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Relational Identity and Metaphysical Unity - Spinoza's Metaphysics of Singular Things

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Dafna Mark – Ben Shabat

Committee in charge:

Professor Donald Rutherford, Co-Chair
Professor Clinton Tolley, Co-Chair
Professor Michael Della Rocca
Professor Robert Twomey
Professor Eric Watkins

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University of California San Diego

2026

DEDICATION

For those to whom my heart belongs, Jonathan, Rafael, and Leon.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Individual works of Spinoza are abbreviated as follows. All citations are from the *Ethics* unless otherwise specified:

<i>E</i>	<i>Ethics</i>
Ep.	Letters
CM	<i>Metaphysical Thoughts</i>
KV	<i>Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being</i>
TdIE	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>
TTP	<i>Theological-Political Treatise</i>
DPP	Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy"

In citing from the *Ethics*, I use the following abbreviations:

ax	Axiom
App	Appendix
c	Corollary
D	Definition
d	Demonstration
Exp	Explanation
DOA	Definition of the Affects
lem	Lemma
NS	De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S. (alternative formulation from a posthumous Dutch edition published the same year as the Latin <i>Opera Omnia</i>)
p	Proposition
Pre	Preface
s	Scholium

References to the *Ethics* use the above abbreviations preceded by an Arabic numeral to indicate the Part. So, '2p13D' indicates '*Ethics* 2 proposition 13 definition, and '4p18s' indicates '*Ethics* 4 proposition 18 scholium'. References to NS are given in text with the addition of square brackets. References to Spinoza's other works are given in the following form:

EP	Arabic numerals indicate order in the Curley 1985/2016 edition.
CM	Roman numerals indicate Book number and Arabic Numerals indicate Chapter number.
KV	Roman numerals indicate Book number and Arabic numerals indicate Chapter numbers.
TdIE	Arabic numerals indicate paragraph number.
TTP	Roman numerals indicate Chapter number and Arabic numerals indicate paragraph number.

All citations are followed by references to the Gebhardt 1925 edition of Spinoza's works, which are marked by the letter 'G' and use Roman numerals to indicate volume and Arabic numerals to indicate page number, and subsequently by references to the Curley 1985/2016 edition, with Arabic numerals to indicate page number. So, e.g., '1p1; G/II/47, C/I/410' represents a full citation.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Relational Identity and Metaphysical Unity - Spinoza's Metaphysics of Singular Things

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California San Diego, 2026

Professor Donald Rutherford, Co-Chair
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Spinoza's monistic metaphysical picture is unique in its uncompromising and radical commitments. According to Spinoza, there is one substance—God—of which everything else (trees, humans, and chemical elements) are modes. Thus, all things are causally and conceptually dependent

on God, inhere in God, and are effects of God's infinite essence, from which everything necessarily follows. Spinoza is also a committed necessitarian and determinist, according to whom God alone is a free cause, acting, as do all things in nature, from the universal laws of its own nature. According to this view, all finite things are on a metaphysical par, existing as parts of an infinite chain of finite causes as finite and determinate expressions of God's infinite power.

These austere metaphysical commitments have led some readers to question the reality of anything but God and to adopt an acosmist view. Furthermore, according to Spinoza's epistemology, our experience of singular things yields only partial and confused knowledge. His definitions of both individuals and singular things, in turn, cast doubt not only on the existence of finite, singular entities but also on their particular identity and metaphysical stability. In other words, Spinoza's philosophy as a whole does not seem to align with our common-sense understanding of the world and the things within it. While it is relatively clear what substance, or *Natura Naturans*, is for Spinoza, it is less clear what he takes finite things to be exactly, or what *Natura Naturata* consists of.

This dissertation delivers an account of the metaphysics of the finite in Spinoza, focusing mainly on his *Ethics*. I argue that singular things are relationally constituted and exist only durationally, and that the identity of each and every singular thing is thus also relational. I further argue that singular things' identity is grounded *solely* in their actual essence, i.e., the *conatus*, which I understand as a striving to increase in power, necessarily and indispensably involving interactions with others. Thus, I argue that when singular things cooperate with things of the same nature, their identities are genuinely metaphysically united. This dissertation further argues that Spinoza's concept of an individual, defined by a *fixed ratio of motion and rest*, determines only a thing's kind, yet not its particular identity. It also argues that formal essences, understood as mediate infinite modes and thus as "concrete universals," express such *ratios* of motion and rest and are shared kind-essences.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Spinoza's Monism and the Question of the Finite

There are many aspects to Spinoza's philosophy for which this phenomenal philosopher is known for – his criticism of religion, his naturalistic (and heretic) interpretation of scripture, his political thought, and his egoistic ethical theory, to name a few. Above all, and perhaps most fundamentally, Spinoza had a remarkable metaphysical picture which to this day, almost 350 years after his passing, is the source of great scholarly interest and disputes. Spinoza, it is well known, is a monist thinker according to whom “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived” (1p14) and “whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (1p15). While substance is “what is in itself and is conceived through itself” (1D3), everything else (1A1), e.g., humans, trees, the laws of nature, or chemical elements, is a mode, i.e., “the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (1D5). According to this metaphysical picture, “particular things [i.e., modes] are nothing but affections of God's attributes” meaning that they are merely properties of the one, infinite and eternal, substance.¹ These most basic building blocks of Spinoza's metaphysical picture already place Spinoza in stark contrast with his most influential predecessor, Descartes, and his contemporary, Leibniz, who are pluralists about thinking substances.² They also undermine our intuitive experience of the world around us as composed of independent, discrete, individuals.

¹ See Melamed, 2013: 49-60; Nadler, 2012: 225; Bennett, 1984: 60-1; Della Rocca, 2008: 61-9. Cf. Curley, 1990, Lin, 2019b.

² See Descartes, *Objections and Replies*; CSM/II/119; Leibniz, *Monadology*, §1, §9. Whether Descartes takes there to be one or many material substances is disputed. Scholars who think there is only one material substance for Descartes are, e.g., Cottingham, 1986; Williams, 1987. Stuart, 1999.

Another unique feature of this metaphysical picture is, e.g., what is known as Spinoza's parallelism. As an infinite and eternal substance, God has an infinity of attributes (1p11) – “what the intellect perceives... as constituting its essence” (1D4) – such as thought and extension (2pp1-2). These attributes are conceived through themselves (1p10) and thus cannot be explained in terms of one another and cannot causally interact, either.³ God's power of acting, thus, is equal to his power of thinking (2p7c), and “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (2p7). In other words, according to Spinoza, there is perfect symmetry between things and ideas, as every idea represents a corresponding body; the relationship that holds between ideas is thus isomorphic to the relationship that holds between bodies, such that ideas give rise to ideas in the exact same way that bodies cause changes in other bodies, yet ideas and bodies do not causally interact.⁴ In stark contrast to Descartes, thus, Spinoza denies mind-body interactions.⁵ A further striking related issue which stems from this doctrine is Spinoza's panpsychism, according to which *everything* (rocks, chairs, horses, and humans) is animated, or has a *mind* (2p13s). Spinoza understands a mind as an idea which corresponds to a certain body and its modifications (2pp11-13), yet his panpsychism seems to quite robust, as “the claims [regarding the human mind in particular] that he sees as having general import are about mentality, representation, perception, and awareness... So his general claim is that these mental features can be found in things ubiquitously” (Della Rocca, 2026: 402).⁶

³ For discussions regarding the causal, and explanatory barrier between the attributes see Della Rocca, 2002.

⁴ See Della Rocca 1996, ch. 2 for a thorough discussion of Spinoza's parallelism focused on its representational aspect. See Melamed 2013 for a reading according to which there are, in fact, two parallelism doctrines. See Primus 2013 and 2021 for a reading according to which the parallelism extends to adequate ideas only.

⁵ Spinoza's parallelism sets him apart from Leibniz's alternative for the Cartesian mind-body interaction. According to Leibniz's “there is perfect *harmony* between the perceptions of the monad and the motions of bodies, pre-established from the first between the system of efficient causes and that of final causes” (Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace*: §3 p. 208). While Leibniz denies the causal interaction between souls and bodies, and similarly to Spinoza, takes there to be an explanatory barrier between the two realms (Rutherford, 1995: 215) he grounds the pre-established harmony in virtue of which they correlate in God's wisdom and the principle of the best, and most importantly takes the correlation to occur between monads, i.e., substances, and an aspect of them (Rutherford, 2015: 213-28).

⁶ See Lin, 2019b for another defense of a strong panpsychism. Cf. Renz, 2018: 60-1.

Additionally, according to Spinoza's metaphysical picture, everything is bound by the exact same causal mechanism originating in God's essence; God himself acts from the laws of nature (1p17), which are everywhere the same (3pre; G/II/138), and so "from the necessity of the divine nature there *must* follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)" (1p16; emphasis added). Spinoza further argues that "in nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way" (1p29), and that "a thing which has been determined by God to produce an effect, cannot render itself undetermined" (1p27). Thus, "God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence" (1p25), and these things "could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced" (1p33). Thus, as is again a well-known feature of this radical, non-compromising metaphysical picture, Spinoza is a full-blown determinist, and a necessitarian, according to whom "whatever we conceive to be in God's power, necessarily exists" (1p35).

These metaphysical commitments paint a relatively clear picture of the nature of substance, or God considered as *Natura Naturans*, i.e., as "what is in itself and is conceived through itself, *or*... God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause" (1p29s). Spinoza's substance exists necessarily and has infinitely many attributes which constitute its essence (1p11); it is indivisible (1p13), eternal (1p19), and completely free (1D7). What is much less clear is the nature of *Natura Naturata*, i.e., "whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature... that is, all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God" (1p29s). In other words, while it is clear that God is the cause of everything, it is less clear what, according to Spinoza's metaphysics, "everything" is: what exactly particular things are, to what extent they correspond to our everyday experience, or whether they even exist. *The metaphysics of the finite is, thus, at the heart of this dissertation, which is an attempt to provide a coherent account of it.*

The deep and inherent unclarity surrounding finite things is evident in Spinoza's perplexing and permissive definitions of individuals and singular things, which he attributes strictly to non-substantial things, i.e., to modes. Spinoza defines singular things as finite and determinate and argues that to the extent that a few individuals are together the cause of a single effect, they are considered as one singular thing (2D7). Read at face value, this definition does not bring forth metaphysically robust single entities, and seems to imply that with every causal interaction, new entities emerge. Spinoza also argues that individuals are defined by a *ratio of motion and rest* that obtains between their parts (2p13D), yet he does not explain what exactly such a *ratio* is (and suggests that physical proximity between an individual's parts is unnecessary for its constitution as such), nor does he provide a minimal time frame within which such a *ratio* must obtain for the individual to be constituted as such. In both cases, Spinoza's definitions do not help much in accounting for the nature of any particular, finite, entity. To use Melamed's words, the definition of singular things provides a "very loose criterion for constituting a singular thing [and] the situation is not much better with the other term Spinoza uses to designate finite things: an individual [2p13D]" (Melamed, 2010: 85-6).

Not only is it unclear what exactly finite modes are, but the very basic fact of their existence is doubtful. Spinoza argues that "what is finite and has a determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God" (1p28), and that God is neither the proximate cause, nor, properly speaking, the remote cause of finite things (1p18s). Since God is the only substance and is the cause of *all* things, it seems impossible for finite things to ever be truly caused by God, i.e., to really exist. This idea is reinforced in 1p4d, where Spinoza argues that substance is considered *truly* when it is considered regardless of its affections, to which it is prior, and by Ep. 50 where Spinoza argues that "determination is negation", undermining, so it seems, the reality of finite and determinate things. In sum, God is "by its nature infinite, immutable, indivisible, and so forth, as

anyone can easily see” (2p10s), yet the nature and existence of finite things, and how they relate to God, is much less clear.

2. Acosmism, and a Proposed Shift in Gear

The issues surrounding the reality of the finite had led many of Spinoza’s readers to adopt an acosmist reading of his metaphysics, according to which anything other than God, i.e., the cosmos as we know it, simply does not exist. Hegel most famously argues that for Spinoza “the true is simply and solely the one substance... and only this absolute unity is reality (Hegel, *LHP.III*: 258); “[R]igid substantiality is the last point [Spinoza] reached... and thus determinateness continually vanishes from his thought” (Hegel, *LHP.III*: 261). For Hegel “in the system of Spinoza all things are merely cast down into this abyss of annihilation...” (Hegel, *LHP.III*: 288), meaning that nothing, other than the one infinite substance, exists. British Idealists such as Joachim and Martineau similarly criticize Spinoza for affirming a plurality he cannot justify given his monism. Joachim, e.g., argues that “we are left with no rational answer to the question ‘How—on what principle—can Substance, in spite of being unity, reveal itself in an order of diverse states [i.e., in modes]?’” (Joachim, 1901: 108), and Martineau argues that “the sudden step into finiteness is wholly unexplained, —nay, is made under conditions which have been carefully proved to exclude it” (Martineau, 1883: 204-5). Both thinkers take issue with Spinoza’s deduction of the finite from the infinite, and even though they attempt to avoid the acosmist conclusions, they take Spinoza to be inconsistent in holding both substance’s unity, and the diversity and plurality of the finite (Newlands, 2011: 15).

