

The Unity of Metaphysics and Ethics in Spinoza

Simon Buterin (BA, BPhil)
Macquarie University
Philosophy Department

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Supervisor: Professor Nicholas Smith
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Summary

This thesis will give an exposition of Spinoza's key metaphysical and ethical doctrines, with a view to clarifying their underlying unity. The importance of the unity for ethics is to support the case for a conception of ethical life that goes beyond a focus on the individual ethical subject, towards a view of ethical life that includes our strivings to understand the world around us. It is shown that Spinoza belongs to a tradition of philosophical thought in which ideas of a good life are inextricably bound up with the comprehension of the essential nature of our surroundings. To live ethically is to have one's thoughts move away from the idea of a self in an endeavour to see how one is related to the environment one lives in. In developing this conception of the unity of metaphysics and ethics, Spinoza, like other philosophers in this tradition, draws on ideas of truth and perfection, which become the motivating force behind human action. In the final chapter of the thesis links are made between Spinoza's attempt at unifying metaphysics and ethics and Iris Murdoch's approach to ethics, and the project of unifying metaphysics and ethics is defended against approaches that are based on the separation of these branches of philosophy, such as that proposed by Christine Korsgaard.

Candidate Statement

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled "*The Unity of Metaphysics and Ethics in Spinoza*" has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledge.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.


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Signature

Simon Buterin

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Full name

40437469

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Student ID

09/ 10/ 2017

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Date

Abbreviations

All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* will be taken from the Penguin Classics edition published in 1996. This edition was edited and translated by Edwin Curley with an introduction by Stuart Hampshire.

When referring to the text in the footnotes the specific section of the *Ethics* will be given and not the page number of book. In referring to the specific sections the following abbreviations will be used:

Pt = Part

Def. = Definition

P = Proposition

Ax = Axiom

Cor. = Corollary

Schol. = Scholium

Dem. = Demonstration

For example when referring to the scholium of proposition 29 in part 1, it will be shown as Pt 1, P29, Schol.

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I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Nicholas Smith for his guidance and patience in helping me put this thesis together and develop a better understanding of Spinoza's Ethics.

I would mostly like to thank my parents. Without their care and support over the last year during extended periods of physical pain, completing this project would not have been possible.

Introduction

This thesis will attempt to clarify the unity of the metaphysical and ethical theories that Spinoza presents in his text the *Ethics*. I make the claim that the connection between these two branches of philosophical study occurs because his ideas of an ethical life emerge from his metaphysical conception of the world. In brief terms, Spinoza's idea of human freedom is grounded in the knowledge we have of God, which is the unique metaphysical force that underpins our world. This means that in order to be happy and free, one needs to understand the essential nature of the world we live in. Amongst the benefits we gain from having a clear conception of reality, are stability and security against the destabilizing effect of the emotions. This is an example of how our happiness is directly linked to a metaphysical understanding.

Once the connection between metaphysics and ethics in Spinoza has been established, I want more specifically to argue that there is an inherent significance in linking them together. By grounding human freedom in the understanding of a non-subjective force, Spinoza's ethics obliges one to look outwards from the self. On his account, the good life is achieved and maintained by turning our focus towards our objective surroundings, and aligning our thinking with the absolute force that underpins nature. One who has knowledge of God not only comprehends what makes the world possible, but also sees how humans fit in nature. By knowing our place in the world at large we can live more aligned to it and be more embracing of the people and things we engage with.

Conceiving the two disciplines of metaphysics and ethics as being connected to each other has a long and deep philosophical history. It is by no means a method peculiar to Spinoza and in fact was the way philosophy was customarily practiced. How one should act, or what constitutes a happy life is traditionally dependent upon the metaphysical conception one has of the world. This approach is evident in ancient Greek philosophy, including, of course, Plato. He believed that human virtue is grounded in an understanding of the true forms of reality, the forms being the invisible essential truth behind the material world we live in. Likewise the Stoics adopted a similar line by arguing that happiness was aligned to our understanding of the unitary force in nature, and we become more virtuous by having greater

knowledge of the substance that links everything together. The unity of metaphysics and ethics can also be found in Scholastic philosophy, which generally maintains that our greatest endeavours are directed towards an understanding of God. Whilst we can never fully know God, our faith in the divine leads us to pursue a greater understanding of him. In continuing this tradition into the early modern period of philosophy, Spinoza has greatly borrowed from this history and has adopted many of the ideas of the aforementioned thinkers. He has in many respects transformed their ideas into a philosophical system that has culminated in his own understanding of how metaphysics and ethics are complementary disciplines of study. In the process of giving an elucidation of Spinoza's work, I will make reference to this history in order to clarify Spinoza's ideas and to also give them historical context.

Despite this long tradition of aligning moral theories and maxims with a metaphysical understanding, ethics today is to a very large degree a philosophical practice that is done independently of metaphysics. Historically, skepticism towards metaphysics surged during the Enlightenment and is exemplified in Hume who believed nothing could be determinatively said about anything beyond sensible experience, and Kant who removed the divine and the non-empirical essence of things from the sphere of human knowledge. In both Hume and Kant ethics was uprooted from its traditional base in metaphysics, and metaphysics itself as a study into a non-empirical reality was regarded with suspicion. The separation of metaphysics and ethics in Hume and Kant has been highly influential and much modern moral philosophy follows in the path they laid out. To a large degree contemporary ethics has taken inspiration from Kant's conception of the practical use of reason that is independent of how things are in nature, and whose point arises solely from its role in shaping autonomous human action. Rawls' moral and political theory is an example of such an approach. He specifically advocates a public conception of justice that is political and not metaphysical. Rawls' method explicitly puts to one side religious or transcendent elements that might feature as a background from which ideas of a moral life emerge.¹ Another contemporary example of ethics being done in isolation of metaphysics, and to which particular focus will be given in this thesis, is the work of Christine Korsgaard. Her ethical theory is centred on the autonomous individual whose freedom

¹ See John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol, 14 No. 3, 1985

is exercised in the practical realisation of identity. For Korsgaard, ethics is inwardly focused on the self-regulating individual whose chief concerns are its identity and reflective choices. Moral action is grounded in the norms we autonomously give to ourselves and an ethical person is one that is faithful to the maxims that one considers most suitable to maintain one's own identity. Ethics thus becomes focused on the self-determining individual who in particular contexts chooses a course of action that best reflects a practical identity. This kind of moral philosophy, which puts to one side the problems of understanding one's place in nature and reality as a whole, is so pervasive today that it might seem there is no respectable alternative to it. My aim in this thesis is to explore the possibility of such an alternative approach, using Spinoza's attempt at unifying ethics and metaphysics as my guide.

The first two chapters of the thesis will offer a detailed exposition of the main features of Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics as outlined in his *Ethics*. The first chapter will focus on the key elements of his metaphysics. Particular attention will be given to his notion of substance, which is the foundation of his whole philosophical system. Substance, by way of its unique self-causing nature, is the necessary power that makes our world possible. The second chapter will be dedicated to elucidating some of the central notions of Spinoza's ethics, understood as a development of metaphysics. Spinoza's key idea here is that by utilizing our rational capacities, we can connect with the environment we engage in as manifesting a moral order. The greater the connection we make between things in our environment, the closer we come to understanding God. The intuitive knowledge of God is the height of Spinoza's idea of human freedom.

On the back of the elucidation given in the first two chapters, the third and final chapter will more explicitly argue for the inseparability of metaphysics and ethics and the importance of understanding them as intimately related. The arguments I make will be fashioned through the philosophy of Iris Murdoch, and these views will be juxtaposed with those of Christine Korsgaard, whose contemporary approach to ethics puts to one side the problems of understanding nature as a non-observable whole. Korsgaard's work has been chosen as she is a distinguished Kantian scholar and belongs to a tradition of thought that understands morality to be enwrapped in the

self-determining individual. Finally, the chapter will return to Spinoza and the broader vision of ethics that becomes available once it is conceived in unity with metaphysics.

Chapter 1: The Key Elements of Spinoza's Metaphysics

In order to demonstrate how the ethics of Spinoza is tied to his metaphysical conception, it is necessary to explain each of the elements that he considers constitute all of nature. His work the *Ethics* is dedicated to enumerating and explaining the fundamental parts of our world in geometric order.² Though Spinoza tries to demonstrate the logical necessity of his claims by way of definitions, axioms and supporting propositions, it would be misguided to interpret his philosophy in purely logical terms. At its highest moment, an understanding of our reality is not rationally deduced but intuitively grasped. Along with our rational capacities to logically order our reality, it is possible to intuitively see the coherence of our surroundings after deductive reasoning. Owing to this, it would be more appropriate to interpret Spinoza as suggesting that an understanding of the world and its parts is as much a developed psychological state as it is logically necessary.³ The interplay between logical necessity and intuitive awareness is most significant when we consider his ethics and how our well-being is tied to an understanding of the objective reality. Before we reach this far though, an explanation of the essential features of Spinoza's metaphysics, as laid out in the first parts of the *Ethics*, is required. It is within the metaphysical landscape established by Spinoza, that he develops his key ethical ideas such as human happiness and freedom.

The chapter will focus on three fundamental ideas of Spinoza's metaphysics: substance, God and Nature. It will be shown that for Spinoza, everything is unified in God, the one unique substance, through the attributes that are an expression of God's existence. By identifying God with Nature, Spinoza gives an alternative conception of God to the one traditionally proposed by the dominant western religions and is more

² The full title of Spinoza's *Ethics* is *The Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometric Order and Divided into Five Parts, Which Treat I. Of God, II. Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind, III. Of the Origin and Nature of the Affects, IV. Of Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects V. Of the Power of the Intellect, or On Human Freedom*

³ This point is made by Genevieve Lloyd, in *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics*, (Routledge, London, 1996) p.53

Furthermore, as will become apparent in this thesis, Lloyd will be referred to extensively. I do acknowledge that there are different interpretations of Spinoza, though due to limited space I cannot engage with them all and for this reason I will mostly limit myself to Lloyd's interpretation as it is with her views I have the closest affinity.

aligned to Stoical conceptions of the divine. As a result of the equivalence of God and Nature, the divine is an immanent force and not a transcendent one. God does not determine the world from a transcendent realm beyond the world we live in; rather in specific ways God determines the world from within it owing to its unique nature.⁴ At the end of the chapter I will also provide some remarks on Spinoza's use of the ideas of unity and perfection. These notions are particularly important because they mark the transition from metaphysics to ethics that will be explored in more detail in the second chapter.

1.1 Substance, God, Nature

What underpins Spinoza's whole metaphysical system is his notion of substance. There is an extended tradition of thinking about substance in philosophy from which Spinoza develops his own conception. I will refer to segments of this history to bring out the continuity of ideas that persists in Spinoza, and show how he has reconfigured these ideas to suit his own metaphysical views.

For Spinoza, the self-generating activity of substance makes the world and our understanding of it possible. Everything that forms a part of nature can be explained in terms of its relation to substance, as something belonging to it as an attribute, or as something causally determined by it. Substance is the unity to which everything is related. What makes substance primarily distinct is that it is the cause of itself, meaning it does not require another thing, or the concept of another thing in order to exist. Substance is unique due to it being "conceptually independent"⁵ from all other forms of being and having the power of generating existence within itself. Having said this, Spinoza's idea of self-causing implies that substance is more than a being that is not caused from without. He gives it positive significance by stating that for something to be the cause of itself is for it to exist necessarily. This is a development on the Scholastic and Aristotelian idea of self-causing, which was predominantly a

⁴ I here refer to God (as I do substance) using the personal pronoun *it* rather than *he*. Even though Spinoza does refer to God using *he*, I will refrain from doing so because I do not think it appropriately captures the conception offered and also to differentiate it from the traditional notion present in religion.

⁵ Richard Glauser, "Spinoza," in *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*, (Routledge, London, 2009) p.89

negative notion that meant not to be caused by another.⁶ Spinoza in the first definition writes, “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.”⁷ Existence is the very essence of something that is considered to be the cause of itself and when referring to substance Spinoza states that existence and essence are one and the same thing.⁸ The definition points out that a self-causing thing such as substance is a purely positive force that cannot be conceived as not existing and necessarily produces its own being by way of its particular nature.

