



## Spinoza's Distinction Between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge

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DISCUSSIONS

SPINOZA'S DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN RATIONAL AND  
INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE

Spencer Carr

I

There seems to be a growing consensus about how Spinoza's distinction between rational knowledge (*ratio*) and intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) is to be understood. Central to this body of agreement is the view that the distinction, as it is drawn in the *Ethics*, is one between the knowledge of general truths and the knowledge of individual things; the former is to be associated with reason, the latter with intuition.<sup>1</sup> We will soon have occasion to note other positions and consequences associated with this interpretation of Spinoza's distinction. But perhaps the most striking of these is the notion that the *Ethics* version of the distinction differs radically from the version Spinoza provides in the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*.<sup>2</sup> I find the evidence for both the central claim and its corollary unconvincing; acceptance of them leads to un-Spinozistic ideas and to the undermining of what I take to be Spinoza's fundamental insight. In what follows I will defend the constancy and integrity of Spinoza's distinction by arguing for an alternative reading of his texts, one which is plausible in its own right and which does not entail that he changed his mind between the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*.

It will be necessary to work fairly close to Spinoza's texts, so I begin by setting out the crucial passages from, respectively, the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, G.H.R. Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1954), pp. 182-5, and Errol E. Harris, *Salvation from Despair* (The Hague, 1973), pp. 107ff. More sustained defense of this view may be found in E. M. Curley, "Experience in Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in M. Grene, ed., *Spinoza* (Garden City, N.Y., 1973) and in J. J. MacIntosh, "Spinoza's Epistemological Views," in G.N.A. Vesey, ed., *Reason and Reality: Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Volume 5* (London, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> This is explicitly claimed by both Curley and MacIntosh. Because the views I am considering are held and defended most explicitly in these two papers, I will attend exclusively to them.

Reflection shows that all modes of perception or knowledge may be reduced to four:

I. Perception arising from hearsay or from some sign which everyone may name as he pleases.

II. Perception arising from mere experience—that is, from experience not yet classified by the intellect, and only so called because the given event has happened to take place, and we have no contradictory fact to set against it, so that it therefore remains unassailed in our mind.

III. Perception arising when the essence of one thing is inferred from another thing, but not adequately; this comes when from some effect we gather its cause, or when it is inferred from some general proposition that some property is always present.

IV. Lastly, there is the perception arising when a thing is perceived solely through its essence, or through the knowledge of its proximate cause.<sup>3</sup>

From what has already been said, it clearly appears that we perceive many things and form universal ideas:

1. From individual things, represented by the senses to us in a mutilated and confused manner, and without order to the intellect [Corol. Prop. 29, pt. 2]. These perceptions I have therefore been in the habit of calling knowledge from vague experience.

2. From signs; as for example when we hear or read certain words, we recollect things and form certain ideas of them similar to them, through which ideas we imagine things [Schol. Prop. 18, pt. 2]. These two ways of looking at things I shall hereafter call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.

3. From our possessing common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things [Corol. Prop. 38, Prop. 39, with Corol. and Prop. 40, pt. 2]. This I shall call reason and knowledge of the second kind.

Besides these two kinds of knowledge, there is a third, as I shall hereafter show, which we shall call intuitive science. This kind of knowing advances from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.<sup>4</sup>

The differences in these formulations lead Curley to conclude that the distinction between reason and intuition has altered radically.

In the *Treatise* the primary contrast between reason and intuition seemed to be that, whereas reason involved an inadequate, because inferential, knowledge of the essences of things, intuition involved an adequate and immediate knowledge of their essences. And there were two species of intuition—one exemplified by knowledge of the essence or definition of an attribute, the other exemplified by knowledge of the essence or definition of a mode.

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<sup>3</sup> *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione. Spinoza Opera*. Herausgegeben von Carl Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters. V. II. p. 10. (Translation by W.H. White) This passage appears on p. 7 of John Wild's *Spinoza Selections* (New York, 1930).

<sup>4</sup> *Ethics* in Gebhardt, op. cit. (Translation by Elwes, Bohn) IIP40S2. I.e. Part two, proposition 40, scholium two. In other references, A stands for "axiom," C for "corollary."