Some contemporary readers also endorse an acosmist interpretation of Spinoza. Kristin Primus argues that “the *essences* of *all* things follow from the divine nature and *all* essences enjoy infinite, eternal reality as modes immanently caused by the infinite, eternal substance” (Primus, 2021b:

1), such that “finite reality turns out to be *ersatz* reality” (Primus, 2023b: 447). According to Primus’ acosmism, thus, only infinite modes follow from God’s absolute nature, and finite modes are completely illusory. Michael Della Rocca proposes a radical acosmist reading of Spinoza according to which in Spinoza’s metaphysics all there is is simply being. According to Della Rocca, Spinoza is committed to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and thus to the claim that “to be is to be intelligible”, meaning that “ x exists if and only if it is intelligible that x exists” (Della Rocca, 2012: 9). A thing’s existence is thus dependent on it being explained. Yet, as Della Rocca argues in numerous papers,⁷ explanations are always relational, and relations are unintelligible, thus any explanation of any particular thing, which necessarily involves relations, must (at least to some extent) fail, i.e., no thing is completely intelligible, and thus no thing actually exists.

The implications of the acosmist readings are, quite obviously, extremely counterintuitive, and are also in tension with the numerous passages where Spinoza discusses the plurality of finite things and their relation to God (e.g., 1p25; 2p1d; 2p8c; 2p9; 2p45; 4p4d; 5p24; 5p36s). Thus, some scholars defend Spinoza’s positing of the finite and argue that God’s infinite nature necessitates the existence of the finite realm, which is in no tension with God’s unity and indivisibility.⁸ Scholars who do not directly discuss the question of the reality of the finite, and are focused on different aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy, e.g., his political thought, epistemology, his account of the human mind, or his ethical theory, must, quite naturally, assume the reality of the finite and take the existence of finite things as a working premise.

Whether Spinoza is an acosmist or not is, of course, a question worth asking. Yet the acosmist discussion may lead us to overlook a more basic question regarding the nature and identity of the finite, which, as suggested earlier, does not have an obvious answer in Spinoza. In addition to the

⁷ E.g., Della Rocca, 2008b; 2012; 2020b; 2020c; 2023.

⁸ See, e.g., Melamed, 2012; Nadler, 2012; Miller, 2010.

metaphysical commitments mentioned above, there are epistemological considerations in light of which we should be hesitant to assume that Spinoza's realm of the finite corresponds to our everyday experience of the world, and assume his account of the finite resembles our naïve, commonsensical one. As will be discussed thoroughly in chapter 4, Spinoza argues that we can only have inadequate ideas of finite, singular things (see, e.g., 2p16c1; 2p25). He further argues that "random experience", i.e., opinion or imagination (2p40s2) via which we encounter finite particular things, is the only cause of falsity.⁹ In 2p10s Spinoza argues that his predecessors reached mistaken conclusions regarding God and its relation to humans since "they did not observe the [proper] order of philosophizing" (2p10s), and in the preface to Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* Meyer argues on behalf of Spinoza that different foundations than Descartes' are needed to "solve all the very difficult problems that occur in metaphysics..." (DPPpre; G/I/132-3; C/I/230). Spinoza, thus, took our first-person experience to have no epistemic privilege when attempting to acquire true knowledge. Given the metaphysical weakness of his notions of singulars and individuals, given the more general metaphysical framework according to which finite things are modes of God, and given these epistemic considerations which severely undermine the validity of our commonsensical, everyday perception of the world, I conduct a deep and thorough enquiry into what finite entities are exactly, how are they constituted, relate to God and to each other.

What I aspire to do throughout this dissertation is thus to shift gears and slow down. Rather than asking questions regarding the existence of finite things, my aim in this dissertation is to conduct a thorough investigation regarding their identity and most basic structure, as it emerges from Spinoza's metaphysics. Whether finite things really exist or are completely illusory, it is undeniable that Spinoza

⁹ Reason provides knowledge of common notions, which particular things share, but which are not distinctive of any singular entity (see 2p37), and intuition provides knowledge of the formal *essences* of singulars (2p40s2), which, I will argue in chapter 3, are shared among singulars, and are infinite and eternal. Thus, our everyday encounter with finite entities such as trees, other human beings, or ourselves, happens at the level of the imagination and thus is necessarily confused.

not only constantly discussed them, but that his *Ethics* is aimed at the salvation and blessedness of a particular kind of finite entity, i.e., the human being. Thus, regardless of the acosmist question,¹⁰ I wish to provide a detailed account of what finite entities are exactly, or of what Spinoza took them to be. In other words, I wish to better understand *Natura Naturata*, and Spinoza's metaphysics of the finite.

To do so, I aim to leave my intuitive, commonsensical, experience of myself and the world as composed of discrete finite entities, outside the bounds of philosophical investigation, and to question, rather than assume, what sort of finite things Spinoza's metaphysics gives rise to, and whether they correspond to our ordinary experience. In other words, I refrain from assuming anything about the identity of the entities under scrutiny and draw my conclusions from Spinoza's text only. By conducting a conceptual investigation into Spinoza's terms relevant to the question of singular things (such as individuals, singulars, formal and actual essences, and so forth) I will show that in fact, Spinoza's notion of singular things, i.e., finite modes such as humans and trees, does not perfectly correspond to how we intuitively think about such entities. Rather, as my research will show, singular things are relational entities, constituted by their causal relations with each other, which may be, under certain conditions discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation, metaphysically united with one another.

¹⁰ Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to remain agnostic toward the acosmist question, which is related to this project yet remains outside its scope. Although I stand behind this agnostic position, the reader might find some of my ideas and arguments to suggest a commitment to an acosmist reading of Spinoza. For instance, in Chapter 4, I argue that there are only inadequate ideas of singular things and thus that no idea of any particular singular exists in isolation in God's mind. Since God possesses all true ideas, my reading suggests that ideas of singulars are necessarily false, and thus singulars do not truly exist. However, I do not argue for an acosmist view, remain indifferent to its implications, and believe my account works both under acosmist and cosmist frameworks. To determine whether my statements fully commit me to acosmism, further issues require exploration, such as the idea of a degraded reality or how being part of an infinite causal chain grants reality and existence to a finite mode. Therefore, I leave this issue for the reader to decide and am open to both cosmist and acosmist interpretations of my view.

3. The Counter Case – Renz’s Intuition-motivated Reading

To illustrate what my project stands in contrast with, and to explain my motivations for it, I wish to briefly discuss a reading of Spinoza which is motivated by considerations opposed to mine: that of Ursula Renz. Renz’s reading, presented in her acclaimed book *The Explainability of Experience*, is focused on accounting for human experience within Spinoza’s monistic framework. In the introduction to her book, Renz explains that her view is motivated by “the *intuition* that experience is explainable” or by the idea that “the seemingly indubitable intuition—that discrete subjects are numerically different [and that individual people are distinct subjects]—has to be justified” in Spinoza’s metaphysics (Renz, 2018: 2, 15; emphasis added). In her book Renz attempts to do just that, i.e., to provide an account of Spinoza’s human mind and numerical difference between singulars which is able to accommodate our first-person experience of ourselves as discrete subjects.¹¹ Renz, I believe, makes an important contribution to the understanding of Spinoza’s theory of the human mind and human subjectivity, and I am grateful for her focus on singulars’ finitude and innate indexicality as crucial for understanding their identity (Renz, 2018: 141). Yet I also believe Renz makes a few moves which are in tension with Spinoza’s metaphysical commitments. According to Renz, for example, Spinoza distinguishes between two kinds of minds, or two ways in which things are animated, *mens* and *anima*, and he uses the former restrictively “for beings capable of *possessing ideas*”, i.e., human minds (Renz, 2018: 60). Thus, “a body’s individuality is a sufficient condition only for being thought of as animated, not for being attributed a *mens*... even if we assume that all ideas about individuals are, by analogy, themselves individuals, these... are not *eo ipso* minds” (Renz, 2018: 60-1). In other words,

¹¹ See also Della Rocca’s review of Renz’s book, where he suggests similarly that “Part of what may be motivating Renz here is the worry that if God has ideas—including the ideas which are my mind and your mind—then such ideas would inhere in God, and the very being of our minds would thus be vulnerable to being engulfed by and annihilated in the vast sea of being” (Della Rocca, 2011: 378) As me, Della Rocca takes Renz’s motivation to be the desire to “secure” and make sense of our intuitive understanding of ourselves as subjects within Spinoza’s metaphysical framework.

Renz's reading attributes to human minds a distinctive feature which sets them apart from the rest of nature, in virtue of which their subjectivity cannot be dismissed and thanks to which we can square our everyday experience with Spinoza's metaphysics.

Spinoza, though, never argues that humans have such distinctive mental features, nor that the way humans are animated is essentially different from the way other singular things are. Quite the contrary, Spinoza is explicit about his aversion to thinking of humans as superior to nature, or as a "dominion within a dominion" (3pre; C/I/491; G/II/137). As mentioned already, Spinoza is a committed naturalist, and his commitment to the universality of the laws of nature is pervasive, such that he argues that he intends to treat human actions and appetites "just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (3pre; G/II/138).¹² Even though Renz does not argue against Spinoza's naturalism, and does not claim that humans do not follow the universal laws of nature, I am still hesitant to attribute to humans a feature which non-human finite entities lack, and to force everyday intuitions on Spinoza's unique, uncompromising metaphysical commitments. Renz's move, with which she justifies the "indubitable intuition", exemplifies the way in which working with a preconception of what the identity of a human being should amount to is forced on Spinoza's texts in a way that is not always in complete accordance with it.¹³

¹² Spinoza naturalism give rise to a further relevant distinctive feature of his philosophy, namely, his anti-humanism (Melamed 2010b: 150-1). As Melamed points out (Melamed, 2010b: 153-4), Spinoza's non-substantial account of the human mind (i.e., the fact that human minds, as *all* minds, are modes rather than substances) distance him from most philosophers of his time, including Descartes, whose account of human subjectivity which is grounded in the idea that each mind is a substance (Thiel, 2011), shapes, to a great extent, our conception of ourselves as distinct persons (Ayer, 1963: 82). Given the great disagreements between Spinoza and Descartes regarding the nature of the human mind (and regarding the status of humans within nature more generally), and given Meyer's explicit statement that "Descartes assumes, but does not prove" that the human mind is a substance, while Spinoza argues it is "a thought determinate in a certain way" (DPPpre; G/I/132; C/I/229) we should be even more hesitant to force a quasi-Cartesian approach to the human mind on Spinoza, as Renz does.

¹³ In distinguishing the two kinds of minds Renz also argues that while in extension collective bodies may form a genuine individual, such an individual does not have a correlate in thought (Renz, 2018: 59). This claim has, I believe, relatively weak textual evidence, is in tension with 2p7 and 2p21d, and is another way in which Renz's interpretation seems to be motivated more by a desire to square our first-person intuitions with Spinoza's texts, rather than to see what sort of identity the text actually gives rise to.

While my disagreement with Renz's method and motivations is, to a great extent, what originated this project, it is important to say that my project is *not* a direct response to Renz's, as it is not focused on human experience, the human mind, or humans' identity specifically. What I wish to achieve here is a general account of the identity of singular things in Spinoza, which extends to all finite entities as such. Even if one is most interested in the human case in particular, in order to arrive at an account of human identity which is faithful to Spinoza's thought, one needs, I believe, to slow down and shift gears, and to reexamine Spinoza's account of the singular as such, without giving any privilege or primacy to the human case. Only after doing so, and with a correct view of the metaphysics and identity of singular things in general, may one inquire into the identity of humans. As I have just mentioned, the task I set myself to accomplish in this dissertation is the former, i.e., to deliver a general account of the metaphysics of the finite. It will not be until the second half of chapter 5 that one may begin to see how the view I will be promoting here shapes the identity of humans *per se*, and I do not intend to deliver a coherent account of human subjectivity or to delve into questions of consciousness and personality.

What I wish to emphasize is that given everything that was said in these introductory remarks, whatever will be true of singular things in general must be true of humans as well. And if it turns out that our experience of ourselves is inconsistent with Spinoza's account of singulars (as we experience ourselves as discrete individuals, while Spinoza's metaphysics gives rise to relational entities), it might be that we should reconsider, and perhaps alter, our intuitions, rather than deem Spinoza's view (or the interpretation of it) as implausible. For, as Della Rocca inspiringly argues, "the fact that a view is... counterintuitive or goes against common sense is not a mark against that view... the taming of philosophy may preclude the possibility of overturning our existing convictions..." (Della Rocca, 2020b: 260, 271).