Given that a substance is the cause of itself, it is a being that is in itself and is to be conceived through itself, which means that causal independence equates to ontological and conceptual autonomy. In what for Spinoza is a determined world, substance stands independently of all other modes of being. The independent nature of substance is the basis for the idea of *Natura naturans*, which refers to substance as a “free cause.”⁹ Substance conceived as *Natura naturans* has no limitations that could impede its creative nature, and its power to act is a non-contingent absolute force. The world is determined by substance as its self-generating power produces our objective reality in specific ways. Therefore the concept of another mode of existence is necessarily related to substance by way of it being a product of its dynamic nature. This directly impacts on Spinoza’s ethics, as understanding what is good for humans first entails how we are related to substance. Considering we are modes that emanate from the productive force of substance, means in order to know something about the good life we need to know what substance is, because substance is the reason we have a life. The nature of human life as conditioned by substance is an example of what Spinoza refers to as *Natura naturata*, which is differentiated from *Natura naturans* and refers to a thing or mode of being that can only be conceived through the necessary existence of God and its attributes.¹⁰

⁶ See David Bidney, “Value and Reality in the Metaphysics of Spinoza,” in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, p.229

⁷ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, (Penguin Books, London, 1996), Pt I, Def. 1

⁸ Ibid, Pt I, P20

⁹ Ibid, Pt I, P29, Schol.

¹⁰ Ibid, Pt I, P29, Schol.

Spinoza claims that there is only one substance in the universe and that substance he defines as God. He writes, “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.”¹¹ Central to the argument of there being only one substance is the idea that God consists of infinite attributes. Spinoza does not allow that two or more substances can share the same nature or that they could have attributes in common.¹² To say that God contains infinite attributes is to say that there is not an attribute that does not pertain to it, and given that substances cannot have shared attributes, there must be only one substance, that is God. All the attributes therefore stem from the one source in which they are unified. Spinoza’s metaphysics is built on the idea of God as one self-contained unity, given that it is the single immanent substance to which all the other forms of existence are connected.

Despite all the attributes being unified in God, Spinoza claims that each attribute is to be conceived through itself and the idea of one attribute cannot be conceived through the idea of another attribute. This means that each attribute is conceptually independent from all the other attributes, and one could easily be mistaken in thinking that Spinoza is conflating attributes with substance and therefore proposing infinite independent attributes and not infinite attributes that reside in one substance. The ambiguity arises because each attribute is in the most general sense the kind of thing substance is.¹³ In order to resolve the uncertainty that arises due to the indistinctness between attribute and substance, God can be conceived in two complementary ways that as will be shown position Spinoza’s understanding of substance between the conceptions offered by Plato and Aristotle. In order to see how Spinoza arrives at this position, we first need to keep in view his distinctive conception of the divine. He explains that we need to differentiate between what is infinite in its own kind and what is absolutely infinite. The world conceived through a particular attribute is infinite in relation to this attribute only. On the other hand, substance is considered absolutely infinite, as we understand it to be infinite in regards to all the attributes. When we contemplate God, we understand it to be infinite in relation to infinite

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt I, Def. 6

¹² Ibid, Pt I, P5

¹³ This point is made in Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics, An Introduction*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006), p.56

attributes and not just particular ones. There is no constraint in the manner that God's activity manifests. Therefore the attributes are likened to God when we consider all the attributes as a unity in God. Whilst each attribute is conceived through itself, God is expressed through all the attributes. Lloyd offers a similar solution to the problem of likening attributes to substance. She explains that Spinoza utilizes a mixture of two approaches when defining God. One is "God-under-an-attribute" as a determinate object or "God-of-many-attributes" which is not given as a determinate object.¹⁴ This is another way of construing the infinite in its own kind and absolutely infinite distinction given above.

Having these two views of God, as a determinate object under a single attribute or as an idea through infinite attributes puts Spinoza's conception of substance somewhere between that of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, reality is only intelligibly evident in the true ideas of things and is distinguished from the physical world. In order to unite the intelligible and natural worlds that remain separate in Plato's doctrine of forms, Aristotle argues that the essence of each thing, meaning what something invariably is, does not exist apart from the material thing that it is. The essence of something is instantiated in its physical matter. We know what something is by reference to its form, but this form, or essence, is individuated in a particular subject due to the material thing it is. On their own, the forms are devoid of content. Matter actualizes the form in an individual subject, from which we can predicate things according to the different categories. Without matter, we can only refer to essence as an intelligible form, but not as the form of a physically existing body.

Spinoza's conception of substance goes beyond the intelligible forms of Plato but not so far as to be instantiated in individual subjects as it is for Aristotle. God as an idea in which reside all the attributes is Platonic in the sense that it is something that is purely rational and not a determinate object. On the other hand, the individual attributes as an expression of the divine essence help Spinoza's conception of substance to move beyond the world of forms and have material legitimacy in the natural world. In the case of extension, we do not equate instances of physical matter with the divine substance, but we do understand it to be caused by God through the

¹⁴ Lloyd, (1996), p.34

attribute of extension. There is an immediate relation between the intelligible form and our objective world that is not evident in Plato. Having said this, substance cannot be ascribed to an individual subject as it is for Aristotle. What for Aristotle are individual instantiations of substance, Spinoza understands as modal variations of the one divine substance. Through the attributes Spinoza allows for a general instantiation of substance and not particular ones.

From a historical perspective, the idea that there is only one substance is an alternative to some of the more familiar metaphysical conceptions, such as the one offered by Descartes for example. For Descartes, like Spinoza, God is an infinite substance that necessarily exists.¹⁵ Strictly speaking, a substance is something that needs nothing else in order to exist. Having said this, Descartes does not employ this meaning of substance universally, and considers mind and body to also be unique substances. In a sense, they are of a secondary nature to God. They rely on the “conservation” of God as the primary substance in order to exist, meaning mind and body depend on God as the creator of all things for their existence.¹⁶ As Descartes explains, mind and body unlike other created things, are each a substance because they only rely on God and not on other things to exist. Other created things that rely on more than just the conservation of God Descartes terms attributes or qualities of substance. A substance is recognizable not just from the mere fact that it exists, but from some principal property in which inheres the nature and essence of the substance and to which is referred all its other properties.¹⁷ For example, the principal property of the mind is thought and extension is the principal property of the body.

In certain respects Spinoza develops his notion of substance from the concept dualism found in Descartes. Where for Descartes, mind and body are each a particular substance, for Spinoza, they are two attributes of the one substance, God. The separation of the mind and body in Descartes as two unique substances is unified in God in Spinoza’s metaphysics. Despite the different ways they conceptualize mind

¹⁵ Rene Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, (Penguin Books, London, 1998)

¹⁶ Rene Descartes, “The Principles of Philosophy,” in *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, (Penguin Books, London, 1998) p.131

¹⁷ See Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, p. 132

and body, both Descartes and Spinoza ascribe a primacy to them that is not permitted for other modes or qualities. Thought and extension are ways in which God's necessary existence is objectively evident in Spinoza. In other words, due to the nature of God to exist, we have a world of ideas and extended matter. Like in Descartes, mind and body are solely reliant on the existence of God. Whilst Spinoza does consider the attributes to be the essence of God, as will be shown, they could not be conceived without the existence of God. It is because one substance necessarily exists and therefore necessarily acts in the way it does, that our world is the way it is. What Spinoza does attempt to do is to integrate the dualism found in Descartes through an alternative conception of God. Whilst for both of them God is the creator of all things, it is over the nature of God and how it is conceived that they differ. The different ontologies offered by Descartes and Spinoza result from differing conceptions of how God actually creates all things.

Descartes' conception of God is one of a purposeful creator. Minds and bodies constitute the world because God has conceived the world in such a manner. It is by the will of God, who is the source of all goodness, that humans have been created in the form that they have.¹⁸ For Spinoza, to ascribe a will to God is to mistakenly suppose that God acts for the sake of an end in the way humans do.¹⁹ Rather, he believes that God's necessary existence has no teleological purpose. Its being is not intentionally directed to producing the attributes or any particular end for that matter. To understand the effects of God's existence teleologically, is to mistakenly project our own self-image and desires onto God. The effects of God's existence have necessarily resulted in a particular manner because they could not have been affected in any other way. They are what God produces without design and follow from it necessarily. God's active nature can be likened to volcanic activity in the earth from which masses of land are formed. The shape of the land is not intended by a volcano but necessarily comes to be the way it is due to the nature of the volcano to erupt. When speaking of the cause of the configuration of land, we refer to the active essence of the volcano. Likewise, God is an active force whose being manifests into our sensual and intelligible world. The universe is the effect of God as a dynamic power that acts necessarily and not teleologically. Thought and extension, along with

¹⁸ This point is made by Descartes in, *The Principles of Philosophy*, p. 120

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt I, Appendix

infinite other attributes are what God's activity actually is. For this reason they are thought to be the essence of substance along with existence.

In order to clarify the conception of God being presented by Spinoza and to differentiate it from the more traditional conception present in Descartes, Lloyd explains that attributes are not properties of a God that transcends our world; rather they are the manner in which reality is expressed. They do not belong to God as something it has created, but are related to it as a definite expression.²⁰ If we recall the definition of God given earlier, Spinoza specifically uses the word “expresses” to denote what the infinite attributes do. They are an expression of God's eternal and infinite essence.²¹ Our understanding of the objective world is mediated through them. The attributes are demonstrative proof of the existence of the divine substance that emerges in specific ways in the world.

There is a philosophical tradition that posits a substance or God as a primary active force that is the cause of everything in the universe. Notably Aristotle also believed that there is something that exists prior to everything else that makes the existence of the universe possible. Whilst all contingent substances come to exist in an actual state from a potential one, Aristotle argues that there must first of all be an actual thing that makes the movement from potentiality to actuality possible. More precisely, he claims that there must be an imperishable eternal thing that is not subject to change and which is always in an actual state and never a potential one. This means it exists necessarily and prior to all contingent things that it makes possible.²² Similarly in Spinoza, God as the cause of all things must be prior to all its affections.²³

The Scholastics who were of course well versed in the philosophy of Aristotle also claimed that God is an eternal active force that necessarily exists. The universe is the result of the active nature of one self-generating substance, which is God. This is evident in Anselm who explains that there must be one self-causing thing that can

²⁰ This point is made by Lloyd in, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics*, (1996) p. 31

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt I, Def. 6

²² See Aristotle, “Metaphysics” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (Random House, New York, 1941), p. 830

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt I, P1

explain why anything else is caused to exist.²⁴ Equally, St Thomas Aquinas posits God as an infinite, eternal substance that is not caused by something but is the cause of itself. The dynamic nature of God to act without design he describes as “pure actuality.”²⁵ Aquinas writes that God is a power that is the first cause of everything that determinately follows from its existence.²⁶ The idea of substance or God as a prime mover from which everything else is conceived Spinoza has largely borrowed from the history of philosophy.

Substance as the primary cause of our world is the first principle from which Spinoza develops his metaphysical system. Everything is defined in terms of its relation to God, whereby the attributes are immediately related and the modes are proximately related through the attributes. This philosophical approach of beginning with definitions that branch out into supporting propositions Descartes terms the synthetic method of geometric demonstration.²⁷ Descartes explains this approach as one that is able to demonstrate conclusions on the basis “of a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems” that precede it.²⁸ In the instance of substance, by beginning with a precise definition of it, Spinoza develops his arguments by using the synthetic method to establish that there is only one substance that underpins our reality and all modes of existence are connected to it through the attributes as a proximate cause. He can be seen advocating this philosophical method in earlier works such as in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* where he writes that in order to be able to draw a conclusion from a metaphysical enquiry, we should “develop our thinking from the basis of some given definition, and progress will be more successful and easier as a thing is better defined.”²⁹ This methodology of

²⁴ Anselm, ‘Monologion’ in *Anselm, Basic Writings* (Hackett Publishing Company Inc, Indianapolis, 2007)

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Of God and His Creatures*, (Grand Rapids MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000) p.47

²⁶ “God is the First Cause; therefore he did not begin to be: hence neither will he cease to be; because what always has been has the force of being always.” p.47

Ibid

²⁷ This point is made by Don Garrett in, “Introduction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006)

²⁸ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 85

²⁹ Baruch Spinoza, ‘Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect,’ in *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, (Hackett Publishing Company, Indiana, 1992) p.257

geometric order is significant not only in terms of explaining Spinoza's metaphysics, but also is indicative of his approach to ethics, whereby his ethical theory begins with definitions of how we are affected by our immediate environment and lead to propositions that explain how it is necessary to manage these affects in order to live a good life.

