

# MEANING IN SPINOZA'S METHOD

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Adobe Garamond 11/12.5 pt.    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 82611 X hardback

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## CHAPTER I

# *A worm in the blood: some central themes in Spinoza's Ethics*

The Emmet's Inch & Eagle's Mile  
Make Lame Philosophy to smile.

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

In order to understand why Spinoza embraced the geometrical method in the *Ethics* it necessary to reflect on the general contours of his philosophy. It is also important to have a sense of what Spinoza's method – geometrical or otherwise – is trying to get at, what Spinoza is seeking to discover with it. The purpose of this chapter and the next is to set the stage for the chapters that follow, while at the same time developing a few basic questions about Spinoza's method. The first section of this chapter provides a brief sketch of Spinoza's *Ethics* and introduces some of Spinoza's key definitions and concepts. The middle sections will present a problem in Spinoza's *Ethics*: "What does it mean to be a part of nature?" "Part of nature" is one of Spinoza's most potent concepts but it needs careful interpretation in order not to render it inconsistent with other aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, particularly his criticisms of anthropomorphism and teleology.<sup>1</sup> The final section of the chapter will consider Spinoza's system from the "emmet's inch"<sup>2</sup> or the bottom-up perspective, as opposed to the "eagle's mile" or top-down perspective of Part I of the *Ethics* and the first section of this chapter. I will introduce the "bottom-up" perspective through a letter written by Spinoza to his friend Oldenburg describing a "worm" (by which Spinoza understood a small simple particle or being) floating through the bloodstream of a giant being and trying to make

<sup>1</sup> This is an important theme throughout Spinoza's philosophical works. Philosophers "place true happiness solely in virtue and peace of mind, and they strive to conform with nature, not to make nature conform with them; for they are assured that God directs Nature in accordance with the requirements of her universal laws, and not in accordance with the requirements of the particular laws of human nature" (*TTP* VI, Samuel Shirley (trans.), *Theological-Political Treatise* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991], 78).

<sup>2</sup> "Emmet" is an eighteenth-century word for ant.

sense of the vast circulatory maze it finds itself within. Finally I will consider the problem of combining these two perspectives with an allusion to Wilfred Sellars' distinction between the manifest image and the scientific image.

#### AN OUTLINE OF SPINOZA'S ETHICS

Spinoza divided the *Ethics* into five parts.<sup>3</sup> Part I presents Spinoza's metaphysics. Spinoza populated his metaphysics with three basic sorts of entities – substance, attributes, and modes. A worm, for example, is a mode or a collection of modes. Ideas are also modes. Thus the idea of a worm, as well as any and all ideas worms might have, are modes. Thought as opposed to a thought or a group of thoughts, is an attribute. God is the only substance. These entities – substance, attributes, and modes – are referred to over and over again in the *Ethics*. Spinoza considers them to be exhaustive of what there is – anything and everything belongs to one of these three categories. A central question the *Ethics* investigates is: what are the consequences of holding these three entities as basic for one's understanding of self and world?

Here are Spinoza's definitions of each:

DEFINITION 3: By substance I understand what is in itself and conceived through itself, i.e., that the concept of which does not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed.

DEFINITION 4: By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence.

DEFINITION 5: By mode I understand the affections of substance, or that which is in another, through which it is also conceived.

What can we tell about the three definitions on a quick examination? It is clear that substance is fundamentally different from attributes or modes insofar as substance is what it is independent of modes and attributes, while modes and attributes both presuppose substance. What it means to be a mode is to be an affection of a substance, and an attribute is "what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence." Consequently substance has pride of place among the basic entities in Spinoza's ontology.

These definitions also point toward another of Spinoza's basic distinctions, a metaphysical distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura*

<sup>3</sup> It appears that at a relatively early stage of its composition the *Ethics* was divided into three parts and what eventually became *Ethics* III–V was all one large section. The five-part structure of the *Ethics* appears to have evolved as the work was written. See Letter XXVIII.

*naturata*.<sup>4</sup> The Latin expression *Natura naturans* means “naturing nature” or “nature insofar as it natures.” Spinoza understood this to denote nature considered as fully actual and causal (1P29S). *Natura naturata* literally means “natured nature” or “nature insofar as it is natured.” All modes are *natura naturata* since they are not free causes – causes arising only from their own essences or natures (1D7) – but rather they are what they are in and through another. They are *natured*, they derive some of their essence or nature from another. Thus there is a kind of divide in Spinoza’s metaphysics with substance and attributes, *natura naturans*, on one side, and modes or *natura naturata*, on the other. When taken all together they are the whole of nature.

There is no reference to “cause” in Spinoza’s definitions of substance, modes, and attributes. In fact one of the main purposes of Book I is to develop an account of causation. I consider this theory of causation – which links divine causation, modal causation, and the causal individuation of modes (to be discussed at greater length in later chapters) – to be the buttress of Spinoza’s metaphysics. But, even if the distinction is not really implicit in the initial definitions of substance, attribute, and mode, it is important to keep in mind that, from the three basic entities in his philosophy, and a fairly general and abstract notion of cause (1D1, 1P16), Spinoza developed this important metaphysical division.

Spinoza did not invent the terms substance, attributes, and modes. From Aristotle to Descartes many or even most mainstream philosophers were interested in understanding substances, attributes, and modes, and consequently there was some sort of shared tradition in how the concepts were discussed. This is not to imply that Spinoza just took over traditional terms. Rather, over the course of the *Ethics* Spinoza invests each of these definitions with his own particular sense. For Spinoza there is only one substance, in contrast to Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, and most Aristotelians. This one substance has infinite attributes. Spinoza’s attributes are not the sorts of attributes that many medieval philosophers predicated of God, like omnipotence or omniscience, but rather thought and extension. Finally, each attribute has an infinity of modes that necessarily follow from the divine essence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> These terms are traditionally left untranslated. When Spinoza introduces them at 1P29S he implies that they are technical terms that most of his readers would know.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Philosophy of Spinoza* Harry Wolfson emphasizes that the definition of substance is traditional but the definition of mode is a break with the Aristotelian idea of accident (cf., Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* 2 vols. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934] 1, ch. 3). I will argue that the definition of mode is sufficiently vague that it is not at all clear, on an initial reading, whether it is a Scotistic mode or an Aristotelian accident. As the *Ethics* unfolds it becomes clear that Spinoza’s modes are very different from Aristotelian accidents.

