts* we make to secure our place in the world. In the words of one commentator, 'In its most general form, the essence of each individual is to exert force upon its environment (IP36), that is, to have a tendency to continue in existence, and this force is the individual's defining operations by which it maintains its existence.'⁴⁸ The tight connection between essence and force or power makes intuition particularly well-suited to knowing essences. For intuition, as we have seen, is at bottom a matter of the activity of ideas: when we know ideas intuitively, we grasp them and their implications, and we are led by the ideas themselves to explore all these implications. Because they are inherently active, if we are to know essences, we must be able to grasp them in all their activity. Other modes of knowledge (viz., imagination and reason) are ill-equipped for this project because they do not have activity built into them. Since intuition, however, is essentially active, it is capable of fully intellectualizing essences: it is the one mode of knowledge that can follow the activity of the essence.

A second point about the intuitive *a priori* is that while the truths known intuitively are conceived under a species of eternity (VP31) and are necessary (IIP41), we do not know them as necessary. The reason for this stems from Spinoza's modal views: in brief, he defined (metaphysical) modality in terms of the laws of nature, so that things are metaphysically necessary just in case they follow from the laws of nature together with a set of initial conditions, possible when they are compatible with

48 Steven Barbone, 'What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?' in Koistinen and Biro, *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, 99

the laws of nature alone, and impossible otherwise.⁴⁹ Since this is the ultimate basis for metaphysical necessity, we can know things as necessary only insofar as we relate them to the laws of nature. As just argued, however, truths that are known intuitively are not related to general laws of nature; instead, they are related to individuals. As a result, truths that are known intuitively are not metaphysically necessary. To state the point in slightly different terms, rational knowledge is necessary because it is deduced from laws of nature that are necessary. Since intuitive knowledge is not derived from the laws of nature, it isn't necessary.⁵⁰

Third, there is an accrual of ideas through time: for example, first the agent might have an idea of, say, God; then she might have an idea of a perfect being; then she might have an idea of a being that exists; etc. Moreover, if she has been well educated or if she has thought long and hard about God, she will be more adept in the formation of new ideas. Because of the processes that go into the formation of ideational knowledge, there is a sense in which experience plays a part in the intuitive *a priori*. New ideas are acquired as a result of the activity (in the sense

49 This interpretation was first suggested by Richard Mason, 'Spinoza on Modality,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1986). It was fully developed and defended by Jon Miller, 'Spinoza's possibilities,' *The Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2001).

50 In a well-known letter (Ep. 32), Spinoza discussed how a change in perspective could affect the assessment of an event's modal status. To use the example he provided in that letter, an event may be necessary from the perspective of a 'worm in the blood' but not from the perspective of the human whose blood the worm is in. Because of the susceptibility of modality to perspective, one cannot assert absolutely that an event is necessary since a change in perspective (say, switching from the worm's perspective to the human's) could entail a change in necessity. For an elaboration of this relativistic interpretation of Spinoza's modal views, see Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 115f.

Now, it might be thought that the relativity of necessity poses a problem for the claim made in this paragraph, since it might be thought that one cannot reference two kinds of necessity — one for reason, another for intuition — on the grounds that either form of necessity can be transformed to the other by changing perspectives. However, while it is indeed possible to switch perspectives, it is nonetheless true that within a given perspective a certain kind of modality prevails. To speak in the terms of this paper, insofar as we know things rationally, we know them necessarily because we deduce them from laws of nature that are themselves necessary. By contrast, when we know things intuitively, we do not know them necessarily because we do not deduce them from natural laws. At a minimum, the relativity of necessity noted by Curley and others requires the existence of two kinds of necessity — one for reason, another for intuition. Since Spinoza explicitly provided us with reason to think there is a rational necessity but failed to do so for the intuitive, it is reasonable to conclude (as the paragraph in the text does) that there is no metaphysical necessity to intuition.

specified above) of the old ideas: past experience with forming and extracting ideas on the basis of extant ones will render us more capable of doing the same in the future. To be sure, the experience here is not sensory: as we have seen, the senses contribute only to the formation of opinion or imagination, the first kind of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is important to note that experience does factor in the formation of intuitive knowledge. While we might think of *a priori* knowledge as gained entirely independently of experience, Spinoza demurs, arguing instead that intuitive *a priori* knowledge is only gained independently of a particular kind of experience — sensory experience.