The synthetic method is noteworthy in terms of explaining Spinoza's philosophical outlook and not just his methodology. Given that his whole metaphysical system is grounded in his definition of substance, Spinoza is clearly committed to the idea of an objective world that can be known with certainty. Spinoza seeks to grasp the foundations of our reality by using the geometric method in order to achieve certainty in his conclusions not unlike the definite outcomes attainable in mathematics. The security of the geometric method is supposed to uphold what he takes to be the truth about our metaphysical reality. As a result, the ethics of Spinoza is linked to his metaphysics as he utilizes the same method to enwrap the outcomes of his ethical theory within his metaphysical system. The good life is guided by a grasp of the truth that underscores our reality.

Spinoza's utilization of the synthetic method is also significant as it compels one to look outward from the self in order to understand the world. Substance as an immanent force to which our rational capacities are directed, is the first determinate truth, and not the cogito as it is for Descartes. This is due to Spinoza approaching the material world with the security of definitions and not viewing it with looming doubt. We build a set of facts about the world by opening out to it, by trying to understand our experiences as being necessarily part of a system that we try to conform our thinking to. We accept the assertions we take to be true because we believe the reality about which we are thinking have made the facts what they are.³⁰ Unlike Kant who tries to have the material world conform to the rules of the human mind, Spinoza aspires to have the mind correspond to the underlying laws of the universe. As a result Spinoza believes all our experiences are unified in God, whereas Kant takes all our experiences to be connected by the unity of apperception, the same self that is present in all of our experiences of the objective world. The significance of the difference

³⁰ This point is made by Alasdair MacIntyre in, *The Tasks of Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006) p.201

between these two approaches to metaphysics and ethics, one turning in and the other directed outwards, will be dealt with in more detail in the third chapter.

Spinoza's definitions and propositions encapsulate extended matter within substance; therefore a material element is ascribed to our metaphysical foundations. Given God does not belong to a transcendent realm and is materially evident in the attributes, it is reconfigured as being part of our immediate environment and is thus equated to Nature. God or Nature is the unified system that regulates the interactions between the modes, and knowing how to live well entails unifying our thoughts to the laws of Nature. Ethics, or inquiry into how to live well, thus emerges directly from metaphysical inquiry, which ultimately is inquiry into the foundations of nature as a whole, which for Spinoza means inquiry into the nature of God.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza interchangeably uses the terms God and Nature.³¹ For him they both refer to the same thing, as God is equated with Nature. From a historical perspective, equating God with Nature is an idea that underpinned Stoical metaphysics. In fact many aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics is congruent with the concepts espoused by the Stoics. They too understood that there is only one substance that is the cause of everything in the universe. The one substance they claimed to be God they also equated to Nature. By Nature, they understood natural laws that unified everything that exists by way of necessary causal relations. Marcus Aurelius writes, "O Nature: from you all things are, in you are all things, to you all things return."³² Furthermore they proposed that the world is a network of causal relations and nothing happens independently of it. God or Nature consists of necessary truths by which the world is determined. Like Spinoza, the Stoics believed there is nothing contingent in the world and everything exists determinately due to the necessity of God's existence, which is eternal and infinite.³³ Moreover God was the most perfect being for the Stoics, and knowledge of God was an understanding of

³¹ I also will interchangeably refer to the divine substance as either God or Nature

³² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (Dover, 1997) p.23

³³ The similarities between the Stoics and Spinoza is succinctly made by Jon Miller in the introduction to his text, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015) p.3

what is supremely good.³⁴ As will be shown further on in this thesis, Spinoza also believes that an ethical life is based on knowledge of God, which is the most perfect being. To live a good life is to have an understanding of the necessary truths that determine the world we live in.

Considered as Nature, God is understood as constituting the natural laws that govern our world. These laws are the fruition of God's active being. God acts because God exists, and its productive essence has manifested itself in ways that include our world of scientific laws. Whilst God is the cause of the laws, it is not subject to it. The causal chain that links finite determinate modes can be understood as being all the universal laws that comprise nature. Nature is the self-contained unity that determines all the effects that emanate from its necessary existence.

Edwin Curley points out that Spinoza speaks of God's power and essence in the same manner as he does of universal laws, meaning there is a likeness, or at least a very close connection between God and the laws of nature.³⁵ He states elsewhere that the divine substance can be identified as being "those most general principles of order described by the fundamental laws of nature."³⁶ We are related to God by the fact that we live within the natural laws that have resulted from its active essence. The laws of nature are inscribed in all the attributes and permeate through all modes of existence. The creative power of substance renders the laws of nature a necessary condition of human existence. Spinoza writes, "The way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature."³⁷ In this particular section, he wants to highlight that ideas on an ethical life can only be considered within the regulative force of Nature. To conceive of an ethics otherwise is to have a distorted view of man and Nature.

³⁴ This point is made by Susan James in her chapter entitled, "Spinoza the Stoic," in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy, The Tension Between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993)

³⁵ Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay In Interpretation*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969)

³⁶ Edwin Curley, 'Introduction', in *A Spinoza Reader*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994) p.xxv

³⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, Preface

Nature is the inescapable system where all of our experiences occur. There is no other reality to which our thoughts could be legitimately directed. The unobstructed force of Nature constructs a world in which bodies and minds can exist. Beyond Nature there is no transcendent realm that is upheld or governed by an alternative metaphysical force. As a consequence of Nature being the immanence of God in this world, the true ends for which humans strive in an ethical life pertain to this world and this earthly life. There is no heavenly sphere that is the abode of only those souls worthy of entry. Our endeavours to be perfect are captured in the clear vision we have of our existence as modes of thought and extension amongst all the other modes in the causal web of the divine. The vision we have of God is the end by which we are morally propelled towards an understanding of the all-pervasive being of Nature rather than acting in the hope of an eternal afterlife. As will be shown in the next chapter, we experience eternity by seeing it in Nature and by thinking in accordance with it and not by conceiving of it as being the character of a supernatural being in a transcendental realm, or the ever-lasting life of the soul after death.

1.2 Concluding Remarks: Perfection and Unity

By way of a conclusion to the chapter, I want to draw attention to Spinoza's use of the concepts of perfection and unity, since they play a special role in shaping Spinoza's ethics. Whilst these two ideas have already been mentioned, here more particular focus will be given to them in order to provide a link to the next chapter. As will be demonstrated in the final section of the next chapter, the two concepts of perfection and unity are crucial when we reach the intellectual love of God, which is the peak of Spinoza's ethics.

Owing to Nature being an absolute force it is in a perpetual state of perfection. For this reason Spinoza equates reality with perfection.³⁸ Nature cannot be conceived to be in a state other than the one it is in. If it could, and its laws were somehow subject to revision, Nature would then be limited in its current form and therefore not be perfect. According to Spinoza's metaphysics this is not possible as there is no being that could limit Nature and its activity. Therefore the perfection of Nature essentially resides in its uninhibited powers to act.

³⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt II, Def. 6

Human perfection on the other hand, which is of a limited nature due to our finite capacities, resides in being able to direct our thinking towards absolute perfection. God or Nature is the idea to which all our other ideas are related. Our ideas of nature insofar as they adequately reflect God, are “more excellent” than the ideas we have of other things.³⁹ Spinoza advocates in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, that we should think in accordance with the “standard of a given true idea,” and this standard is based on a “given idea of the most perfect Being.”⁴⁰ Therefore our thinking should conform to the essential nature of our reality, and therein our ideas will be able to adequately mirror the reality that makes these ideas possible. This is to say that human perfection is based on being able to conceive of ideas that are equated to the attribute of thought, which stems directly from Nature and not on modal variations of it, which are only proximately related to the divine. Therefore our perfection is grounded in having an understanding of absolute perfection, and how we are related to it and limited by the laws and modes of being that are encapsulated within it. The idea of perfection is then twofold; in terms of how it relates to Nature and how it relates to finite modes of being such as humans. In relation to Nature perfection is absolute as it is the infinite force with which it perpetually acts and produces our world of universal laws. As for humans, it is relative to the absolute and refers to the clear conception we have of God, which entails seeing ourselves as finite and necessarily a part of Nature.

A clear idea of God conceives it as a unity from which infinite attributes emanate. This was established in the first section. However Spinoza’s idea of unity wants to go further than just to say that the infinite attributes reside in God. He more specifically argues that because all the attributes are the result of God acting perpetually, for every instance of Nature expressed as extension, there is a corresponding expression in thought, just like every thought has a corresponding extended expression. In Nature thought and extension are not the outcome of two different actions, nor does one follow the other; rather God’s absolute power is expressed in infinite attributes perpetually and therefore the attributes emanate simultaneously. At the level of absolute perfection, that is to say when conceived through Nature, mind and body

³⁹ Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, p.242

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.242

have corresponding relations and not causal relations. The attributes, just like Nature, cannot be divided into parts; they are whole and absolute. Due to thought and extension being one action in Nature, there is no division in the attributes. There is an immediate relation between the body and the mind, as infinite modes of thought correspond to infinite bodily modifications. Singular instances of ideas and bodies are essentially a part of one singular infinite substance. The ethical consequence is that human beings are essentially one body and one mind in Nature. To differentiate people on the basis of empirical facts is to have a superficial view of the world, and to be ignorant of our common essential nature.

The corresponding relation between mind and body removes the skepticism that is prevalent in Descartes. Given they are the result of the same perpetual action, there is no more reason to doubt matter than there is to doubt thought. Though on Spinoza's terms he would have it that we can be equally sure of ourselves as extended matter as we can be certain of ourselves as thinking beings. In reference to mind and body Hampshire writes, "they are two instances of a single inclusive reality."⁴¹ To doubt the certainty of extended matter is to fail to understand the fundamental truth of the reality we live in.

God or Nature encapsulates Spinoza's whole metaphysic. It is a monist conception in the strictest sense. God is the one underlying substance for everything that is and everything that can be conceived. Unifying everything in the world in God creates a oneness, whereby the distinction between mind and body is removed in the divine, as thought and extension essentially express the same thing, the existence of God. The infinity of attributes and multiplicity of individual particular modes dissolve in the unity of Nature. This has great ethical implications considering Spinoza considers the essence of human life to be rooted in *conatus*, that is, a striving to persevere in existence. How we combine our own strivings with the fact that we are united in Nature to all the other modes of being is a tension that will be addressed in the account of Spinoza's ethics. As will be shown, Spinoza's ethics is shaped by his metaphysical conception. A clear understanding of God is the most perfect state we

⁴¹ Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza*, (Penguin Books, Hammondsworth, 1951) p.63

can maintain and is crucial for a good life. Having given an outline of Spinoza's metaphysics, this thesis will now move on to the next chapter and look at his ethics.

Chapter 2: Ethical Outcomes of Spinoza's Metaphysics

On the basis of his metaphysics, Spinoza develops an account of human life that endeavors to explain how we can be virtuous. His ethics is primarily one of joy that is founded on an understanding of Nature and our relation to it.⁴² Knowing how to live well is intimately tied to having an understanding of God. The more we comprehend the relationship between substance and its modes, the greater our lives will be filled with joy. Spinoza continues the ancient philosophical tradition of integrating metaphysics and ethics, which construes human happiness as being contingent on knowledge of the world we live in. Given the correlation between our well-being and understanding, an elucidation of an ethical life in Spinoza entails a study of the human mind. As Garrett points out, Spinoza's ethical theory is the result of "understanding Nature in general and human psychology in particular."⁴³ The operations of the mind and how it can adequately form ideas about God are crucial to being able to live happily.