All three of Spinoza's definitions are quite controversial. Spinoza's definition of substance has been widely criticized, most famously by Hegel.<sup>6</sup> Generally these criticisms are directed less at the definition itself than at the perceived consequences of the definition, i.e., that it commits Spinoza to only one substance that is God or nature, and the denial of the independent reality of individuals. There are many problems with Spinoza's derivation of this one substance, but these problems seem less to be a direct consequence of the definition as stated by Spinoza, and more to arise from the ways in which Spinoza argues from the definition.

Spinoza's definition of attribute as "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence" is also extremely general. The most notable feature of the definition is Spinoza's emphasis on "intellect," that there seems to be some epistemic aspect to the attributes. There is much ambiguity as to what sort of intellect we are talking about (human or divine), and whether the attribute is to be understood as a subjective perception of a substance (what one thinks of substance) or as an objective set of facts about substance perceived by an intellect.<sup>7</sup> This is further exacerbated by Spinoza's tendency to use both "perceive" and "essence" differently in different contexts.

And there are further points of contention. One controversy concerns just how many attributes there are. I will discuss this in passing in the next chapter. Another controversy – closely connected to the question of whether the attributes are subjective or objective – concerns the differences between substance and attributes. If an attribute is what an intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence, and if attributes are objective in some sense (which there are many reasons to believe they are), then what is the difference between attribute and substance? This is a notoriously difficult problem.

Spinoza's definition of mode is perhaps most intriguing of all. The definition is neutral as to what sort of content a given mode has. This neutrality is a consequence of the generality of Spinoza's definition. Take, for example, my goldfish Charlie. The idea of Charlie, Charlie's body, and Charlie himself are all modes, even though each mode has a very different content. The idea of Charlie is a mode of thought (it is conceived in and through something else, the attribute of thought), Charlie's body is a mode of extension

<sup>6</sup> See particularly G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 1.3.3c (1:456–7), 11.3.1c (11:195–200), in English, A. V. Miller (trans.), *Hegel's Science of Logic* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969) 382–3, 536–40. For a thorough defense of Spinoza see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1990), ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> The consensus is that Spinoza meant attributes to be objective. But see Charles Jarrett, "Some Remarks on the 'Objective' and 'Subjective' Interpretations of the Attributes," *Inquiry*, 20 (Winter 1977), 447–56.

(it is conceived through the attribute of extension), and Charlie himself is a mode expressing itself both as thought (Charlie's mental states or thoughts) and extension (Charlie's body, Charlie's swimming, etc.). Furthermore, Charlie is both a mode and composed of many modes. This brings up an obvious question: are the mind and the body of a given thing the same mode (Charlie) now considered as an extended mode (Charlie's body), and now as a thinking mode (Charlie's mind) or are they two different modes?

Substance, attributes, and modes, despite the many controversies concerning how precisely to understand them, are the basic categories of Spinoza's metaphysics, and by extension Spinoza's account of nature and the world. There are two further definitions from Part I of the *Ethics* that are important for understanding Spinoza's basic metaphysical commitments:

DEFINITION 1: By *causa sui* I understand that, the essence of which involves existence, or that, the nature of which is not able to be conceived, except as existing.

DEFINITION 6: By God I understand an absolutely infinite being, that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, [all of] which express the same eternal and infinite essence.

The definition of *causa sui*, or "cause of itself," is only rarely invoked in the *Ethics*, but its prominent place as "Definition 1" signals its importance. It is a somewhat peculiar definition as it equates a causal concept – cause of itself – with two ontological claims. What seems important about *causa sui* is that it implies that the *primum ens* in Spinoza's universe, that being whose essence involves existence and who cannot be conceived except as existing, is caused. Of course it is caused by itself, but the implication is that causation and reason extend to all beings. In principle there is nothing beyond cause and nothing beyond reason. This has many striking and heterodox consequences.

Ultimately, Spinoza equated *causa sui* with God. Although the definition of *causa sui* is first among Spinoza's definitions, the definition of God is the cardinal and crucial definition of the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, the definition of God does not supplant the definition of substance. Rather, in *Ethics* I Spinoza argues that God is the one substance from which infinite attributes and an infinite infinity of modes arise and which are understood and comprehended, insofar as they are capable of being understood and comprehended, in and through God. I will have much to say about Spinoza's definition of God in what follows.

The metaphysics that Spinoza presents in *Ethics* I is derived not just from definitions but also from seven axioms or common notions. Spinoza



presents these axioms as if they are philosophical commitments that anyone and everyone might hold. But, like the definitions, they are highly equivocal. It is really only over the course of reading the *Ethics* that the reader begins to understand them.<sup>8</sup> They are all very important but there are two that demand particular consideration for my purposes:

AXIOM 3: Out of a given determinate cause an effect necessarily follows, and conversely, if no determinate cause has been given it is impossible that an effect will follow.

AXIOM 4: Understanding an effect depends on and involves understanding the cause.

Both of these axioms concern causes. Axiom 4 is a strong claim, one might imagine the following far weaker version that "Understanding an effect depends on and involves the cause." In this variant one need not understand the cause, it is just the case that when one understands an effect this depends in some way on the cause of that effect. For example, the variant could just assert that if it were not for the cause there would be no effect to understand at all, hence to understand an effect there must be a cause. Spinoza's real axiom is far stronger, understanding the effect depends on *understanding* the cause.