In the *Ethics* intuition seems to be conceived more narrowly. It includes adequate knowledge of the essences of singular things, i.e., finite modes, but it does not include adequate knowledge of the essences of divine attributes. . . . In the *Ethics*, though not in the *Treatise*, this kind of knowledge is classified under the heading of reason. . . . Reason is knowledge of the essences of those things that in the *Treatise* are described as fixed and eternal things—the attributes and infinite modes of the *Ethics*. Intuition is knowledge of the essences of those things that in the *Treatise* are described as singular mutable things—the finite modes of the *Ethics*. [Curley, pp. 56-7]

So Curley contends that the crux of the distinction has changed from one of inferential versus direct knowledge to one of knowledge of universals versus knowledge of the essences of finite things. This characterization of the latter distinction is based to a great extent upon an aside made by Spinoza at V36CS.

I thought it worthwhile for me to notice this here, in order that I might show, by this example, what that knowledge of individual objects which I have called intuitive or of the third kind [Schol. 2, Prop. 40, pt. 2] is able to do, and how much more potent it is than the universal knowledge, which I have called knowledge of the second kind.

Referring to this same passage, MacIntosh reaches the same conclusion. He offers “truths of a general nature vs. insights into the essence of individual things” as a slogan to catch the crucial distinction (MacIntosh, p. 47).

There are two crucial elements of this new consensus: (1) That the distinction in the *Treatise* is that between inferential and direct knowledge, and (2) That in the *Ethics* the distinction is that between knowledge of universal or general truths and knowledge of individual objects. These two elements lead to a third: (3) That whereas in the *Treatise* there are two kinds of intuition (intuition of an *attribute* involves grasping its essence; intuition of a finite *mode* involves grasping the essence of its proximate cause), in the *Ethics* intuition is only of modes. I am primarily concerned to contest these three positions.

There is no denying that Spinoza’s language can suggest something like the consensus view. But there are a number of problems for this interpretation. Consider, for example, Spinoza’s favorite illustration of the different kinds of knowledge:

Let there be three numbers given through which it is required to discover a fourth which shall be to the third as the second is to the first. A merchant does not hesitate to multiply the second and third together and divide the product by the first, either because he has not yet forgotten the things which he heard without any demonstration from his schoolmaster, or because he has seen the truth of the rule with the more simple numbers, or because from the 19th Prop. in the 7th book of Euclid he understands the common property of all proportionals.

But with the simplest numbers there is no need of all this. If the numbers 1, 2, 3, for instance, be given, every one can see that the fourth proportional is 6 much more clearly than by any demonstration, because from the ratio in which we see by one intuition that the first stands to the second we conclude the fourth. [IIP40S2]

This example raises two questions. In the first place, unless Spinoza holds that numbers are finite modes, it is unclear how any mathematical knowledge can be intuitive if rational knowledge is of universals and intuitive knowledge is of particular things. And there is the related problem that Spinoza's use of the same example for all the types of knowledge implies that the same thing can be known in each of the ways of knowing. His classification is presented as one of different ways of knowing the same thing and not as one of different objects of knowledge. Now it is possible that an analysis of different ways of knowing can lead to the consequence that only certain objects are appropriate to certain ways, but according to the interpretation we are considering, a difference in object is at the heart of the distinction. The example of finding the fourth proportion strongly suggests that Spinoza did not see it in this way.

There are other difficulties for the interpretation. When Spinoza celebrates the intellectual love of God in Part V of the *Ethics*, intuitive knowledge is called the highest and most perfect form of knowledge. On the consensus interpretation this refers to knowledge of the essences of singular mutable things, that is, the finite modes. But this is surprising since the knowledge of fixed and immutable things is the likelier candidate for improving one's relationship with Spinoza's God. Another surprising consequence, one noted by both Curley and MacIntosh, is that intuition, the highest form of knowledge, necessarily depends upon rational knowledge, the lower form.<sup>5</sup>

Much of this is *prima facie* puzzling, but there is another, more general, problem to face. If we assume that Spinoza's epistemological views underwent a substantial change between the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*, we should also assume that he had some good reason for changing his mind. Even if we accept that the *Treatise* version is unclear and not completely thought out, it is difficult to believe that Spinoza would undergo a radical change in his beliefs unless he were under the influence of some newly perceived insight or problem. Neither Curley nor MacIntosh provide any such motivation.

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<sup>5</sup> For arguments to this conclusion see Curley, p. 58, and MacIntosh, p. 47.