The importance of a cultivated rational mind is a recurring theme in Spinoza's works. In *The Emendation of the Intellect* for example he writes, "The more things the mind knows, the more it understands both its own powers and the order of Nature."⁴⁴ When humans are led to act by reason, we demonstrate a capacity to be active beings as we are the adequate cause of our actions. This is in contrast to being determined to act by emotion, which is the result of being affected by something external to us. In this case we hold inadequate ideas of our relation to the world around us and as a consequence are only a partial cause of our actions. By way of rational scrutiny, Spinoza believes we can manage these affects and therein be active beings that accord to the dictates of reason rather than passive beings that are subject to the whims of the passions. The more we understand why and how we are affected by our environment, the more active we will be and the greater joy we will experience. Ultimately this will lead to a virtuous life and to what Spinoza regards as the pinnacle of his ethics, the intellectual love of God.

⁴² As noted by Lloyd, (1996), p.83

⁴³ Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory" in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006) p.270

⁴⁴ Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, p.242

This chapter will be divided into three sections that will try and explain the constitutive elements of Spinoza's ethics. The first section will look at the affects, which are transitions that occur in us as a result of having ideas about things we engage with. Grounded in the relationship between mind and body, the affects arise from the way we imagine a particular body to be related to us. When not moderated by reason, they are a determinative force on human actions, and are underpinned by inadequate ideas. By utilizing our capacity to reason we can transition from the inadequate ideas that we hold in imagination, to adequate ideas that explain the logical necessity of our relation to things. It is in this active nature, where our actions are determined by reason and not by the affects that Spinoza's idea of freedom resides.

The second section will look at the development of the role of the imagination in Spinoza. A contemporary interpretation, such as the one offered by Gatens and Lloyd gives the imagination a positive role in human freedom. In contrast to a traditional view of Spinoza as a strict rationalist, they see the imagination as being the source of liberation and not bondage through its creative powers to develop pathways for reason to build adequate ideas.

The third section of this chapter will look at three interrelated ideas that encapsulate the peak of Spinoza's notion of freedom. Intuitive knowledge, the eternity of the mind and the intellectual love of God are features of the blessed state that one who has strived to live according to one's rational nature enjoys. One's toil to live an ethical life and to be free culminates in an intuitive understanding of God and the accompanying joy that this knowledge brings. This is the apex of Spinoza's *Ethics* and the point where his metaphysical and ethical doctrines come together. Much of this section will be an elucidation of these three ideas and the transformative effect they have on one's social relations.

2.1 Affects

As we are a part of Nature, humans are necessarily subject to the affects. An affect is the transition that occurs in a person as a result of interacting with their immediate

environment, and has an almost “law-like relation” with the objects one engages with.⁴⁵ When one encounters an object, one has ideas that dispose the body and mind in a particular way. An affect arises from the ideas we have of our sensible experiences and is evident in the mental and physical dispositions we maintain. Affects are unavoidable given our bodily nature. When writing of the affects, Spinoza says that they “follow with the same necessity and force of Nature as the other singular things,”⁴⁶ and are therefore regulated by the “universal laws and rules of Nature.”⁴⁷ For this reason, he aims to give an exposition of them utilizing the same geometric method he uses throughout the *Ethics*.

Spinoza lists joy, sadness and desire as the three primary affects from which all the others are derived.⁴⁸ They are the simplest affects that emerge from the affections, which are the impressions left on one’s body by another body. In order to illuminate the contrast between these two terms, an affect is the transition in us that results from the idea one has of the affections. In other terms, the affections are the modes of substance and the affects are modifications that occur in the modes.⁴⁹

The affects of joy and sadness are passions that indicate a movement as a result of being affected. Joy is the passion that follows an increase in the body’s power of acting, which is coupled with an increase in the mind’s power of thinking.⁵⁰ Contrarily, sadness results from a decrease in the capacities of the body and the mind. Spinoza evokes the Aristotelian idea of the passions being defined by movement. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes the passions as “feelings that are accompanied by pleasure and pain,” in respect of which we are said to be moved.”⁵¹ The movement is made possible by a faculty to feel a passion. Because we have an ability to feel anger, for example, the passion of anger can be aroused in us and move us to acts of violence. The point here is that in Aristotle we can already see that the

⁴⁵ Stuart Hampshire, ‘Spinoza’s Theory of Human Freedom’, in *The Monist*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 1971, p.554

⁴⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, Preface

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid, Pt III, P11, Schol.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Pt V, P4, Cor.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Pt III, P11, Schol.

⁵¹ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (Random House, New York, 1941) p.956

passions imply a shift, as one is moved in a particular way according to the passion one feels. Likewise in Spinoza, the passions are indicative of movement, which is evident in the transition of one's state of being.

The third primary affect desire is grounded in the essence of humans as finite beings, which is the striving to persevere in existence, or what he terms conatus. The conatus is the striving that underpins all action, whether it is accompanied by joy or sadness. What is essential in the conatus is the striving itself. Spinoza writes, "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing."⁵² At the most fundamental level, a person will seek to nourish their body with food and avoid things that will harm or impede them from continuing to exist. We first need to be an existing being if we are to be affected in any kind of way. Self-preservation is the most basic desire, from which we develop an appetite for other things.

In terms of self-preservation being the fundamental desire, Spinoza agrees with the Stoics who claimed that appropriating for oneself what is required to exist is the rudimentary motivation in life.⁵³ Hierocles wrote, "Each animal does what contributes to its own preservation, avoiding every attack from afar and contriving to remain unharmed by dangers, while it leaps forward toward whatever brings safety and provides for itself from far and wide whatever tends towards its survival."⁵⁴ This is opposed to the Epicurean notion that we are principally driven by pleasure and pain. As derivatives of the primary affects of joy and sadness, pleasure and pain are the consequence of our conatus.

The idea of movement or transition, which is evident in the affects, is central to Spinoza's ethics. All of our experiences are regulated according to the laws of cause and effect. In the causal web of Nature we are constantly in contact with things external to us, meaning we are perpetually a cause or an effect depending on the

⁵² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, P7

⁵³ A. A. Long points this out in his chapter, "Stoicism in the Philosophical Tradition: Spinoza, Lipsius, Butler," in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.21

⁵⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts*, (Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2009) p.19

nature of the particular relations we have to things. We transition to either a more perfect state of being, or a less perfect state of being, according to how we deal with the affections. In the human mind, a shift is initiated by the imagination, which coupled with memory and the affections, produces images of things for one to form ideas about. Again there are semblances of Aristotle here as he also described the imagination as being constituted by movement due to the objects the mind portrays the images of. Aristotle believes that the imagination belongs to the “organs of sense” due to its power to bring to light or make visible, an object in the mind despite the object not being physically present.⁵⁵ For this reason he ascribes motion to it, as it is a kind of sensible activity, which involves the reception of an object by an organ of sensibility. Likewise in Spinoza, the imagination is closely aligned to the senses. Without the body we could not imagine anything. The images recalled in the mind indicate the body is acted on by something exterior to it. Whilst we can imagine things, we are disposed to be affected and respond in a particular way.

Insofar as the ideas we have of things are products of the imagination, Spinoza believes them to be inadequate. The inadequacy lies in a distorted perception of one’s own essence and that of the objects we imagine. The true nature of the relation between things is misrepresented, as the ideas are contingent on the affections. Due to this dependency on particular bodily relations, the perceptions are arbitrarily formed. To use Spinoza’s phrase, the ideas are taken “from the common order of Nature,” which means the ideas are based on reproducing and giving order to random experiences of the body.⁵⁶ It is indicative of a passive state as one has been acted on, or caused to think in a certain manner according to how an external object impinges on their body. The imagination cannot explain the true relation between things in Nature due to its attachment to the senses, meaning its ideas essentially stem from a modification of our extended nature rather than from a mode of thought. Without accounting for how bodies necessarily come into contact with each other, one isolates an event from the true cause, God. As a result one has a distorted idea of their own essence and that of other bodies.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, “On the Soul”, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (Random House, New York, 1941) p. 589

⁵⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt II, P29, Cor.

As a consequence of having inadequate ideas one is determined to act by the affects. This signals a change in a person of which they are not the adequate cause, meaning one relinquishes, at least partially, the control they have over their own actions. For as long as one is determined by the affects, one does not conceive of ideas beyond the pleasure and pain they receive from the affections. One's mode of thinking and state of mind are at the mercy of whoever or whatever it meets. Being in command of oneself therefore entails correcting the initial perceptions one has of particular affections. The need to clear our thinking of bodily affections echoes the philosophy of the Stoics. In the *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius states, "Put away from your ruling centre all that accretes to it from the affections of the body."⁵⁷ The modification or correction in our thinking comes from the power of reason, which forms ideas in the mind independently of specific impingements on the body. Our capacity to reason is based on the formation of logical relations between ideas rather than an ordering of sensible experience as we do in the imagination. The ideas are the product of our nature as thinking beings and not extended beings.

By utilizing our reason we exercise our active nature with the aim of forming adequate ideas of our relation to the affections and the affects. Insofar as we do this we understand that being a mode in Nature means that we are unavoidably affected by the people and things we engage with and this knowledge transforms how we deal with the affects. External things are no longer viewed as obstacles to our freedom as we are necessarily connected to them. Having this knowledge diminishes the impact of the negative passions such as envy and hate that curb our power to act. Freedom is a journey that involves developing adequate ideas in order to understand the necessary connection between things in Nature. When we have adequate ideas, we have ideas that are adequate in the divine intellect and subsequently are thinking in accordance with Nature. As a result our ethical strivings correspond to our metaphysical reality.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011) p.115

⁵⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt II, P40, Dem.

2.2 Imagination

The imagination and reason are distinguished by inadequate and adequate ideas. Hume offers a very similar dichotomy between these two sources of knowledge when he splits the objects of human reason into “Matters of fact” and “Relations of ideas.”⁵⁹ Hume claims that reason can tell us nothing about things relating to matters of fact. Deductive reasoning is restricted to fields such as mathematics and geometry, and our knowledge of nature is made possible by sensible experience only. His approach to matters of fact, or inadequate ideas to put them in Spinoza’s terms, is related to his view that reason, being distinct from the passions, has no power over them. There is no possibility of commanding the affects by understanding them, or by forming a rational idea that can be a force or motive for action. On Hume’s terms, there is no possibility of rationally striving to bring about better states of being. As a result one is perpetually passive and never active, as one transitions between affects without the rational means for maintaining desirable joyous emotions.

By contrast, Spinoza believes that human beings have a power of understanding that can shape the affects to which they are subject. On the basis of one being able to rationally construct a chain of causal relations between things, one diminishes the force of the affects.⁶⁰ Reason allows one to revise content in the imagination and build an idea that is related to more things in Nature. A good life hinges on humans being able to develop their thinking beyond how they are affected particularly, towards understanding how they fit in Nature and therefore are affected necessarily.⁶¹ Reason is the means to bringing about real change in how a person views the world. One is less likely to be determined by ideas that surge from sensible experience when one has been accustomed to hold rational ideas over a period of time. Adequate ideas provide stability and consistency to one’s thinking and way of life. They underpin one’s strivings to give order to the world and maintain a more perfect state of being and not be resigned to the imperfection of doubt and skepticism.

⁵⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Dover Publications Inc., New York, 2004) p.14

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P9

⁶¹ Ibid, Pt V, P6

Though reason is distinguished from the affects, it should not be interpreted as being opposed to them. We should keep in mind that joy is the affect that follows rational thought. It is the fact that reason aligns itself with joy that it can override the affects of irrational ideas.⁶² Happiness is linked to acting from reason. Spinoza writes, “Among all the affects which are related to the mind insofar as it acts, there are none which are not related to joy and desire.”⁶³ One is drawn to exercise one’s rational capacities due to the joy that understanding brings. Happiness is the result of human desire being determined by rational thought. Consequently conatus, reason and joy become intertwined. The passions that do affect us are converted into positive or joyful affects through our understanding. As Lloyd writes, the passions “are the subject matter for the transformative power of understanding.”⁶⁴ They form a part of one’s striving to be ethical. As will be shown later, joy and reason develop into an even stronger alliance of love and intuition when one reaches the peak of an ethical life.