4. Roadmap

Here is how this dissertation unfolds. In Chapter 2 I conduct a general discussion regarding individuation and argue that there are a few different questions associated with the topic which are often conflated. I distinguish between three such questions, namely, what makes a thing an individual rather than a non-individual (Q1), what makes it an individual of a certain kind (Q2), and what makes it *this* rather than *that* individual (Q3). Distinguishing the three questions and answering each on its own is crucial, I will show, for adequately answering the identity question I am after. As a first impasse to these questions, I look into Spinoza's definition of an individual as constituted by a *ratio of motion and rest* that obtains between the individual's parts (2p13D), which is often taken to explain what makes something the particular thing that it is (i.e., to answer Q3).¹⁴ I argue that contrary to how it is usually understood, a thing's *ratio* offers an answer to Q1 and Q2, but that it cannot, and is not supposed to, on its own, answer Q3. As a thing's individuality determines the kind of thing that it is, it is a part of its particular identity, yet it does not exhaust all and everything that a singular entity is. My interpretation of Spinoza's concept of individuality, thus, creates a conceptual as well as a metaphysical gap between a thing's *ratio* and its unique identity. A novel answer to Q3, then, is what the rest of this dissertation aims to establish.

In Chapter 3 I discuss an additional candidate for accounting for a singular thing's identity – its formal essence. I argue that formal essences are mediate infinite modes, and that as such they are infinite and eternal and follow directly from God's absolute nature. Since this is the case, I argue that we should think about them as “concrete universals”, i.e., as single entities which have universal-like qualities and are able to be expressed by many, yet which exist prior, and are indifferent to, the

¹⁴ More accurately, it is taken to be what the *conatus*, i.e., a thing's actual essence, strives to preserve. As I will argue in chapter 5, scholars take the *conatus* to be more directly related to identity questions, but they also identify the *conatus* with *ratio* preservation, and take the latter to be unique, while I take it to be shared by many.

existence of the singular things of which they are essences. I further argue that such essences express *ratios of motion and rest*, meaning that it is in virtue of its formal essence that a thing is of a certain kind, and I argue that this *ratio* should be understood as a power structure which modifies God's infinite power. In this chapter, I will also begin to account for how infinite formal essences are related to the finite singular things of which they are essences (a task I complete in the following chapters) and will suggest that the former are the *formal causes* of the latter. According to this view, my formal essence is that in virtue of which I am human being, able to, e.g., think rationally, stand on two legs, yet not to breathe under water or photosynthesize. Clearly, though, my formal essence so understood fails to explain my unique identity or what makes me the particular human that *I* am, as it is unable to account for why I chose, e.g., to write a dissertation about Spinoza rather than Descartes. Thus, by the end of the third chapter, while the metaphysics of the infinite aspect relevant to Q3 will be fleshed out, a complete answer to the question will not yet be delivered.

In Chapter 4, I leave the infinite realm and focus on the entities whose identity is in question, i.e., singular things. I inquire into the metaphysics of singular things and their durational existence and consider in detail the implications of singulars being finite, determinate and constituted by causal relations (2D7). I argue that singular things exist *only* durationally, and that only singular things exist in this particular way (as part of the infinite chain of finite causes), and that as such, they are inherently and necessarily relational. This reading has a few important implications. First, since formal essences are infinite and follow directly from God's nature, yet singular things are caused both by these essences and by other singular things (1p28) the "*it*" which exists durationally is necessarily different from the infinite "*it*". In other words, it is not the case, I argue, that singular things as such have an eternal aspect to them, and they do not, in and of themselves, exist in two distinct ways (i.e., eternal and durational). Thus, again, singular things do not stand in a one-to-one relation to their formal essences. Second, since singular things necessarily exist durationally I argue that there can *only* be an inadequate

idea of them, meaning that considered in isolation from the causal chain of which they are part, there is no idea of them in God's infinite intellect.¹⁵ Third, since singular things necessarily exist durationally, i.e., in virtue of causal interactions, I argue that Spinoza's mention in 2p8 of "singular things that do not exist" should be understood as referring to those thing's formal essences, and thus I offer a reinterpretation of this perplexing proposition and its scholium which further explicates the relationship between formal essences and singulars. This chapter creates a relatively sharp distinction between the infinite realm, where formal essences exist, and the durational one, where singulars do. Yet, as I have argued already, formal essences cause singulars to some extent and determine the kinds of things that they actually are, and so participate in one way or another in the durational. Thus, in this chapter I continue to account for the causal relation which obtains between formal essences and singular things and argue that singulars are inadequate expressions of *the same* power structure which runs from God's essence, through formal essence, to singular things. By the end of this chapter, the grounds for providing an answer to Q3 would be completely laid out, as the metaphysical nature of singular things will be clear, as well as what their identity involves – formal essences, but also and most crucially, their actual, durational, existence, and interactions with others.

Chapter 5 is where I finally provide an answer to Q3. I argue that it lies in a thing's *conatus*, i.e., its actual essence, in virtue of which it is *this* rather than *that*, and that in fact, a thing's identity is nothing but its *conatus* or striving. Since whatever the *conatus* turns out to be would eventually be what a singular thing's *is*, the vast majority of this chapter is devoted to analyzing the *conatus* doctrine, while focusing on the aspects of the doctrine which are relevant for a thing's identity. The account of identity my interpretation of the *conatus* will give rise to is, as mentioned already, of a relational identity, wherein one's identity is constituted by its interactions with others, and to this extent is metaphysically united

¹⁵Contrary to the overall realist tone of the dissertation regarding the reality of the singular, this claim suggests that singulars *qua* singulars do not really exist.

with them. As such, this chapter represents a further step in the direction of establishing the truth of “relational autonomy”, a theory already present in Spinoza scholarship, by providing it with stronger metaphysical arguments, and by extending relationality not only to a thing’s autonomy and freedom, but to its core identity as a singular enduring thing.

I begin this chapter by linking a thing’s striving and to its being a singular thing, and argue based on my previous account of singulars that striving should be understood as expressing casual power, and that things strive to increase in power rather than for self-determination or being more active. I motivate this claim by discussing Spinoza’s account of human freedom, which I suggest should not be understood merely in terms of being an adequate cause and having adequate ideas. Thus, inspired by Matthew Kisner’s view of striving (Kisner, 2020) I argue that things successfully strive not only when they are active, but also when they are passive and acted on, as long as their causal power is increased, and that such cases of passive increase are an indispensable aspect of striving as a singular thing. To support this claim I discuss Spinoza’s account of affects and focus on the way in which passive joy in particular is an integral part of a thing’s striving.

Next, I provide further details as to how exactly such passive increases in power occur and how interactions with other singular things are relevant to it. I build on the idea of “constant essence constitution”, arguing that each and every case of an increase in power, whether active or passive, is a genuine instance of a thing’s essence constitution, meaning that a thing’s actual essence is open-ended and develops throughout its lifetime. I explain in more detail the way in which two organizing principles determine how exactly, and with what kind of entities, a thing can interact such that its essence is constituted. I argue that passive joy born out of interactions with things with which we share a nature, or a formal essence, expresses the kind of interaction that results in the metaphysical union of the two entity’s essences, and hence in a unification of their identities which extends to the level of their agreement in nature. Here I distinguish between a complete, numerical identity, which

occurs when things act solely from their shared nature (i.e., adequately) and results in their dissolution into an eternal shared essence, and a partial agreement passive joy gives rise to, resulting in a union of two singulars, which is relevant to the identity of durationally existing singulars. I wrap up this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, by more explicitly arguing that what makes a thing *this* thing rather than *that* are the causal interactions it participates in throughout its life, and that the account of identity which Spinoza's metaphysics gives rise to, or the "*this*" which emerges from the *conatus* doctrine as an answer to Q3, is not so sharply distinguished from others, as in the Cartesian model, but is united with others in virtue of a shared nature. My view, then, helps better understand why man is God to man (4p35s) and why two individuals of entirely the same nature compose an individual twice as powerful (4p18s).

Chapter 2: INDIVIDUALS

Distinguishing Questions of Individuation, and the Concept of *Individual* in Spinoza

1. Introduction: Distinguishing Different Questions About Individuals

Spinoza's concept of *individual* touches on different aspects of his philosophy, most prominently his metaphysics, ethics, and politics. In what follows, I investigate what this concept involves for Spinoza by focusing on the exact way Spinoza uses it, mostly throughout the *Ethics*. What I will argue for is that Spinoza's concept of *individual* does not (and is not supposed to) fully determine an entity's unique being, and thus should not be used to explain a particular entity's (synchronic, diachronic, or personal) identity. Rather, I will argue, Spinoza uses the term restrictively as explaining only the *kind* of a thing an entity is.

In *Ethics* 2p13D Spinoza defines being an 'individual' as being comprised of bodies pressing upon one another or communicating their motions to one another in a *certain fixed ratio* [*certa ratio*].¹⁶ This definition leads scholars to debate on numerous questions, e.g.: whether states or nations are real individuals for Spinoza;¹⁷ or, conversely, whether anything besides the whole of nature (E2p13lem7s) can count as really determined as to *one ratio*;¹⁸ or whether Spinoza even has a worked-out theory of individuals.¹⁹

¹⁶ For discussions which foreground this passage, see, e.g., Garrett, 1994; Morrison, 2021. From now on, when I use the term *ratio*, I refer to the ratio of motion and rest of an individual, and not the second kind of cognition, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁷ Barbone, 2002, LeBuffe 2021; Zellmer, 2025.

¹⁸ Which poses problems for the ontological status of any merely 'finite' individual, in light of Spinoza's substance monism. See Melamed 2010, Newlands 2018. See also Letter 32 (C II 18-22; G II IV 169-76) and Peterman 2019.

¹⁹ Della Rocca 1996, Bennett 1984 §26.

At least one thing is clear and is easily agreed upon, however — human beings are Spinozistic individuals (E2p13s, E2p21s).²⁰ Since this is the case, Spinoza’s characterization of individuality in E2p13D — the *ratio* of motion and rest in virtue of which a thing is an individual — is usually thought to explain what determines each person’s identity. Moreover, Spinoza uses the term ‘individual’ in the context of his more general doctrine of ‘striving’, with a thing’s status as an individual seeming, to many readers, to bear some important relation to what is preserved by a thing’s *conatus*, i.e., its actual essence.²¹

While these systematic interconnections help fill out Spinoza’s account of individuals beyond the E2p13D passage, exactly what these further connections (to human beings, the *conatus* doctrine) do or do not entail about the concept of *individual* is not clear from the existing literature. The main reason for this unclarity, I believe, has been the tendency among interpreters to conflate different questions pertaining to the topic of individuals. There are three basic questions that should be kept apart when inquiring into the question of individuals²² — namely, what makes something an individual (Q1), what makes something an individual of a certain kind (rather than another kind) (Q2), and what makes something *this* rather than *that* individual (Q3). The first question (Q1) asks after the ground or principle due to which something has the distinctive quality of being an individual, i.e., its *individuality*; the second question (Q2) asks after what is sometimes called a thing’s *definition*; the third question (Q3) asks after what makes the thing the particular thing that it is, or in virtue of what a thing is different from another.²³

²⁰ Yet see the different approaches of Bennett, 1984 and Renz, 2018, or Barbone’s 2002 arguments against Matheron.

²¹ Both these ideas (that a thing’s *ratio* determines its identity and that it is identical to its *conatus* or fully exhausts what a thing strives for) are pervasive in the literature. See, e.g., Garrett 1994, 2002; Barbone, 2002; Perler, 2021; Melamed, 2010; Della Rocca, 2004, 2008; Lin, 2019, 2015; Viljanen, 2011; Carriero, 2002.

²² Or better, at least three. King, 2000 presents further distinctions, yet these three are the crucial and relevant ones for the argument this paper makes.

²³ For discussions of these distinctive questions and their different answers in the history of philosophy, see Lukasiewicz, Anscombe, and Popper 1953; King 1992; King 2000; Cohen 1984. For discussion about these distinctions in contemporary philosophy see Gracia 1988. To illuminate the work each question does, and a possible way to answer them, I will take an Aristotelian approach and will suggest throughout the chapter that Spinoza is thinking along similar lines to Aristotle.

After briefly illustrating the work each question does by using Aristotle's influential theory of individuation as an example in section 2,²⁴ in section 3 I will provide my own reading of Spinoza's account of individuals, or individuality, by rereading key passages from his texts (primarily the *Ethics*) in light of the questions. I will show that the concept of individuality fully answers Q1-Q2, and will explain why, although it also relates to Q3, it fails to fully answer it. In section 4 I will address possible objections to my reading, and will defend it by delving a bit more into the relationship the reading bears to the *conatus* doctrine, which I take to provide the answer to Q3.²⁵ It is important to say from the outset that the idea that the *conatus* offers the answer to Q3 is agreed upon in Spinoza's scholarship, and is not unique to me.²⁶ The novelty of my reading lies in its disassociation of a thing's *conatus*, and hence its *identity*, from its *individuality*.