This has an obvious but important consequence for the *Ethics*. We need to first understand causes (not just recognize them) in order to understand effects. Consequently, a proper philosophy needs to be structured in accordance with this axiom; we need to build our philosophy in such a way as to understand causes. There is still the problem of how we access these causes, but our need to access them and understand them is clear.

Axiom 3 states that an effect will follow when there is a determinate cause, and, conversely, if there is no determinate cause it is impossible that an effect will follow. It is not clear exactly what Spinoza meant by "determinate," but the axiom has the following powerful consequence. If there is no determinate cause as to why something does not exist, God for example, then it is impossible for that thing not to exist, and consequently it necessarily must exist. This functions as a kind of principle of sufficient reason in some of Spinoza's most important propositions. Taken together with IA4 and the definition of *causa sui* they support a fully causal and fully rational world where everything has a cause, all causes entail reasons, and,

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Wilson, "Spinoza's Causal Axiom (*Ethics* I, Axiom 4)," in Y. Yovel, ed., *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 133–60.

consequently, to be is to have a cause and a reason. This identification of causation and existence, which I noted in the discussion of *causa sui*, is a central feature of Spinoza's metaphysics.

In the latter half of *Ethics* I (IP16–33) Spinoza works out some very dramatic consequences that these considerations have for metaphysics. One notorious consequence is determinism – “that every event is causally determined from antecedent conditions by the laws of nature.” Spinoza also seems to be committed to some sort of “necessitarianism,” either to the strong claim that “every actual state of affairs is logically or metaphysically necessary, so that the world could not have been in any way different than it is” or to something a bit weaker that does not require that all finite states are necessitated in all ways.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of Part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues for an infinite and necessary world where all things arise from one fully rational God through which all things are what they are. I will discuss a number of the propositions of *Ethics* I in the following chapters at some length.

I would like to briefly sketch the remainder of the *Ethics* to provide a general sense of its overall structure. Part II of the *Ethics*, “Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind,” offers the consequences for minds (infinite and finite) of Spinoza's account of God. Spinoza argues that thought and extension – both of which are substances for Descartes<sup>10</sup> – are each separate attributes expressing the eternal and infinite essence of God. Thus, Spinoza takes the heterodox step of identifying both the mental and physical with the divine attributes. Once Spinoza establishes this, he develops a number of surprising theses about the mind, including his notorious claim that the will is just a mode of the mind and thus that the will is as necessitated and as necessary as any other mode (IIP48, IIP49C). He also argues that thought and extension exhibit the same “order and connection” (IIP7), that the mind understands itself and all else through the body, and that the mind is literally the idea of the body (IIP11–13).

There are a number of definitions in Book II that will be important in later chapters. But, since I have been using “essence” willy-nilly, it seems particularly important to present this definition at the outset. Actually,

<sup>9</sup> Don Garrett, “Spinoza's Necessitarianism,” in Y. Yovel, ed., *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 191–2. Garrett provides a highly convincing argument that Spinoza is a rather strong necessitarian. But see Edwin Curley and Charles Huennemann, “Spinoza's Necessitarianism Reconsidered,” in Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (eds.), *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 241–62.

<sup>10</sup> *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.52–3.

strictly speaking, Spinoza does not define essence as such, but rather “belongs to an essence”:

IID2: To the essence of something belongs that which when given, the thing is necessarily put forward, and which when removed the thing is necessarily taken away; or that, without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and vice-versa.

Curley (*CW* 447n1) points out that this a more restrictive definition of essence than the Cartesian definition of essence Spinoza offers in the *Principles* (the clause “that which when given, the thing is necessarily put forward” prevents God from necessarily belonging to the essence of each individual (ἰδιότις)). The definition of essence is a touchstone throughout the *Ethics* connected with Spinoza's theory of definition, and thus relevant to his thinking about method.

Parts I and II of the *Ethics* form a unit for reasons I will discuss in a later chapter. Parts III, IV, and V also form a unit – although Part V provides a kind of syncretic conclusion to the entire book and is in this way different from any of the chapters that come before it. I will discuss why and how this is the case in the concluding chapter of this book, but, for the moment, “On the Origin and Nature of the Affects” (III) presents a theory of the affections and the passions grounded on the metaphysics presented in the first two parts of the *Ethics*. Spinoza's theory of the passions is extremely interesting, and built on one of his most fundamental concepts, the *conatus*. The *conatus* is a sort of metaphysical principle of inertia, the drive each individual has to persist in its existence: a human to persevere as a human, a rock to persevere as a rock, and so on. Spinoza uses the *conatus* to develop a theory of the passions and an account of the ways in which human beings persevere in their existence. In defining the passions in this way, Spinoza is developing some suggestions derived from Hobbes' and Descartes' theories of the passions.

Theories of the passions were central to the projects of many of the best-known philosophers of the eighteenth century (Descartes, Hobbes, Malebranche, Gassendi) as they provided a means to explain the ways in which the body affected the mind. The ways these philosophers defined the passions, and what precisely they meant by the body affecting the mind were quite diverse. But there is a general sense that a mechanistic physiology would provide a wedge into a rich variety of ethical phenomena. Spinoza diverges from all of the above philosophers in (1) denying that the passions were ways in which the body disturbed the mind and (2) considering the

mental and the bodily as autonomous. Descartes and Malebranche accept (2) but not (1), Hobbes and Gassendi (1) but not (2). The *conatus* was, for Spinoza, the concept that anchored (1) and (2), as the tendency to persevere in existence holds of all modes, mental, physical, or both, yet it does not imply that mental is reducible to the physical.