The means to freedom is grounded in our capacity to understand things through reason, though it is worth noting that this is also a transitional process that involves the imagination. How scholars have interpreted the role of the imagination has evolved during the second half of the last century. The traditional view of Spinoza as a ‘rationalist’, such as the one offered by Hampshire, puts down a clear line of demarcation between the imagination and reason.⁶⁵ Knowledge from reason is the result of a process that begins with sensible experience, and then passes through memory and imagination. The imagination is instrumental to reason so it has things to reflect on in order to be able to form common notions. When writing of the relation between imagination and reason, Hampshire states that, “our passive, unreflecting, common-sense experience and knowledge provide the means of transition to the higher level of genuine scientific knowledge.”⁶⁶ There is a scaling order from sense to imagination and then reason, and to regress back to the imagination from reason is to move back down the order of knowledge, that is to say, to move back into the realm

⁶² See on this Lloyd, (1996), p.86

⁶³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, P59

⁶⁴ Lloyd, (1996), p.77

⁶⁵ See chapter entitled “Knowledge and Intellect” by Stuart Hampshire in *Spinoza*, (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1951)

⁶⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza*, p.94

of inadequate ideas from the domain of adequate ideas. This account of imagination and reason as having a strict hierarchical distinction gives Spinoza a likeness to the Scholastic notion offered by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*. When distinguishing between the diverse powers of the soul, Aquinas explains that the imagination pertains to the sensitive part of the soul, as it retains our experience of sensible forms for the estimative and intellectual powers to reflect on. He writes, “One power arises from the soul by means of another,” meaning that before one arrives at knowledge in the intellect, one first traverses through the sensible forms retained by the imagination.⁶⁷

More recent interpretations of Spinoza, such as the one offered by Gatens and Lloyd, depict the imagination to be other than just a passive retainer of images.⁶⁸ They understand it to have a dynamic nature that helps one understand things and also promotes positive affects. On this account, the imagination assumes a collaborative role with the conatus in order to fulfill certain desires. It has an intentional quality to bring about certain states by striving to posit things that foster the affect of joy rather than sadness. “The mind strives as far as it can to imagine those things that affect us with joy.”⁶⁹ This indicates that the imagination is not just a passive receptor of things, but actively pursues certain images in order to foster positive affects and our general well-being. It has a strength to divert one away from sadness and the subsequent transition to a less perfect state of being, by positing images of things we love and that affect us with joy.

In terms of our understanding, the activity of the imagination resides in its ability to create fictions that rework illusions one has in the mind into ideas or stories that come closer to the truth. Our initial perceptions are made more adequate by the fictions we create so the path to adequate knowledge is easier. Where one is ignorant about something, the ability to present an image or create a story, is made possible by the imagination. Though the story we create is fictitious, it nevertheless is a response to

⁶⁷ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (Benziger Brothers Inc., USA, 1947) p.396

⁶⁸ Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, (Routledge, London, 1999)

⁶⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, P.25, Dem.

the limitations of our understanding, and provides grounds for one to move from in order to reach an adequate idea.⁷⁰ On this account the endeavour for truth is not just the realm of reason but also belongs to the imagination, as it creates a path for reason to know something as necessary. The mind's power of acting is aided by what it imagines, therein one strives to imagine what will support its rational capacity.⁷¹ There is a transitional interplay between the imagination and reason that is more dynamic than the one proposed by the strictly rationalist interpretation of Spinoza. Rather than reason moving on from and transcending imagination, it returns to search for truths or other avenues to the truth and continues to do so until its path is cleared.⁷² The imagination has an active role in one's struggle to understand the world and to be free.

Despite reason being the means to attaining freedom, Spinoza does concede that the desire for knowledge of the truth is often restrained by "pleasures of the moment."⁷³ This is primarily due to the "intensity" of the images in the imagination that confront us and arouse an affect in us to which we are compelled to respond.⁷⁴ For this reason our path to understanding Nature is an arduous one due to the constant wavering between emotions, and the desire to bring about immediate pleasurable outcomes. Having said this, we are also inherently social due to the imagination, as it primarily forms ideas about our relations with others. Given the propensity for humans to be determined to act by the passions rather than reason, and the inherent social nature of the imagination, the best we can do is to live harmoniously by creating a society that protects people from being harmed by others.⁷⁵ By forming social bonds, the self-preservation of one becomes aligned to the desires of others. When society guarantees the security of people, we make possible a communal striving to live according to our rational nature and bring about a collective joy. Our endeavour to persevere is enriched and aided by creating an environment where we share common ideas about how to live well. Where a collective striving is developed so that what one seeks for oneself is advantageous to all, humans "would compose, as it were, one mind and one

⁷⁰ This point is made by Gatens and Lloyd, (1999), p.34

⁷¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt III, P54

⁷² See Lloyd, (1996), p.63

⁷³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt IV, P16

⁷⁴ Gatens and Lloyd, (1999), p.52

⁷⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt IV, P37, Schol. 2

body.”⁷⁶ Thus, the danger humans pose to each other individually, is abated by the collective power of the people to ensure a greater degree of freedom for all.

2.3 Freedom and the Intellectual Love of God

When Spinoza speaks of a person as being free, it is a notion of freedom that is limited. A finite being can never be absolutely free primarily because its existence is contingent on the existence of other finite beings. Definition seven of section one of the *Ethics* states: “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its own nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone.”⁷⁷ As one finite being is not the cause of its own existence, the only sense in which it can be considered free is in its ability to determine its own actions. As we saw above, a person is the adequate source for their actions insofar as they act from reason, and reason is the capacity to form logical relations. Having said this, freedom for Spinoza goes beyond merely having a series of adequate ideas or understanding the singular determinations of mental and physical dispositions. These are the means to attaining freedom, but they are not sufficient for what Spinoza considers the highpoint of human freedom. His notion of freedom involves a higher level of understanding that is independent of external causes. It relies on intuition rather than reason and understands not just the rational order of singular things, but conceives the unity of Nature. Our rational strivings culminate in a reflective state that understands the essence of God and the essence of its modes in the most perfect idea a person can have. The idea of movement is again important as a transition is made from the adequate ideas one has of the attributes of God to an adequate idea of the essence of things.⁷⁸ In “one glance” one is able to understand God and how everything relates to it.⁷⁹ When one understands God, the particular dissolves into the unity in which reside all the modal variations of substance.

For Spinoza the capacity to know the essence of things is innate in the human mind, and lays dormant until one comes to the idea of God’s essence. One comes closer to

⁷⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt IV, P18, Schol.

⁷⁷ Ibid, Pt I, Def. 7

⁷⁸ Ibid, Pt V, P25, Dem.

⁷⁹ Ibid, Pt II, P40, Schol. 2

awakening this intuitive capacity, as one is determined more by adequate ideas than inadequate ones. The innate capacity to intuitively understand God is the eternal quality of the mind. One realizes the eternity of one's mind when one conceives the essence of Nature. This eternal aspect is always present in the mind but in order to better understand this concept Spinoza says we feign that it has become so rather than always having been eternal.⁸⁰ We use our imagination to create a story that aids our intellectual conception of it. Whilst this remains a highly controversial issue amongst scholars of Spinoza's ethics, with some preferring to ignore it completely, the intuitive apprehension of God is nevertheless important to comprehend, as it is the pinnacle of an ethical life.⁸¹ It is the junction where Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics come together. The greatest joy and cause for love is the very substance from which all modes of existence originate. One's transitions to ever more perfect states of being occur because our accumulation of adequate ideas bear ever greater semblance to the metaphysical reality. Without this power of the intellect, and the associated notion of the eternity of the mind, the chasm between human life and the divine would not be bridgeable.

The eternal aspect of the mind is grounded in God. Amongst the infinite ideas that are in God, there is one that expresses the essence of the human body, and as it is an idea of the body, it necessarily belongs to the essence of the human mind.⁸² Therefore, where one has a conception of the body as it relates to God, that is as emanating from an eternal and infinite extended being, this idea expresses the essence of the mind, which is an idea that is derived from an eternal and infinite thinking being. When one intuitively thinks things in relation to God, one conceives things with an eternal necessity and therefore thinks "through God's essence itself."⁸³ In a sense, one partakes in the divine for it is as if the idea comes from the attribute of thought itself and not from a modal variation of it. The eternity of the mind makes itself apparent when one grasps one's existence as a finite mode of substance. A truth that has

⁸⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P31, Schol.

⁸¹ See Jonathan Bennett work *A Study in the Philosophy of Spinoza*, (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1984)

⁸² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P23, Dem.

⁸³ Ibid, Pt V, P23, Dem.

always been there is revealed, and everything that has ever happened in one's life makes perfect sense when related to Nature.⁸⁴

The endeavour to awaken our intuitive capacity is the primary virtue in an ethical life.⁸⁵ Our strivings over the course of a life, to understand how we are related to other people and things reaches a climax when we intuitively see everything connected to Nature. When one attains this knowledge it produces a joy that Spinoza describes as the “greatest satisfaction of the mind,” and a transition to the most perfect state a human being can attain.⁸⁶ Owing to the fact that God is the cause for a person having knowledge of the necessity of all things in Nature and the subsequent joy this knowledge produces, one has a love for God.⁸⁷ As the joy and love for God is aligned to our intuitive capacity, which is a purely intellectual faculty, it is more specifically an “Intellectual love of God.”⁸⁸ Spinoza writes, “For the mind feels those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in the memory.”⁸⁹ Therefore, we not only know that we know our own essence and the essence of God, but we love that we know and for this reason we love God. Therein our greatest freedom or “salvation”, or “blessedness” resides in being able to consistently love Nature and all that emanates from it.⁹⁰ Because this love springs from the eternal truth that is the essence of the human mind, it is a love that is not contrary to anything in Nature.⁹¹ Our power to love is propagated by the vision we have of the power of divine and we therefore think and feel in conformity with Nature. The force of intuitive knowledge springs from its alignment with love, not unlike the power of reason, which resides in its link to joy.

Jonathan Bennett offers a damning interpretation of this last section of the *Ethics*, where the intellectual love of God is so prominent. He dismisses this notion as

⁸⁴ On this see Lloyd, (1996), p.110

⁸⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P25

⁸⁶ Ibid, Pt V, P27

⁸⁷ Ibid, Pt V, P32, Dem.

⁸⁸ Ibid, Pt V, P32, Cor.

⁸⁹ Ibid, Pt V, P23, Schol.

⁹⁰ Ibid, Pt V, P36, Schol.