2. Clarifying the Different Questions and Answers

To better illustrate the issue at hand, let me briefly present Aristotle's answers to the three questions, so that the difference between their three answers becomes concrete, and the work each of them is supposed to do clearer. It is worth mentioning that the conflation of the different questions is present in Aristotle scholarship as well. Thus, Karl Popper famously drew attention to the confusion the question of individuality gives rise to when he realized that Jan Lukasiewicz and G.E.M Anscombe,

Even if Spinoza did not consciously adopt Aristotle's framework in approaching these questions, the centrality of Aristotle's theory of individuation, the pervasiveness of the distinction among the questions, and the fact that, indeed, Spinoza has different answers to each of them, is enough to allow such reading. It should be mentioned right away that there is a possible difficulty with the answer to Q2, namely, that according to Spinoza and in contrast to Aristotle, definitions are not shared or instantiated by many. I will respond to this criticism when discussing Q2, and possible critiques my readings.

²⁴ I will address the difference between Aristotle's view regarding natural, biological kinds, and Spinoza's in my discussion of Spinoza's answer to Q2. Generally speaking, as just mentioned, while I believe Spinoza's theory draws to a certain extent on the Aristotelian one, I am not committed to the claim that Spinoza was directly influenced by Aristotle. On Aristotle's indirect influence on Spinoza see Wolfson, 1962, chapter 1.

²⁵ A complete account of this relationship will unfold throughout the dissertation and is in fact at the heart of the overarching argument.

²⁶ See n. 21 above, and chapter 4 section 4.

when debating over the principle of individuation in Aristotle, were, “far from giving different replies to the same problem... dealing with two entirely different problems” (Lukasiewicz, 1953: 98). According to Popper, Lukasiewicz was dealing with the problem of the *unity* of an entity composed of many parts (i.e., what makes something an individual rather than a non-individual, Q1) while Anscombe was dealing with the problem of the distinctness of an individual, (i.e., what makes it *this* rather than *that* individual, i.e., Q3) (Lukasiewicz, 1953: 100-1). The two questions yield two different (although related) answers. According to Aristotle, what makes something an individual rather than a non-individual (Q1) is its form, a quality due to which it is considered a whole. Aristotle argues that “in a sense we call anything one if it is a quantity and continuous, in a sense we do not unless it is a *whole*, i.e., unless it has *unity of form*” (Met. Δ. 6. 1016b; emphasis added). For Aristotle, then, while the notion of qualitative unity or wholeness is connected to the concept of numerical unity, the two notions have different intensions, and numerical unity does not necessarily and automatically entail qualitative unity.²⁷ An individual, thus, is such in virtue of having a distinctive quality – its *individuality*, distinct from its numerical oneness.

On to the second question, i.e., what makes something an individual of a certain kind (Q2). When asking about the kind of thing an entity is, what I have in mind is an answer to the question “what is x”, or what is the definition of x?²⁸ Accordingly, saying that x and y are of the same kind is

²⁷ The distinction between numerical and qualitative unity is common throughout the history of philosophy. In medieval philosophy, e.g., the term ‘singular’ is opposed to ‘plural’ or ‘multiple’, while ‘individual’ is opposed to being ‘collective’, or a mere aggregate (Suarez, 1982: 262). In early modern philosophy Leibniz famously argues that “In nature *there cannot be two individual things that differ in number alone*. For it certainly possible to explain why they are different, and that explanation must derive from some difference they contain” (Leibniz, *Primary Truths*: 32; emphasis added). Thus, again, while numerical and qualitative unity are related, they do not refer to the exact same thing and are intensionally, even if not always extensionally, different. As we will see, this relationship gets tricky when attempting to provide Spinoza’s answer to Q3, as the qualitative identity of singular things determines, to an extent, their numerical identity. But more on this in Chapter 5.

²⁸ Meaning, under what definition does x fall. Aristotle repeatedly says that there are no definitions of individuals *per se*, e.g., “there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible individual substances” (Met. Z. 15. 1039b). For further discussion see Cohen, 1984. This feature of Aristotle’s account, according to which a definition is never of an individual *per se*, is shared by many other philosophers (Gracia, 1982: 3) and will be central in my interpretation of Spinoza’s account, as well as for a possible criticism of it, which I will address later on.

equivalent to saying that x and y fall under the same definition. Aristotle argues that “Two things are called one, when the definition which states the essence of one is indivisible from another definition which shows us the other...e.g., if two things are indistinguishable *qua* man, they are *one kind of man*...” (Met. Δ. 6. 1016b; emphasis added). According to Aristotle, a thing’s definition expresses its essence, and two things that share the same definition have the same form and are, to that extent, one, i.e., they are united under the same kind. That these two things are two *individuals* is clear from the fact that they have the same unifying quality, i.e., the same form (in this case – of man).²⁹ Thus, put simply, what makes something an individual of a certain kind is the particular form it has, which, taken in more general terms and without specification, is that in virtue of which a thing is an individual.³⁰

The third question, i.e., what makes something *this* rather than *that* individual (Q3) is perhaps the most interesting one, as it pertains to the thing’s self-identity and unique being. According to Aristotle, what makes an individual *this* rather than *that* individual is its matter. This is most evident from Aristotle’s remark that “when we have the whole, such and such a form in this flesh and in these bones, this is Callias or Socrates; and *they are different in virtue of their matter* (for that is different) ...” (Met. Z. 8. 1034a). Callias and Socrates share the form of man, thus they are individuals of the same kind, yet they are numerically distinct individuals and have distinct features which are unique to them which make them *Callias* or *Socrates*, due to their peculiar matter.³¹

²⁹ Cf. Suarez according to whom ‘formal unity, as it exists in a thing, is incommunicable (DM VI 1.11).

³⁰ For another illuminating answer to Q2 see Scotus, *Ordinatio* II, d.3, p.1, q.2, n.30-2. According to Scotus, there is a nature, e.g., “horsesness”, which “is not numerically one, nor many, not a universal nor a particular, but “is prior naturally to all of them [and] is expressed by a definition”, which makes the thing the kind of thing it is (e.g., a horse) and “is what gets spelled out by a strict Aristotelian definition [or] an abbreviation of the essence of a thing” (King, 1992: 54).

³¹ See also Met. I. 9. 1058b, where Aristotle says that “Callias is definition + *matter*”. As will be discussed later on, Q3, and the answer provided for it here, may be understood both in terms of numerical distinction, i.e., in terms of what makes there be two distinct entities, and in terms of qualitative distinction, i.e., in terms of what *makes an entity the particular entity that it is* and constitutes its essence. The answer I provide on behalf of Spinoza to Q3 is related to the latter. As I discuss in Chapter 5, I do not argue for the numerical difference among finite things in Spinoza, but take it as a working premise that to the extent that finite things exist, they are numerically distinct from one another. What I am interested in is better understanding what constitutes their essences as single entities, and the way in which they are related (and united) with each other, albeit in their plurality.

While this presentation of Aristotle's theory of individuation is obviously vulnerable to criticism,³² I believe it is solid enough to get the discussion started with two important premises. The first is that, at least under Aristotle's (and many others') understanding of definition as something shared by many, the answer to Q2 cannot, principally, be the answer to Q3. This is because Q3 is exactly after what is unique to a single individual and thus is necessarily not shared by others. The second point is that the different answers do different work and explain different features of an entity. While looking into a theory of individuation one must, then, keep these questions apart so as not to take an answer to, say, Q1, as an immediate answer to Q3. Spinoza scholars, I believe, do not carefully distinguish the different questions when looking into Spinoza's theory of individuation in general, or the definition he provides in 2p13D in particular, and by focusing mainly on Q3, they tend to conflate and confuse the different answers. My reading, to which I now turn, avoids this confusion.

3. Spinoza's *Individual* Reevaluated

Having mapped out the different questions associated with individuals, I now turn to reread and reevaluate Spinoza's own remarks on the concept of individuals. To anticipate what follows: I will argue that Spinoza's notion of individual is primarily meant to answer the first two questions, not the third. But then, since Spinoza's notion of individual is not supposed to explain what makes an entity *this* or *that* specific entity, predicating individuality of something does not exhaust or fully determine a thing's unique being.

More specifically, I will argue that Spinoza's answer to Q1 is that having a *ratio* of motion and rest is what makes something an individual (E2p13D). This *ratio* also offers an answer to Q2 (E2p13s,

³² An opponent of this sort of reading of Aristotle's forms is David Charles, who argues that the forms of natural objects are according to Aristotle "impure", or "inextricably enmattered". See: Charles, 2021, chapter 2. As mentioned, my presentation of Aristotle is meant to give an answer to the questions at hand, against which the discussion of Spinoza will be held, and I do not intend to defend a specific reading of Aristotle. See also Leshner, 1971 for a related discussion.

E2p13lem4-7), meaning that an individual is of a certain kind in virtue of having a *particular ratio* of motion and rest. Finally, since this is the case, a thing's particular *ratio cannot* answer Q3. Thus, e.g., to say that Spinoza is a man (answering Q2) is to define him as a kind of thing, to say something about his nature (which he shares with you and me), and to say something about his particular form (which you and I also possess). It also, as I will argue in Chapter 5, determines which things, external to him, may in fact strengthen his nature, i.e., aid his power of acting or *conatus*, and to what extent. Yet the fact that Spinoza is a man cannot fully explain, and is not explained by, his unique intellectual abilities, his philosophical interests, or how his excommunication influenced his thought. In other words, the answer to Q2 is completely independent from matters of Spinoza's unique identity and continued durational existence.³³

My discussion will illuminate the fact that Spinoza's theory of individuation does not fully determine a thing's being, and that while it clearly answers Q1 and Q2, it does not, and is not supposed to, answer Q3. Yet, while an entity's individuality, i.e., its *ratio*, cannot, on its own, answer Q3, it does condition or constrain its singular unique being by determining its kind and setting limitations on how it could act, react, or simply be.³⁴ An individual's *conatus*, on the other hand, which is its actual essence, fully determines an entity's course of life and unique way of being, and thus is the answer to Q3.³⁵ Toward the end of this chapter, I will begin to flesh out how I think individuality is related to Q3 and to the *conatus* doctrine—a task I will complete by the end of the dissertation, when a comprehensive answer to Q3 will be provided.

³³ See Bender, 2023: 301.

³⁴ E.g., a man can walk on land and a fish can breathe under water, but not the other way around.

³⁵ As already mentioned, there is no dispute among scholars over the fact the *conatus* is what a single individual is, or that it is what actually answers Q3. Yet since most scholars conflate the different aspects of the question of individuality, they answer Q3 confusedly, overlooking the distinction between a thing's *ratio* and its striving.

3.1 Q1: What Makes Something an Individual for Spinoza

That E2p13D serves as an answer to Q1 only (and is closely related to Q2, but more on that later) is evident from the definition itself, as well as from E1p8s2. The definition reads as follows:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degree of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies (E2p13D; C I 460; G II 99-100).

This definition is usually regarded in Spinoza scholarship as the definition of a single individual that can be “picked out” from mere collections of things (Barbone, 2002: 99). Yet a closer look at the definition reveals that it describes the quality in virtue of which a thing is taken to be an individual, or what constitutes an individual as such. As Ursula Renz explains, “the definition of the individual [explicates] the *conditions under which* composite bodies act as individuals” (Renz, 2018: 51-2, emphasis added), meaning that it gives a straightforward answer to Q1. Most scholars must agree on this issue, as they take the *ratio* of motion and rest to be roughly equivalent to Aristotle’s notion of form.³⁶ What

³⁶ See in particular Bennett who argues that “Spinoza’s use of the term “form” is Aristotelian (Bennett, 1984: 231). How to understand such *ratio*, or what kind of a form is it exactly is a debatable and complexed question which I take on in the next chapter. To provide some interpretive options, some (Matheron, 2020) take it to be, or express, some kind of a mathematical ratio of quantifiable motion and rest. Others take it to be some kind of a logos, a systematic relation that obtains between an individual’s different parts (Lin, 2005). Some take it to be a very general and non-restricting idea which simply means no part of the individual can independently and exclusively change its motion without all others’ response (Garrett, 1994: 85-7), and others think of it is an “ad-hoc” idea, a placeholder for a yet not fully developed physics (Della Rocca, 1996; Bennett 1984). All of these readings, importantly for the purposes of this chapter, agree that the *ratio* provides a form, or a structure, for the entity of which it is a *ratio* of.

follows from the fact that what constitutes the individual is its *ratio*, i.e., a unifying structure, is that a thing lacking such structure is not an individual. And since an entity's *ratio* is equivalent to its nature and form (E2p13lem4-7), it is also that through which a thing is defined. According to the Aristotelian tradition, which Spinoza seem to follow, definitions are indivisible and sharable among many (Met. Z. 8. 1034a).³⁷ Spinoza argues, then, that having a nature or form, or a definition, is what makes something an individual. Yet he does not say that this *ratio* is what makes something *this* rather than *that* individual. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Spinoza uses *unum* to refer to the one composite body [*et omnia simul unum corpus sive individuum componere*], rather than *singulare*, which suggests that when he discusses the unity or “oneness” of the composite individual, he does not necessarily refer to numerically one entity. The definition by itself does not give us the resources to “pick out” any single entity,³⁸ and so remains faithful to the traditional use of the concept described in the previous section. Thus, with his definition of individual, Spinoza answers Q1, but not Q3.³⁹

E1p8s2 supports such reading. In E1p8s2, Spinoza explicitly argues that the definition of a thing *cannot* explain its existence. To explain why there are twenty men in nature “it will not be enough to show the cause of human nature in general; but will be necessary in addition to show the cause why not more not fewer than twenty exist” (E1p8s2). Thus, a thing's definition i.e., an individual's *ratio*, which clearly answers Q1, cannot fully account for, or explain, the actual being of any single,

³⁷ I argue for this claim in the next paragraph, yet see E1p8s2, *TdIE* §§96-97. In the second point made in *TdIE* §96 Spinoza explains that from the definition of a thing considered *alone*, all the thing's properties be deduced. This means that the definition of a single existing thing pertains only to the things which can be understood from its nature (i.e., form) alone, and not to its particular existence, which necessarily includes its interactions with external things. The example Spinoza gives is of a circle and its properties, which obviously are not unique to any existing drawn circle, but are common to all existing, and non-existing circles. Additionally, according to §97, only in the case of uncreated things (i.e., God) is it required that the thing's definition include its existence. Thus, it is clear that a finite thing's definition cannot explain its unique, particular existence but must be limited to explaining its (formal) essence and *propria*.

