

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Inertial Onto-Theology:

Heideggerian Meditations on the Historical and Philosophical Significance of
Spinoza's Onto-Theology

By

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June 2025

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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The dark 'is' in its essence the light, and the light 'is' in its essence the dark. In the first place, we recognize this for the following reason: where the brightness in question is pure brightness, and is thus a brightness that shines on its own terms beyond the measure of what is adequate to us, one can see nothing precisely on account of this pure brightness.

- Martin Heidegger

Introduction:

The purpose of this essay is to, with continual reference to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, elucidate a previously concealed dimension of Spinoza's thought. In particular, through a Heideggerian exploration of the way in which a uniquely modern 'logic of inertia' shapes the horizon of Spinoza's thinking, this essay will identify a hidden dimension of Spinoza's historical and philosophical significance, and it will delineate the relation this dimension has to the emergence of certain broader scientific, technical, existential, economic, and onto-theological modes of thinking. In doing so, it should be emphasized that the point of the essay is not to mount a critique of Spinoza's doctrine in terms of its own internal validity or consistency; it is, rather, to demonstrate the utility of applying Heidegger's thinking onto a delineation of the inertial logics of Spinoza's thought. Hence, while the essay is geared toward those already familiar with the philosophical intricacies of Spinoza and Heidegger, it may also prove edifying for a general readership interested in the modern-condition, the history of being, and Spinoza's philosophy taken as a decisive epoch within the history of thought.

It should be further noted that the essay is divided into three parts; each of which proceeds by charting certain ways in which the shape of Spinoza's thought is conditioned by the logic of inertia. The first part will, taking its cue from Hans Blumenberg and his "Self Preservation and Inertia: On the Constitution of Modern Rationality," argue that Spinoza's philosophy (and in particular his conatus doctrine) does not represent a synchronic continuance or radicalization of Aristotelian-Scholastic teleology, but rather articulates a novel, modern logic of understanding over and against teleology. To do this, the first part of the essay will (1) articulate the ineffectiveness of simply tracking the philosophical usage of the term conatus over time; (2) delineate certain theological and scientific debates regarding teleology, eschatology, and self-preservation up through the early modern period; and (3) consider some present day implications for this conceptual shift undergirding the use of the term conatus.

Following from this, the second part of the essay will examine the teleological or ultimate cause within the work of Spinoza. In doing so, it will (1) explore how Spinoza's antagonism toward the teleological cause conditions his understanding of divinity; and (2) how this new Spinozist theology therefore maps cleanly onto the contemporary state of technical knowledge and production as it is articulated by Martin Heidegger in his "The Question Concerning Technology."

Lastly, the third and final part of the essay will explore the implications of Spinoza's equation of the horizon of all possible knowledge with divine self-knowledge. In particular, this section will demarcate: (1) the relation between Spinoza's trifold equation of life, being, and action with his theological closure of finitude as a source of knowledge; (2) how Spinoza's closure of disclosure as a form of knowing is actually dependent on a hidden process of optical

reconfiguration; and (3) how this optical reconfiguration is essentially a virulent form of philosophical blindness akin to Heidegger's diagnosis of metaphysical thinking as nihilism.

Ultimately, this essay posits that Spinoza's thinking signals the instantiation of a philosophical blindness at an onto-theological level; and that, in this way, Spinoza both articulates and prefigures an essential element of the modern condition at its deepest and most universal level. This does not mean, however, that Spinoza's thought ought to be abandoned. Quite to the contrary, the essay affirms the power of Spinoza's thought to arrive at what is essential insofar as Heidegger and Spinoza are, in their profound opposition, both necessary to clarify the horizon of modern onto-theology. Spinoza's thought, therefore, is not only shown to be relevant due to its historical significance, but also due to its essential utility— or, what is the same, its utility insofar as it is essential.

Part One: On Inertia

1.1 On The Current State of Scholarship Which Pertains to Heidegger and Spinoza:

At the outset it should be noted that the impetus behind this essay is, in part, a response to a curious trend that has emerged amongst the subsection of philosophical scholarship focused on the relation between Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677). Indeed, a major current of this admittedly small body of work now asserts that there exists a Spinozist undercurrent to Heidegger's thought and that there is, furthermore, a "subterranean line from Spinoza's concept of conatus as *in suo esse perseverare* to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein as Seindes, dem es in seinem Sein um dieses selbst geh.*"¹ In arguing this point, this vein of scholarship posits a hidden Spinozism at the heart of Heidegger's philosophy.

¹ Lysemose 2020, 140.

Giorgio Agamben and Jean Luc-Nancy both hold a form of this position.² In Agamben's words: "It is probable that it was precisely his [Heidegger's] prolonged adherence to the Aristotelian apparatus that did not allow him to understand that the ontological difference must be completely resolved into the being-modes relation. In any case, it is a matter of the same difficulty that constrained him to avoid up to the end a confrontation with the philosophy of Spinoza."³ Similar sentiments are echoed in Paul Ricœur's *Oneself as Another*;⁴ and they can also be found in Miguel Vatter's "Bare Life and Philosophical Life in Aristotle, Spinoza, and Heidegger" wherein, Vatter suggests that "Jonas to Derrida and Deleuze to Agamben, have all in their own ways tried to bring together Heidegger and Spinoza."⁵

The newest and strongest example of this tendency to read Spinoza into Heidegger, however, is Kasper Lysemose's "The Force of Existence: Looking for Spinoza in Heidegger"—which, in citing Agamben, Luc-Nancy, and Ricœur as influences, represents both an intensification and an instantiation of this scholarly trend within the literature. For Lysemose, the conative doctrine that "each thing, insofar as it exists in itself, tries to persevere in its own being" has a potential or hidden relation to Heidegger's thought. Indeed, taking up this endeavor, or in his own words, using it as "point of entry to the discussion," Lysemose centers the locus of engagement between Heidegger and Spinoza within Heidegger's treatment of the transition from

² "In this regard—and akin to Nancy—Agamben also notes the unexpressed complicity between Heidegger and Spinoza." (Lysemose 2020, 141.)

³ Agamben 2016, 175. For Agamben, this proposition is intimately bound up in the broader act of thinking the concept of mode "as a threshold of indifference between ontology and ethics." His concern is not simply to elucidate the intellectual-affinities between Heidegger and Spinoza but to develop his own project via continual reference to both thinkers. To this end, it is noteworthy that in demarcating the domain of this thinking as a first ontology "between language and world" Agamben rejects explicitly the notion that "Ontology is laden with the historical destiny of the West not because an inexplicable and metahistorical magical power belongs to being but just the contrary, because ontology is the originary place of the historical articulation between language and world, which preserves in itself the memory of anthropogenesis, of the moment when that articulation was produced." For our purposes the significance of these lines rests in the second clause, the denial of the power of being to affect historical change. In this way, although Agamben mobilizes Heidegger for his own project, he substantially alters the role being plays at the outset of this inquiry. Agamben denies, or at the very least, substantially alters, the role of being in Heidegger's history of being; hence, because he ignores a central tenant of Heidegger's thought, he cannot really be said to be engaging with Heidegger's thought in good faith. As such, his work should, furthermore, not be taken as a point of departure into the relation between Heidegger and Spinoza *per se*.

⁴ Ricœur 1992.

⁵ Vatter 2014, 221.

potentiality to actuality found within his seminal *Being and Time* and within his 1931 lecture series on the first three chapters of Book Θ of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

Regarding these two works, Lysemose writes that: "At the point of transition from potentiality to actuality, we thus find a drive... The drive enables the transition but remains itself unaffected by what it enables. In this way, the drive is nothing but its own preservation."⁶ This ostensible similarity between the conatus and the structure of Dasein leads Lysemose to observe that, not only can Spinoza be read as an "existential analyst," but, more importantly, there exists a "Spinozian 'correction' of Heidegger's existential analytic."⁷ Indeed, for Lysemose, "it is here that we can begin to engage with Spinoza. The hypothesis in that respect will be the following: *what Spinoza calls force of existence—and develops in his doctrine of the conatus—is located right at the indistinction between potentiality and actuality.*"⁸ Hence, according to Lysemose, although Heidegger claims to think through Aristotle, he is actually a Spinozist even if he does not know it or does not want to know it. "The similarity between these two formulae is striking," Lysemose writes, "is this just a superficial coincidence? Or could Spinoza's analysis of conatus turn out to be a version *avant la lettre* of Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein?"⁹

A problem with this line of argument is that, because Lysemose localizes his argument solely within Heidegger's 'existential analytic' – an early (some would say immature or not yet fully realized) analysis of *our* being – he completely misses Heidegger's interest in the question of being as such. This interest in being is the essential and uniting element of Heidegger's thought. Indeed, Heidegger is explicit on this point. At the outset of *Being and Time*, his most complete analysis of Dasein, he notes:

⁶ Lysemose 2020, 158.

⁷ Lysemose 2020, 141.

⁸ Lysemose 2020, 156.

⁹ Lysemose 2020, 141.

*Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity-the inquirer-transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of Being; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "Dasein". If we are to formulate our question explicitly and transparently, we must first give a proper explication of an entity (Dasein), with regard to its Being.*¹⁰

Hence Dasein, the structure of our being, the focus of the early Heidegger's 'existential analytic,' is of secondary import. The primary concern is the elucidation of being as such. Indeed, it should be noted that the same conative proposition, if plugged in for *all* being and not just *our* being, is for Heidegger simply a tautological annihilation of being. To say that the being of every being is simply its conatus – or for that matter, a hylomorphic combination, a subject or object, a mere tool, a monad, etc. – is really to obscure the actual disclosure of being.

Indeed, if being and conatus are in any sense equivocal terms, then the proposition that 'the being of the Rhine River is conative' is equivalent to saying 'the being of the Rhine River is being.' This, it will be admitted, is a perfectly correct assertion, yet it is also an ultimately vacuous one. Therefore, Lysemose might be able to reasonably argue that there are certain similar elements between Spinoza's conatus and Heidegger's Dasein – he might even be able to say, in a qualified manner, that an allusion to the conatus helps clarify Heidegger's position within select sections of *Being and Time* – but because his analysis has forgotten being, Lysemose certainly errs in arguing that these similar elements are themselves sufficient to posit a "Spinozian undercurrent" to Heidegger's thought.¹¹

While in these cases, the source of error seems to therefore be strictly philosophical, or at the very least, textual in origin, the impact of this particular error exceeds its original classification. Indeed, in positing a compatibility between Heidegger and Spinoza (especially one

¹⁰ Heidegger 1978, 27.