There has been a tendency when considering Spinoza's philosophy to view Parts III and IV as interesting but ancillary to the meat of Spinoza's arguments. I think this is because when teaching philosophy there is a tendency to make major divisions between moral philosophy, philosophy of mind or epistemology, and metaphysics. Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics* is clearly a metaphysic. Part II is, at least in part, a philosophy of mind and theory of knowledge. In Part II Spinoza analyzes and compares different sorts of knowledge and cognition as well as issues surrounding the relation (or lack of relation) between mind and body. In addition he develops a theory of truth and adequacy. Much of what he has to say about issues in metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, and the theory of knowledge is relevant to current philosophical practice.

The case is somewhat different with moral theory. Although there has been a real resurgence of interest in the emotions and the passions among moral philosophers and philosophers of psychology, and an attendant resurgence in interest in Spinoza, most issues in moral philosophy are still dictated by a few philosophers writing before Spinoza – Aristotle and Plato – or after – Kant, Mill, Bentham, and Hume. Spinoza's concerns overlap with all of these philosophers on particular issues. But his way of doing moral philosophy built on a theory of the passions, although akin to Hume, is still foreign to the ways in which most contemporary moral philosophers do moral philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

Part IV of the *Ethics*, "On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects," describes the ways in which we are limited and buffeted by our passions such that they diminish our power. But Spinoza also concurrently develops his concept of a "free man," a person who, despite the power of his (or her) passions, manages to be as little impacted by contingent circumstances as possible and to be happy, powerful, and free. The discussion of the "free man" includes some of the most powerful passages in the *Ethics* including two of Spinoza's best-known maxims: that the free man thinks least of all about death (IVP67) and that if men were born free they would have no ideas of good and evil (IVP68).

<sup>11</sup> There is a notable list of counter examples, Annette Baier, Martha Nussbaum, and Amélie Rorty being some of the best known.

Part V, "On the Power of the Intellect or Human Freedom," is the culmination of the propositions in Parts III and IV of the *Ethics* and the *Ethics* as a whole. In the final sections of Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza once again adopts the austere metaphysical lens of Part I of the *Ethics* to develop two crucial concepts. First, he argues that there is a part of the human mind that is eternal. These arguments provide a stepping-stone toward a second claim – that we can know through what Spinoza calls the third kind of knowledge or the "scientia intuitiva." This knowledge is "sub specie aeternitatis" or "beneath a species of eternity" and Spinoza claims that from the third sort of knowledge arises an intellectual love of God in and through which we are the very love by which God loves itself. These aspects of Part V, in tandem with Part I, gave rise to Goethe's "god-drunken" Spinoza, as well as the interpretations of Coleridge and a host of other admirers who wished to view Spinoza's highest sort of knowledge as an intuitive understanding of the deep unity of nature. This is at odds with the more "naturalistic" picture of Spinoza's philosophy emphasized by many recent Anglo-American interpreters.

#### A PART OF NATURE

One of Spinoza's most celebrated claims is that we – human beings – are a "part of nature." By describing human beings as a "part of nature" Spinoza meant above all that man should be explained through the laws of nature that hold of all natural beings. This is the cardinal thesis of Spinoza's naturalism. Undergirding all "parts of nature" – humans, lumpfish, telephones, and neutrinos – are metaphysical and physical laws which relate the "parts of nature" back to a cause that explains what they are. The laws of nature are not only physical laws, although physical laws are clearly part of what Spinoza meant by laws of nature. Since the attribute of thought expresses the essence of substance, and yet is fully independent of the attribute of extension, it, too, seems to have laws. Since the attribute of thought is part of *natura naturans* – "naturing nature" – its laws are also laws of nature.

Spinoza presents the basic tenets of his naturalism eloquently in the "Preface" to *Ethics* III:

There is nothing that happens in nature which can be attributed to a vice; for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws of nature, and rules, according to which all things are made, and are changed out of one form and into another, are everywhere, and always, the same, and so also the nature of things must be understood by one and the same reason, namely through universal laws and rules of nature.

The laws of nature are uniform and universal and hold of all of nature. As there is nothing outside of nature, all beings must be understood through these laws of nature. Supernatural explanations as well as explanations that depend on a transcendent realm can be ruled out. They lack a referent since there is nothing above or beyond nature.

Spinoza's denial of any realm external to nature and any human laws operating in opposition to the laws that guide all natural beings is expressed succinctly in a well-known passage (also from the "Preface" to Part III of the *Ethics*) criticizing philosophers who elevate man as beyond nature:

Rather they seem to conceive man in nature as an *imperium*<sup>12</sup> within an *imperium*. For they believe man more disturbs, than follows, the order of nature, and that he has absolute power over his actions, and he is determined from nowhere and by nothing other than himself.

This claim (and Spinoza's naturalism more generally) is both deflationary and explanatory. Jonathan Bennett states the deflationary side of Spinoza's naturalism well: "His thinking is firmly grounded in the conviction that there is nothing fundamentally special about mankind as compared with chimpanzees and earthworms and cabbages and rivers; for Spinoza, man is just a part of Nature."<sup>13</sup> Humans have no supernatural powers, like self-determination, that place them in a different *imperium* from chimps and cabbages, and if they claim they do, they could be up to some dangerous nonsense.<sup>14</sup> But Spinoza also understands the fact that human beings are parts of nature as a thesis about explanation. If I am capable of discovering general laws that hold of all natural beings then nothing is in principle beyond explanation. Bennett refers to this, aptly, as Spinoza's "explanatory rationalism" – everything has a cause, every cause provides a reason, and consequently everything is rationally explicable.<sup>15</sup>

This general naturalistic framework is clearly one motivation for Spinoza's geometrical method in the *Ethics*. In fact, the paragraph I have just quoted is offered by Spinoza as an explanation for why he employs the geometrical method in explaining "human vices and ineptitudes." He concludes the "Preface" to Part III with his strongest characterization of the geometrical method as deflationary and explanatory naturalism. Spinoza

<sup>12</sup> Curley translates *imperium* as "dominion." "Imperium" is a key term in Spinoza's political philosophy, translating as "dominion," "empire," and "command." But these words are only able to hint at the rich uses Spinoza makes of it. As with *conatus*, I will leave *imperium* untranslated.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 36.