Finally, we ought to figure out whether and in what sense intuitive knowledge can be inferential. Here a distinction must be drawn between two types of inference: rule-case versus ideational. From what has been said, Spinoza plainly would not call the intuitive *a priori* inferential in the former sense. What distinguishes the intuitive *a priori* from the rational *a priori* is precisely that the latter but not the former involves an essential appeal to general rules or laws. So the nature of the logic of the inference in the intuitive *a priori* is not rule-case. It doesn't follow, however, that the intuitive *a priori* is not inferential in some sense. Indeed, there are texts where Spinoza explicitly said that it is inferential. In the problem of the fourth proportional he said that 'we infer' (*concludimus*) the unknown number from the known numbers. Also, he said in IIP47S, 'since all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately [*sequitur, nos ex cognitione hac plurima posse deducere, quae adaequate cognoscamus*], and so can form that third kind of knowledge of which we spoke in P40S2....' Here Spinoza said that the third kind of knowledge is formed by deduction from our knowledge of God. The type of deduction involved in the formation of intuitive knowledge will be unique to it, proceeding from one individual idea to another and necessarily excluding the use of general rules. Still, although the logic of the inference is unique to itself, intuitive knowledge should be called inferential. It will be inferential in the sense that it will be obtained via a certain kind of process from another body of knowledge.⁵¹

51 For further discussion of whether intuitive knowledge is inferential, see Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 447f, together with Wilson, 'Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge,' 118f.

V Christ and Intuitive Knowledge

In his analysis of prophecy in the *TTP*, Spinoza discussed at length the ways in which prophets came to know God and their prophecies. While other prophets came to this knowledge by using their imagination, Christ did so by using his intuition.⁵² This is of interest because it presents a new opportunity to learn about the intuitive *a priori*: in contrast to the terse, theoretical discussion from the *Ethics*, the *TTP* offers an example — a concrete instance — of someone who has intuitive knowledge. What Spinoza said about Christ can be used to augment or at least reinforce the interpretation of intuitive knowledge advanced in the previous section. Two of the points he made about Christ's knowledge are especially valuable for our purposes.⁵³

The first is an important clarification of what was said in the last section. Intuition is sometimes analyzed as a quasi-perceptual faculty, so that we form intuitive knowledge as a result of 'seeing' certain truths or propositions with our faculty of intuition. Gödel is said to have held such a view, according to which (in the words of one of his commentators) we have 'quasi-causal ... relations to concepts and meanings.'⁵⁴ We learn from the *TTP*, however, that this is not how Spinoza conceived of intuition. He writes that Christ came to know God as a result of communing with him 'mind to mind [*Christus quidem de mente ad mentem cum Deo communicavit*]' (*TTP* One [G III: 21]). Since on Spinoza's account the

52 While most of 'God's revelations were received only with the aid of the imaginative faculty,' Spinoza said that 'God's ordinances leading men to salvation were revealed not by words or by visions, but directly [to Christ]...' (*TTP* One [G III: 21]). The knowledge that Christ gained as a result of his communication with God is plainly not an instance of *vaga experientia*, for it is in precisely this respect that Christ differed from other prophets. Moreover, it doesn't seem to be an instance of rational knowledge, for Spinoza said that when Christ formed his knowledge of God, he perceived 'by pure intuition that which is not contained in the basic principles of our cognition and cannot be deduced therefrom' (*ibid.*). On the assumption that the 'basic principles of our cognition' alluded to are the 'common notions' discussed in the *Ethics*, Christ's knowledge was formed without reliance on the general rules or laws that are constitutive of common notions and hence rational knowledge.

53 In the past, the value of Spinoza's so-called 'political' works for understanding his 'metaphysical' and 'epistemological' writings has been doubted (see, e.g., Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1984], 7). This paper assumes that such doubts have been put to rest by, among others, Edwin Curley, 'Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): The *Theological-Political Treatise* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*,' in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, J.A. Cover and Mark Kulstad, eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1990).

54 Peacocke, 'The Programme of Moderate Rationalism,' 263

mind is a collection of ideas, when Christ communed with God ‘mind to mind,’ he must have been communing with God’s ideas. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defined ideas as ‘conceptions’ that the mind forms because it is a thinking being (II D3). Because concepts are not objects that the mind can perceive, ideas are not perceptible, either. So when Christ communed with God, he was not ‘seeing’ or otherwise sensing God’s ideas. Instead, he was forming conceptions about God, presumably based on his own innate idea of God (II 47). Intuition is therefore purely mental; acts of intuition occur when the agent directly accesses one idea from another.