¹¹ Lysemose 2020, 141.

based on Spinoza's conatus) this trend in the scholarship not only fails to appreciate what is unique in both thinkers, but also ultimately helps conceal their historical significance. Fully redressing this error, therefore, requires not simply a corrective philosophical explanation, but a corresponding historical elucidation. This essay, therefore, not only corrects a problematic interpretation regarding Heidegger's philosophical relation to Spinoza, but also enriches our understanding of Spinoza via the staging of an actual, proper encounter between him and Heidegger.

1.2 On Spinoza's Conatus as Conceptual Rupture:

The true significance of Spinoza's philosophy – for Heidegger and otherwise – will remain elusive if it is not studied historically. In particular, a principal, although hidden danger, is to confuse the use of the concept conatus, as it is articulated in Spinoza's *Ethics*, with a simple chronology of the term's usage over time. This danger is, of course, inherent in any attempt at conceptual history. There is an ever-present tendency to occlude the concept itself through simple linguistic cataloging of its terminological use.¹² Here, such a tracking of the term 'conatus' has led to the idea that the inception of the conatus – as meant by Spinoza – can be found as far back as Homer, and can be traced through the "Stoic moral psychology found in Chrysippus" all the way to the "theories of Hobbes, Leibniz, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey."¹³

Indeed, as Christopher Kirby in his, "The Organic Roots of Conatus in Early Greek Thought" puts it:

[The conatus] percolated through the Neo-platonic and neo-Aristotelian writings of the medieval period; motivated the mechanics of Galileo, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes; engendered the cosmologies of Vico, Spinoza, and Leibniz; animated the theories of "will to life" and

¹² Koselleck 2011, 21.

¹³ Kirby 2021, 34.

*volition in late German idealism, and undergirded notions of instinct at the beginnings of modern psychology. It can even be found today as a key concept in theories of neurobiology (e.g. Antonio Damasio's somatic marker theory), ecology (e.g. the deep ecology movement inspired by Arne Næss), educational theory (through the works of Maria Montessori) and perhaps even evolutionary biology, if one takes heed of what Richard Dawkins has written about memes and selfish genes. In fact, it could be argued that the hormê-conatus concept is one of the most successful memes in the history of philosophy.*¹⁴

For Kirby, it should be noted, the concept signified by the term conatus, or *conatus-essendi*, within his analysis is the greek concept hormê (ὁρμή)— a term which signals “an inherent impulse from which all motion (both human and natural) derived.” The conatus, then, although it may mutate throughout its long history, remains, in essence, unchanged. A sentiment which prompts Kirby to write that the dictum of C.S. Pierce – “the feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions”¹⁵ – expresses the very same conative concept found in Homer, Plato, Hobbes, Dewey, Spinoza and beyond.

Kirby is, of course, not the first thinker to take such a long view of the conatus, although he does perhaps take the longest view. Indeed, “ever since Spinoza was alive, commentators have been struck by the prevalence of Stoic themes in his writings.”¹⁶ Both Hegel and Leibniz associated Spinoza's thought with that of the ancient Stoics – “Leibniz named him a leader of “a sect of new Stoics” which maintained that “things act because of [the universe's] power and not due to a rational choice”¹⁷ – while more recent scholars Susan James and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty have asserted that Spinoza was ultimately, or “at bottom,” a Stoic.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kirby 2021, 31.

¹⁵ Kirby 2021, 34.

¹⁶ As cited in: Miller 2024.

¹⁷ As cited in: Miller 2024.

¹⁸ As cited in: Miller 2024.

The importance of such a proposed linkage between the ancients and the moderns lies in the constitutive role it plays for our understanding of the horizons of modernity. For if there is an intact linkage between the Stoics and Spinoza – or between Homer and Richard Dawkins for that matter – then what is invoked by the term *conatus* signals a purely synchronic history. Indeed, although it is situated at the threshold of modernity, under this view, Spinoza’s *conatus* doctrine can represent nothing more than an intensification or radicalization of an ancient concept. It does not, in other words, signal a meaningful break with the past.

The extent to which this position is conditioned by the methodology that underpins it is worth noting. Indeed, any method of inquiry that works by attempting to trace terminological continuities will more likely than not prefigure a position that advocates historical continuity. This is not a critique of the correctness or incorrectness of such positions *per se*, but rather of their potential for occlusion— their ability to obscure certain key developments. In this case, the development obscured by this continuity is that which Hans Blumenberg calls “not only a new rational principle among others, but *the principle of modern rationality itself*.”¹⁹ For Blumenberg, this principle of modern *rationality par excellence* is the principle of self-preservation— a principle that is not only historically new, but intimately bound up in the being of modernity *qua* modernity.

It is, in other words, a logic of inertia. Consider, here, the phrase ‘an object in motion tends to stay in motion’ or in Newton’s original formulation of the first law of motion: “*Corpus omne perseverare in statu suo quiescendi vel movendi uniformiter in directum, nisi quatenus a viribus impressis cogitur statum illum mutare.*”²⁰ For Blumenberg, this formulation relates to “the concept of forces in a purely negative manner to the *perseverare in statu suo*” of Spinoza.²¹

¹⁹ Blumenberg 1990, 211.

²⁰ Newton 2009, 16.

²¹ Blumenberg 1990, 210.

The implication is that, understood in the domain of ontology (as compared to mechanics), a being will continue to exist or have-being until acted upon by a greater, external force. In this sense, in espousing his conatus doctrine, Spinoza is a thinker of inertia. Indeed, for Blumenberg: “This alone is Spinoza’s metaphysical position expressed in terms of physics;”²² a point which becomes self-evident in proposition III:VIII of Spinoza’s *Ethics*— “the effort by which each thing tries to persevere in its own being involves no finite but indefinite time.”²³

To appreciate the true radicality of this proposition it is worth understanding something of the pre-modern, Aristotelian-Scholastic paradigm of physics in place prior to the rise of this new rational principle. For Aristotle, “fire is ordained to fly up and earth down.”²⁴ Stated differently, a stone fell only because its ultimate or teleological purpose was to reach the center of the cosmos. It follows from this that, if there were no earth or terrestrial sphere in the center of the cosmos, then the stone would fall until it reached the exact center of the cosmos at which point it would fall no more. Indeed, for the Aristotelian, the termination of motion does not require a greater external force – as with Newton – but is instead latent within the essence of a given being.

Even when this logic was replaced by the impetus theory of motion – which Kuhn defines as “a late medieval paradigm which held that the continuing motion of a heavy body is due to an internal power implanted in it by the projector that initiated its motion”²⁵ – motion still stemmed from an internal, and more importantly, *exhaustible* power. “Buridan,” Kuhn notes, speaking of Jean Buridan, a fourteenth century philosopher and important representative of impetus theory, “describes the motion of a vibrating string as one in which impetus is first

²² Blumenberg 1990, 211.

²³ Spinoza 1994, III:VIII.

²⁴ Aristotle 2016, 269.

²⁵ Kuhn 1970, 119.

implanted when the string is struck; the impetus is next *consumed* in displacing the string against the resistance of its tension.”²⁶ Hence, although “the “new science” of the century had at last succeeded in rejecting Aristotelian and scholastic explanations expressed “in terms of the essences of material bodies,” it still had a conception of decay latent within its theory of motion.²⁷ Motion in both the Aristotelian-Scholastic and impetus theories was teleological as compared to inertial— it was something to be completed. In this way, the paradigmatic break introduced by Newton was not simply a surmounting of Aristotelianism, but rather a rejection of a mechanical teleology *per se*. For Blumenberg, this is the rational principle as expressed in the domain of mechanics.

These diverging logics of inertial and teleological, however, were not confined to the domain of mechanics. In particular, they figured prominently in certain late-medieval theological and eschatological discourses regarding the relation between creation and creator— God and world. For the late medieval, the proper answer to this discourse was, as Blumenberg notes: “the extravagant claim of a constant, inward, and most radical dependence of the world on God. He is not only its once and for all creator, its regent and administrator. He must also be its ‘preserver’ in the strictest sense.”²⁸ This theological absolutism – a cluster of doctrines which emphasized the voluntarism of God, the contingency of the world, and the nominalism of concepts – held that God had not only created the world, but also perpetually sustained it. In this way, left to its own devices the world would exhaust itself and decay— returning to nothing. As Kasper Lysemose puts it: “[T]he doctrine amounted to the suggestion that all created being was stripped of any

²⁶ Kuhn 1970, 120. My Italics.

²⁷ Kuhn 1970, 104.

²⁸ Blumenberg 1990, 218.

power of being and thoroughly left at the mercy of transitive preservation. It is clear that *creatio* and *conservatio* in this way became equivalent in theological absolutism.”²⁹

The radicality of Spinoza’s conative account of being, then, lies in rejecting this equivalency between *creatio* and *conservatio*. Indeed, in asserting that, if left to its own devices, a being will continue to be or have-being, Spinoza is invoking a principle which decisively breaks with a dominant Medieval paradigm of thought. Both pre-modern mechanics and theological absolutism function through the teleological logic of decay or exhaustion. In favoring self-preservation over conservation, inertia over teleology, Spinoza inverts the dominant mode of thinking. He does not follow his contemporary, René Descartes, the oft hailed father of modern philosophy, in asserting that “I *doubt*, that is, am an *imperfect dependent Being*, I from hence Collect such a *clear and distinct Idea* of an *Independent perfect Being*, which is *God*... I do so *clearly* conclude that *God also Exists*, and that on him my *Being depends* each Minute.”³⁰

Instead, breaking convention, Spinoza “does not demand that a sufficient reason be sought for there being something rather than nothing, but only for when that which is ceases to be what it is.”³¹ The norm, as it were, is no longer to question why a being should continue to exist, but rather to ask what causes it to cease existing. Post-Spinoza, “there is no longer the inner factor of decay, analogous to aging or exhaustion, which is the immanent fatality of things by which the Stoics were moved when they allowed their *pyr technikon* to decline into the *pyr atechnon*.”³²

This is not to say that Spinoza’s stark and geometric prose was itself poignant enough to eradicate teleology as a guiding principle. It is, however, to locate Spinoza and his conatus doctrine within a certain class of thinkers who, at the threshold of modernity – what Koselleck

²⁹ Lysemose 2020, 145.