³⁸ In this sense, it might better be thought of as a definition of *individuality*, rather than of individual, even though one could say that being an individual is possessing the quality of individuality, i.e., *ratio*, in Spinoza's case. Notice that referring to a single entity's individuality or saying that single entities are individuals, does not yet mean that individuality is particular to single entities or that it exhausts all that is involved in being a single entity.

³⁹ See King, 1992: pp. 65-6.

durationally existing individual, and does not pertain to the question of its singular existence (Q3).⁴⁰ The definition of individual by itself, thus, can be put to very little use – it can merely tell us whether a collection of bodies qualifies as an individual or not.⁴¹ The fact that a thing has a *ratio* cannot reveal anything about an individual’s being or even if such individual exists, thus Q1 (and as we will see now, Q2) can be answered independently of Q3.

3.2 Q2: What Makes Something an Individual of a Certain Kind of Spinoza?

While Spinoza’s answer to Q1 involves the notion of *ratio*, his answer to Q2 involves having a specific *ratio*. There is an abundance of evidence suggesting that this is the case and, furthermore, that a thing’s specific *ratio* does not fully determine its unique being, but can only determine the *kind* of thing an entity is. The relevant key passages are E2p13s, E2p13lem4-7, E4p18s, 1p8s2, and E4pre.

In E2p13s, the passage leading to the physical digression (hereafter PD) and the definition of an individual, Spinoza explains his motivation for providing a more detailed account of physics. He writes: “the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more *to man than to other individuals*... And so to determine what the difference is between the *human mind and the others*... it is necessary for us... to know the nature of its object... *the human body*” (2p13s; G/II/96-7, emphasis added). Spinoza focuses on ‘Man’ as opposed to other kinds of individuals and explains that the need

⁴⁰ This may seem to limit the scope of the argument to existing singular individuals only. In chapter 3 I address the issue of the existence of singulars and argue that they only exist durationally, and thus that, strictly speaking, there is no “singular thing that does not exist”. Regardless, though, it is important to remember that this is one of many supporting passages for the reading I am promoting here. Second, Spinoza’s point in E1p8s2 is a metaphysical one, as he has established that existence is part of God’s essence, but not of modes. And since this is so, due to his understanding of true definition as explaining the essence of the thing alone (TIE §95), a definition cannot explain the existence (or non-existence) of any mode whatsoever. Thus, the point made here is simply that due to a finite thing’s finitude, its definition cannot exhaust the explanation for its being, whether it exists or not, but can merely suggest that it is an individual (and as I will argue next, an individual of a certain kind).

⁴¹ This reading is in line with Renz’s, who argues that the definition, and the term ‘individual’ in general, is meant only to subject the extended world to the same mechanistic laws. Renz, 2018: 52.

to get clear on this difference is what gives rise to the discussion that follows. The physical digression will explain how the *human body* is different from other kinds of bodies, and thus how a human mind is different from other kinds of minds. Spinoza is explicit and clear as to what he is interested in doing in the PD — to explain in virtue of what an individual is of a certain kind (or more specifically, what makes a human body particularly human), i.e., to answer Q2.⁴² This reading fits Spinoza’s more general philosophical temperament and his aversion to attributing to humans a unique metaphysical status, as, e.g., Descartes does. As Spinoza makes clear in the demonstration to lemma 4, different bodies “are not distinguished with respect to substance; what constitutes the *form* of the individual consists [NS: only] in the union of bodies” i.e., in their *ratio* (E2p13lem4d). Since for Spinoza humans, animals, plants, and all other entities for that matter, are all finite modes of the one substance, the difference between them is not a metaphysical one but has to do with the way they are organized and their particular *ratios*.

Further support for this idea – that a thing’s individuality (constituted by its *ratio*) determines its kind – is found in E2p13lem4-7. In E2p13lem4 Spinoza argues that the individual’s parts may be substituted by others without the individual losing its *form*. What constitutes the form, the demonstration makes clear, is the *union* of bodies, i.e., the individual’s particular *ratio* (E2p13lem4d). In E2p13lem5 Spinoza argues further that the individual *retains its form* when it loses or gains parts, so long as the *proportion* of motion and rest between those parts remains. In E2p13lem6 he argues that an individual retains its *nature* even when it is forced to alter the direction of its motion, as long as its *ratio* is preserved, and in E2p13lem7 he explains that the individual retains its *nature* whether it is at rest or is in motion, so long as its *ratio* remains. Crucially of our purposes, Spinoza does not say that it is the *individual* which stays intact so long as the *ratio* remains, but rather the individual’s *form*, meaning that

⁴² See also Bennett 1984 §33.

a thing's *ratio* determines the kind of thing that the individual is.⁴³ We already know that what makes something an individual is its *ratio*. From these passages it is also quite clear that the specific *ratio* is what gives an individual its form or nature, and that its form pertains to the kind of thing that it is.⁴⁴

As already mentioned, in 1p8s2 Spinoza argues that “no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined” (1p8s2; G/II/50), meaning that the definition of a thing cannot explain the particular thing that it is, but only expresses its nature or form, or, I argue, its kind. And so, it is clear and cannot be overemphasized, that the particular *ratio* does not explain what makes an individual *this* rather than *that* individual. Historically, definitions are understood as shared among singular entities and thus lacking the ability to explain their singularity,⁴⁵ an idea which Spinoza seems to endorse as well.⁴⁶

⁴³ Of course, if an individual is turned into a different kind of thing (say from a man to a horse) its particular identity also changes. See the following note and Chapter 5.

⁴⁴ The scholium of Proposition 39 of Part 4 could be read in a similar way. Spinoza argues that he takes a body to die “when its parts are so disposed that they acquire a different proportion of motion and rest to one another [such that] even though the circulation of the blood is maintained... the *human body* [*corpus humanum*] can nevertheless be changed into *another nature* entirely different from its own [*posse nihilominus in aliam naturam a sua prorsus diversammutari*]” (4p39s; G/II/240, C/I/569; emphasis added), suggesting that what happens when there is a change in *ratio* is that the kind of thing the individual is changes (say, from a human being to another kind of mammal). On the other hand, Spinoza also says that the Spanish poet, offered as an example of this change in the same passage, was “hardly the *same man*” (emphasis added) after losing his memory due to an illness, suggesting that while he suffered a change in *ratio*, he did not change into a different kind of thing, but into a different man. The two readings, though, are not mutually exclusive, as memory, which the Spanish poet loses, is specifically related to personal identity (see Curley, 1988; Nadler, 2001; Lin 2005; Rice 1971). Thus, Spinoza might mean that the poet's identity was changed due to his memory loss, in addition to his taking a different form due to the change in his *ratio*.

Interestingly, scholars agree that the *ratio* is what gives an individual its form and that this form could be understood as some sort of a mathematical expression, which, naturally, can be shared among many. Yet, they automatically assume that if this is the case, then the particulars are merely similar in form, and do not actually share the exact same one. This assumption, I argue, rests on the confusion between Q2 and Q3, and on the identification of a thing's *ratio* with its *conatus*. See, e.g. Ablondi & Barbone, 1994. Yet, as Garrett admits “Spinoza himself makes no formal connection between the theory of individuation and the part III argument for the doctrine of self-preservation...” (Garrett, 1994: 96), and thus an identification of these two doctrines in Spinoza should at least be questioned.

⁴⁵ This idea was discussed with regard to Aristotle (Met. D. 6. 1016b). See also Gracia on Suarez, 1982: 3. I will discuss the possibility of unique *ratios* in the next part of this chapter and will argue that even if there are such *ratios*, those too cannot fully determine a finite thing's identity.

⁴⁶ See also E2p37 where Spinoza argues that “What is common to all things... and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any *singular thing*” (E2p37; emphasis added). At first glance the way I use this proposition is in tension with what I have argued for so far, as the thing's kind is grounded in its *ratio*, or nature or essence. Yet, in Chapter 3, I argue that singular things necessarily exist durationally, and that as such, their actual essence is different in content from their formal one, which expresses their shared *ratio*. A singular thing's shared qualities (say, its horseness) constitute its particular essence, and constrain it, but the formal essence by itself is not the formal essence of any particular single finite mode, as I show in this chapter.

What, then, is not determined by a thing's individuality, or what does the singular aspect or unique status of the individual consist of? E4pre, where Spinoza discusses things passing to a greater or lesser degree of perfection, sheds some light on this issue. Spinoza writes: "when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is turned into a man as if it is changed into an insect" (E4pre; G II 209; C/I/546).⁴⁷ I will return to this important passage in Chapter 4, yet what is important for the matter at hand is that Spinoza explicitly discusses a thing being a man or a horse in terms of its form, and he contrasts this aspect of the individual with a central aspect of a thing's *actual* being — its level of perfection — arguing that the latter is not identical to, does not influence, and is not influenced by this form. A thing's life, or its striving (to be more precise), is thus something that its individuality cannot fully explain.

E4p18s is another passage where this reading is both reinforced and, perhaps, becomes illuminating. Spinoza argues that if "two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man" (E4p18s; G II 223; C/I/556). What Spinoza means by this union, and whether he is talking literally or metaphorically is in dispute among scholars.⁴⁸ Some argue that this question cannot be answered at all, since the condition of numerically identical natures can never actually hold in Spinoza (Barbone, 2002: 94).⁴⁹ Yet what my reading reveals is that the essence of the individuals *qua* humans is in fact shared among different entities and is, in a certain respect, one.

⁴⁷ This key passage is important for understanding Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine and the exact relationship it has with a thing's individuality. In a nutshell, I believe this passage shows that necessarily, there is a way of striving that has to be something over and above the preservation of a thing's form, i.e., it being an individual, since we strive to increase in perfection *but not* to alter our form. I will discuss this further in the objections and replies part of the paper.

⁴⁸ Nadler argues that what is doubled in the case of such union is the *power* of both individuals (Nadler, 2001: 360), Matheron argues that the union is metaphysical (Matheron, 1969), and Barbone, as discussed above, argues it is impossible (Barbone, 2002). I discuss this passage in more detail in Chapter 5.

⁴⁹ A few lines earlier Barbone argues that from E3p57 it seems that individuals may differ in essence (Barbone, 2002, 94), and comments that "what differentiates the essence of a particular person from that of any other person is exactly the same thing that differentiates the person from any other thing, say, for example, a fish" (Barbone, 2002, n. 21). Barbone

To recap, there seem to be no good reason to think that Spinoza answers Q3 with his concept of individuality, or that he even attempts to. A thing is an individual in virtue of having a *ratio* (E2p13D), and its particular *ratio* is what makes it the kind of individual it is, as the passages discussed above clearly indicate. None of the passages discussed suggest that Spinoza actually takes the same thing — the individual’s *ratio* to answer both Q1-2 and Q3, and this assumption seems to originate in presuppositions that aren’t grounded in the text itself. Holding the discussion at the conceptual level, without relying on commonsensical intuitions about individuals, does not give rise to any discussion that has to do with a single individual’s unique identity, and leaves aspects of an individual’s being undetermined and in need for further explanation.

Yet, one might wonder: doesn’t Spinoza reject the idea of Aristotelian natural kinds?⁵⁰ Spinoza does say, for example, that “the authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates is not worth much... it’s no wonder that the people who invented occult qualities, intentional species, substantial forms, and a thousand other trifles contrived ghosts and spirits, and believed old wives’ tales, to lessen the authority of Democritus...” (Ep. 56; G/IV/261-2; C/II/423); and that “the Philosophers have reduced all natural things to certain classes, to which they recur when anything new presents itself to them. These they call genus, species, etc.”, by which we merely retain things in memory (CM I; G/I/234; C/I/300). These passages seem to suggest quite explicitly that when Spinoza talks about humans and horses, he does not talk about actual, natural kinds.⁵¹

takes this to be the case because he conflates Q2 and Q3 and takes the *ratio* of a thing and its *conatus* to amount to the same thing, and it is this conflation which all the readings presented suffer from. See Della Rocca 2004 for another discussion regarding the problem of shared essences in Spinoza. Cf. Istvan 2023; Hübner, 2015.