The second point reinforces the claims made about the contrast between intuitive versus rational knowledge. The way Christ communed with God is not depicted as rule-case; instead, Spinoza suggested later in the *TTP* that Christ first formed his knowledge intuitively *and then* appealed to common notions or laws to make it comprehensible to the rest of humanity. He wrote, ‘[Christ’s] mind had to be adapted to the beliefs and doctrines held in common by all mankind, that is, to those axioms which are universally true’ (*TTP* Four [G III: 64]). The contrast between Christ’s intuitive knowledge of God and other ways of knowing God is very much as described above. Intuitive knowledge is immediate and ideational; the process by which one attains that kind of knowledge is not a matter of derivation from axioms or rules. By contrast, rational knowledge is a matter of deriving content by using axioms or rules. Interestingly, Spinoza also described rational knowledge as lawlike: he said that the contrast between how Christ understood the truths revealed to him versus how he explained those truths to everyone else is the contrast between understanding things ‘truly and adequately’ versus as ‘laws’ (*ibid.*). Bracketing the notion (which hasn’t been examined in this paper) of true and adequate comprehension, notice that Christ’s own knowledge, which was intuitive knowledge, is not lawful, whereas the justified knowledge of God that he helped others to attain is lawful. This is completely in accordance with the contrast between intuitive versus rational knowledge as interpreted in this paper.⁵⁵

55 The discussion of Christ here is necessarily truncated, designed only to reinforce previous conclusions and not to introduce new premises into the argument. For a much more extensive and detailed analysis of the so-called ‘Christ question,’ see Alexandre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne 1971).

VI A Spinozistic Critique of Moderate Rationalism⁵⁶

The main thrust of this paper has been to argue for an interpretation of two ways in which Spinoza thought we could come to know that something is the case, two ways of forming knowledge that are describable as '*a priori*.' According to the first of those ways, we come to know that something is the case when we recognize that our laws of thought apply to particular problems. Our laws of thought teach us that sorts of things must possess certain properties; when we recognize that individuals are members of those general sorts, we are entitled to conclude that they have those properties. The second *a priori* way of forming knowledge eschews the general for the particular. Sometimes we are able to form new knowledge simply on the basis of our knowledge of individuals. We don't 'see' new ideas; instead, the active introspection of our ideas leads us to recognize connections to other ideas. When this happens, we have intuitive knowledge.

In addition to Spinoza exegesis, another theme of this paper has been the structure of the history of the *a priori*. It has been argued that this history divides into three periods: the Ockhamite, when the *a priori* was conceived in causal terms; the brief but turbulent and important pre-Leibnizian early modern, when there were competing conceptions; and the Leibnizian, when it has been contrasted with experience. Spinoza is so fascinating because we find traces in him of all ways of thinking about the *a priori*.

Such is a description of the historical results of this paper. Many questions remain about the history but these must be postponed for another day.⁵⁷ Instead, by way of conclusion and in order to draw out

56 Ian Hacking argued several decades ago that Descartes had a fundamentally different conception of proof from ours. More recently, David Owen has contended that early modern conceptions of reason are incommensurate with post-Fregeian conceptions. For more, see: 'Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths,' reprinted in Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002); David Owen, *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), esp. Chs. 1-3.

Because of the possibility, introduced by Hacking and Owen (among others), that at least some categories of early modern thought cannot be unproblematically translated into our idiom, it is important for me to stress that the generality of these criticisms. While they are obviously inspired by Spinoza and (in my opinion) they could be deepened by reading and reflecting on his writings, they are formulated in terms that do not rely argumentatively or conceptually on him. Hence, they are 'Spinozistic' — and not 'Spinoza's' — criticisms of moderate rationalism.

57 Among the many interesting questions are who coined '*a priori*' and to what end

the purely philosophical interest of Spinoza's views, a Spinozistic critique will be offered of 'moderate rationalism,' as some contemporary rationalists call their program.⁵⁸ For brevity's sake, only three points will be made.