³⁰ Descartes 2023, 56.

³¹ Blumenberg 1990, 245.

³² Blumenberg 1990, 244.

famously calls the ‘saddle time’ – articulated a new rational principle of self-preservation as over against the pre-modern notions of teleology and decay. As Kasper Lysemose puts it: “The principle found various articulations within different fields of inquiry—e.g., ethics (Telesio), politics (Hobbes), and physics (Newton). Spinoza, however, gave it its ontological and universal form.”³³ We have seen how Newton intervened in mechanics and we have seen how Spinoza applies this same principle to the being itself.

Hence, one cannot simply track the conceptual history of the conatus by tracing the use of the term conatus. Just because the Jesuit scholar and apologist Muzio Vitelleschi used the term conatus, for example, does not mean he had in mind the same concept or rational principle that Spinoza mobilized. “According to Vitelleschi, conatus occurs when the natural motive tendency of a body is impeded. It is therefore the dynamic manifestation of the intrinsic kinetic tendency that each sublunary body has towards its natural place.”³⁴ Consider also the work of Eustachius a Sancto Paulo who in his 1626 *Summa*, noted that “this would not happen if it were not for the reciprocal strivings [conatu] of the heavy bodies to descend, and of the light ones to ascend.”³⁵ In both of these cases, although the Medievals certainly made use of the term conatus, the logic underpinning this use was not actually inertial but rather teleological in character.

It is clear, therefore, that Spinoza’s conatus doctrine cannot be seen as a continuation or radicalization of the previous uses of the term but must instead be seen as a meaningful, conceptual break. “The conceptual history of ‘self-preservation,’” writes Blumenberg, “can be documented in a sufficient manner neither from the reception of Stoicism nor from the reduction of the Aristotelian-Scholastic teleology or doctrine of act.”³⁶ In the same way, the conceptual

³³ Lysemose 2020, 145.

³⁴ Garau 2014, 482.

³⁵ As cited in: Garau 2014, 482.

³⁶ Blumenberg 1990, 210.

history of the conatus cannot be tracked merely by reference to the term conatus. One cannot rely solely on tracing its terminological usage. Instead, an awareness of the broader epochal shifts constituted by the rise of modernity and its new rational principle must be cultivated in order to attune one to the radicality of Spinoza's conatus and its rupture from previous uses of the term. Only through such an attunement can the history of the conatus both in its Spinozist form and beyond be properly appreciated.

1.3 On Inertial Ontology and Economics:

In thinking through the significance of this rupture, one might recall Koselleck's thesis regarding the notion of progress in his "'Progress' and 'Decline': An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts." Here, Koselleck argues that, at the threshold of modernity, the increasing age of the world lost its biological-moral sense of decay. The Greek and Romans of antiquity, Koselleck tells us, lacked our concept of progress. Indeed, where once progress meant advancing toward an end in the same way that aging is always an aging toward death; the modern idea that progress could be infinite (itself a product of a new scientific optimism and faith in the power of autonomous reason to disclose the nature of reality and the reality of nature) was antagonistic toward this natural metaphor of aging. By 1668, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle "finally repudiated the age comparison because it was no longer suitable to describe progress. Everything in the world pointed to the fact that reason constantly perfected itself."³⁷ In this way, reason was denaturalized and was therefore no longer subject to the metaphor of aging nor fated to decline or decay. This denaturalization was soon extended to the human, who, as the rational animal, the bearer of reason, was now seen as able to maintain the vigour of youth while simultaneously attaining the wisdom of maturity.

³⁷ Koselleck 2002, 223.

By the time of Leibniz – who consummated this denaturalization by applying it to the cosmos as a whole – progress became the infinite task and goal of humanity. Decay and decline were no longer seen as the impending and inevitable ending of any and all endeavors, but were merely a finite setback toward a collective and infinite goal. As Koselleck puts it: “Anticipating Hegel, Condorcet could finally resolve the logical contradiction, the inconsistency, by way of a new concept: the *perfectionnement* of the human race is, at once, the goal (*terme*) and unlimited (*indefini*).”³⁸

For Koselleck, such a notion of progress gives as much as it takes. “The progress of modernity,” he writes, “despite its universal claim, reflects only partial, self-consistent experience, and, instead, masks or obscures other modes of experience.”³⁹ Atomic energy brings with it atomic bombs. In thinking with Rousseau and a host of other thinkers, Koselleck voices a concern that, as technology continues to progress, morality hobbles along behind, and in some cases may be said to legitimately decay. This desynchronization of morality and technology, itself a cause of technological marvels and moral depravity, marks the great danger for modernity hidden in the light of progress. To quote Heidegger: “Where the brightness in question is pure brightness, and is thus a brightness that shines on its own terms beyond the measure of what is adequate to us, one can see nothing precisely on account of this pure brightness.”⁴⁰ Our faith in the light of progress conceals as much as it reveals— pushes as much as it pulls, darkens as much as it lightens.

Like the modern concept of progress, the conatus of Spinoza, too, engages us in a play of concealment and unconcealment. Indeed, when thought through the inertial logic of Spinoza’s conatus, the old questions of ‘why, and to what end?’ now appear inane, if not completely

³⁸ Koselleck 2002, 223.

³⁹ Koselleck 2002, 221.

⁴⁰ Heidegger 2018, 27.

nonsensical. They lose their force. “Self-preservation now entails such a principle of exclusion of questions regarding the sufficient reason and a corresponding admission of questions relating to the alteration of circumstances.”⁴¹

This principle of exclusion is directed against teleology. Creation is now no longer seen as dependent on the creator for its continued conservation. As Spinoza puts it: “The duration of things cannot be determined by their essence, for the essence of things involves no fixed and definite period of existence.”⁴² Theoretically, now, existence presupposes no determinate duration. Being will not exhaust itself. Indeed, “modern theology practices eschatology under the presupposition that destruction intervenes upon a world which continues to exist on its own accord.”⁴³ It does not contain its end within itself. In this way, existence itself is, in a sense, vindicated and thereby freed from the fetters of judgement placed on it by the absolutism of old. This orientation results in the experience of a certain ontological autonomy. A new liberty is posited; a new freedom is felt.

But what is this new freedom unleashed? The freedom of the atom in the void— the freedom to hurtle through space unopposed? One could perhaps detect in Spinoza’s conatus a certain similarity to Marx’s observation that the immanent laws of capitalism “make it constantly necessary to keep increasing the amount of the capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking.”⁴⁴ Yet while the Marxist account holds that capitalism's crises are entirely in-born and that, in this way, the end of capitalism is immanent to its being, on a Spinozist reading, the ‘being’ of capitalism cannot imply any immanent exhaustion principle. The crises of capitalism, therefore, are not the result of an internal and teleological contradiction at the heart of its being,

⁴¹ Blumenberg 1990, 245.

⁴² Spinoza 1994, IX:Preface.

⁴³ Blumenberg 1990, 249.

⁴⁴ Marx 2011.

but of its continued ‘collisions’ with the external. There is, as such, nothing intimate to capitalism’s own logic which signals its end. Hence, deforestation ceases, not when enough timber has been harvested to sustain the needs of society, but only when there is no more timber to harvest, or when some other transcendent force intervenes. In this way, capitalism is not free to cease, it must actively be forced to cease. Its very source of freedom is therefore at once also a source of unfreedom.

Likewise, the inertial freedom of the conatus both prefigures and conceals its own unfreedom. For the modern, the ability to detect exhaustion is lost. Ontologically speaking, being loses its freedom to cease being. This should not be taken as anything like advocating suicide as a form of liberation – ontologically or otherwise – but rather it is to highlight a certain tension or aporia latent within the modern way-of-being. “A free man,” writes Spinoza, “thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.”⁴⁵ Indeed, at play here is a certain ‘vital avarice’ or intoxication. We are temporal, ephemeral beings. For us death is, as Heidegger puts it: non-relational, and not to be outstripped. Yet the innermost rational principle of modernity – of which Spinoza’s conatus doctrine is the broadest and deepest – cannot account for death as anything other than an external, immovable object. It cannot account for exhaustion. The idea of an ultimate goal, purpose, or end – a reason to live, in other words – beyond base existence or bare life is thereby rendered illogical. Indeed, in this way, the history of modernity is a crisis of meaning. Meaning may be created and invested, but it can no longer be detected.

There is an aporic element to this. Spinoza’s rupture in the conceptual history of the conatus ushers in a new liberatory form and self understanding of being; but, in doing so, it renders the quest for meaning a blind quest. The conative light is too bright. The pleading of exhaustion, the urging for temperance, the questioning of ‘to what end?’ becomes babble. In

⁴⁵ Spinoza 1994, V:LXVII.

doing so, it does not rid us of these feelings, it merely occludes them. Allows them to fester unseen.

This festering is not new, nor is it without consequence. In the realm of production, the lack of an economic, immanent principle of exhaustion, necessitates the continued inducement of crisis-states within capitalist society. At the height of revolutionary fever Marx noted that:

*In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity — the epidemic of over-production. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce.*⁴⁶

The only way to assuage such crises, short of a completely successful communist revolution, is “on the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones.”⁴⁷ Such a course of action, however, simply deepens the problem— “that is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.”⁴⁸ Capitalism, here, both generates and is blind to the wounds inflicted on itself by its own infinite growth imperative. Whereas for Marx this signals the increasing instability of capitalism, on the inertial account it signals only an intensification of the unfreedom to exhaust itself. Hence, while such a nature unquestionably opens up a new, liberatory horizon, it also results in terrible violence. The inertial logic of capitalism necessitates that force is doomed to collide with object; that unconcealed must lacerate concealed; and that modernity is repeatedly plunged into crisis.

⁴⁶ Marx 1948, Chapter I.

⁴⁷ Marx 1948, Chapter I.

⁴⁸ Marx 1948, Chapter I.