⁵⁰ I thank Sam Newlands for raising this issue and pressing me on this point, and for his many other insightful comments.

⁵¹ And so what could Spinoza mean by ‘humans’ and ‘horses’ is a good question. A possible response, different from my own, is that he is simply talking loosely, without committing to any of these creatures being instantiations of a fixed, real, kind. Another is that what he has in mind are what Karolina Hübner calls “good abstractions”, i.e., abstractions born out of real similarities between qualities different entities share, which give rise to universals which are *beings of reason* – grounded in real qualities, but themselves completely mind depended. See Hübner 2015. I will discuss the issue of abstractions a bit more in the upcoming part of this chapter.

While this worry is reasonable, I believe it can be easily overcome. It seems that what Spinoza is attacking in these passages is the specific Aristotelian idea of *substantial* forms, the explanatory work they are supposed to do, and the way in which these concepts are developed and used by other philosophers.⁵² Additionally, further passages indicate that Spinoza does indeed take humanity to be a kind, or thinks of “human nature” as a real shared quality humans possess. In 4p30, Spinoza argues that “no thing can be evil through what it has in common with our nature...”. To demonstrate this claim, Spinoza explains that it would be *absurd* for a thing to be evil, i.e., destroy us, in virtue of what it has in common with us, and he brings up 3p4 to make this point (4p30d). In 3p4 Spinoza argues that “no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause”. Thus, one can extrapolate that to the extent that a thing has some quality in common with us, that quality is *in us*, or that we genuinely and metaphysically shared it.⁵³ Later, in 4p35 Spinoza explicitly refers to “human nature”. He argues that “whatever follows from human nature insofar as it is defined by reason, must be understood through human nature alone” suggesting that such a nature is real, common, and explains the *actions* of humans, to the extent that they are all guided by reason.

These passages (and the others discussed above) suggest that, in fact, “human being” is a real kind for Spinoza, yet a Spinozistic rather than Aristotelian kind, which is nothing more than a certain *ratio*, a particular arrangement which obtains between an individual’s parts. The fact that this view seem to refer to the same finite particular things which Aristotelians identify as humans on different grounds does not seem to be a bug in the view, but a feature of it. How do we reconcile this with Spinoza’s dismissive remarks about kinds mentioned earlier? Well, it seems that, as in the case of God, there are good and bad ways to talk about kinds for Spinoza.⁵⁴ Substantial forms, or intentional species,

⁵² On this point see Tropper, 2026: 30-3.

⁵³ How exactly this can be is a question for all non-nominalists, not only for me or for Spinoza, and is thus not a pressing issue for my view in particular. Yet, I do provide an account of how *ratios*, which I identify in the next chapter as infinite and eternal formal essences, are expressed in the durational by a multiplicity of singular things.

⁵⁴ Wolfson makes a similar point. (Wolfson, 1962: 21-22).

are simply a bad way. Luckily there is an alternative, which is to talk about them as *ratios of motion and rest*.⁵⁵

3.3 Q3: What Makes Something *this* Rather than *that* Individual

Spinoza's concept of Individual, or a thing's *ratio of motion and rest* (i.e., its individuality), cannot fully determine an entity's being, cannot explain everything about it, and cannot answer Q3. What does answer Q3 is the *conatus*. Spinoza argues, e.g., that "though the thing and it's striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason... they are not in any way really distinct" (CM I.6; G/I/248; C/I/314); And that Desire, i.e., conscious striving, consists of all of "man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions..." (3DOA I; G/II/190; C/I/531).⁵⁶ As I further discuss in Chapter 5, where I offer a comprehensive answer to Q3, a thing's *conatus* and the way it strives account for its distinctive identity, for what makes a singular thing the specific thing that it is. It is thus implied that singular things are numerically distinct in virtue of having different *conatus*.⁵⁷ The question, then, is how the answers to Q1 and Q2 relate to the answer to Q3, or in what way shared *ratios* relate to unique ways of striving. The answer to this further question, I believe, is that a thing's *ratio*, the kind of thing that it is, constrains, or sets limits, on the way in which a thing can strive. To fully account for this idea, I

⁵⁵ I will account for what such *ratios* are exactly in the following chapter.

In n. 49 for the third part of the *Ethics* Curley notes, with regards to Spinoza's definitions of affects, that although Spinoza does not intend to give an analysis of ordinary language and thus that "Spinoza's definitions are not subject to the constraints analysis of ordinary language would impose, neither are they stipulative [thus] there must, at least, be considerable overlap in the extensions of the terms... if the term's range of application, as newly defined, were not closely related to its former application, there would be no improvement in our understanding" (Curley, 1988: n. 49 535-6). There is no reason to think that Spinoza employs such a linguistic strategy only when defining affects and emotions. Such use of language thus could be extended more generally to how Spinoza uses philosophically loaded terms such as forms or kinds discussed above.

⁵⁶ I will defend this view further in Chapter 5.

⁵⁷ And, as I will argue in Chapter 5, it is also in virtue of these *conatuses* that they may be metaphysically united. I assume that the claim that singular things are numerically distinct due to their *conatus* requires no argument. This seems explicit in Spinoza's texts and agreed upon in Spinoza scholarship. My focus, then, is on the exact way in which a thing's *conatus*, i.e., its actual essence, is constituted, and the account of identity arising from it.

need to first explain exactly what kind of essence a thing's *ratio* is, a task I take on in the next chapter, and then explain the nature of the singular things to which such essences relate, a task I take on in Chapter 4. Thus, this section should only be read as a first inquiry into the relationship that obtains between Q1-2 and Q3, not as the last and final word on the issue.

The first cluster of passages that might shed light on the relationship between a thing's individuality and its striving occur in E3p57, where Spinoza discusses how individuals differ from one another with regard to their affective power. The proposition reads: "Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other" (E3p57). And in the demonstration, Spinoza claims:

"Desire is the very nature, or essence, of each [individual] (see the definition of Desire in P9S). Therefore the Desire of each individual differs from the Desire of another as much as the nature, or essence, of the one differs from the essence of the other. Next, Joy and Sadness are passions by which each one's power, or striving to persevere in his being, is increased or diminished, aided or restrained... Joy and Sadness are the Desire, or Appetite, itself insofar as it is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, by external causes. I.e. (by the same scholium), it is the very nature of each [individual]. And so, the Joy or Sadness of each [individual] also differs from the Joy or Sadness of another as much as the nature, or essence, of the one differs from the essence of the other. Consequently, each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much, etc., q.e.d". (E3p57d)

From what Spinoza says here it seems that the individual's essence is, after all, identified with its striving, and thus that each and every single individual (i) has its own unique *ratio*, and (ii) that

striving can be understood merely in terms of preserving this *ratio*. Spinoza argues that a thing's desire, which sadness and joy are instances of, is the very *essence of the individual*, and he refers to E3p9s to support this idea, meaning that he is speaking of a thing's actual essence, i.e., its striving. So, an individual essence is its striving, or desire, or *ratio*. I have said above that a thing's striving, i.e., its *conatus*, is what fully determines the entity's being. It follows that the *ratio* must be unique and that maintaining it is what striving, i.e., increasing and decreasing power, is all about.

While this may seem like a genuine challenge to my reading, I believe it is in fact an important feature of it, as it illuminates the relationship between a specific individual's individuality and its unique way of striving. In E3p57s Spinoza explains that “from this it follows that the affects of the animals which are called irrational... differ from men's affects as much as their nature differs from human nature [as] the Lusts and Appetites of Insects, fish, and birds must vary...”. Contrary to the somewhat vague demonstration, in the scholium Spinoza explicitly discusses kinds, and argues that their different nature is what brings about a difference in affect.⁵⁸ The scholium thus supports my suggested reading, yet this alone does not account for the demonstration. The way out of this confusion is, I believe, to acknowledge that Spinoza discusses two non-mutually exclusive levels or ways in which the affects of two singular things can vary. They can differ both in virtue of their being of a certain kind rather than another, and in virtue of their striving in a certain, unique manner.⁵⁹

A thing's *ratio*, on my suggested reading, determines it *to a certain extent* — it determines the kind of thing it is. Whether something is a human or a snail will determine what affects arise in them when stumbling upon a great novel (the snail will be indifferent and the man may experience love or

⁵⁸ Spinoza argues that “both the horse and the man are driven by a lust to procreate; but the one is driven by an *equine lust*, the other by *human lust*” (E3p57s; G/II/187; C/I/528) meaning that the lust itself is understood in terms of a certain kind, in accordance with the kind of individual.

⁵⁹ The relationship between being of a certain kind and striving will be discussed throughout the dissertation. As mentioned, this subsection is a first step toward providing an answer to Q3, and thus leaves many aspects of the answer open.

disgust, i.e., joy or sadness). On the other hand, the fact that two distinct men are rational (which is a feature of their human nature) does not necessarily mean they will both experience joy from reading the very same novel. In other words, one might say that the *ratio*, or that in virtue of which a thing is a member of a certain kind, is a prerequisite or condition for a thing to strive, i.e., desire (experience joy or sadness) in a certain, particular way.⁶⁰

Another, already-mentioned passage which expresses this relationship between an individual's individuality and its particular unique being is *TTP XVI*, where Spinoza discusses natural and civic rights and argues that "by the right and established practice of nature I mean nothing but the rules of the nature of each individual, according to which we conceive each thing to be naturally determined to existing and having effects in a certain way" (*TTP XVI* §2; G/III/189; C/II/282). From this it seems that Spinoza understands an individual's existence to be fully determined by its nature (or form) and thus that its individuality can fully account for its being, answering Q3. Spinoza discusses a thing's right in terms of its power to bring about affects, further supporting the idea that its striving can be completely understood in terms of its nature, i.e., *ratio*.⁶¹ Yet Spinoza provides the following example to explain this idea: "fish are determined by nature to swimming, and the large ones to eating the smaller. So it is by the supreme right of nature that fish are masters of the water, and that the large ones eat the smaller" (*TTP XVI* §2; G/III/189; C/II/282). Big fish have a right, afforded to them by nature, to eat the little ones, in the same way that they have a right to swim. Fish have the power to swim and breathe under water; thus, they are in fact determined to do so. But this does not fully explain a certain fish's entire existence or its unique way of being. Since Spinoza's example is given in general terms, it merely describes what a thing's nature *allows* it (or rather forces it) to do. In other

⁶⁰ Obviously, instances of sadness are cases where the thing's power is diminished, meaning that it does not strive for them. Nonetheless, they are still part of its overall expression of power, as I discuss in chapter 5.

⁶¹ The power exercised by each thing due to its natural right is that in virtue of which a thing "strive to preserve in its state..." (*TTP XVI* §3; G/III/189; C/II/282).

words, it describes the limitations within which singular things operate, or a relatively general level of operation forced on a thing due to the kind of thing that it is.

What both of these passages (E3p57, and *TTP* XVI) suggest is that there is a close relationship between an individual's *ratio* and its particular being, and that a thing's striving is what fully determines its existence. An individual's *ratio* determines how an entity could respond to external forces, and what *kind* of affects will arise in it, in light of different encounters. It more basically determines the ways in which an individual could, and could not strive, for it determines whether it is a man or a fish. And, while this *ratio* has crucial bearing on one's being, it is also shared among many individuals of the same kind, and thus does not explain what makes one *this* rather than *that* individual. So, the answer to Q3 is not given in terms of a thing's individuality, and must be related to its striving, which is not exhausted by maintaining a *ratio*.⁶²

4. Some Objections and Replies

There are two main objections to my view which I want to address — the nominalist reading and the multi-layered *ratios* possibility. According to the first objection, Spinoza is a nominalist, and thus definitions or natures simply cannot be shared among many.⁶³ This reading of Spinoza is held by scholars who take Spinoza's remarks against abstractions without qualification (e.g., 2p40s1, 2p49s [III.B.(iii)]; G/II/135; C/I/479, *TdIE* §99; G/II/36; C/I/41), and thus to mean that he rejects abstractions, and universals, entirely.⁶⁴ If this is the case, and if Spinoza does in fact reject universals

⁶² Karolina Hübner argues similarly that there is a variety of powers a thing can express its power, without causing a change in its essence. According to Hübner “what remains the same as long as the thing remains essentially the same is the range of degrees of power that this thing may have—that is, *its range of possible determinations*” (Hübner, 2017: 46). Hübner's overall account is different from mine since she does not identify this “range of determinations” with the thing's kind, yet I am on board with the general idea that striving happens within a certain *ratio* (or possible range of determinations) which remains fixed throughout.

⁶³ I thank Leonardo Moauro and Sam Newlands for raising this objection, and for further important feedback on this paper.