The first is that moderate rationalists often conflate different sources of *a priori* justification and knowledge. Take two of the philosophers mentioned above, Peacocke and Bonjour. Peacocke frequently calls the epistemological capacity that makes it possible for us to form *a priori* knowledge 'rational intuition.'⁵⁹ Since he thought that reason offers one way of forming *a priori* knowledge and intuition another, Spinoza would have found this is a particularly unfortunate choice of words. To speak of 'rational intuition,' Spinoza would have argued, is to run together two completely distinct sources of the *a priori*.⁶⁰ For his part, Bonjour says that an 'act of rational insight' is '(a) direct or immediate, non-discursive, and yet also (b) intellectual or reason-governed, anything but arbitrary or brute in character.'⁶¹ Elsewhere he writes that '*a priori* justification occurs when the mind directly or intuitively sees or grasps or apprehends ... a necessary fact about the nature or structure of reality. Such an apprehension may of course be discursively mediated.... But in the simplest cases it is allegedly direct and unmediated.'⁶² Notice the different properties ascribed to the single capacity that makes *a priori* knowledge possible: it is 'reason-governed'; it is 'intuitive'; it occurs when the mind 'directly grasps' a necessary fact; it is usually 'discursively medi-

(see n. 3 above), why the usage of '*a priori*' expanded considerably in the first decades of the 1600s, how exactly Leibniz contributed to the evolution in the meaning of '*a priori*' (n. 19), and how Leibniz's contributions differ from Hume's.

58 Being Spinozistic, these criticisms are meant to be friendly, offered by a rationalist who is pleased that his fellow rationalists are defending the *a priori* but who thinks there are problems with their arguments. For a different kind of criticism, presented by someone who is outside the rationalist tradition, see Bruce A. Aune, 'Against Moderate Rationalism,' *Journal of Philosophical Research* 27 (2002).

59 See 'The Programme of Moderate Rationalism,' 256, 275, 283, etc.

60 To be fair to Peacocke, he may be using 'rational' here as a synonym for 'intelligible' or 'explicable,' intending to contrast rational with non-rational intuition. If that's the case, however, he unfairly disparages Spinoza when he says that 'the phrase "rational intuition" has historically been associated with some of the headier forms of rationalism' (257-8). Spinoza (and probably other historical rationalists) can claim to have provided an account of the nature of intuition and so not to have invoked a mysterious power of the sort that worries Peacocke.

61 *In Defense of Pure Reason*, 102

62 *Ibid.*, 15

ated' but sometimes it isn't; it relies on demonstrative argument; it also doesn't rely on demonstrative argument. It seems remarkable that one capacity should have all of these powers. Like Peacocke, Bonjour would do well to consider the possibility that the *a priori* could derive from such different sources as are found in Spinoza.

The next point straightforwardly follows from the first. As noted in section IV, contemporary rationalists disagree over whether *a priori* knowledge is restricted to necessary truths or propositions. The notion that there could be different sources for *a priori* knowledge — different ways in which truths or propositions can be known *a priori* — helps to explain this disagreement and suggests a solution. It may be that part of the reason philosophers disagree on the question of necessity is that they think of all *a priori* knowledge as being formed by a single process. If they also conceptualize the process in different terms, then if different conceptualizations of that process are in conflict on the question of necessity, a philosopher who thinks of the *a priori* as being formed by one process would have different views on necessity from another philosopher who thinks of the *a priori* as the result of a second process. Such a dispute might be solved by giving serious consideration to Spinoza's claim that reason and intuition provide fundamentally distinct ways of forming *a priori* knowledge. If Spinoza was right about how reason is different from intuition and about how both are valid means to the *a priori*, then *a priori* knowledge derived from reason is necessary whereas that derived from intuition is not.

The final point concerns the desire of contemporary rationalists to be 'moderate.' As this paper has shown, Spinoza's views on the *a priori* depended heavily on his larger theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind and overall metaphysics. His substance monism, parallelism, theory of ideas and views on the laws of nature all support his claim that we can know the world via reason and intuition. The dependence of his views on the *a priori* on his metaphysics and epistemology is at once a deterrent and an enticement: a deterrent, because it seems a high price to pay for such justification; an enticement, because it shows that they have very solid foundations. The connection between Spinoza's general metaphysics and epistemology and his specific views on the *a priori* also raises two questions that are relevant to current epistemology. First, is it possible or advisable to formulate a coherent and compelling theory of *a priori* justification independent of metaphysics and epistemology? And second, if it isn't possible or advisable, what does this portend for contemporary rationalists? After all, contemporary philosophy is non-systematic: there are no comprehensive accounts of the world and our place in it. If it isn't possible or advisable to argue about the *a priori* without first having something to say about those broader issues, perhaps contemporary rationalists need to set aside their moderation and

try to plumb the deeper metaphysical and epistemological depths they have been avoiding.⁶³

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