Part Two: On Causality

2.1 On Superstition, Causality, and Divinity within Spinoza:

This shift from a pre-modern subsistence economy to the new inertial mode of production necessitates a proportional shift in the horizon of technical knowledge— taken here as that domain of knowledge concerned with rendering the ‘processes of making’ intelligible. Indeed, whereas for centuries this intelligibility was bound up in the fourfold causality of Aristotle (explained by Heidegger as follows):

*(1) the causa materialis, the material, the matter out of which, for example, a silver chalice is made ; (2) the causa formalis, the form, the shape into which the material enters; (3) the causa finalis, the end, for example, the sacrificial rite in relation to which the chalice required is determined as to its form and matter; (4) the causa efficiens, which brings about the effect that is the finished, actual chalice, in this instance, the silversmith.*⁴⁹

Now, under the new paradigm of inertial logic, technical knowledge must necessarily sublimate the teleological *causa finalis*. Hence, while the silver chalice may still be made, it cannot be, in any meaningful capacity, made toward the end of a sacrificial rite.

This is not, of course, to suggest that knives are no longer made to cut, nor pens to write, nor capital to generate more capital. Indeed, such a notion is an impossibility if only because it would be the death of economic rationality; i.e., in demanding that individual acts of production have no end at all, they might just as well deny the laws of supply and demand. Hence, in the domain of technical knowledge, the *causa finalis* is not simply destroyed or abolished, it is swallowed up by the *causa efficiens*. There is still an end – a purpose – to making, but now this purpose becomes mere demand and thereby loses its status as a distinct mode of causality. Why is the knife made sharp? Because no one would buy a dull knife. Why does the silversmith make a silver chalice? The ritual market is positively booming. To inquire further, or in this case

⁴⁹ Heidegger 1977, 6.

deeper, would be, like the constant ‘but why?’ of a precocious child, to make a game of unleashing irrational skepticism.

Indeed, in the words of Spinoza, to ask after a cause beyond the efficient is to act as a superstitious babbler or pedantic charlatan. As he puts it:

if a stone falls from a roof on to someone's head, and kills him, they will demonstrate by their new method, that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for, if it had not by God's will fallen with that object, how could so many circumstances (and there are often many concurrent circumstances) have all happened together by chance? Perhaps you will answer that the event is due to the facts that the wind was blowing, and the man was walking that way. "But why," they will insist, "was the wind blowing, and why was the man at that very time walking that way?" If you again answer, that the wind had then sprung up because the sea had begun to be agitated the day before, the weather being previously calm, and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will again insist: "But why was the sea agitated, and why was the man invited at that time?" So they will pursue their questions from cause to cause, till at last you take refuge in the will of God—in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance.⁵⁰

The basic fact that efficient causes emerge due to other efficient causes *ad infinitum* does not mean that there must be something beyond these causes. Indeed, that we cannot as of yet unravel the entire infinite series of efficient causes does not mean that “the wind, the falling tile, and the man’s death are all part of God’s wonderful plan.”⁵¹ Ignorance is negative, an absence of knowledge, so how, Spinoza asks, can it be used to prove something positive— the will of God as ultimate cause?

This broader sentiment is further developed by Spinoza in explicit relation to his understanding of technical knowledge. Indeed, like in the case of the falling stone:

When we say that to be inhabited is the final cause of this or that house, we mean nothing more than that a man, conceiving the conveniences of household life, had a desire to build a house. Wherefore, the being inhabited, in so far as it is regarded as a final cause, is nothing else but this particular desire, which is really the efficient cause.⁵²

⁵⁰ Spinoza 1994, I:Appendix.

⁵¹ James 2012, 98.

⁵² Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

Here, what we take to be a final cause, in this case habituation, is really just another efficient cause (in this case a particular desire) which is itself subservient to the dictates of an infinite efficacious series. As Spinoza puts it: “it is regarded as the primary cause, because men are generally ignorant of the causes of their desires. They are, as I have often said already, conscious of their own actions and appetites, but ignorant of the causes whereby they are determined to any particular desire.”⁵³ Like in the case of the falling stone, the positing of a teleological cause is revealed to be a mere privation of the inertial logic. It is not a positive designator, but rather signals a negative rupture in the efficient causal chain. In this way, the position of teleology is dialectically inverted; where once it was seen as the knowledge of termination, now, in Spinoza, it becomes the termination of knowledge.

This termination is, in turn, theologized or theologically instantiated in Spinoza’s fusion of divine freedom with necessity. For Spinoza: “That thing is called free, which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and of which the action is determined by itself alone. On the other hand, that thing is necessary, or rather constrained, which is determined by something external to itself to a fixed and definite method of existence or action.”⁵⁴ In this way, freedom is the state, not of being *absolutely* free from necessity, but of being bound only by an immanent necessity. One is not free to choose absolutely, but only to express themselves according to their own unique nature. A scorpion, even if left to its own devices, cannot choose to be other than that scorpion. Even if no greater force acts on it, it cannot but be as it is according to its own nature.

Indeed, to think otherwise is to fall into ignorance. As Spinoza puts it: “men are mistaken in thinking themselves free; their opinion is made up of consciousness of their own actions, and

⁵³ Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

⁵⁴ Spinoza 1994, II:XXXV.

ignorance of the causes by which they are conditioned. Their idea of freedom, therefore, is simply their ignorance of any cause for their actions.”⁵⁵ This conception of freedom as an absolutely free will is irrational—stemming from a privation of knowledge. “I am also convinced,” Spinoza writes, “that if such persons reflect on the matter, and duly weigh in their minds our series of propositions, they will reject such freedom as they now attribute to God, not only as nugatory, but also as a great impediment to organized knowledge.”⁵⁶

Here, the axiomatic inability-to-choose of Spinoza’s inertial logic in turn prefigures free-choice as an impediment to knowledge. That a scorpion may of its own volition choose something contrary to its nature becomes, for modern knowledge, a completely irrational position. If the rooster abruptly ceases to crow at sunrise, a reason external to the rooster is sought—be it in a parasite, a sickness, an alteration in its avian physicochemistry, or a simple change in weather. That the rooster could have decided to cease crowing of its own accord, unconditioned by the infinite series of efficient causes, becomes, in Spinoza, an irrationality. It is in this context of privation that Spinoza writes “God does not act according to freedom of the will” and later, “yet God cannot on that account be said to act from freedom of the will.”⁵⁷ This does not suggest that God is not free to be God, but only that He *must* be free to be God. He cannot but be God. Indeed, He is, to borrow Sartre’s famous line, “condemned to be free.”

The consequence of this position is that God could not have created other than he did. As Spinoza puts it: “All things, I repeat, are in God, and all things which come to pass, come to pass solely through the laws of the infinite nature of God, and follow (as I will shortly show) from the necessity of his essence.”⁵⁸ The radicality of this statement is not simply that creation, for

⁵⁵ Spinoza 1994, II:XXXV.

⁵⁶ Spinoza 1994, I:XXXIII.

⁵⁷ Spinoza 1994, I:XXXII.

⁵⁸ Spinoza 1994, I:XV.

Spinoza, is no longer a product of God's prerogative, being eclipsed by his divine nature; but rather, that God's nature itself has been theologically altered to exclude the notion of prerogative. Indeed, whereas for Spinoza's contemporary Leibniz, God (insofar as He is God) must choose the best of all possible worlds – "God, having chosen the most perfect of all possible worlds, had been prompted by his wisdom to permit the evil which was bound up with it, but which still did not prevent this world from being, all things considered, the best that could be chosen"⁵⁹ – for Spinoza, God cannot have *chosen* to make anything. Hence, "solely from the necessity of the divine nature, or, what is the same thing, solely from the laws of his nature, an infinite number of things absolutely follow in an infinite number of ways."⁶⁰ Despite His absolute freedom, 'an infinite number of things absolutely follow' from the necessity of His divine nature. This is not a limit to, but the ultimate testament of God's freedom.

Part of the genius of Spinoza, therefore, rests in authorizing a divine imperative to create without at the same time sacrificing God's absolute freedom. The consequences of this authorization are far-reaching. Indeed, the divine necessity of Spinoza's deity ensures that creator and creation have equal (and intertwined) claims to existence. This gives the denizens of the created world a sort of historically unprecedented theological dignity. To see this, one need only reflect that God, for Spinoza, had to create you; that you are a necessary mode or manifestation of divine nature. God's immanent nature necessitates not simply creation, but *this* creation, this world. It follows that within this necessitated creation there is no real privation or imperfection. As Spinoza puts it: "men are wont to style natural phenomena perfect or imperfect rather from their own prejudices, than from true knowledge of what they pronounce upon."⁶¹ In relation to creation, then, imperfection and perfection are both simply states of mind.

⁵⁹ Leibniz 2005, 67.

⁶⁰ Spinoza 1994, XVII.

⁶¹ Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

They are superstition, an irrationality which, noteworthy arises out of a belief in ultimate ends. As Spinoza puts it:

*This seems to be the only reason for calling natural phenomena, which, indeed, are not made with human hands, perfect or imperfect: for men are wont to form general ideas of things natural, no less than of things artificial, and such ideas they hold as types, believing that Nature (who they think does nothing without an object) has them in view, and has set them as types before herself. Therefore, when they behold something in Nature, which does not wholly conform to the preconceived type which they have formed of the thing in question, they say that Nature has fallen short or has blundered, and has left her work incomplete.*⁶²

That “men began to form general ideas, to think out types of houses, buildings, towers, &c., and to prefer certain types to others, it came about, that each man called perfect that which he saw agree with the general idea he had formed of the thing in question, and called imperfect that which he saw agree less with his own preconceived type,” leads them to believe that nature (sive deus) also has an end in mind to creation.⁶³ Such an end, however, is contradictory to the logic of God’s nature.

*Nature does not work with an end in view. For the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature, acts by the same necessity as that whereby it exists. For we have shown, that by the same necessity of its nature, whereby it exists, it likewise works (I. xvi.). The reason or cause why God or Nature exists, and the reason why he acts, are one and the same. Therefore, as he does not exist for the sake of an end, so neither does he act for the sake of an end; of his existence and of his action there is neither origin nor end. Wherefore, a cause which is called final is nothing else but human desire, in so far as it is considered as the origin or cause of anything.*⁶⁴

God, in other words, cannot cease creating, for to cease creating would be to cease being God, which, via God’s absolute freedom, is an impossibility.