⁶⁴ See, e.g. Peterman 2014, Newlands 2015; Ward, 2011: 24-25.

all together, the whole “kind” talk is off the table. Yet, following Karolina Hübner, I want to suggest that these readings attribute to Spinoza much more than he actually says, and are in tension with his frequent use of the term “human nature” and with other general concepts crucial for his metaphysics and epistemology (e.g., common notions or the idea of motion-and-rest). As 2pp37-9 make clear, Spinoza does think there are real, common things shared (or instantiated) by many.⁶⁵ Thus, while Spinoza may be wary of the confusions abstractions and universals may give rise to, he does not seem to be rejecting universals altogether, at least not in the *Ethics*.⁶⁶

Additionally, it is quite clear that Spinoza thinks of definitions as capturing the essence of many, and not as unique to particular entities. In E1p8s2 Spinoza argues that “no definition involves or expresses any number of individuals, since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined”⁶⁷ meaning that (i) a definition expresses the nature (or essence) of the thing defined, (ii) does not explain the existence of any particular entity (whose essence does not involve existence), and (iii) that several different individuals can fall under the same definition.⁶⁸ Thus, there seems to be no good reason to think that Spinoza rejects the idea of shared definitions (and shared natures).

⁶⁵ Hübner distinguishes between “bad universals”, grounded in the imagination, which Spinoza rejects, and “good” universals — mind-dependent, yet ontologically real “beings of reason” grounded in true properties of particular things (Hübner; 2015: 74). *Ratios*, I take it, may be thought of as “good” universals (i.e., grounded in rational abstraction), yet importantly, they are *not* mind-dependent. From the epistemic fact that we abstract in order to conceive of these notions, it does not necessarily follow that what we conceive of does not exist independently of us having an idea of it. In other words, “human nature” might be something all humans genuinely share — an infinite and eternal essence which by itself is single, a formal essence. I argue for this position in the Chapter 3 on the basis of my reading of individuality, E2p8, and my understanding of what Spinoza means by “singular things”. In a nutshell, I believe that everything that was said above about individuality pertains to what Spinoza calls “formal essence”. Unfortunately, I do not have the space within the limits of this chapter to unpack this claim here, yet what I can say is that I develop, perhaps, a new Platonic reading according to which there are two essences related to a thing, the actual one which is *of the thing*, and a formal one under which a singular thing *falls*, yet does not copy or completely instantiate. See Primus 2023 and 2019 for a position of a formal essence as eternal and infinite. See KV I 1; G/I/17 where Spinoza argues that the essences of things (such as the essence of a triangle) must be “outside me” whether they exist or not.

⁶⁶ See also Hübner, 2021. Cf. Newlands, 2015: 263; Istvan, 2023.

⁶⁷ See also Ep. 34 (G/IV/179; C/II/25). See Martin 2008 for an attempt to develop a view similar to mine on this point.

⁶⁸ See Della Rocca, 2004 where he uses E1p8s2 as an example of shared essences in Spinoza’s metaphysics.

The second objection to my reading, which I called the “multi-layered *ratios* possibility”, goes something like this:⁶⁹ suppose that there are some sort of universals for Spinoza and that there are shared definitions. Since there are unique essences, there might also be unique definitions, and hence unique *ratios*. In other words, an entity might have a certain *ratio* at the level of its kind, and another at the level of its unique being. If this is the case, the *ratio* might be identical with a thing’s *conatus* after all, and might fully determine an entity’s being.

My answer to this objection is two-fold. To begin with, I cannot find firm textual evidence suggesting that there are unique *ratios*, or any conclusive arguments for it. This assumption is based, I suggest, on the conflation of the different questions associated with individuals and on the close relationship between the concept of individuality and Q3. What I hoped to have achieved in this chapter, among other things, is a shift in the burden of proof from my position (arguing that *ratios* are shared and only determine the kind of thing an entity is) to my opponent’s (insisting they do more, are unique, and fully determine an entity’s being). Thus, while I am fully on board with readings according to which for Spinoza there are essences, or natures, at the different levels of generality each entity can be grasped at (Hübner, 2015), I am not convinced that each level is expressed by a *ratio* (Lin, 2005).⁷⁰ Furthermore, in the following chapter I provide extensive evidence that Spinoza takes formal essences to express *ratios*, and that these are mediate infinite modes which are prior and indifferent to the things which partake in them (i.e., to finite entities which fall under them). Since this is the case, there cannot be unique *ratios*, for a hypothetical case where a *ratio* is eternal yet the thing to which it stands in a one-to-one relation to is not would clearly violate Spinoza’s definition of essence in 2D2.

⁶⁹ I thank Michael Della Rocca for raising this objection and for many other important comments and suggestions for this chapter.

⁷⁰ In a different paper, which I discuss later on, Hübner argues that there is necessarily a difference between a thing’s essence and its power, for in order for changes in power (*conatus* activity) to be intelligible, a thing’s “essential nature” must remain unchanged (Hübner, 2017: 44). Hübner understands the “essential essence” as the thing’s “kind” (n. 13), and as I argue, it is exactly a thing’s *ratio* that determines its kind. Thus, according to Hübner, in order for Spinoza to have an intelligible account of a particular entity the two essential aspects of an entity *must* be really distinct.

Yet let's grant, for the sake of argument, that there are in fact unique *ratios*, in addition to the shared ones which determine a thing's kind. Still, I want to insist, these will not be able to fully determine an entity's being and will not explain everything there is to know about what makes *this* entity the specific entity that it is. This is because (i) *ratios* do not change (without bringing about the destruction of the individual), but the parts between which they obtain do (2p13lem4-6). Thus, a transition to a lesser or greater perfection (i.e., striving) cannot be explained in terms of a specific *ratio*, but happens, perhaps, within its limits.⁷¹ (ii) if you identify particular *ratios* with definitions (and you might, since the grounds for arguing there are unique *ratios*, in addition to shared ones, is the identification of essences, natures, *ratios* and thus definitions at all levels of generality) another problem arises. Definitions, as 1p8s2 makes clear, whether shared or unique, do not explain the existence of anything but God. To exist (durationally) is for Spinoza nothing other than to strive (3p8d),⁷² and thus it cannot be that the definition of a thing, be it unique or shared, can by itself express and account for its being.

(iii) lastly, as mentioned already, arguing that the particular *ratio* fully determines an entity's being means identifying it (or its preservation) with the thing's *conatus*, which is in tension with the importance of the *conatus* doctrine within Spinoza's ethics. This identification is what the "existential inertia" readings – which limits the *conatus* to the attempt to maintain a thing's *ratio*, i.e., to mere survival – are grounded in.⁷³ While this is not the right place to discuss these readings in depth, let me just

⁷¹ So, regardless of the level of generality and whether a *ratio* is shared or not, it stands in the same kind of relation to striving, i.e., conditioning, setting limits over it.

⁷² See also 4p24 where Spinoza says that acting, *living*, and preserving our being signify the same thing. And Kisner who argues that the actual essence is the essence of things existing in space and time (Kisner, 2020: 39). I further argue for this point in chapters 3 and 4.

⁷³ Scholars who hold an "existential inertia" reading are, e.g., Hampshire, 1951; Matson, 1969; Allison, 1987; Curley, 1990; Della Rocca, 2008; Cook, 2011; Martin, 2008. Primus, 2023 n.15, seems to suggest this too. Scholars who take the *conatus* to be more than a mere attempt to survive, yet identify it with a thing's *ratio*, such as Waller, 2012; Lin, 2019, and Carriero, 2011, explain a thing's attempt to increase in power as means for mere survival, thus also fail to capture, I believe, the importance of the doctrine for Spinoza's ethics. Della Rocca 2021b provides a different explanation for why a thing strives to increase in power, which is not grounded in its attempt to survive. According to Della Rocca, a failure to increase in power is, at bottom, is no different from an attempt to decrease in power, as both limit the thing's striving in the same way. The latter is in clear conflict with 3p4 and thus the former too cannot be part of the thing's essence (Della Rocca,

quote Yovel's criticism of such readings, which I take to be spot on. According to Yovel, "readers of Spinoza must feel there is something incongruent, indeed wrong, when *conatus*, the basic human desire, is understood as a desire for survival only..." (Yovel, 1999: 46). If the *conatus* is understood merely as an attempt to maintain a fixed *ratio*, this unwelcome conclusion seems inevitable.

5. Conclusions

In this chapter I have proposed a revised understanding of Spinoza's concept of *individual*, its limits, and correct usage. I have shown that the term and its uses should not be taken to fully determine an entity's being. I have argued, specifically, that a thing having a *ratio* answers the questions of what makes something an individual (Q1), and that its specific *ratio* is what makes the entity an individual of a certain kind (Q2). Further, I have argued that since Spinoza takes the *ratio* of an entity to be equivalent to its form and nature, it *cannot* serve as an answer to what makes something *this* rather than *that* individual (Q3). I have also briefly explained how I think individuality relates to Q3, which is answered by a thing's *conatus*, and suggested that a thing's *ratio* constrains, or sets limits or boundaries on the ways in which a thing can strive.

If my reading is correct, it provides greater terminological clarity, and better situates Spinoza's use of the term within the philosophical tradition. Most importantly, it opens the door for a new inquiry into Spinoza's understanding of the identity of finite, singular entities. With this reading in hand, and with the gap it creates between a thing's *ratio* and its striving and unique being, I turn to discuss the metaphysical locus of *ratios*, arguing, in the following chapter, that they are what formal, infinite and eternal, essences express.

2021b: 247-8). While I disagree with Della Rocca regarding the meaning of an increase in power (as I will discuss in chapter 5), I completely agree that the attempt to increase is built into the very core of what striving is, and cannot be a by product of an attempt to survive and face external dangers.

Chapter 3: FORMAL ESSENCE

Formal Essences as Infinite Modes, Concrete Universal Kind-Essences Expressing *Ratios of Motion and Rest*

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that Spinoza's concept of individuality, defined in 2p13D as a *ratio of motion and rest* that obtains between the individual's parts, can explain what makes something an individual, and what makes it an individual of a certain kind, but that it cannot explain its singular identity, i.e., what makes it *this* rather than *that* individual. Thus, according to my reading, Spinoza takes particular *ratios* of motion and rest to express kinds of things (e.g., humans or horses). What is left undetermined at this point is the metaphysical status of these kinds, i.e., whether they are genuine essences of things and thus are completely real, or whether they should be understood as merely mind-dependent abstractions (what Spinoza calls "beings of reason" CM I.5). This third chapter aims, among other things, to provide an answer to this question.

In this chapter I take a step back from the discussion regarding individuals and individuality and enquire into the structure of Spinoza's metaphysics more generally, looking at whether there is room in his ontological picture for what, from a finite human perspective, are "concrete universals",⁷⁴ that is, single entities which are able to be instantiated (in one way or another), and thus are present (in one way or another) in many singular, finite, entities. In other words, I enquire into what really *is*,

⁷⁴ The term "concrete universal" is found in different forms in Hegel, Armstrong, Stout, and even Aristotle (and, perhaps in a different version in Scotus). This kind of universal is best understood in contrast with abstract universal, i.e., mind-dependent ideas of particular features or qualities which are grounded in abstraction and comparison but are not, in and of themselves, real independent entities. These may be found in different forms in Locke, Leibniz, or Malebranche. For a good summary of the different accounts of universals in the Early Modern period, see Di Bella and Schmaltz, 2017: 1-12.

from the point of view of the eternal (i.e. God), or what enjoys an actual, completely real, formal reality, and whether it aligns with my reading of *ratios*. My answer to this last question is affirmative; I argue that Spinoza's notion of a formal essence understood as an infinite mode is the exact thing which satisfies these demands as the metaphysical locus of *ratios* described in Chapter 2. In other words, I will argue that since formal essences are infinite modes they should be considered actual single entities expressing *ratios of motion and rest*, and that they are, from a finite mind's perspective, shared kind-essences that are completely different from singular things' actual essences, and that exist regardless of the existence of enduring finite things.⁷⁵

Arguing in this way situates my view among the Platonist readings of Spinoza's metaphysics in general, and essences in particular. According to such readings, there is, in Spinoza, a real distinction between essences and existence, and thus between formal eternal essences, and actual ones which are associated with the durational existence of the thing.⁷⁶ Yet, the vast majority of these readings identify (to varying degrees) the content of the formal and actual essences as they take them to be different expressions of the same thing and to have the same one-to-one relationship with the singular thing of which they are essences.⁷⁷ Contrary to such views, I will argue that necessarily, since formal essences

⁷⁵ I will not provide a positive account of actual essences until Chapter 5, but it will become clear that since formal essences are shared by many singulars, and cannot fully determine or explain what makes any singular thing the unique singular that it is, they cannot be identical in content to whatever the essence of a singular enduring this is. An exception to this reading is Lærke's aspectual reading. Lærke's point is that each essence has a formal as well as an actual aspect to it, and thus "actual essence" is not restricted to a finite, durational things. I agree with Lærke's main point (i.e., that everything for Spinoza is always and necessarily actual), yet I think he is wrong to suggest that Spinoza's use of the term "actual essence" tracks actual aspect of an eternal and infinite essence. See also Garrett, 2018: 245 and n. 4.