## II

I turn now to the task of providing an alternative interpretation of Spinoza's two formulations and their relationship. I shall first discuss the *Treatise* distinction between reason and intuition and argue that it is *not* a distinction between inferential and direct knowledge. I shall then try to show that the *Ethics* formulation of the distinction is consistent with a proper understanding of the *Treatise*. Then I shall consider, one by one, those passages from the *Ethics* which have seemed to require the interpretation of the consensus. If I am right, a close scrutiny of all these passages, with special attention to their contexts, will allow us to deal with them in a way that will not involve us with the difficulties attending to the consensus position.

Turning, then, to the *Treatise*, I suggest that the crux here is not that rational knowledge is inferential and that intuitive knowledge is not. In the first place, what Spinoza says is that rational knowledge arises "when the essence of one thing is inferred from another thing, but not adequately." This suggests that the essence of a thing might be inferred from another thing *adequately*, in which case we would not have an instance of rational knowledge. What would we have? Certainly not imagination or opinion. The only plausible candidate is intuitive knowledge. If so, then intuitive knowledge can be inferential. The same conclusion is suggested by the very formulation of intuitive knowledge itself, for intuitive knowledge arises "when a thing is perceived through its essence, or through the knowledge of its proximate cause." Perceiving a thing through the knowledge of its proximate cause amounts to perceiving it as following as a consequence from its proximate cause. So it looks as though inferential knowledge need not be rational and that it can be intuitive.<sup>6</sup>

What is essential to the distinction Spinoza is drawing is not the presence or absence of inference. Spinoza's first example of an inadequate inference is that of inferring from an effect to its cause, and the generality of his example clearly implies that any such inference will be inadequate. This contrasts with the case of intuitive knowledge in which we perceive a thing through its proximate cause, that is, in which we infer from cause to effect. Spinoza's point has to do with the proper *ordering* of our thoughts.

That this is the proper view to take of the distinction is supported by the overall structure and argument of the *Treatise*. The question is which

<sup>6</sup>Of those I have cited, Parkinson argues that intuitive knowledge may be inferential. See p. 183. Curiously enough, he argues this from the text of the *Ethics*.

form of knowledge is best, and Spinoza's answer, unequivocally, is that based on intuition. That this "best knowledge" is a matter of the direction of thought comes out many times in the *Treatise*:

[D]oubt always proceeds from want of due order in investigation. [Gebhardt, V. II, p. 30; Wild, p. 32]

[T]rue science proceeds from cause to effect; [Gebhardt, V. II, p. 32, Wild, p. 34]

[T]he knowledge of an effect is nothing less than the acquisition of more perfect knowledge of its cause. [Gebhardt, V. II, p. 34; Wild, p. 36]

And, from the *Ethics*, "The knowledge of an effect depends upon and involves the knowledge of its cause" (IA4). Of course, everything that is not self-caused is an effect. So, on what I shall call the "ordering" interpretation, what is important about knowledge is that it is rooted in causes and moves toward effects. Since the ultimate cause of everything is to be found in substance, or God, intuitive knowledge must have its source in attributes of God. Rational knowledge arises when we infer from the nature of dependent things and not from the nature of substance. It starts at the wrong place and it moves in the wrong direction.

What has happened to this distinction in the *Ethics*? Spinoza says that knowledge of the second kind (rational knowledge) comes "from our possessing common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things." Intuitive knowledge, however, "advances from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things." What is of special interest here is the same notion of a certain source and direction of thought that we saw in the *Treatise*. Intuitive knowledge is an *advance from* the formal essence of an attribute *to* the adequate knowledge of the essence of things. Rational knowledge, on the other hand, arises from our ideas of things. Spinoza, I claim, is making the same methodological point in both places. He is willing to grant, at least in the *Ethics*, that there is adequate knowledge arising from our ideas of things; but this knowledge is less than the ideal, according to which "true science" will always move from cause to effect, from the independent to the dependent, from substance to mode, and from God to finite things.<sup>7</sup>

Why, then, if the two accounts are not fundamentally different, does Spinoza list two forms of intuitive knowledge in the *Treatise* and only one in the *Ethics*? This is not an inconsistency or a change of mind on Spinoza's part, but only a reflection of the different contexts in which the two classifications arise. In the *Treatise* Spinoza is talking about intuitive knowledge in general. It arises either when a thing is perceived

<sup>7</sup> Spinoza's attitude toward the adequacy of rational knowledge may be perceived as ambivalent. I will consider this question below in section III.

solely through its essence (this can apply only to attributes) or when it is perceived through the knowledge of its proximate cause (this applies to modes). In the *Ethics* Spinoza gives only one case because he is in the midst of a discussion of the relationship between knowledge and objects, that is, individual things or finite modes. This being so, it would not be relevant to mention the intuitive knowledge of attributes. That this *is* so is clear from the context, and it may be useful to spell this out.