<sup>14</sup> They could use their supposed special access to the laws of the human *imperium* to add legitimacy to their political authority.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *A Study*, 29.

remarks that in Part III he will consider the nature and force of the affects as if they were questions concerning "lines, planes, and bodies" just as he had considered God in Part I and Mind in Part II. Thus, due to the uniformity and universality of the geometrical method, we can show that human follies and absurdities are no more or less explicable than anything else in nature. They are explicable in precisely the same way as anything else is, through necessary reasons.

So, Spinoza assumes that there are general laws of nature and that these laws have great explanatory power. He assumes that we are parts of nature. There has been a tendency in reading Spinoza to consider this dictum to imply that we are all parts that interlock in a vast whole or community of nature. I will argue that to be a part of nature means something different than being a part of a whole in this sense. In other words, if we examine what it could possibly mean for Spinoza to be a part, we see that it cannot mean anything so teleological.

There is a general strategy in all of Spinoza's major works, but particularly the *Ethics* and the *TTP*, of taking over loosely defined terminology, like "part," and using it in a determinate way which is sometimes at odds with the colloquial sense of a term. I will argue in subsequent chapters that this strategy is important for how Spinoza understands method. So what does "part" mean? By extension, what is the relation between nature and the individual and how and what can the individual know of nature? Spinoza's answer is one of the most thoroughly naturalistic, in the above sense, that has ever been put to paper.

#### PARTS IN THE WHOLE OF NATURE

1665 was not a happy year for Amsterdam or London, and it was a low point in relations between Holland and England. The Anglo-Dutch war flared for a second time, eventually to be settled by the Peace of Breda. A devastating plague first struck Holland, and then moved on to London in late 1664, the plague remembered and immortalized more than fifty years later in Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. In 1666 the Great Fire of London followed the plague. Comets and portents were sighted all over Christendom. Millenarians and religious enthusiasts awaited the end of the world in the year 1666, as "prophesied" in the Book of Revelations. Sects, ranging from large groups such as the followers of the self-proclaimed Messiah Sabbatai Sevi to small collections of radicals, proclaimed the end of the world, salvation for the blessed, and punishment of the wicked; and the signs, the plagues and violence, seemed to confirm it everywhere.

The Thirty Years War, life before the Peace of Westphalia, and the religious anarchy of Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century were all within the reach of memory. The English Civil War had recently concluded, and the failure of the revolution would lead to another political rapprochement between the Dutch and the English: the Glorious Revolution and the ascent of the House of Orange. At the end of the previous century the religious discord had led the great Dutch neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius to write *De Constantia* presenting a Christianized path of removal from the chaotic and heaving world of sectarian violence.<sup>16</sup> But, even by the rather high standards of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 1665 was a remarkable year. If not as violent as many years in the preceding century, 1665 looked back toward grim religious and national violence, to present plagues and to the near future as many tongues proclaimed the millennium. In such times an ordinary, powerless man or woman might feel like a mere worm or particle, caught in machinations far beyond their control.

Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza's most prolific correspondent, the secretary of the famed Royal Society, and a central figure in the organization and proliferation of early modern science had a bad time of it. In late 1666 he was thrown into prison on suspicion of being a Dutch spy, and briefly condemned to the Tower of London. After 1666 Spinoza and Oldenburg did not correspond again for ten years. Perhaps this was due to Oldenburg's perception that friendship with Spinoza – who was already gaining a reputation for impiety – was dangerous, particularly given Oldenburg's own contingent situation. Perhaps it was aggravated by Oldenburg's horror at Spinoza's criticisms of revealed religion in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the reason the end of this correspondence must have been a great loss to Spinoza, as Oldenburg was one of his main conduits (along with Johannes Hudde and Huygens) into the scientific world. Through Oldenburg, Spinoza communicated with Robert Boyle, heard word of other luminaries in the burgeoning days of the Royal Society, and participated in the "Republic of Letters."

<sup>16</sup> Stoicism is a good philosophy for bad times. What the times were like is evident from Lipsius: "who is of so hard and flinty a heart that he can ani longer endure these evils? wee are tossed, as you see, these manie yeares with the tempest of civill warres: and like Sea-faring men are wee beaten with sundrie blasts of troubles and sedition. If I love quietness and rest, the Trumpets and ratling of armour interrupt mee. If I take solace in my countrey gardens and farmes, the souldiers and murtherers force mee into the Towne," *Two Bookes Of Constancie Written in Latine by Iustus Lipsius*, ed. R. Kirk and C. M. Hall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1939), 72 (critical reprint of Sir John Stradling's translation of 1594, *De Constantia* originally published in Latin 1584).

<sup>17</sup> Although Oldenburg would write that he had qualified his negative judgments somewhat when he resumed correspondence with Spinoza in 1675 (Letter LXI).



The seven letters exchanged in 1665 are significant documents for understanding Spinoza's philosophy. Although today letters might seem peripheral to a philosopher's central doctrines, early modern letters were widely disseminated. They were an integral part of a philosopher's corpus; a testing ground for theories as criticisms flowed in from other scientists and philosophers. They also allowed intellectuals to forge *personae* in the "Republic of Letters." This particular correspondence allows us quickly to glimpse some of the issues that underlie Spinoza's complex corpus as he attempted to explain his philosophy to Oldenburg during what was one of Spinoza's greatest periods of intellectual ferment. They give us a brief and vivid sketch of some central problems in Spinoza's philosophy through which we can clarify a few key philosophical issues in the *Ethics*.

Spinoza invested a great deal of thought in his correspondence. He was doubtless excited to communicate his philosophy to an open-minded and intellectually capable listener, as his letters to Oldenburg began amid his extended and taxing exchanges with the maddening Dutch Calvinist William van Blijenburgh.<sup>18</sup> Spinoza could only take so much of Blijenburgh's questions and brought the correspondence to an end in June of 1665. Oldenburg's letter, coming after "a space of so many months," and word of the continuing interest of the great Boyle in Spinoza, must have been a gust of fresh air from more liberal and congenial thinkers abroad.