This collapse of distance between creation and creator leads to the deification of the act of creation itself. Indeed, creation now moves beyond the categories of perfection and imperfection— becoming unquestionable insofar as it is a divine mandate. This process

⁶² Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

⁶³ Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

⁶⁴ Spinoza 1994, IV:Preface.

completely inverts the voluntaristic nature attributed to the God of theological absolutism, but additionally, it transforms the notion of God as divine craftsman. What is worshipped – in the sense of divine adoration – is no longer the craftsman, but the act of crafting itself.

This process turns technical knowledge, as the knowledge concerned with knowing the now divine ‘processes of making’ into a form of theological knowledge. Indeed just as belief in God as divine architect inspired scientific inquiry as a form of religious devotion – Kepler, for instance, wrote: “those laws [of nature] are within the grasp of the human mind; God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts”⁶⁵ – now technical, not scientific, knowledge is elevated into a way of knowing God. Indeed, the instruction manual becomes a prayer book. The act of production becomes a religious rite. Weber famously locates the capitalist imperative in the theological innovation of Calvinist predestination; we should wonder, here, if it is not (also) in Spinoza’s theologizing of production itself.

2.2 On Spinoza’s Thought as Onto-Theological Articulation of Modern Technics:

In this way, technical knowledge swells beyond the bounds – or ends – of any one craftsman, divine or human. This does not, of course, mean that it becomes an end in itself; rather, it destroys all ends in its efficient, inertial momentum. This unleashment is traced by Heidegger in his “The Question Concerning Technology.” Here, Heidegger thinks the essence of modern technology – or, more accurately, modern technics – in terms of “Ge-stell” or en-framing. Indeed, as William Lovitt, a translator and commenter on Heidegger, puts it:

⁶⁵ Kepler 1951, 50. See also: “Nevertheless here we see how God, like a human architect, approached the founding of the world according to order and rule and measured everything in such a manner.” Kepler 1951, 33.

The challenging claim that now summons man forth, that "gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve," Heidegger calls das Ge-stell (Enframing) (QT 19). As "Enframing," that claim ceaselessly brings both men and things to take their places in the stark configuration that is being wrought out through ordering for use.⁶⁶

This notion of the 'standing-reserve' is defined by Heidegger as: "something more essential, than mere "stock." The name "standing reserve" assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric. It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the challenging revealing. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object."⁶⁷ Lovitt expands on this sentiment further when he notes:

As is increasingly the case in our time, things are not even regarded as objects, because their only important quality has become their readiness for use. Today all things are being swept together into a vast network in which their only meaning lies in their being available to serve some end that will itself also be directed toward getting everything under control.⁶⁸

Hence, under the standing-reserve, entities are not even reduced to their properties, but are instead reduced to that which can be ordered, stored, and extracted from them.

An airliner, to use one of Heidegger's examples, is, when disclosed, or challenged-forth by enframing, not even a mere object. It is not revealed as a whole composed of wings, cockpit, engine, propeller, tail assembly, and landing gear but rather only "inasmuch as it is ordered to ensure the possibility of transportation. For this it must be in its whole structure and in every one of its constituent parts, on call for duty, i.e., ready for takeoff."⁶⁹ In this way, then, what is revealed is not the airliner itself, but only the way in which it can "supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Lovitt 1977, XXIX.

⁶⁷ Heidegger 1977, 17.

⁶⁸ Lovitt 1977, XXIX.

⁶⁹ Heidegger 1977, 17.

⁷⁰ Heidegger 1977, 14.

This is not just true for the airliner. Enframing demands all entities – including human beings – exist under the standing reserve. Indeed, under the ascendancy of modern technology, the totalizing influence of enframing grows ever stronger. As Heidegger notes: “Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium.”⁷¹ Similarly, “the coal that has been hauled out in some mining district... is on call, ready to deliver the sun's warmth that is stored in it. The sun's warmth is challenged forth for heat, which in turn is ordered to deliver steam whose pressure turns the wheels that keep a factory running.”⁷² All is revealed purely in terms of what it can be made to yield. “The current talk about human resources,” Heidegger writes, “about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this. The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not.”⁷³

Perhaps Heidegger's most poignant example, however, is the Rhine River and what it has become under the ascendancy of modern technology. “In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrousness that reigns here,” Heidegger tells us, “let us ponder for a moment the contrast that speaks out of the two titles, “The Rhine” as dammed up into the power *works*, and “The Rhine” as uttered out of the art work, in Holderlin's hymn by that name.”⁷⁴ Where once the Rhine used to be revealed as “the noblest of all rivers, the free-born Rhine,” it is now seen as “as something at our command,” as a mere water-power supplier.⁷⁵ Hölderlin's Rhine is gone. It is – under the essence of modern technology – no longer disclosable. We are – insofar as the Rhine's

⁷¹ Heidegger 1977, 15.

⁷² Heidegger 1977, 15.

⁷³ Heidegger 1977, 18.

⁷⁴ Heidegger 1977, 16.

⁷⁵ Heidegger 1977, 16.

revealing is constituted by a challenging-forth – no longer capable of seeing it as an ‘object of respect and wonder’ but only as a standing-reserve.

The critic might, upon hearing this assertion, point out that the Rhine is ‘still a river in the landscape,’ and that, indeed, it still inspires those who see it with its majesty. Surely, then, this critic asserts, the Rhine cannot have been reduced to a pure standing-reserve? Heidegger’s response, here, is measured: “Perhaps.” He replies, “But how? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.”⁷⁶ Here, it is not simply that the Rhine’s majesty is being exploited (for this would imply that its majesty is still capable of being disclosed); it is rather that the majesty experienced is an artifice of the act of touring, not a disclosure of the Rhine itself.

Although he does not actually engage with Spinoza in his work on technics, Heidegger notes that this monstrous development of manipulation and domination can be correctly understood through an investigation into the four-fold causality of Aristotle. “For centuries philosophy has taught that there are four causes,” he writes, “what technology is, when represented as a means, discloses itself when we trace instrumentality back to fourfold causality.”⁷⁷ This tracing back to fourfold causality, however, cannot occur via a simple tracking of translation and usage over time, as this process pre-supposes a unified conceptual history of causality which thereby prefigures all changes as mutations instead of meaningful conceptual rupture. Hence, while for Heidegger, causality is now intimately bound up in the notion of ‘effecting,’ what he wants to attune us to is the fact that “everything that later ages seek in Greek thought under the conception and rubric “causality,” in the realm of Greek thought and for Greek thought *per se* has *simply nothing at all to do with bringing about and effecting.*”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Heidegger 1977, 18.

⁷⁷ Heidegger 1977, 6.

⁷⁸ Heidegger 1977, 7.

Indeed, for Heidegger, “what we call cause [Ursache] and the Romans call *causa* is called *aition* by the Greeks, that to which something else is indebted [das, was ein anderes verschuldet]. The four causes are the ways, all belonging at once to each other, of being responsible for something else.”⁷⁹ In this way, the causes, in a Greek manner of thinking, are not conceived of as that which forces – through effecting – something to come into being; they are, rather, that which *allow* something to come into being. The distinction here is subtle but crucial. The ancient gardener brings forth a blossom by allowing it to bloom. Without the gardener’s love and attention the flower would not flourish, yet it was also always within the flower to flourish if the conditions were made right. Causing, here, is therefore understood in the sense of ‘making room,’ or of setting free. Hence, for Heidegger, “the four ways of being responsible bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing [An-wesen]. They set it free to that place and so start it on its way, namely, into its complete arrival.”⁸⁰ In the case of modern, technical botany, however, greenhouses, pesticides, and genetic engineering are all mobilized to force the flower to grow and bloom at the appropriate, which is not to say natural, rate. The flower is given no choice but to comply with our technical demands, set as it is against the totalizing apparatus of efficient causes.

In this way, Heidegger is right to note that: “to bring about means to obtain results, effects. The *causa efficiens*, but one among the four causes, sets the standard for all causality.”⁸¹ He immediately follows with another equally important point: “This goes so far that we no longer even count the *causa finalis*, telic finality, as causality.”⁸² The ascendancy of the *causa*

⁷⁹ Heidegger 1977, 7.

⁸⁰ Heidegger 1977, 9.

⁸¹ Heidegger 1977, 7.

⁸² Heidegger 1977, 7.

efficiens necessitates the fall of the *causa finalis*. This has been previously noted, but it is worth noting the profundity with which Heidegger later expresses it:

*That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing. But the revealing never simply comes to an end. Neither does it run off into the indeterminate. The revealing reveals to itself its own manifoldly interlocking paths, through regulating their course.*⁸³

While technics was originally in the service of bringing-forth, now bringing-forth is in the service of technics' own irrespective accord. It has no end, no goal, no boundary, or purpose. It simply creates, produces.

This process of enframing finds its perfect analog in Spinoza's deification of production. The fusion of divine freedom and necessity collapses the distance between craftsman and craft, creator and creation. This leads to the deification of the creative process itself. Essential to this deification is the inability to cease, and hence the only necessity which binds production is that it must continue producing. It is, in other words, fully unleashed beyond human and divine control, subject only to its continued unleashing. That this mirrors Heidegger's analysis of modern technology marks Spinoza as the first thinker to think the essence of modern technics at an onto-theological level.

It is also particularly noteworthy that this onto-theological articulation is rendered through an inertial logic of thought that supplants the older teleological principle of rationality. The decline of this pre-modern principle of rationality and its corresponding scientific, technical, existential, and onto-theological manifestations created room for new, non-teleological forms of thought to emerge. Indeed, while it cannot properly be said that the teleological cause was replaced by an 'inertial cause'; it can, perhaps, be ventured that inertia as the guiding rational

⁸³ Heidegger 1977, 16.

principle of modernity not only dispatched the *causa finalis*, but conceptually unleashed or unbounded the ascendant *causa efficiens*.

Part Three: On Optics

3.1 Finitude and The Tri-Fold Equation:

As previously noted, for Spinoza, “a free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.”⁸⁴ We might now bring this proposition more fully into contrast with the thought of Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, death is not an external object upon which the life-force fatefully crashes— rather, death reveals itself to us as “that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.”⁸⁵ Death is, in other words, inherent in our very way of being— our being-there or Dasein. It is not a separate entity, a sort of ‘pure other’ to life, but something which permeates the very structure of our being. Indeed, for Heidegger, it is this awareness of death as our ownmost, inescapable possibility that serves as a catalyst toward the living of a free, authentic life. As Heidegger puts it, the anticipation of death “reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself... in an **impassioned freedom towards death**— a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.”⁸⁶

In deciphering Heidegger’s enigmatic observation it should be noted that the specific unfreedom from which the anticipation of death rescues Dasein is the abstract domination of

⁸⁴ Spinoza 1994, V:LXVII.