⁹¹ Ibid, Pt V, P37

carrying “the burden of error and confusion.”⁹² The intellectual love of God, along with the notions of intuitive knowledge and eternity of the mind, he claims, “has nothing to teach us and is certainly pretty worthless.”⁹³ The burden of error he refers to is what appear to be contradictory claims by Spinoza. In proposition seventeen of the fifth section Spinoza states: “That God is without passions, and is not affected with joy or sadness”⁹⁴; yet later on in the final section he writes that, “God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love.”⁹⁵ They appear like contradictory claims only because Bennett is reluctant to accept a difference between intuition and reason and the accompanying affects. When one is led to act by reason one is filled with joy and moves to a state of greater perfection. We cannot ascribe to God the affect of joy that accompanies reason, because to do so would be to imply that God also transitions to greater and lesser states of perfection. We know this is wrong because God is the reality we live in and cannot be more perfect than it is. On the other hand, when Spinoza says that God loves itself with an infinite intellectual love, he is saying that insofar as God can be explained by the essence of the human mind, the mind’s love of God is an infinite love that resides in God and by which it loves itself.⁹⁶ The eternity of the mind is linked to infinite love, and this love is perfect because the cause of it is the essence of Nature, the unity in which resides all modes of being.⁹⁷ This is differentiated from the joy that accompanies reason, which has particular objects as its idea and where not moderated can have the contrary affect of sadness. In contrast intellectual love is not caused by the idea of a singular thing but by reflection of the whole within which all particulars are determined. It is not measured by degrees nor is there anything contrary to it so it does not need to be moderated but in fact perpetuated as much as possible throughout one’s life. To be truly free is to maintain the vision of intuitive knowledge in all of one’s dealings.⁹⁸

Bennett’s further claim that the three ideas of intuition, eternity and love are worthless, fails to capture the practical import these have in a life. Being able to

⁹² Jonathan Bennett, *A Study in the Philosophy of Spinoza*, p.370

⁹³ Ibid, p.372

⁹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P17

⁹⁵ Ibid, Pt V, P35

⁹⁶ Ibid, Pt V, P36

⁹⁷ Ibid, Pt V, P37

⁹⁸ Ibid, Pt V, P36, Schol.

maintain this love of Nature fosters an alternative disposition in a person when they interact with their immediate environment. It allows one to be more in control of one's actions and less swayed by the affections of the body, as one sees how everything one deals with is necessarily in God. The most noble act, being able to return hate with love, epitomizes the actions of a truly free person, who responds contrarily to an affection of the body in order to promote peace and harmony amongst modes of substance. As a consequence of seeing the necessity with which things occur, the affects of hope and fear diminish, as one is less distressed by the past and less inclined to be bound by expectations for the future. Furthermore one is less troubled by one's own finite existence and the thought of death, as one rejoices in the life that one has and the capacity to know and love Nature and all the modal variations of it.

Whilst the eternity of the mind and intellectual love of God are capacities for thinking and feeling independently of affections, this does not mean that being free requires one to be detached from one's environment. One's freedom is evident in how one interacts in one's social setting. Returning hate with love is the primary example of being free yet still engaged socially. It demonstrates how the love of Nature can instill a security and peace of mind when one understands humans to be united in the idea of God. One is not swayed by affections that separate one from others, and even an affect of sadness such as hate is converted to joy when thought in relation to Nature.⁹⁹ The strength of character that is demonstrated in our tenacity to act from reason and in our desire to enter into friendships with others converts into an even more assured state of mind that is less susceptible to antagonistic affections.¹⁰⁰ One's strivings and struggles translate into flourishing as all the affections are converted into an affect of joy and our state of being is in its greatest perfection. As a result one is more disposed to have a social life due to the solidarity one has with others.

The affect of love that accompanies the intuitive knowledge of Nature is the greatest joy in a human life. It also demonstrates the unification of metaphysics and ethics. Where movement was the prevalent idea in the striving to achieve greater degrees of freedom, when one reaches the knowledge of the essence of Nature, movement is

⁹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P18

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, Pt III, P59, Schol.

replaced by the idea of unity and perfection. Our greatest perfection resides in unifying the particular into the whole by making our mode of thinking compatible with the attribute of thought itself. There is no more perfect state to transition to as one's power to act is in its most uninhibited condition.

Up to this point the thesis has been mainly concerned with providing an exposition of the key elements of Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics. Along the way, allusions have been made to the unity of these two branches of philosophy in Spinoza, but it has yet to be explained in detail how they come together and the significance of their combination. The third and final chapter of this thesis will be devoted to that task. But it will also offer a more general argument for embracing the unity of metaphysics and ethics, which was so brilliantly accomplished by Spinoza, today.

Chapter 3: Spinoza and Contemporary Approaches to Ethics

This chapter will be divided into three sections that between them will go into further detail concerning the contrasts between unifying ethics to metaphysics and doing ethics on its own, regardless of a metaphysic. The first section will look at the synthesis of these two branches and more specifically at the ideas of truth, perfection and love as providing the link between metaphysics and ethics. It will be argued that these notions are interrelated and provide the metaphysical background that directs human action. Furthermore it will be shown that on the basis of these ideas ethics is conceived as a striving towards something, a transition and movement that is inspired by ideas considered to be absolute and unavoidable in a human life. Many of the arguments developed in this section take inspiration from the works of Iris Murdoch, and to a large degree they are a reconstruction of her position. At various points in this chapter reference will also be made to Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor who all share similar views to those of Murdoch. The second section will deal with the contrasting approach and explain that when ethics is done in isolation from metaphysics, it tends to be centred on the individual. Reality is limited to the empirical circumstances that one faces and morality is based upon the norms we believe are necessary to deal with the situation we encounter. As previously mentioned, Korsgaard will be specifically referred to as an example of an approach to ethics that is centred on the individual through which moral priorities are primarily attached to the self. The final section will go back to Spinoza and apply the notions developed in the first section of this chapter to his philosophy and show how in a sense, Spinoza's ethics was a stand against the looming individual-centred morality whose seeds can be detected in his predecessor Descartes. It will be argued that Spinoza conceives of a good life as one that looks beyond the self towards the world in which one engages in order to develop a clearer conception of human beings' true standing in the world.

3.1 Truth, Perfection and Love

Human action, as the subject matter of ethics, is generally a striving for something. People direct their endeavours towards certain things as these objects or ideas are

thought to be essential to their lives. If it were not for such goals and purposes, life would lack meaning and direction. Anscombe maintains that to disregard them “is to suggest a phantasmic notion of the individual as a bare particular,” and such a notion “supposes a continued identity independent of what is true of the object.”¹⁰¹ In the case of metaphysics and ethics being linked together, the motivation for action stems from one’s conception of reality, as we seek an understanding of the essential quality that underpins human life. As Murdoch states in *Metaphysics as Morals*, metaphysics is the result of serious contemplation and examination into one’s own thinking. “Thought aims at reality, but with varying degrees of success.”¹⁰² The ideas that are determinative of our action emerge from our understanding of what is foundational in the world we live in. One’s moral compass is steered by the connection it has to the underlying essence of all things. Commonly, there is an inclination for humans to search beyond their immediate perceptions for something that can unify and explain all their experiences in a more substantial way. Murdoch explains that an ethical life is directed towards something that is irreplaceable and immovable, and it approaches this absolute element as something that is ever present in human life but which remains elusive to attain.¹⁰³

On this conception, the desire to know the foundation to all of our experiences is the yearning for an ultimate truth. To be inspired by the truth is to acknowledge that there is more to the world than what we receive by immediate sensible experience. Owing to the recognition that there is something foundational to all our experiences, we attempt to bring our thought closer to a reality that is independent of our ordinary everyday circumstances. As an unqualified element in a non-observable reality, the truth is the basis upon which humans comprehend and conceptualise the world around them, and is the standard to which we aspire but can never fully maintain.¹⁰⁴ We are moved towards a definitive truth by intuition, whereby in a reflective glance we conceive the world to be underpinned by something non-sensible. The transition towards an absolute idea strongly resonates with Plato’s ideas of the forms. In Plato’s

¹⁰¹ Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, *Metaphysics and The Philosophy of Mind*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981) p.38

¹⁰² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as Morals* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1992) p.398

¹⁰³ see Ibid, p.391

¹⁰⁴ see Ibid, p.399

terms, “the physical world has only a secondary reality” that inadequately resembles the “unchanging” and “indestructible” form.¹⁰⁵ We get closer to the forms of reality, or the essential truth that underpins our world by working through the layers of falsehood we have been accustomed to stand by. Whilst we move away from our distorted visions of reality, we understand the truth to be complete and absolute and not subject to change as is the case with our own transitory opinions. The longing for truth is a pursuit of knowledge that gives one security and stability and is divorced from the realm of uncertainty and opinion.

Whilst the truth has a magnetic effect in the sense that humans are drawn towards it, conversely it also bears down on one, particularly in times of hardship and suffering. Reality has a way of asserting itself on a person that compels one to revise and reassess one’s actions. MacIntyre writes, “just as the real is what impacts upon us independently of our willing, what is true of that reality is true independently of our thinking it to be so.”¹⁰⁶ The force of an absolute reality emphasizes what is necessary in an ethical life, which has the simultaneous effect of revealing the fantasy and delusion one has been occupying oneself with. Being led by the truth has the power to redirect our attention and shape our actions. Murdoch states that a search for the truth “demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires.”¹⁰⁷ The refinement of our aspirations requires a discipline of the mind, which is the ability to think clearly and rationally and not be derailed by random pleasures of the senses or sudden unexpected events. It is in fact the continual succumbing to the random and unexpected that causes one to suffer. This is not to say that one needs to suffer in order to acknowledge a reality greater than what they can ordinarily perceive, though often it is when one feels vulnerable that one reflects more sharply on one’s circumstances and becomes more acutely aware of fundamental absolute elements in life. Suffering often instills humility in people and makes them mindful of their own lack of power when faced with the strength of a non-subjective reality.

¹⁰⁵ Plato, “Timaeus” in *Timaeus and Critias*, (Penguin Classics, Middlesex, 1971) p.40

¹⁰⁶ MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy*, p.202

¹⁰⁷ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as Morals*, p.399

A person suffers when they realize a chasm between their own perceptions and the truth. False beliefs stand between reality and us. To be divorced from what is absolute and ever present in our world is to be separated from what is good in life. Murdoch writes: “Goodness is connected with reality, the supremely good is the supremely real.”¹⁰⁸ Disconnection from reality can have a psychological effect that fills one with a sense of emptiness. It is a void that symbolizes one’s life as being insubstantial due to the lack of weight that emptiness represents. It is a notion similar to what Kundera termed ‘the lightness of being’.¹⁰⁹ One translates this idea of nothingness to one’s own life, which is seen as comprising of a vacuum that needs to be both filled and removed. What needs to be removed is the illusory manner of seeing things, the false nature of our perceptions that understands pleasure as the fundamental source of a good life. The disdain of a good other than the immediate satisfaction we can get from the pursuit of pleasure is what instills a sense of nothingness in a person. The weight of the absolute compels one to reach out for a good greater than immediate sensual pleasure. Reality begins to appear in a different form for the person who is steered from the path of illusion towards a course to the truth. The vacuum of emptiness is filled by other ideas such as perfection, which is aligned to a feeling of love. Perfection and love arise in the process of developing a clearer vision of reality, of seeing things more for how they really are. We can see here that along with the idea of movement and transition, ethics incorporates the idea of vision and attention.¹¹⁰ Moral striving is grounded in developing a vision of reality, which requires one to give adequate attention to the people and things one deals with, and develop a gaze that is not fixed on preconceived notions of how one thinks things are. This means our vision in the moral sense is not just aligned to our understanding, which is our ability to logically construct ideas, but also incorporates our imagination, which allows one to create a reality that strives to give a just representation of people one interacts with.

The importance of the imagination is evident in the statements we use to try to understand other people. Statements like “Imagine what it would be like to be her,” or

¹⁰⁸ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as Morals*, p.398

¹⁰⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (Faber and Faber, Chatham, Kent, 1999)

¹¹⁰ This idea of morality being a process whereby we develop a “vision” of reality and of fixing our “attention” in particular directions is an idea that Murdoch uses in her lecture “The Idea of Perfection.”

“Imagine what she has been through,” demonstrate that in spite of the facts we may or may not have of other people and their circumstances, we use our imagination to create a story that tries to give a more accurate and just depiction of them. We draw ourselves closer to others by filling in their own particular contextual realities utilizing our imagination. This is most poignantly evident where a person does not reciprocate animosity to another who has done them harm, or who does not wish them well and speaks badly of them. In these cases we imagine what the circumstances could be in the other person’s life and understand why he or she has antagonistic sentiments towards me. Furthermore we try to see more clearly how our own actions could have possibly inflicted a feeling of negativity in the other person. The imagination allows one to open out to others, and perceive a picture of reality greater than what the facts on their own usually permit. Rather than immediately react to the empirical facts, the imagination permits one to enlarge the context and see how the particular circumstances fit in nature at large. This is not to say that we disregard the facts, rather we develop a story that integrates them and explains how the circumstances have in fact made them possible. As Murdoch states, “clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort.”¹¹¹ To be able to refrain from being antagonistic to one who displays animosity towards us, and moreover to be able to forgive another requires discipline and strength. Morality is the striving and transition towards a clearer vision of reality, which entails using our imagination to fill in the spaces between the facts to see other people and things for who and what they really are.