In propositions 37-40 of Part II Spinoza explains that we can form common notions from our perceptions of objects and that these notions are necessarily adequate. His idea is, roughly, that all bodies, by virtue of involving the conception of the same attribute, agree in certain respects; every body and every part of every body has something in common. Spinoza's view of the relationship between mind and body and his doctrine of perception lead him to hold that any such common notion can only be perceived adequately. (At IIP13L2 Spinoza gives "being capable of motion and rest" as an example of what is common to all bodies.) The first scholium to proposition 40, the scholium just preceding the classification, is concerned with distinguishing these common notions from universal ideas drawn from experience which we might confuse with common notions. Throughout, Spinoza is talking about how we do and how we should handle our experience of natural objects. He sums up the two main ways in which we have knowledge of things from experience (imagination or opinion and reason); then he adds that there is another way of knowing things, one which gets to their essence. He describes this intuitive knowledge of the essences of things and, naturally enough, he does not mention intuitive knowledge of attributes. But it certainly cannot be inferred from this that Spinoza now believes that knowledge of attributes would not be intuitive. This would be an unmotivated change of a radical sort and one contrary to the spirit of Spinoza's thought. We should be hesitant to attribute such a change to Spinoza, and I shall now try to show that there is no real pressure to do so.

So far, then, there seems to be no clear reason to think that the two formulations are inconsistent. They can both be seen as attempts to articulate the point about the proper ordering of our thoughts. It remains to examine in some detail those aspects of the *Ethics* that have led others to the more complex view of the consensus.

(1) In the first place, why does Spinoza's description of rational knowledge insist that it arises out of *common* notions and adequate ideas of the *properties* of things? The consensus view takes these expressions to contrast with the *individuals* mentioned in the description of intuitive knowledge. In fact, though, Spinoza's arrangement of the types of



knowledge strongly suggests that the description of rational knowledge is meant to contrast more tellingly with that of imagination or opinion. Both reason and imagination or opinion deal with our experience of objects; the demand that reason involve common notions and adequate ideas of properties is a demand that in working from experience we take care to stick to what may be adequate. This is the demand that our experience be ordered and corrected by reason. It is not a demand that rational knowledge be knowledge of universals as opposed to knowledge of individuals. As we shall see, rational knowledge may arise out of common notions without being knowledge of general truths or universals.

(2) It may be argued that in introducing in the *Ethics* definitions of the types of knowledge as a way in which we form “universal ideas,” Spinoza implies that rational knowledge is of universals. And if intuitive knowledge is of individuals, this would explain why Spinoza curiously tacks on intuitive knowledge without numbering it as a fourth way in which we perceive many things and form universal ideas. But this procedure, if curious, does not tell against an “ordering” interpretation. For one thing, if it follows from this procedure that rational knowledge is not of individuals, it would also follow that opinion or imagination is not of individuals. This is surely not Spinoza’s view. In the second place, from the fact that Spinoza is here talking about deriving universal ideas from experience it actually follows that rational knowledge of individuals is possible. So suppose that one forms a common notion from the proper application of reason to one’s experience of things. According to Spinoza (*Ethics* IIP49CS), every idea involves an affirmation or negation. The affirmation associated with a common notion will be the thought that everything following under the relevant attribute has the given property. But it follows from this that, for any such particular individual, *it* has the property. I take this to be rational knowledge of an individual. It is certainly *adequate*, and it cannot be intuitive since common notions are no part of the essence of a thing (*Ethics* IIP37). In a similar way, adequate ideas of properties should give rise to rational knowledge of individuals. And such knowledge of an individual is fairly described both as being “inferred from some general proposition that some property is always present” (from the *Treatise* version) and as arising “from our possessing common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things” (from the *Ethics*).