⁸⁵ Heidegger 1978, 294.

⁸⁶ Heidegger 1978, 311.

what Heidegger calls the “dictatorship of the they.”⁸⁷ This “dictatorship” should not be understood in the sense “of a collection of particular others,” (not of a set of particular “theys”) but rather as that which we all are (“though not as the sum”) and that which “prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.”⁸⁸ Indeed, as the they-self which is subject to the laws of the dictatorship: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back; we find 'shocking' what they find shocking.”⁸⁹ We do as the they – the public, the masses, the herd, the group – does, we are as the they is.

Hence, within this dictatorship, discourse is neither absolutely prohibited nor outlawed, but rather reconfigured into the form of idle talk or chatter, wherein “discoursing has lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about,” and as such “it does not communicate... as to let this entity be appropriated in a primordial manner.”⁹⁰ Similarly, while curiosity is still encouraged, it is no longer an impulse toward being-in-the-truth but instead concerns itself with “seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a Being towards it) but *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty.”⁹¹ These novelties are neither freely selected nor freely discarded, but are instead conditioned by a climate of frenetic galvanication. “The tranquillity in inauthentic Being,” Heidegger tells us, “does not seduce one into stagnation and inactivity, but drives one into uninhibited 'hustle' [“Betriebs”].”⁹² Hence, the inauthentic curiosity of the they-self, in occluding an authentic relation to being, is not free to steer its own course or even to cease through its own power.

⁸⁷ Heidegger 1978, 164.

⁸⁸ Heidegger 1978, 164.

⁸⁹ Heidegger 1978, 164.

⁹⁰ Heidegger 1978, 212.

⁹¹ Heidegger 1978, 216.

⁹² Heidegger 1978, 222.

One could, in such an observation, perhaps detect a certain similarity to the inertial logic delineated in part one of this essay. In both the they-self and the inertial logic of the conatus, the great unfreedom is the inability to cease. There is no exhaustion principle and no sensitivity to death. This is not, of course, to suggest that the they-self is simply another articulation of the inertial logic of modernity. It is important, after all, that for Heidegger in his *Being and Time* the they-self is not a historical development and so admits of no genealogy nor conceptual history. Rather, it is to suggest that although Heidegger had in mind the they-self when he spoke of the need for an ‘impassioned freedom towards death,’ such an orientation is also fundamentally counter to that espoused by Spinoza in a way that exceeds the simple juxtaposition of life with death.

Indeed, it would be a vast oversimplification in comparing these two philosophers to say that, in relation to human freedom, Heidegger somehow ‘worships’ death whereas Spinoza champions life. Being-toward-death certainly does not mean wanting to die. Heidegger does not view suicide as liberation or a new freedom from this mortal coil. Rather, according to Heidegger, only in recognizing ourselves as mortal beings are we free to live authentically. “How is this essence of freedom to be thought?” Heidegger writes in his essay, “On the Essence of Truth.” The answer: “That which is opened up, that to which a presentative statement as correct corresponds, are beings opened up in an open comportment. Freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are. Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be.”⁹³ For Heidegger, freedom is itself intimately bound up with the disclosure or truth of being. Hence, to in any way deny or occlude the fact that we are mortal, finite beings is in effect to inhibit our freedom— it is to discursively deny the possibility of authentic expression by removing authenticity from the sphere of intelligibility.

⁹³ Heidegger 2014, 143.

For Spinoza, conversely, death is the great source of unfreedom. “The sick man,” he writes, “through fear of death eats what he naturally shrinks from, but the healthy man takes pleasure in his food, and thus gets a better enjoyment out of life, than if he were in fear of death, and desired directly to avoid it.”⁹⁴ The same fear of death which for Heidegger leads to freedom, for Spinoza hampers it. For Spinoza, anxiety is not a jolt toward meaningful, authentic purpose, but a gateway to superstition and foolishness. It is not a precondition of freedom, but a preclusion. Such thoughts of death cloud our judgement. They obstruct us from thinking clearly and from acting in our own self-interest. As Warren Montag notes: “Anxiety troubles the soul, elevating suffering and denouncing pleasure, *contaminating life with death* and nature with nothingness.”⁹⁵ For Spinoza, death *contaminates* life. It is foreign to life— a virus, a contagion. The tension between Spinoza and Heidegger rests, therefore, not simply on a case of conflicting value judgements regarding a binary opposition between life and death, but rather on the position of death relative to the logic of being. For Heidegger, death is immanent to our being; for Spinoza it is transcendent— an externality.

One could attempt to ease this tension by arguing that Spinoza seems to be speaking of an efficient type of freedom, a freedom of act, whereas Heidegger is concerned with a purely ontological type of freedom (the freedom to *be* authentic, not simply to *act* authentically). Therefore, the tension between them is, on closer examination, simply the result of a category error. Such a charge, however, is to belie the centrality of the conatus to Spinoza’s thought. For Spinoza, “to act, to live, or to preserve one’s being (these three terms are identical in meaning).”⁹⁶ As a result of this tri-fold equation of action, life and being, actions or the restrictions of actions, bear deep ontological implications. Anything that hampers action also hampers being. In losing

⁹⁴ Spinoza 1994, IV: LXIII.

⁹⁵ Montag 2016, 166.

⁹⁶ Spinoza 1994, IV:XXIV.

the ability to act, one also loses being. It is, for Spinoza, definitional that reality and perfection are synonymous terms, and that therefore “in proportion as each thing is more perfect, it possesses more of reality (II. Def. vi.), and, consequently (III. iii. and note), it is to that extent more active and less passive.”⁹⁷

Hence, one cannot simply sidestep the issue at play. Both Heidegger and Spinoza’s accounts of freedom, and of death, occur in the same ethico-ontological domain. They are not simply espousing two different views in the way that one might say ‘red’ without contradicting another who says ‘down,’ but rather they are making legitimately contradictory claims.

In considering the onto-historical significance of this subtle yet extreme, existential tension it is perhaps illuminating to note – if only anecdotally – that for Blumenberg, Heidegger was the “great anti-modern thinker.” He was a thinker who planted himself in opposition to modernity and the modern way of being. It might therefore be said that this tension exceeds a simple squabble between Heidegger and Spinoza, and in fact discloses to us something of the modern condition itself. As previously noted, Spinoza’s view on death is intimately and explicitly bound up with his doctrine of the *conatus*.⁹⁸ While the first part of this essay noted that this tri-fold, conative equation of ‘to act, to live, and to preserve his being’ occludes an exhaustion principle, we can now add that such an occlusion runs essentially counter to the thought of Heidegger.

⁹⁷ Spinoza 1994, V:XL.

⁹⁸ See also: A free man is one who lives under the guidance of reason, who is not led by fear (IV. lxiii.), but who directly desires that which is good (IV. lxiii. Coroll.), in other words (IV. xxiv.), who strives to act, to live, and to preserve his being on the basis of seeking his own true advantage; wherefore such an one thinks of nothing less than of death, but his wisdom is a meditation of life. Q.E.D.” (Spinoza 1994, IV:LXVII.)

3.2 On Spinoza's Three Types of Knowledge and The Closure of Passion:

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza gives three possible kinds of knowledge: (1) imagination; (2) reason; and (3) intuition. The first kind of knowledge, imagination, is that by which trees can be said to talk as men, and that by which the sun appears as “distant from us about two hundred feet” instead of “more than six hundred of the earth's diameters.”⁹⁹ It is a knowledge composed of hazy impressions and fanciful connections. Through it, one sees the sun as larger than the moon and assumes it must therefore be closer to the earth; through it, one gains favor by being supplicant to other people and so assumes the same rule must apply to winning the favor of trees. As Spinoza puts it: “An infant believes that of its own free will it desires milk, an angry child believes that it freely desires vengeance... men believe themselves to be free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined.”¹⁰⁰

The paucity of this knowledge – out of which alone falsity may emerge¹⁰¹ – is embedded within and configured by our own finitude and imperfection. As Michael L. Morgan notes:

*Each of us is, [Spinoza] tells us, like a little worm in the blood. Nature is like the entire circulatory system or like the entire organism; each of us lives within that system or organism, interacting with only a small part of it and experiencing only a very limited region. Even if we grasp the fact that there is a total system and understand its principles to some degree, our experience is so circumscribed and narrow that we are bound to make mistakes about our understanding of the system and our place in it. Myopia confines our understanding, no matter how we seek to overcome it.*¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Spinoza 1994, II: XXXV.

¹⁰⁰ Spinoza 1994, II:III.

¹⁰¹ “Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge, which inadequate, fragmentary, or confused ideas involve” (Spinoza 1994, II:XXXV)

¹⁰² Morgan 2002, XI.

In this way, a naive reliance on the obviously imperfect apparatus of experience yields an equally imperfect type of knowledge; and, as such, clear and distinct knowledge of nature (*sive deus*) cannot occur through the first kind of knowledge, imagination.

This does not, of course, mean that knowledge is necessarily out of reach. Rather, clear and distinct knowledge emerges through the aid of the second and third kinds of knowledge.

“Knowledge of the second and third kinds, not knowledge of the first kind, teaches us to distinguish the true from the false.”¹⁰³ The first of these latter two, reason, does not proceed via passionate influence, unexamined basis, and fragmentary, inadequate impressions, but rather emerges “from the fact that we have notions common to all men, and adequate ideas of the properties of things.”¹⁰⁴ In the domain of mathematics, these common and adequate ideas manifest themselves in the laws of Euclid. If one is given the numbers one, two, and three, “everyone can see that the fourth proportional is six.”¹⁰⁵ This seeing, Spinoza argues, is not an act of the imagination.