Oldenburg (and by proxy Boyle, who had discussed Spinoza's letters with Oldenburg) asked Spinoza the following: "We warmly beseech you to communicate it to us, if you see any light on the most difficult investigation, which turns on the question of our knowing how each part of nature agrees with the whole, and in what way it coheres with the rest" (Letter XXXI).<sup>19</sup> This question arose in response to Spinoza's claim, in the previous letter that "men, like the rest, are only a part of nature, and that I do not know how each part of nature agrees with the whole, and how it coheres with the

<sup>18</sup> Curley has speculated that Blijenburgh's inability to understand Spinoza's arguments made Spinoza realize time was not yet ripe for the *Ethics* (*CW* 350). Subsequent to the end of their correspondence, Blijenburgh wrote polemics against Spinoza. Spinoza owned a copy of Blijenburgh's polemic *De waerheit van der christelijcke gods-dienst etc. of een Wederlegginge van dat Godt-lasterlijcke Boeck, genoemt Tractatus Theologico Politicus etc.* (Leiden: D. V. Gaesbeeck, 1674). See *Catalogus*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> There are affinities between my emphasis on wholes and parts, Letter XXXII, laws and causes, and the role of the infinite intellect in two essays: Wolfgang Bartuschat, "The Infinite Intellect and Human Knowledge," in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (eds.), *Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 187–208; and Richard Mason, "Spinoza on the Causality of Individuals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 24 (1986), 197–210. What I make of these concepts is quite different from Bartuschat's interpretation that emphasizes the centrality of the finite human intellect (although I will also centralize the human intellect in a different way in the following chapters). My interpretation is closer to Mason who emphasizes the fictive character of parts (210) and the distinction between finite and infinite.

rest," (Letter XXX).<sup>20</sup> Spinoza must have been flattered by interest from such important figures in the Royal Society and the European Republic of Letters – although this did not stop him from criticizing Boyle and Bacon.<sup>21</sup>

Spinoza immediately ruled out two answers that might be thought promising – “I should like first to warn you that I do not attribute to Nature beauty or ugliness, order or confusion. For things cannot, except with respect to our imagination, be called beautiful or ugly, ordered or confused.” We might argue for a hierarchy in nature from more ugly and less beautiful to more beautiful and less ugly allowing us to view all of nature as fitting into a beautiful whole. This was the line pursued in the more aesthetic eighteenth-century variants on the argument from design such as Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* and George Berkeley's *Alciphron*. Or, we might view all of the parts of nature as either ordered or confused (as was assumed by countless philosophers both before and after Spinoza) and thereby infer that the parts fit into an ordered whole.<sup>22</sup>

Both assumptions project anthropomorphic prejudices onto nature and assume that the whole of nature has features much like those we access through our imaginations. Spinoza rejected all forms of anthropomorphism and teleology when applied to nature as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, he

<sup>20</sup> For the entire letter to Boyle, see A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall (eds. and trans.), *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 557–8 (Letter 430). There is further information in a letter to Sir Robert Moray in *ibid.*, 549–50 (Letter 427).

<sup>21</sup> Boyle apparently never saw Spinoza's response to his question. Oldenburg wrote to Boyle: “I had lately another letter from Sigr Spinoza, who is very much yr servant, and who entertains me with a discourse of his, concerning ye agreement and coherence of ye parts in ye World with the Whole; wch is not unphilosophicall, in my opinion, though it would perhaps be tedious to you, to have a letter filled wth it; and this makes me forbear to send it to you,” *ibid.*, 615 (Letter 457). Boyle was horrified by the *Ethics* and the *TTP*, and the Boyle lectures were partially instituted to fight against Spinozism. Some of the differences between Boyle and Spinoza on parts and wholes can already be seen in Letter VI from 1662, where Spinoza criticizes Boyle's experiments on the reconstitution of nitre. For a compelling presentation of the disagreements in this correspondence see A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall, “Philosophy and Natural Philosophy: Boyle and Spinoza,” in *Mélanges Alexandre Koyré* (Paris: Hermann, 1964), 11:241–56.

<sup>22</sup> Oldenburg did not understand Spinoza's rejection of “order” (and how could he, without the *Ethics* or the *TIE*). He noted in his response to Spinoza's letter: “Your philosophic reflections on the agreement and connection of the parts of Nature with the whole give me much pleasure, although I do not follow sufficiently how we can exclude order and symmetry from Nature, as you seem to do; especially as you yourself admit that all its bodies are surrounded by others, and are mutually determined in a definite and constant manner both as to their existence and their action, while the same proportion of motion to rest is itself the sufficient ground of a true order,” Letter XXXII. Spinoza's reply is missing.

<sup>23</sup> Almost all Anglo-American interpreters of Spinoza agree that Spinoza argues against anthropomorphism. How resolutely anti-teleological Spinoza was, and what teleology meant for Spinoza, are matters of dispute. Jonathan Bennett has argued that Spinoza is thoroughly, in some cases misguidedly, anti-teleological (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 213–30). Edwin Curley has disputed

considered the idea of “perfection” as particularly suspicious (IV “Preface”), and, since “beauty” and “order” often draw on some notion of perfection, they should also be rejected. But what are we then left with?

If we reject order and disorder or beauty and ugliness as poor characterizations of Nature, then it is not so clear how we can speak of parts and whole of nature much the less of the agreement of parts of nature. Here is Spinoza's explanation:

By agreement of the parts, then, I mean nothing other than how the laws, or nature, of one part adapt themselves to the laws, or nature, of another part so as to cause the least opposition. Concerning whole and parts, I consider things so far as they are parts of some whole, insofar as their natures mutually accommodate themselves as much as possible; but insofar as things differ among themselves, each produces an idea in our mind, which is distinct from the others, and is therefore considered to be a whole, not a part. (Letter XXXII)

We can still talk about parts and wholes but in terms of laws or “natures” which may differ from region to region. To know about parts and wholes is to know about these laws and how they adapt from one region to another.