(3) But what of Spinoza’s remarks in Part V? Despite the appeal made to this passage by both Curley and MacIntosh, it does not support the consensus view. Spinoza does *not* say that intuitive knowledge is necessarily of individuals. The crucial line here is the relative clause “which I have called intuitive,” and the issue turns on whether the clause is

interpreted as restrictive or nonrestrictive. A nonrestrictive reading of the clause would support Curley and MacIntosh; but the restrictive reading is, I claim, more plausible. It has Spinoza saying that of the various ways of knowing individual objects, it is intuitive knowledge of them that is more powerful. There is no suggestion that intuitive knowledge is of individuals only. He goes on to contrast this way of knowing individual objects with the universal knowledge of them, which he has called knowledge of the second kind. (This last "of them" is not in Spinoza; I have added it to make clear what I take to be his intentions in this passage.) Although I claim that my reading of V36CS is more plausible than the alternative, I need not do so to make my case. Just pointing out that the restrictive reading is possible suffices to show that we need not take V36CS to support the consensus.<sup>8</sup>

It remains to explain why Spinoza would call knowledge of individuals *universal*. Two possibilities come to mind. One is that such knowledge can be universal in the sense that all persons share in it. Spinoza believes that there is such knowledge, and it may be no accident that its possibility depends upon the common notions (*Ethics* IIP38C), the doctrine of which is central to the *Ethics* account of rational knowledge. More likely, I believe, it is that the knowledge can be said to be universal in that it *rests upon* our grasping properties that are in all things. This connects rational knowledge to (some) individuals, but it would not follow that the knowledge is *of* universals or *of* general truths. It is still reasonable to insist that the knowledge can be knowledge of particular things.

(4) Now the fact that in this same passage Spinoza contrasts the power of intuitive knowledge of objects with his demonstrations in Part I of the *Ethics* might be thought awkward, since it suggests that this knowledge is not intuitive, whereas on my view that the matter of direction of inference is crucial, all these proofs should produce intuitive knowledge. The answer is, again, that Spinoza is talking about knowledge of individual things. The knowledge of Part I *is* intuitive, but it is not intuitive knowledge *of individual things*. Intuitive knowledge of individual things, of course, must end in our knowledge of the essence of the thing; what we know about things from Part I is only what is common to them all, and what is common to them all

<sup>8</sup> Those familiar with the vagaries of 17th century texts will recognize that this issue cannot be settled by an appeal to Gebhardt. It is my understanding that, in fact, a restrictive reading of the clause is the more natural view to take of the Latin. But this is not decisive. Of more weight are considerations of immediate context and of consistency with one's general understanding of Spinoza's thought. Thus, arguments made elsewhere in this paper will weigh in on the side of the restrictive reading.

can be no part of the essence of any. In a nutshell, in Part V Spinoza is not contrasting intuitive and rational knowledge; he is contrasting intuitive knowledge of individual things with rational knowledge of them.

Notice that on the *Ethics* description of intuitive knowledge of objects there are two ways in which adequate knowledge of a thing can fall short of intuitive knowledge and, hence, be merely rational. Such knowledge may not be grounded in the formal essence of an attribute, or, being properly grounded, it may not advance to the essence of the thing. What Spinoza proves of objects in Part I fails to be intuitive knowledge because it fails the second requirement. It is significant that the second example of rational knowledge given in the *Treatise* is "knowledge inferred from some general proposition that some property is always present." This is a fair description of what is shown of objects in Part I, and it is further confirmation that the two accounts of intuition and reason are not fundamentally different.

(5) It would be unfair to finish this survey without taking note of the largest embarrassment to what I believe to be the correct way of seeing Spinoza's distinction. I refer to his example of our knowledge of the fourth member of a proportion. For when he speaks of knowing the fourth member intuitively rather than through a Euclidean proof, it does seem likely that he is thinking of a distinction between direct and inferred knowledge. However, it should be noted that it is notoriously difficult to reconcile any account of the ways of knowledge with the examples Spinoza provides. Furthermore, precisely the same strong suggestion of the inferential/direct knowledge distinction is present in the example Spinoza gives in the *Ethics*, in which, on the view I am criticizing, the distinction is supposed to have changed altogether. So in the *Ethics* this example is an embarrassment for both views. On the strength of the evidence provided above I suggest that it makes most sense simply to concede that Spinoza's example is misleading on this point. Probably he believed that once knowledge was well ordered and rooted in essences, one could "directly intuit" it in a way in which previously one could not. But this is not the distinction Spinoza describes or uses when he actually deals with the distinction between reason and intuition.