*Tradesmen without hesitation multiply the second by the third, and divide the product by the first; either because they have not forgotten the rule which they received from a master without any proof, or because they have often made trial of it with simple numbers, or by virtue of the proof of the nineteenth proposition of the seventh book of Euclid, namely, in virtue of the general property of proportionals.*¹⁰⁶

Hence, reason consists of the elucidation and utilization of common and adequate conceptual laws by which the behavior of entities may be deduced. The motion of the falling apple, for example, terminates only when it strikes Newton’s head – or so the old story goes – and his disciple, on seeing this, knows it adequately through the law: *corpus omne perseverare in statu suo quiescendi vel movendi uniformiter in directum, nisi quatenus a viribus impressis cogitur*

¹⁰³ Spinoza 1994, II:XLI.

¹⁰⁴ Spinoza 1994, II:XL.

¹⁰⁵ Spinoza 1994, II:XL.

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza 1994, II:XL.

statum illum mutare. In this case, the disciple is engaging in the second kind of knowledge; a kind which is distinguished from the imagination's own hazy, atomized perspective by its circuitry of universally valid laws.

There is, however, also a third kind of knowledge in Spinoza's philosophy. Termed intuition by Spinoza, unlike reason, this kind of knowledge does not proceed from common laws but instead "proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things."¹⁰⁷ It is, in other words, to know the world as God does— to know conception as concept. Indeed, for us to know the essence of all things through the absolute essence of certain attributes of God, is, for Spinoza, to know each and every thing as a way by which God causes himself to exist. It is, therefore, a kind of knowledge "founded on the actual knowledge of God" in two senses of the term.¹⁰⁸ In the first place, it is to partake of God's own knowledge; in the second, it is to attain true knowledge pertaining to or regarding God.

This knowledge of the ways in which God causes himself bears the distinction of being the height of all possible knowledge. As Spinoza puts it: "The highest endeavour of the mind, and the highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge"; "From this third kind of knowledge arises the highest possible mental acquiescence."¹⁰⁹ This means that God's knowledge of his own activity becomes the highest attainable kind of knowledge. Indeed, while reason is cast as a mere means to an end – "the endeavour or desire to know things by the third

¹⁰⁷ Spinoza 1994, II:XL.

¹⁰⁸ Spinoza 1994, V: XX.

¹⁰⁹ Spinoza 1994, V:XXV;V:XXVII.

kind of knowledge cannot arise from the first, but from the second kind of knowledge”¹¹⁰ – the self-knowledge of Spinoza’s God is thereby instantiated as the horizon of all possible knowledge.

In this, the possibility of real knowledge outside divine self-knowledge is effectively terminated. What emerges is a perennial philosophical problem. An epistemological and virulent form of solipsism now asserts that, if all knowledge is a type of self-knowledge, then there can be no knowledge outside self-knowledge. The idea of an external world thereby becomes irrational and unknowable while at the same time as the old imperative to ‘know thyself’ becomes the only possible intellectual imperative.

For Spinoza’s God, the fulfillment of this old imperative to know thyself follows immediately from the necessary unfolding of the divine nature. Indeed, because “will and understanding are one and the same,” God’s will and His understanding must also be one and the same and hence the same internal necessity which dictates that, insofar as He is God, He must continually create, now dictates that He must continually know as He creates.¹¹¹ In this way, Spinoza gives credence to the view that the essence of divine omnipotence is divine omniscience and vice versa. Indeed, the very interplay of action and knowledge permeates all of Spinoza’s thinking. The notion that knowledge is power itself reaches its historical consummation in Spinoza’s theory of parallelism— wherein the modal manifestations of the divine attribute of extension perfectly reflects those of the divine attribute of thought. The power of mind thereby

¹¹⁰ Spinoza 1994, V:XXVIII. See also: “Again, since the essence of our mind consists solely in knowledge, whereof the beginning and the foundation is God (I. xv., and II. xlvii. note), it becomes clear to us, in what manner and way our mind, as to its essence and existence, follows from the divine nature and constantly depends on God. I have thought it worth while here to call attention to this, in order to show by this example how the knowledge of particular things, which I have called intuitive or of the third kind (II. xl. note. ii.), is potent, and more powerful than the universal knowledge, which I have styled knowledge of the second kind. For, although in Part I. I showed in general terms, that all things (and consequently, also, the human mind) depend as to their essence and existence on God, yet that demonstration, though legitimate and placed beyond the chances of doubt, does not affect our mind so much, as when the same conclusion is derived from the actual essence of some particular thing, which we say depends on God.” (Spinoza 1994, V:XXXVI.)

¹¹¹ Spinoza 1994, II:XLIX.

parallels that of the body, and hence “a particular volition and a particular idea are one and the same.”¹¹²

As such, insofar as they diverge from God’s conceptual knowledge or idea of Himself, the imaginative impressions of modal entities are not simply recast as privations of knowledge but they ultimately become the boundary between infinite substance and finite mode. What separates us from the divine, then, is the fruit of our finitude, the perception of passionate imagination. While Spinoza does not comment on whether this boundary can ever be fully abolished – “we may thus readily conceive the power which clear and distinct knowledge, and especially that third kind of knowledge, founded on the actual knowledge of God, possesses over the emotions: *if it does not absolutely destroy them, in so far as they are passions; at any rate, it causes them to occupy a very small part of the mind*”¹¹³ – it is evident that he considers the task itself to be the highest endeavor which we may undertake.¹¹⁴

According to Spinoza, then, while the passions can be understood (insofar as they are made to occupy a definite place within his definite system of emotions), they cannot, on this account, actually be said to impart knowledge. Indeed, in the same way that ignorance is not itself a teacher but rather the signal that one needs teaching, the passions do not themselves reveal truths, but only signal the need for truths. Spinoza’s commitment to the equation between being and action therefore necessitates that the passions are an external limitation on being. They are the absence of being insofar as being is action. As such, because God has no external limitations on His being, he cannot, for Spinoza, have any passions.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Spinoza 1994, II:XLIX

¹¹³ Spinoza 1994, V:XX. My Italics.

¹¹⁴ As Spinoza puts it: “The doctrine is good. . . Inasmuch as it teaches us to act solely according to the decree of God, and to be partakers in the Divine nature, and so much the more, as we perform more perfect actions and more and more understand God. Such a doctrine not only completely tranquilizes our spirit, but also shows us where our highest happiness or blessedness is, namely, solely in the knowledge of God, whereby we are led to act only as love and piety shall bid us.”

¹¹⁵ “Some assert that God, like a man, consists of body and mind, and is susceptible of passions. How far such persons have strayed from the truth.” (Spinoza 1994, I:XV.)

Unlike in Heidegger – wherein our finitude may serve as a catalyst toward real, authentic self-knowledge in the form of being-toward-death – here, finitude actually signals the privation of knowledge. Death cannot impart knowledge, it can only signal the end of knowledge. “Death becomes less hurtful, in proportion as the mind's clear and distinct knowledge is greater.”¹¹⁶ For Spinoza, the more knowledge one gains, the less death – as the ultimate expression of our human finitude – occupies their mind. This is not an incidental relation. As Spinoza puts it: “In proportion as the mind understands more things by the second and third kind of knowledge, it is less subject to those emotions which are evil, and stands in less fear of death.”¹¹⁷ This inability to account for death can be understood in terms of the inertial logic of Spinoza’s conatus; yet it is also noteworthy, here, that this logic is in turn theologized in the self-knowledge of God. Because God’s own inertial nature is antithetical to finitude and all its accompanying passions and anxieties, these passions can, themselves, no longer serve as sources of knowledge.

3.3 On Emissive Vision and the Radiance of Spinoza’s God:

This closure of passion as a source of knowledge does not occur for Spinoza because imagination itself inherently involves error.¹¹⁸ Rather, what worries Spinoza about the first kind of knowledge is that it lacks an internal means of verification. As he puts it:

*It [imagination] would have no reasons for doubting its [a winged horse’s] existence, nor any faculty of dissent, unless the imagination of a winged horse be joined to an idea which precludes the existence of the said horse, or unless the mind perceives that the idea which it possess of a winged horse is inadequate, in which case it will either necessarily deny the existence of such a horse, or will necessarily be in doubt on the subject.*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Spinoza 1994, V:XXXVIII.

¹¹⁷ Spinoza 1994, V:XXXVIII.

¹¹⁸ “I grant that the mind's imaginations, regarded in themselves, do not involve error.” (Spinoza 1994, II: XLIX.)

¹¹⁹ Spinoza 1994, II: XLIX.

The source of error, here, is therefore not imagination *per se* but rather that specific part of imagination which diverges from, and exists outside of the knowledge attained via reason and intuition. This part of imagination is that which occurs when the mind is in a passive, as compared to active, state. This passive state is termed by Spinoza as perception while its active counterpart is referred to as conception. “I say conception rather than perception,” Spinoza writes, “because the word perception seems to imply that the mind is passive in respect to the object; whereas conception seems to express an activity of the mind.”¹²⁰ From this it follows that only perception as a state of mind inherently involves error and therefore only perception ought to be discarded. Conception, on the other hand, is to be encouraged.

This isolation and elevation of conception as the active element of imagination should be considered a decisive moment within the history of the optics of thought. It signals, insofar as we might speak of ‘philosophical vision,’ or a theory concerning the nature of intellectual vision, a significant, if not ultimately deceive, triumph of the emission theory of vision over the competing intromission theory. Indeed, in championing conception against perception, Spinoza asserts himself into the age-old debate over whether sight occurs through the active emission of ocular rays or through the passive intromission of light into our ocular receptacles. In this way, Spinoza dictates that true vision, or, what is the same, vision of the truth, must be an active endeavor— one cannot wait to passively *receive* light in order to see, but on the contrary, through ocular activity, they must expand their being so as to illuminate surrounding entities. In this way, thinking itself, for Spinoza, is thereby cemented, not as a process that acts upon the mind, but as the pure activity of the mind.

This emissive, ocular light by which ‘seeing’ as a pure activity occurs, is, for Spinoza, the radiance or light of God. In this respect it is worthwhile to note that an intimate connection

¹²⁰ Spinoza 1994, II:Definition III.

between the act of conception – wherein the mind is active with respect to an object – and the nature of divinity is present in Spinoza’s *Ethics* as early as his famed definition of substance: “by substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.”¹²¹ Here, the primordial link between volition (action) and idea is established in the relation between the substantial *concepitur* (conceived, conception) and the substantial *conceptus* (concept). Indeed, substance’s self-conception, or self-creation exists in a necessary and parallel relation to its status as an independent concept. Creation therefore requires conception and vice versa. As such, because there is only one infinite substance (God), everything which can be known, must be known through God *qua* substance. “By substance... that is, something of which the conception requires not the conception of anything else; whereas modifications exist in something external to themselves, and a conception of them is formed by means of a conception of the thing in which they exist.”¹²² To know, in other words, any mode of the single divine substance entails that it must be grasped through God.