Striving for a clearer vision of reality is inspired by the idea of perfection. When one aspires to see things in their entirety, one attempts to see things perfectly. To simultaneously see and understand the permanence that binds the world and to have clarity regarding particular objects is to reach human perfection. One achieves this by being open to the world, that is by turning one’s gaze away from one’s own self and seeing an order in the world one lives in. MacIntyre asserts that a mind judges truly when it is receptive to an external reality.¹¹² The self that is commonly the subject and central figure in contemporary moral philosophy recedes into the background as one tries to live ethically by reaching out to the world around one. Rather than appropriate

¹¹¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) p. 36

¹¹² MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy*, p.201

the external world for the pleasure and amusement of oneself, one tries to align oneself to one's environment. When we try to understand people and things around us, it is not solely for the benefit of having knowledge, rather it is more fundamentally to draw us closer to others and not withdraw from the world due to a disconnection we may perceive to have with it. Murdoch states that virtue is the "self-less attention to nature."¹¹³ We become more perfect to the degree that our own lives become more real, in the sense that we are filled less by fantasy and illusion, and are more receptive to and understanding of the objective world we engage in.

Love is the force that facilitates the ability to redirect our attention away from the self.¹¹⁴ The idea of perfection arises and is motivated by our love towards the environment we live in. Our desire to understand the external world, to have a true vision of things, and to try and be perfect is an undertaking that is driven by love. We are led by love to what is real because when we love something we have compassion towards it and desire to see it justly.¹¹⁵ Love is a power that liberates us from the fantasy of self-centred aspirations. Our freedom essentially resides in our continuing effort to look outwardly and see things clearly. As we are increasingly motivated by love and move closer to perfection, an ethical life begins to incorporate the idea of necessity. A clear vision of reality decentralises the idea of choice and greater emphasis is given to the notion of necessity as one conceives of an unconditional order in the objective world. Necessity resides in nature itself and is understood as such the more perfect our knowledge becomes. Ethics becomes more tied to the realm of necessity and less of choice, but only to the degree that we attend to things beyond how they sensibly appear, and search beyond the mere facts of particular situations for an ultimate truth and imaginatively create a reality that draws us closer to people and things around us. Moreover, our freedom resides in developing an understanding of necessary action. Freedom therefore is not the exercise of creating a conglomeration of possible actions and having many choices. In Murdoch's view it is "rather to be represented as a kind of necessity."¹¹⁶ To remove choice from the centre of ethics is to imbue people and things external to us with intrinsic value. Insofar as

¹¹³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.40

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 64

¹¹⁵ Murdoch makes this point where she combines love, compassion and justice in her essay "Idea of Perfection" in, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.23

¹¹⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.39

we do this, we are less motivated by purposes and ends for which objects appear to us instrumentally, and instead see how there is a necessary element we cannot avoid when we seriously contemplate moral action.

A conception of necessity does not remove choice entirely from the realm of ethics. In fact ethical dilemmas arise when we are presented with options for which there is no obviously morally perfect response. An example could be a man whose family has fled a warzone yet he decides to remain to help those who have stayed behind. In this case there is no obvious choice for the man that is more perfect than the other. The situation does not offer an immediate resolution of how he necessarily needs to act. Murdoch does argue that the ideal response is represented as a necessity to one that gives proper attention to an underlying reality, and to be able to commit the required attention is propelled by the “patient eye of love.”¹¹⁷ Of course, humans are very rarely perfect and it is not even clear if we would recognize a perfect human being if one existed. We can only ever be more perfect but not absolutely perfect, and therefore necessary action is not a clear idea in all circumstances. However there are situations where things are clearer in terms of appropriate courses of action, and choice may in fact be considered the starting point of a path to necessity. In the example stated earlier relating to the person overcome with a feeling of emptiness, one chooses to no longer live the way one has been and begins a contemplative search for the truth. In this case though, it is not totally the choice of the person but also the pull and weight of truth and necessity that bears down on the person and compels one to refocus one’s attention.

A search for truth, when undertaken seriously, is propelled by our willingness to remain close to our environment and not be detached as a kind of isolated observer. The capacity to do this is driven by our ability to love and desire to be perfect, which means not only to be open to nature but more specifically aligned to it. Nature in its capacity to draw us closer to it can be understood as having an energy or force, which we become more aligned to through our own power of love. Thus, we create a unity in nature through the metaphysical concepts of truth and perfection and the feeling of love. Things in nature are necessarily connected when we understand our reality as

¹¹⁷Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* , p.39

being underpinned by these notions. These ideas intertwine as the truth becomes accessible to one who is driven by love and aims for perfection. Our moral endeavours are driven by a desire to be more perfect and to have a clearer vision of reality.

Having given a reconstruction of Murdoch's account of how ethics is tied to metaphysics and the significance of it, I will now move on to consider a rival approach that conceives ethics in isolation from metaphysics.

3.2 The Separation of Metaphysics and Ethics in Korsgaard

Building on Kant's idea of the individual as an autonomous agent that regulates for itself the moral law, Korsgaard's ethics incorporates the notion of a practical identity.¹¹⁸ Due to the absence of a metaphysic or an absolute element in her philosophy, a moral person tries to create a unity within themselves and not in the world around them. What unifies a person or makes them whole is the identity they believe they have and are obliged to maintain. Our most important conceptions of ourselves are what we are morally compelled to uphold. To act contrarily to these conceptions we have of ourselves would entail losing our integrity. In order to redeem one's integrity one turns inwards within oneself and rediscovers the identity one feels most strongly about. Identifying oneself in a particular way provides one with reasons to act and therein gives one's life meaning and value. Unlike the account of Murdoch given in the previous section whereby one's life was thought to have meaning and direction by coming closer to an understanding of a metaphysical reality, here in Korsgaard's case, having meaning in one's life is made possible by reflecting on oneself and conceiving of an identity that one relates most strongly with. Rather than reach out to the world, one turns inwards in order to understand who or what one really is. How one primarily conceives oneself will determine the laws one feels obliged to act by.

Korsgaard explains in her book *The Sources of Normativity* that we are a law unto ourselves due to the reflective nature of human consciousness. Our capacity to reflect

¹¹⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996)

at a distance from our impulses allows us to evaluate our urges and choose which ones to act on. Human freedom lies in this reflective capacity from which we create self-regulating laws. The maxims we give to ourselves can be willed as a law insofar as they conform to the identity we are said to be supporting. To be autonomous is to adhere to maxims that endorse our identity.

Korsgaard remarks that, historically, the shift that saw ethics become focused on obligation and self-determined laws was partly due to the “reluctance” and “recalcitrance” humans have to perfection.¹¹⁹ Korsgaard in her very brief historical analysis explains that the pure or true forms of being such as those proposed by Plato are never actually achieved. There is something on account of being human that prevents us reaching perfection. She turns to Aristotle for an explanation and claims the resistance to true forms is in some way related to being composed of matter, whereby matter defies perfection. As a result of this belief in the resistance to perfection, coupled with the advance of science in the modern world, Korsgaard adheres to an increasingly accepted belief that the world is primarily matter and not form. Given this background, she espouses that ethics is founded on duty to laws and not perfection of form. Because we cannot be perfect, an ethical life entails a dutiful bond to laws. By disregarding perfection, ethics is no longer considered to be a transitive process towards something external to us; rather the focus is inward on the self, as it is believed that there is no perfect form to aspire to. Instead of trying to be perfectly good for example, Korsgaard would have it that we should rather be right, on the basis that we abide by the laws that cohere with our identity. Being morally right is about conceptualizing laws that adequately reflect our identity.

The reflective process of selecting laws makes the world morally significant.¹²⁰ In the act of reflection we value some impulses over others, or certain conceptions as being more right than others. Where Murdoch would have it that goodness, as an absolute metaphysical reality is evident in the way we experience the world, in the interactions we witness and partake in,¹²¹ Korsgaard understands our moral experience to be

¹¹⁹ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p.3

¹²⁰ On this see *Ibid*, p.103

¹²¹ See Murdoch’s chapter entitled “The Ontological Proof” in, *Metaphysics as Morals* where she offers a Platonic interpretation of our world as being fundamentally good

governed by laws that we value, reflection on which shapes our understanding of what is right and wrong.

The disregard for any metaphysical reality barricades ethics within the individual who evaluates the practical use of reason and ignores the idea that humans and the world at large are metaphysically connected. Korsgaard explains that when we reflect on an impulse and weigh up the normative value of it, it is purely “a test of endorsement” and not “an exercise of intuition, or a discovery about what is out there in the world.”¹²² On her terms, moral action is only ever the result of rational deliberation and never an intuitive grasp. Unlike Spinoza who believes that the continual exercise of our rational capacity develops our intuitive abilities, for Korsgaard intuition does not enter the moral realm, because there is nothing to intuit, morality is totally about “what to do” and not about “what is to be found.”¹²³ Knowing what to do is grounded in our conceptions of what is right and is encapsulated in the laws we conceive.

The laws that we adjudicate as having moral validity, which are the ones that correlate with the identity we feel most closely aligned to, we project on to the world we live in. Given this, even in our social engagement the self is central, as how one acts is indicative of how one conceives oneself. When one engages with others, one’s actions are grounded in identity, as that is what one is principally maintaining. Being able to develop social relations is contingent on our own self-determining laws. Owing to this, ethics is entrapped within the self and fails to move out into the world. This is the danger of ignoring metaphysics as morality increasingly looks at the self without being able to detach itself from it. Murdoch writes: “The self is such a dazzling object that if we look there one may see nothing else.”¹²⁴ It is for this reason that I argue that ethics is best conceived in unity with a metaphysic. Being close to other humans is not just a result of rational deliberation but also the outcome of intuition and feeling. Morality involves an understanding that is not calculable or measurable and on the back of this understanding or vision we foster relations that bring us closer to others. The moral world is fundamentally more than just a rational obligation to laws and its expansive nature includes our love for what is true. Taylor states that to disregard love

¹²² Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p.108

¹²³ Ibid, p.116

¹²⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.30

as a determining force in moral action is to have a “cramped and truncated view of morality.”¹²⁵ Humans are drawn together by metaphysical concepts such as truth and perfection that Korsgaard gives little consideration to.

Having said this, Korsgaard is aware of the danger that an ethics grounded in identity could be primarily driven by self-centred aspirations. In order to overcome this pitfall, she advocates that valuing ourselves as human beings above all else is morally the best choice. By doing this we ground our moral laws in an identity we share with all other human beings. In the absence of a metaphysic, this is the fundamental truth, which is that we are primarily human and therefore we belong to the same species as other human beings. By principally identifying ourselves as human, our relation to humanity is grounded in the simplest notion we commonly share. But in appealing to something real that is common to all humans, Korsgaard seems to be implicitly committed to her own, barely articulated metaphysic, a metaphysic that her emphasis on practical identity would seem to repudiate.

Through the conception of laws that would apply to my identity as a human being, Korsgaard believes that we remove the gap between the domain of the categorical imperative and the moral law. For Korsgaard categorical imperatives apply to individuals and the moral law to all humans.¹²⁶ Practical identity, which is the perceivable actions that conform to the laws of one’s identity, is the bridge between a categorical imperative for one and a moral law for all, though this depends on who one thinks one is, and will affect whether one’s practical identity brings one closer to others or distances oneself further from them. Insofar as we primarily identify ourselves as human, our practical identity is related to all other humans. This means that we act, or practically realize our identity, according to laws that can apply to all human beings.