#### LAWS AND INFINITE MODES

In the *TTP*<sup>24</sup> Spinoza defined law in its “absolute sense” as “that according to which each individual acts, [the individuals] taken all together or as belonging to some species, according to one and the same certain and determinate reason” (*TTP* IV, III/43). From this, Spinoza delineated two different senses of “law”: laws that depend on human wills and laws that depend on “Nature's necessity” (*TTP* IV, III/43).

Bennett's claim as being too strong (Edwin Curley, “On Bennett's Spinoza: The Issue of Teleology,” in Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau [eds.], *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* [Leiden: Brill, 1990], 39–52), as has Don Garrett (Don Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism,” in Rocco Gennaro and Charles Huenemann [eds.], *New Essays on the Rationalists* [Oxford University Press, 1999], 310–35). It seems clear that Spinoza writes on numerous occasions in a way that accepts teleological descriptions of human actions. It also seems fairly clear that, if human beings are a part of nature and determined by the laws of nature, this determination cannot be teleological (as it would imply that nature is teleological. I will discuss this issue at length below as well as in succeeding chapters.

<sup>24</sup> Because *TTP* was being written at the same time as, or after, the letters to Oldenburg, as well as after major portions of the *Ethics*, I think it is quite reasonable to use the *TTP* to illuminate Spinoza's ways of thinking about laws (I think, in fact, it is not used enough), and vice versa. I can see no major discrepancies between the *TTP* and the *Ethics*, other than that Spinoza is far more guarded in the *TTP*. But, as the *TTP* presents some of Spinoza's central concepts to a broad audience, it can be an enormous aid to understanding the *Ethics*. It seems to me strangely underutilized in the Anglo-American Spinoza literature and I will, accordingly, make heavy use of it. See Edwin Curley, “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (I): Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics,” in Graeme Hunter (ed.), *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* (University of Toronto Press, 1994).

Both senses of law assume “acting,” which Spinoza defined at *Ethics* IID2 as: “when something is done, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by DI) when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which is able to be understood clearly and distinctly through it alone.” The basic point of the definition is quite clear, that we can only be said to be the cause of something when it arises from us and can be understood through us. Of course this is not easy to cash out. What does it mean to follow from our nature? Is God the only adequate cause and all adequate causes consequently refer back to the divine nature? There are also problems individuating acts. If I pull a trigger on a gun and the gun shoots, this appears to be my act in any ordinary usage of “act.” But does the bullet follow from my nature? Does anything follow from my nature in such a manner that I could properly be said to act? And there are parallel problems, so to speak, as to whether or not an act arises from my thoughts or my body.

The individuation of beings and acts is central to Spinoza’s discussions of part and whole, law, and (as I will show later) the third kind of knowledge. I will touch on this issue only tangentially at the moment, but it is important to see that individuation bears on how we understand laws. The *TTP* definition of law – “that according to which each individual acts, [the individuals] taken all together or as belonging to some species, according to one and the same certain and determinate reason” – is strikingly similar to Spinoza’s definition of “singular thing”:

If more Individuals than one so concur in one action, that they are all simultaneously causes of one effect, I consider them to that extent all the same and as one singular thing. (IID7)

The two definitions seem to present two perspectives on the same thing: the acting individual. When an acting individual is evaluated qua laws they are evaluated qua the necessary conditions for their agency, as an individual acting from determinate reasons and principals. The definition of “singular thing” explains what individuates the acting being or group of beings: being a cause of one effect.<sup>25</sup>

IID7 is likely derived from the idea in Hobbes, best exemplified by the Leviathan itself, i.e., that being the cause of an effect results in the unity of an apparently diverse group of singular things. For example if I cede from

<sup>25</sup> Of course, expressions like “law-guidedness” and “governed” imply a law that acts upon, organizes, gives causal force, normativity, or necessity to something external to it. Spinoza is rejecting this, but unfortunately the way we talk about law seems to have externality built into it. I will try to avoid these idioms as much as possible, but sometimes they are unavoidable.

the Leviathan and am in a state of war with it, this is a combat between two singular things, one quite small and one terrifyingly big. Hobbes maintains a difference between artificial and natural beings (for example me and the Leviathan) although he views them both as singular things. An important and interesting fact about Spinoza is that he makes no such distinction. For Spinoza, the Leviathan and I are equally singular things if we are the causes of one effect. A car phone and a molecule of water are both singular things insofar as each of them unites in a cause. The difference between the car phone and a molecule of water is explanatory, a car phone arises from human practices and through human natures, a molecule of water does not. But they are both singular things, and both modes. I will return to this issue in a few paragraphs once I have introduced infinite modes.

What are examples, then, of laws? In the case of human laws the answer is obvious, laws are products of human wills that compel or direct human beings to act in a certain and determinate way: "No jaywalking." This picture of laws as arising from wills was a normal one in Protestant countries throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>26</sup> But, as opposed to voluntarists like Pufendorf and Locke, for Spinoza only human laws are really products of the will, although not free wills.<sup>27</sup> "Natural laws" are not rules legated and sanctioned by a divine will, but are instead generalities holding of all modes within an attribute; for example "the motion of a thing decreases by the same amount as the motion that it imparts to another body." This sort of law has its support not in a divine legation but in "motion and rest," an "absolute feature" of the attribute of extension, and one of a class of modes that Spinoza referred to as the infinite immediate and mediate modes.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, for Spinoza there are three basic sorts of beings: substance, attributes, and modes. These three beings

<sup>26</sup> Of course, for Hobbes, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke, God is a willing lawmaker.