This kind of apprehension is, of course, identical to Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge. The process by which intuition “proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things” is the same process by which the mind as a thinking thing conceives an idea. To see, therefore, through the light of God is to see intuitively. For Spinoza, this is the only light in which ideas may be grasped. “By idea, I mean the mental conception which is formed by the mind as a thinking thing.”¹²³ Hence, perception, when it is transformed into conception, begets intuition. What this suggests is that the ascent from imagination to intuition is predicated upon a shift in ocular function insofar as the

¹²¹ Spinoza 1994, I:Definition III.

¹²² Spinoza 1994, I:VIII.

¹²³ Spinoza 1994, II:Definition II.

passive intromission of perception must give way to emission. The transformation from the first kind of knowledge into the third kind of knowledge therefore occurs via a process of ocular reconfiguration.¹²⁴ In pursuit of truth the philosophical eye must be operated on so that it is made to act, not to receive.

What is lost in this reconfiguration, however, is the possibility of disclosure as a source of knowledge. That perception has been amputated from the other faculties of knowledge signals that entities themselves can no longer disclose or reveal themselves to us. Indeed, the sun, for example, no longer discloses any truths to us, rather – through activity – we reason or intuit truths about the sun. We do not learn *from* the sun, rather we learn *about* the sun. The advent of Spinoza’s second kind of knowledge, therefore, signals a shift in the discourse of truth. Truth is no longer a dialogue held between us and being; instead, truth has become a discourse about beings held amongst ourselves. The very same surety with which Spinoza first dispatches the superstition (stemming from imagination) that claims ‘trees may talk as men’ also ensures that the trees are no longer ‘listened’ to at all. As such, in becoming a public affair, the discourse of truth has therefore also become a private one. What is truthful, now, is not the being (the disclosure) of entities, but the application of “notions common to all men, and adequate ideas of the properties of things” onto these entities. Truth, therefore, does not rest in the apple’s fall, but only in the law applied to explain the falling apple.

What, on Spinoza’s account, distinguishes a true law from a mere phantasm of human reason is its agreement with the emissive light of intuition. Hence, the laws of Euclid, for example, are only valid through their correspondence with intuition. As Spinoza notes:

They [tradesmen] have in fact found this correct in the case of very simple numbers, or else from the force of the proof of Proposition 19 of the Seventh Book of Euclid, to wit, the common

¹²⁴ The second type of knowledge, here, represents a sort of catalyst by which this transformation from perception to conception is actualized.

*property of proportionals. But in the case of very simple numbers, none of this is necessary. For example, in the case of the given numbers 1, 2, 3, everybody can see that the fourth proportional is 6, and all the more clearly because we infer in one single intuition the fourth number from the ratio we see the first number bears to the second.*¹²⁵

Euclid's proposition has the force of reason because it aligns with intuition. This is why Spinoza claims: "anyone can comprehend Euclid's propositions before they are proved."¹²⁶

Comprehension is prefigured to align with the laws of conception. "We have just shown (in Prop. xvi.), that solely from the necessity of the divine nature, or, what is the same thing, solely from the laws of his nature, an infinite number of things absolutely follow in an infinite number of ways."¹²⁷ The difference between a reason of the second kind and an intuition of the third kind is whether conception occurs at the level of law (of divine nature), or at the level of divine nature itself. Either way the horizon of knowledge remains the same. The laws of reason are identical with God's nature.¹²⁸

In this way, while one might certainly speak of the rain-fall through reference to the relevant scientific laws, these explanations – insofar as they involve laws of reason – are themselves thereby rendered equivalent to the old maxim 'God wills it.' (Or, in Spinoza's case, rendered equivalent to the bare affirmation that God is.) Hence, while one may explain the rainfall through a law of reason, this act is like a blind man describing an elephant through touch. What is described by this tactile exploration may be accurate, of course – provided one does not, by means of the first kind of knowledge, mistake a tusk for a spear, a leg for a snake, or a flank for a wall – yet even described rightly or known in themselves, none of these parts can be said to

¹²⁵ Spinoza 2002, 268.

¹²⁶ Spinoza 2002, 525.

¹²⁷ Spinoza 1994, I:XVII.

¹²⁸ Indeed, for Spinoza these laws of reason are the only true laws. As he notes in the *Tractatus*: "A law which depends on natural necessity is one which necessarily follows from the nature, or from the definition of the thing in question; a law which depends on human decree, and which is more correctly called an ordinance, is one which men have laid down for themselves and others in order to live more safely or conveniently, or from some similar reason." (Spinoza 2021, IV:2) Hence, laws for Spinoza are only truly laws insofar as they follow from natural (divine) necessity.

be the full picture. Hence while one may rightly speak of an amalgamation of tusks and ears and tails, this is really only to speak of a partial or ‘skin deep’ sort of knowledge. It is deeper, instead, to simply speak of the whole elephant, and, in this way, while one may speak of God’s laws, it is deeper still to speak of God Himself. Indeed, this affirmation is the highest and most universal answer— it is capable of serving as the only complete answer to any question. One is still free, of course, to cite the threads of the infinite, efficient causal chain in order to answer questions of why the rain falls, the stars shine, or the pigs snort, but all these events are themselves only holistically or completely explained by the simple affirmation of the divine.

What is eternally curious about this affirmation-as-answer, however, is that, while not incorrect, it is actually to say nothing about the entity or event itself. Indeed, a semantic shift has occurred here. To say ‘God wills it’ with reference to the falling rain is actually to say nothing at all about the rainfall. It is, rather, to say something about God— that He wills, or in Spinoza’s case, that He simply is. Hence, in the case of Spinoza’s optics, the object of inquiry is never actually rain, pigs, or stars – no longer any entity in question – but always just God Himself. While such an observation may not unsettle Spinoza himself, it is worthwhile to point out that entities themselves are therefore no longer a source or object of knowledge *per se* but rather only an occasion for the exercise of our knowledge of God.

What this signals is that, not only is the light of the emissive vision by which Spinoza sees, God, but that all he sees by this light is God. The question therefore becomes whether or not Spinoza has stumbled into the old danger first illuminated by Parmenides in his conversation with the young Socrates. “I think we must admit,” Parmenides tells the young philosopher:

that absolute knowledge is the most exact knowledge, which we must therefore attribute to God. But then see what follows: God, having this exact knowledge, can have no knowledge of human

*things, as we have divided the two spheres, and forbidden any passing from one to the other:—the gods have knowledge and authority in their world only, as we have in ours.*¹²⁹

In this, God's perfection has become the source of his imperfection. The perfect knowledge which follows from the necessity of the divine nature necessarily precludes God from having access to any imperfect knowledge. As Parmenides observes, however, this preclusion itself is a source of incompleteness or imperfection. Indeed, God may know only what is perfect, yet only what is divine is perfect. In this way, God becomes blind to everything but Himself. That in Spinoza's case, absolute knowledge is recast as intuition matters little, the result remains the same: "to deprive God of knowledge is monstrous."¹³⁰

It should be emphasized, however, that this monstrousness is an optical, not theological problem. Spinoza's conative reconfiguration of being – beholden as it is to an inertial logic – necessitates an active, emissive form of seeing. It is this type of seeing, when fused with divine perfection, which renders God blinded by the light of His own divinity. The additional step – that we may not only partake in God's knowledge, but that God's knowledge is the only knowledge – ensures that, insofar as we are knowing beings, we must also share in God's blindness.

In this way, the pure radiance of God is, in essence, the darkness of the *nihil*. As Heidegger notes: "Where the brightness in question is pure brightness, and is thus a brightness that shines on its own terms beyond the measure of what is adequate to us, one can see nothing precisely on account of this pure brightness."¹³¹ Pure brightness, in other words, is really just darkness. To see only the light of God is really to 'see' only the darkness of the nothing. It is in this spirit that Heidegger names the forgetting of being nihilism; a term which should not be taken as a doctrine or disposition of extreme pessimism and skepticism, but rather, as that which

¹²⁹ Plato 1996.

¹³⁰ Plato 1996.

¹³¹ Heidegger 2018, 27.

signals that “there is nothing with respect to a being, and by no means just with respect to this or that being, rather there is nothing with respect to beings as such as a whole.”¹³² As Heidegger puts it elsewhere: “What is happening to Being? *Nothing* is happening to Being.”¹³³ Being has become nothing for us. It has, in a word, been annihilated. Indeed, in the case of Spinoza’s thinking, like Semele before the true face of Zeus, being has been reduced to nothing before the divine radiance of Spinoza’s God.

That this nihilistic brightening of being is not only formulated but actively championed at the onto-theological level by Spinoza indicates that, had Heidegger taken a more active interest in Spinoza, he would have become increasingly antagonistic toward his thinking. There is, as such, no “complicity between Spinoza and Heidegger.”¹³⁴ Quite the opposite, the affirmation of the one necessitates the negation of the other.

It should be noted in closing, however, that it is only in this oppositional tension that the essence of inertial onto-theology may reveal itself. Indeed, as Heidegger notes in his *Heraclitus*: “Every time, we bump up against the apparently irreconcilable and oppositional, the essential is stirred.”¹³⁵ To know Spinoza is to experience the radiant mode of thinking which underpins modernity; to know Heidegger is to know what this mode-of-thought costs. Without Heidegger there can be no understanding; without Spinoza, nothing to understand. Both philosophers are therefore thinkers of the essence of modern, inertial onto-theology; and indeed just as sea and sky are both required to see the horizon line, both Spinoza and Heidegger are required to glimpse its essential edge. It is only in this opposition and absolute tension between them that the essence

¹³² Heidegger 2023, 147.

¹³³ Heidegger 1977, 104.

¹³⁴ Lysemose 2020, 141.

¹³⁵ Heidegger 2018, 27.

of inertial onto-theology – as that which is “decisive and singular and at the very limit of thought”¹³⁶ – may therefore fully come into focus.

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