I conclude from all this that, considering just the relevant texts by themselves, my "ordering" interpretation comes off better than does the consensus view. It is consistent with what Spinoza says in these passages and makes better sense of them than does the alternative. Furthermore, the interpretation of Spinoza offered here avoids the problems facing what I have called the consensus. (1) If my reading is

correct, then, with the proviso just noted, it is appropriate for Spinoza to cite mathematical examples as instances of intuitive as well as of rational knowledge. It is also appropriate in that it makes clear that the same things can be known by reason and by intuition. On the consensus view, Spinoza's example is wildly misleading on this point. (2) My reading does not have the consequence that knowledge of individual things is most blessed for Spinoza. It places knowledge of substance where it belongs—at the heart of Spinoza's doctrine of blessedness. The blessedness of the knowledge of things is derived from that of the knowledge of God. (3) Is intuition necessarily dependent upon reason, as it must be for the consensus? No, for intuitive knowledge of substance, or God, is not so dependent, and God's own knowledge will always be intuitive and not rational. It is only our knowledge of individual things which may, by reason of our finiteness, require reason. And even then, as the passage from Part V suggests, we may later come to know the same thing by intuition. That form of knowledge which constitutes human salvation does not necessarily rest upon an inferior form of knowledge. (4) Finally, the interpretation presented here does not have the consequence that Spinoza's view of knowledge underwent a drastic change in the *Ethics*. The distinction he draws is consistent, well-motivated, and tied to his fundamental insight about the universe and the methods we use to obtain knowledge of it: that what is independent and uncaused is ontologically prior to what is dependent and caused and that the highest form of knowledge must be rooted in the former.

### III

Apart from the main issue of the reason/intuition distinction, both Curley and MacIntosh argue that Spinoza changed his mind about another matter. They claim that in the *Treatise* Spinoza restricts adequate knowledge to the highest form of knowing and that in the *Ethics* he reverses himself, allowing that both intuitive and rational knowledge are adequate. Actually, in the *Treatise* Spinoza is ambivalent about the status of rational knowledge. He says of it that "we may say that it gives us the idea of the thing sought and that it enables us to draw conclusions without risk of error; yet it is not by itself sufficient to put us in possession of the perfection we aim at" (Gebhardt, V. II, p. 13; Wild, p. 10). Spinoza is not going to endorse such knowledge; the point of the *Treatise* is to find the best form of knowledge, and that is clearly intuitive knowledge. But neither is he willing to go so far as to say that it may lead

to error. (Perhaps it should be pointed out that the appearance of the phrase “not adequately” in Spinoza’s definition of rational knowledge in no way commits him to the view that the knowledge itself is not adequate.) In the *Ethics*, of course, Spinoza is quite forthright in holding both that rational knowledge is adequate and that it is less desirable than intuition.

If this does constitute a shift of emphasis, there are at least two possible explanations for it. First, in working out the metaphysical details of the *Ethics* Spinoza may well have become more aware of just how deeply committed he was to the adequacy of forms of nonintuitive knowledge. This commitment grows out of his theory of the parallelism of the attributes of thought and extension and out of the doctrine of common notions. Second, Spinoza had to face the problem that confronts any philosopher with a special path to knowledge. What is to be said of what passes for knowledge among those who are not privileged to the special method? Do “underprivileged” scientists and mathematicians *really* know anything? It is hard to answer in the negative, but a positive answer seems to undermine the claims of the special method. Descartes was willing to take the heroic course of denying full epistemic credit to atheists since, without divine guarantee, they were vulnerable to the overthrow of reason. Spinoza is more tolerant. He allows that rational knowledge is necessarily true, at least so far as it goes. But his ultimate interest in the ethical rather than the epistemic allows him to grant knowledge claims to non-Spinozists without undermining the claims of his method. The method leads to joy and salvation; he can allow rational thinkers their claims to knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I wish to express appreciation to Martha Brandt Bolton for comments on an earlier paper that forced me to face the issues taken up here and to Robert M. Adams for assistance in dealing with Spinoza’s Latin.