<sup>27</sup> Spinoza claims that the will can apply to modes, but does not apply to substance or attributes. Consequently it does not apply to God (1131). In modes "will" is the *conatus* or striving of a given mode "related only to the mind" (1119s, 1149s). There is no such thing as a free will in modes or human beings, the will is determined and is just a particular facet of determinate individuals, how their striving is understood in relation to their minds. Although God is free (117), will does not apply properly to God. Consequently "free will" is derived from a concept properly predicated of modes ("will") and a concept properly predicated of God ("free") that cannot be predicated of God without contradiction. One possible objection to my interpretation is that "freedom" comes in degrees, that a "free man" is a mode, and has a degree of freedom although not the absolute freedom of God. But this line of argument would not apply to God, as I do not think we have degrees of will in the same sense. See Don Garrett, "'A Free Man always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively': Freedom and God in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 221–38.

are grouped into an even more fundamental distinction between *natura naturata* (natured nature) and *natura naturans* (naturing nature). Right at the limit of the division between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* are the infinite modes. They have some of the content we associate with attributes: they are eternal. But they are also modes. They have a crucial systemic place – as those modes that give rise to general laws – and yet they are most decidedly *not natura naturans*.

Spinoza draws a number of distinctions among modes in the *Ethics*. As modes are an exceptionally broad category – all beings that are in and through other beings – we can refer to modes of attributes (a mode of extension, or a mode of thought), modes of substance (all modes are in and through substance in some very abstract sense), and modes of other modes (a moving being is a mode in the attribute of extension as well as a mode of another mode – “motion and rest”<sup>28</sup>). We can distinguish between infinite and finite modes. Finally we can distinguish between the representative content of modes: among infinite modes there are those that are eternal and express the absolute nature of substance, and those that have duration and do not express the absolute nature of the attribute.

That all these sorts of modes exist follows from Spinoza's “principle of plenitude” as captured at IP11S, IP16, and IP35. Spinoza asserts that an infinity of modes arises<sup>29</sup> from substance, everything which falls under an infinite intellect (IP16), and everything comprehended by the divine power must actually exist. Thus, if something can follow from the divine power and is represented in the infinite intellect, it does follow unless there is some reason why it does not exist. Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason as expressed in IP11S asserts that everything that exists has a reason or cause for existing, and whatever cannot exist has a reason for its not existing. The infinite modes are some of the infinity of beings arising from substance (IP16) and are thus clearly within God's power. “Whatever we conceive as being within God's power, necessarily exists” (IP35). There is no *de facto* reason why they do not exist (IP11S).<sup>30</sup> Hence they necessarily exist.

<sup>28</sup> I place “motion and rest” in scare quotes because Spinoza views them as forming an entity when taken together, not individually.

<sup>29</sup> It is important to be careful not to interpret the immediate infinite modes as *emanating* from God. They are eternal and not created in time. Consequently, it makes no sense to view them as *arising* in any temporal sense.

<sup>30</sup> There could be reasons why the infinite modes do not exist, just as there are reasons why an infinite substance, God, is not a willer. For example it could be inconsistent to be both infinite and a mode. But, given Spinoza's emphasis on there being different kinds of infinities (cf. Letter XII to be discussed in the next chapter), it does not seem to be incompatible for Spinoza to be infinite in a derivative sense (to be explained in the next section) and *not* eternal.

The infinite immediate modes (IIMs) and infinite mediate modes (IMMs) are some of these many modes following<sup>31</sup> from substance. They have a particularly important systematic place in Spinoza's metaphysics: they are eternal and infinite.<sup>32</sup> They are modes that share some of the properties of substance and attributes, and hence they sit at the edge of the fault line between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. IIMs and IMMs are two of the toughest technical concepts in Spinoza's philosophy. They are not attributes but are coextensive with attributes. "Motion and rest" applies to all extended things and consequently to all of extension, all extended bodies are moving or at rest. IIMs and IMMs are not the only infinite modes,<sup>33</sup> but the most important infinite modes distinguished by their distinctive representative content.<sup>34</sup> Although all modes exist out of divine necessity (i.e., God is the necessary condition of their existence [ID7]), not all modes exist in an eternal manner. IIMs and IMMs differ from each other in precisely the way that their names suggest. IIMs follow immediately from the absolute nature of the attribute and therefore are modes of the attribute, eternal and infinite through the attribute. IMMs are modes of IIMs and thus are eternal and infinite through them. Almost all of the modes we encounter in the everyday world have duration and are finite. IIMs and IMMs are thus modes that are substance-like and attribute-like (in that they are eternal) but still modes.

This raises an obvious question. Are the infinite modes necessary in the strong sense? *Must* they exist in the way that substance and attributes must exist? Does existence belong to the essence of these modes? The answer is clearly no. Since all modes are considered by Spinoza to be *natura naturata*, their essences are caused by another and they cannot be conceived as *causa sui* (IP24). But, then, since these infinite modes are eternal, what does it mean to say that they are eternal if they are not necessary in a strong sense? I will return to this issue in the final chapter, but one interesting feature of Spinoza's definition of eternity is that an infinite mode can satisfy it without being *causa sui*. Spinoza defines eternity as "existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal

<sup>31</sup> I mean "following" in a logical sense – i.e., "If substance then modes" – not in any temporal sense.

<sup>32</sup> Some have argued that they ought properly to be considered sempiternal and not eternal.

<sup>33</sup> That they are not the only infinite modes seems to follow from the fact that Spinoza differentiates degrees of infinity in Letter XII. But it does seem the case that all infinite modes that are not IMMs or IIMs are modes of IMMs or IIMs.

<sup>34</sup> By the "representative content" of Y, I understand anything Y expresses that refers back to and is derived from some X. The "eternity" that an infinite mode has and expresses refers back to and derives from the attribute of which it is an infinite mode. A "distinctive representative content" distinguishes a group of modes from all other modes.