Whilst there is merit in Korsgaard’s attempt to integrate the individual into humanity, it still falls short and lacks certain elements that an explicitly articulated metaphysic

¹²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989) p.3

¹²⁶ The distinction between the domain of the categorical imperative and the moral law is made by Christine M. Korsgaard in, *The Sources of Normativity*, p.99

provides to create a unity not just between all humans but with the world at large. In the absence of absolute ideas such as the truth, there is no necessary external pull that draws one out to the objective world. Primarily, Korsgaard's ethics remains attached to the conceptions we have of self and identity, and therefore never does away with this inward focus. When we act, we do not look for something beyond us to bring us into relation with others, but an inward glance is kept on how our actions relate to our identity. There remains a certain disengagement from others even when we primarily identify ourselves as human. Moreover maintaining social relations is dependant on others also identifying themselves in the same way and exercising the same laws. There is nothing in common beyond identity that two or more people can strive for and therein necessarily unites them. In cases where one engages a person antagonistic to one's own conceptions of what is right, without a metaphysic and elements such as love that draws one away from one's own self, and the imagination that perceives a reality greater than the empirical facts presented, one lacks the tools with which to foster a relationship and cover the gaps that self-determined laws cannot fill. Korsgaard only speaks of love as an affection for another person, as an exclusive relation between few and not as a force that tries to embrace one's environment and connect one with the people and things one engages with.¹²⁷

Korsgaard offers a moral philosophy that is typical of a contemporary approach to ethics. The focus is on the free individual that constructs for itself moral laws in disregard of a metaphysical outlook. Given this, the propensity is for the individual to try to have the world conform to one's way of thinking, and there is no necessary absolute element that could create a unity with others. Contrary to this, when conceived within the realm of metaphysics, ethics moves beyond the self and seeks to create a unity within nature rather than within one self. In this respect, Spinoza's *Ethics* provides an outstanding exemplar. Spinoza believes the greatest human virtue is to have an understanding of Nature. By understanding Nature, we have clarity

¹²⁷ "And the thought of oneself as a certain person's friend or lover or parent or child can be a particularly deep form of practical identity. There is no obvious reason why your relationship to humanity at large should always matter more to you than your relationship to some particular person; no general reason why the laws of Kingdom of Ends should have more force than the laws of a Kingdom of Two. I believe that this is why personal relationships can be the source of some particularly intractable conflicts with morality", Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p.128.

regarding all the modes of being within nature and the necessary connection between them. Let us conclude this chapter by returning to the philosophy of Spinoza and the unity of ethics and metaphysics it achieves.

3.3 Truth, Perfection and Love in Spinoza

For Spinoza, truth, perfection and love are intertwined in the idea we have of God. When we understand God and the essence of things, the truth of Nature is revealed to us. We have a clear vision of reality and transition to the greatest state of perfection a human can hold. Our love of Nature is a force that keeps us bound to others and maintains clarity in our conceptions of the objective world. In our lucid state we see how everything is necessarily connected in Nature and all of our strivings and transitions culminate in flourishing, which is maintained by our intuitive capacity to see the relation between all things. We see here how the basic elements of ethics and metaphysics are integrated by Spinoza.

Central to Spinoza's philosophy in general and to his ethics in particular, is his conception of God. By unifying everything in God through the attributes of thought and extension, Spinoza points out that there is not only a necessary relation between all humans, but also that there is a necessary relation between all things. As a consequence our love of God is a love for all things that are produced by God. Considering that everything emanates from God, everything then is worthy of moral consideration. This is not to say that we see all things as being divine, though we do understand all things to spring from God, from the same perpetual force that is Nature. Having this knowledge that everything is connected in the divine, obliges one to reassess how one approaches things in Nature. As opposed to seeing people and things for their utility, knowledge of God gives all things in our environment an intrinsic quality.

Given God or Nature is the central metaphysical concept to which all our moral endeavours are directed, one looks away from the self in trying to live an ethical life. Ethics on Spinoza's account is striving to see the unity in Nature to which one belongs and not a unity in one's self. There is no personal unity distinct from the unity that is Nature. In our most perfect state, where we intuitively see God and the

necessary connection between all the modes, the self dissolves along with all other modes of being into the attributes of which they are a modal variation. The moral domain is the world we engage in and is not restricted to our conceptions of self that may or may not include all other human beings. By looking away from the individual Spinoza tries to encapsulate human beings' true standing in the world. Rather than elevate humans as a superior species that are a law unto themselves, Spinoza's ethics is a reminder that everything, including human beings, is equally a part of Nature. Whilst Spinoza does recognize humans as being superior to other creatures in terms of complexity of structure and having the capacity to be affected in more ways, it still does not alter the idea that everything is necessarily a part of Nature. God is not a force that acts for any particular purpose least of all for humans; everything fits into the laws of Nature according to the attribute of which they are a mode.

Our path to freedom resides in understanding how we are subject to the laws of God. By utilizing our reason and imagination to expand our view of the world, and therein being more aware of Nature and aligning ourselves to it, we see little use in holding illusions that prioritize the self. Insofar as we do this, we are disposed to living in conformity with Nature, which is the most perfect state that a human can maintain. Human freedom is entwined with human perfection, and includes the joy and love that arises with and corresponds to the intuitive knowledge of God. Furthermore, as was pointed out in the final section of the second chapter, the experience and maintenance of our most perfect state is evident in how we engage with the objective world. Our freedom is expressed in the love that propels our interaction with our environment. Love is a force that looks away from the self, and in Spinoza's notion of freedom, it focuses on Nature and its laws, which is the unity of which every individual forms a part. In Nature, concepts such as identity are irrelevant as individuals are indistinguishable when conceived through the attributes. The attributes as the essence of God are absolute and do not consist of parts. Human freedom is a process that includes being able to cut ourselves loose from the grip of notions such as identity, which keeps us tied to our self and restrained in our social engagement.

Not unlike the reconstructed arguments of Murdoch presented in the first section of this chapter, the idea of perfection and the feeling of love are also connected in Spinoza. The high point of Spinoza's ethics, where it links with his metaphysics in its

most pure form is grounded in perfection and love. Despite both Spinoza and Murdoch seeing these two elements as conjoined, due to Murdoch's arguments being largely Platonic, Spinoza's account is less abstract and provides an account of perfection and love that is more concrete. Murdoch proposes that perfection resides in having a clear vision of goodness, whereby reality is equated to goodness, which in turn fosters the idea of necessary action. Having said this, it is not exactly clear what goodness will look like in all situations. She claims that goodness is apparent to those that give proper attention to reality, though what goodness and proper attention entail remains somewhat obscure. Spinoza on the other hand offers a clearer picture of reality than the one proposed by Murdoch, which gives us something more concrete towards which we can direct our focus. The attributes as the essence of substance are something readily perceptible in the modes and are therefore explicitly evident in the way we experience the world. There is a material element to Spinoza's reality that is not readily apparent in Murdoch's conception of it. Reality or perfection in Spinoza has a definite form that is less abstract and access to it is built upon a clearer path consisting of joy and adequate ideas. The active affects gives one an immediate indication of whether one is getting closer to perfection. The perpetuation of joy and adequate ideas leads to human perfection and the revelation of the eternal, absolute truth that Nature is the primary cause and all the modal variations are connected to it through the attributes.

Where for Murdoch reality is equated with the good, for Spinoza reality is perfection. Spinoza does not believe in the good as something absolute and transcendent, rather he considers the good to be something relative to each individual. His conception of perfection is not a reference to an absolute good, instead perfection refers to the absolute truth that reveals itself in the perfect idea. When we think the perfect idea we think in conformity with Nature, meaning we are aligned to reality. As we transition closer to knowledge of God, our idea of good becomes more communal and less related to the individual.

On account of the alternative metaphysical conceptions of reality, there is a variation in the ideas of necessity between Murdoch and Spinoza. For Murdoch a vision of goodness reveals how one necessarily needs to act in all given contexts. For Spinoza on the other hand, a perfect vision of reality reveals how things necessarily are, which

does not resolve how one necessarily needs to act. There is no idea of necessary action in Spinoza, as it is difficult if not impossible for humans as finite beings to determine how they need to act in all situations. Being able to relate all things to God does not mean we know how we always need to act. What an understanding of the necessary existence of substance does give is a true conception of our reality, which fosters an alternative attitude to the things we engage with. Having a clear conception of God diminishes the significance of the individual and attaches greater importance to a harmonious communal life given that we are all necessarily connected. How we need to act in all contexts in our community is not always clear. Knowing God is a perfect idea that is accessible to all humans and refers to our most perfect state, which is distinct from the idea of absolute perfection. Total perfection is reality, which is all the individual instances of affections and affects, and all the attributes, not just thought and extension. Humans can conceive of infinity but can never actually see, or account for each instance of the infinite modes and affects.

To a certain degree Spinoza agrees with Korsgaard, in the sense that humans have a certain resistance to perfection and for this reason in particular circumstances require principles or maxims to refer to.¹²⁸ Spinoza advocates this approach in cases where we fail to clearly understand how we are affected. An example of a “maxim of life” as he terms it is to return hate with love.¹²⁹ This maxim indicates that only those principles that are noble and involve a selfless consideration of one’s environment are appropriate as laws to govern one’s conduct. Despite our imperfect nature, Spinoza does not rule out the ability to attain knowledge of how we are affected, and even more importantly does not dismiss the ability of the human mind to understand God. The perfect state that we can reach, which is the intuitive knowledge of God remains our goal despite our susceptibilities to error. God, which is our reality, is the absolute perfection that underpins our life. The consequences of the finite nature of humans are starkly contrasted with Korsgaard’s view, which rejects the absolute as having any bearing on morality, or constitutive relation to the world. She disregards it because she believes humans can have no perfect experience of it. As a consequence her moral

¹²⁸ “The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, P10, Schol.

¹²⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, P10, Schol.

outlook remains in the grip of the notions of self and identity. It is this kind of perspective that Spinoza seeks to avoid and instead promotes one that embraces the environment we live in. The knowledge of God is simultaneously knowledge of the finite nature of humans and knowledge of the substance that binds us to the world. Our love for what is true and desire to see and feel perfection brings us closer to an understanding of Nature.

Conclusion

For Spinoza the world can be explained through the concept of substance. Everything is unified in nature through the one unique substance, God, which exists immanently in this world. By conceiving God as Nature, our world is contained in the infinite forms of God's existence, and all modes of being are brought into closer relation to nature. As a result, conceptions of an ethical life are centred on knowing how humans are related to God.

The path to a clear conception of God is founded on joy and reason. A person morally progresses as they build a series of adequate ideas that depict the necessary relations between things. On the basis of the continual utilization of reason and the construction of adequate ideas, one lives a life of increasing joy and develops an intuitive capacity that fosters a clear conception of Nature. The clarity one conceives, is Nature as a unified network that necessarily brings everything together into cause and effect relations. Our freedom and happiness reside in having an understanding of Nature and how we fit in it. Spinoza's philosophy is a clear example of metaphysics and ethics being unified.

Contemporary approaches to ethics such as the one adopted by Korsgaard disregard the world as having a metaphysical basis. As a result ethical investigation is essentially about knowing who we are and not what we are as it is for Spinoza. In the absence of a non-material element that underpins the world, there is the danger that humans do not see themselves as connected to anything but themselves. In such a case, a person is not induced to look beyond the idea of a self in order to give the world moral value.

By adopting Spinoza's approach whereby ethics is contained within metaphysics, we move beyond the self and embrace the world we live in. As a result we develop a clearer conception of the intimate relation between human life and our surroundings. We strive to align our thinking with the absolute elements that underpin our reality. This fosters a social life as living in conformity with nature, means seeing all modes of existence as necessarily connected in the idea of the divine. By understanding God and its absolute force, we conceive the unity that binds all modes of being and attain

what Spinoza considers happiness and freedom in its most pure form. Our path to knowledge of God is an arduous one considering our imperfect nature and the diversity of affections and affects that we unavoidably encounter. But as Spinoza states at the conclusion of his *Ethics*, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”¹³⁰ Blessedness, which is the love of God, resides in us all, but in order to experience it we need to turn out away from the self and understand our true place in nature.

¹³⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt V, P42, Dem.

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