⁷⁶ That a thing's actual essence is related to its durational existence and thus perishes when the thing goes out of existence (by 2D2) is not disputed in the literature and is clear from the discussion of the *conatus* in 3p6 onward. Particularly, Spinoza argues in 3p8d that "since (by P4) [a thing] will *always continue to exist by the same power* by which it now exists, unless it is destroyed by an external cause, the striving [the thing's actual essence] involves *indefinite time*".

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Deleuze, 1992; Donagan, 1989: 43, 82, 194-7; Matson, 1990: 88; Curley, 1969: 138-141; Wolfson, 1962: 29; Garrett, 1018: 244-8; 1994: 96-7; Viljanen, 2011: 32, 155-7; Koistinen, 2018: 278; Alanen, 2018: 327 n. 28. Two particularly interesting Platonic readings, are Martin's 2008, who argues that formal essences are kind-essences, yet still insists that actual essences are Platonic copies of the formal ones (Martin, 2008: 507), and Primus', who argues that all things, and thus all essences, are for Spinoza infinite and eternal, (Primus, 2021b: 22), yet nonetheless characterizes her view as Platonic (Primus, 2023: 269, n.15). Non-Platonic views which even more obviously identify formal and actual essences are Lærke, 2017; Vermeiren, 2023; Nadler, 2001: 94-131; Marrama, 2016: 362-3.

are infinite modes which exist prior to, and are indifferent to, the singular things of which they are essences, they are not only numerically different from the actual essences of these singulars, but have different content as well.⁷⁸ Thus, I will distance myself from the view according to which “in Spinoza’s metaphysics, the *dual aspect* of the existence of finite modes within Spinoza’s metaphysics reproduces the Platonic doctrine on which time is an *imitation* within the sensible world of a truer reality that is outside time” (Scribano, 2008: 45; emphasis added).⁷⁹ According to my view, durational existence has its own distinctive features, which I discuss in the following chapter, and modes do not have a dual aspect, as formal essences are shared by finite modes (which, in turn, have only one unique essence and exist only durationally).⁸⁰ The relationship that obtains between the formal and actual essence is thus not one of imitation, but of participation.⁸¹

It is clear from the first 15 propositions of the *Ethics* that God is the primary thing that exists for Spinoza, since “whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (1p15). It is also clear that in Spinoza’s metaphysics, whatever is is either a substance or a mode (1D3, 1D5, 1ax1), and that God is the only substance there is (1p14). Thus, the first kind of thing to enquire into when attempting to unpack Spinoza’s ontology is a mode, “an affection of a substance, *or* that which

⁷⁸ As I argued in the end of Chapter 2, and will continue to argue in Chapter 5, there is a deep connection between a thing’s formal essence (or the formal essence in which a thing participates) and its actual one, as the latter is constrained by the former. Yet, this is still very far from arguing that the actual essence is a Platonic copy of the formal one, or that the formal essence is a possibility the actual essence realizes.

⁷⁹ I am in debt to Leonardo Moauro for translating this passage from Italian.

⁸⁰ More on this last point in Chapter 4.

⁸¹ Spinoza himself does not describe the relationship that holds between a singular and its formal essence as a participation relation, yet Plato does. There are, thus, several reasons for my choice of terminology. In the *Phaedo*, Plato argues that the number three participates in oddness, that the cause of two is the participation in duality, and that “nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of beauty in whatever way” (Plato, *Phaedo*: 100d). Differently from most (if not all) Platonic readings of Spinoza, I do not take singular things to stand in a one-to-one relation to their formal essences, but argue that formal essences can be infinitely instantiated in singulars, as Plato does (and in this sense might be more Platonic than other Platonic readers). Furthermore, as I will argue in Chapter 4, similarly to the Platonic relation, I take formal essences to be the formal causes of the singular things of which they are essences, i.e., to be that in virtue of which things have certain properties and are of a certain kind. See Fine, 2003: 380–4. In Chapter 5, I provide more detail regarding the participation relation as I see it.

is in another through which it is also conceived” (1D5).⁸² The modes which are first in the order of existence, and thus should also be the first in the order of enquiry (2p10s; G/II/93-4; C/I/455), are the *infinite modes* which follow from the absolute nature of God’s attributes (1pp21-23). While it is perhaps counter-intuitive to think of particular natures or essences as *infinite*, I think, as I will argue throughout this chapter (and especially in section 3.2), that this is the only available option in Spinoza’s metaphysics. As will become apparent as the chapter unfolds, since Spinoza attributes to formal essences eternal, formal reality, they cannot be anything other than modes which follow directly from God’s nature, i.e., infinite modes. Yet it will also become clear that their *infinity per se* is not the most important thing about them for the matter at hand, and that there are a few satisfactory ways to understand this infinity

In the second section of the chapter, I will provide a general description of what infinite modes are and will establish their status as true and immutable natures, enjoying an eternal, actual existence. My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive account of existing literature on the topic, or to survey all possible interpretations, but rather to provide a possible reading which is focused on the characteristics of infinite modes most relevant to the subject matter of this chapter, namely, their infinite and eternal existence which follows directly from God’s nature, their ontological (and epistemological) priority over finite modes and singular things, their actuality, and their characterization as “universal-like” entities (*TdIE* §101). In the third section, I focus on Spinoza’s notion of formal essences and argue that infinite modes provide the metaphysical locus for them. I will begin this section by discussing the work infinite modes is supposed to do for Spinoza – to explain how finite things are related to the infinite. I will provide textual evidence that Spinoza in fact thinks about formal essences as infinite modes and will explain how thinking of them in this way provides

⁸² Attributes, while unique or single, and pervasive, are “what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (1D4). Thus, they are not of the right ontological kind to satisfy what I am looking for.

the best explanation for the relation mentioned. I will then explain in what way can we understand the infinity of formal essences, and will argue that regardless of how we cash out this aspect, the issue of infinity is of secondary importance. Next, I will argue in accordance with many Spinoza scholars, that these essences express a *ratio of motion and rest*. Yet, in light of the discussion in Chapter 2, and the one regarding infinite modes and their distinctive features, I will argue in contrast to most scholars that these essences are (from the perspective of finite minds and singular things) shared among many. In other words, I will argue that formal essences, understood as infinite modes, can be described as “concrete universals”.

Importantly, since the reality and actuality of infinite modes has already been established, my reading will undermine, or call for a reexamination of, the reality of the finite, rather than the concrete universal. Additionally, it will become clear that a working premise on which many scholars rest their interpretations of Spinoza’s formal essences are and how they relate to actual ones – the assumption that the thing, the *it*, which exists in the infinite realm is identical to the one that merely has finite, durational, existence – should be reevaluated. In the fourth and last section, I will give some philosophical context which will help to better understand the notion of concrete universals and how we may think of them in Spinoza, and I will provide some suggestive evidence for the benefits of thinking about formal essences in this way.

2. Infinite Modes

2.1 What Does Spinoza Say They Are and How Do They Relate to Each Other?

Spinoza doesn't say much about infinite modes, and this unique concept is perhaps one of the most unclear ones in his metaphysics.⁸³ In the *Ethics*, Spinoza introduces the idea of infinite modes in 1p21-23, and distinguishes between modes that follow directly from God's attributes (1p21) and those that follow indirectly, as "modification of modifications" (1p22), i.e., mediate infinite modes. Whether directly or indirectly, though, all infinite modes *follow* from "the absolute nature of any of God's attributes" (1p21), meaning that they are grounded in, and are caused by, God's absolute nature or God's attributes.⁸⁴ As such, infinite modes are eternal, "*must exist necessarily* and be infinite" (1p23; emphasis added).⁸⁵ 1p22 excludes the possibility of finite modes following mediately from God's attribute, and 1p23 excludes infinite modes following from anything other than God's attributes. Thus, according to this cluster of passages, infinite modes exclusively follow from God's attributes, meaning that they (alone) are caused by an eternal, infinite, and immutable nature, and necessarily exist.⁸⁶

In Ep. 64, Spinoza gives examples of what these modes are, explaining that an immediate infinite mode under the attribute of extension is motion and rest,⁸⁷ and a mediate one is "the face of

⁸³ I will later discuss the question of *why* Spinoza posited such modes. There are explicit and implicit discussions of infinite modes throughout Spinoza's writings. Since the discussion here is not meant to be a comprehensive one, but only to serve as background to the claim that formal essences are infinite modes, I will not discuss all of them but will focus on the most relevant.

⁸⁴ Garrett, 1991: 101; Newlands, 2023; Melamed, 2013: 116. Cf. Schmaltz 1999.

⁸⁵ There is a question whether infinite modes are eternal in the sense that their existence is atemporal, or whether they are everlasting or sempiternal (and so exist "in duration"). The answer to this question is somewhat beside the point of my discussion of mediate infinite modes and their relationship to formal essences, so I refrain from discussing it here. But see Primus, 2019: 17; Steinberg, 1981; Nadler, 2006; Garber, 2004, who argue that they are eternal in the full-blown sense and Melamed, 2013; Schmaltz, 1997&2015; Yovel, 1991; Donagan, 1989; Kneale, 1973 who argue they are sempiternal.

⁸⁶ True, the essences of modes do not involve existence (1D1&1D5), yet they exist necessarily due to the necessary existence of their cause. I will discuss this issue further later on.

⁸⁷ The parallel infinite mode under the attribute of thought is God's infinite intellect. This will become crucial for the discussion of formal essences as infinite modes, and for the idea that formal essences are things, i.e., modes which have their own formal reality and not mere ideas of things which only have objective reality.

the whole Universe” (G/IV/278; C/II/439; emphasis added). To further explicate what this phrase means, Spinoza refers to 2p13lem7, where he argues that “the whole of nature is one individual” infinitely affected by infinite individuals without a change in its form (2p13lem7d). Importantly, this reference should not be taken to mean, as it may appear *prima facie*, that the actual universe, composed of finite bodies (G/IV/173a; C/II/19) is the mediate infinite mode.⁸⁸ Rather, as Curley suggests, it is the *form* of the whole universe that Spinoza identifies with the mediate infinite mode (Curley, 2016: 629-30).⁸⁹ This interpretation is reinforced by 2p13lem4-7 where Spinoza argues that what the form of the individual (in virtue of which the individual remains the kind of an individual that it is) is the *ratio* that obtains between its parts rather than the parts themselves.⁹⁰ According to Curley, “This has the philosophical advantage that it frees us from having to explain how the mediate infinite mode of extension could follow from the absolute nature of the divine attributes (as it does, according to E I PP21–23), when the individual things which (on the usual view) make up the immediate infinite mode of extension, the finite modes, do not (E I P28 and Sch.)” (Curley, 2016: 630). The mediate infinite mode under the attribute of extension is, thus, the form of extended existence, which is expressed in duration, yet it is *not*, crucially, durational existence itself.⁹¹

Additionally, this interpretation makes clear in what way the mediate infinite mode is a “modification *of a* modification” – while the immediate infinite mode of extension is motion and rest in general, the mediate infinite mode, as a further modification of it, must be a particularization of motion and rest, perhaps expressed as a certain *ratio* (a determined “portion” of motion and rest),

⁸⁸ This would result in a contradiction for it would mean that the individual, which is constituted by finite parts, is also prior to them and is caused solely by God’s nature. Cf. Lennox: 1976; Schmaltz, 1997: 217-29, Giancotti, 1991: 106-11, Wolfson, 1962: 243-5; Carriero, 2018: 260-1. I discuss this issue further in section 3.1 of this chapter.

⁸⁹ Cf. Yovel, 1991.

⁹⁰ On the distinction between the form of the individual and the individual itself, see Chapter 2.

⁹¹ Ward says something which might be helpful here, if only as an analogy for this relationship of infinite modes and durational existence. According to Ward “whatever comes to be in the causal order, whatever comes to have ‘existence with duration’, as Spinoza calls it, is a way of being extended, but it is no part of what it is to be extended, or of what it is to be a way of being extended, that it should exist with duration” (Ward, 2011: 32).

rather than a completely different kind of a thing, i.e., material extended bodies, or the natural world.⁹² Spinoza, thus, takes infinite modes to be infinite, eternal, and to follow solely from God's attributes; he identifies the immediate infinite mode under the attribute of extension with motion and rest, and a mediate infinite one with the form of the entire universe or the whole of nature.

Yet Spinoza brings up the “face of the whole universe” as an *example* of a mediate infinite mode, and nowhere does he argue that this is the only one. In fact, since “nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow” (1p36), it must be the case that from each infinite mode, another infinite mode follows, to infinity.⁹³ The question is, then, what are those modes and what is the relationship among them; why did Spinoza posit them, or how do they relate to finite modes?

Scholars debate over what infinite modes are. Some take them to be laws of nature (e.g., Yovel, 1991; Martin, 2008;), nomological facts (Curley, 1969), or eternal and immutable truths (Primus, 2019);⁹⁴ while the arguments given for these different interpretations is of less interest here, there are aspects of these interpretations which are worth discussing as preliminaries for the discussion of formal essences as mediate infinite modes.⁹⁵ To these I now turn, beginning with the relationship that obtains among infinite modes and their necessary existence.

⁹² Crucially for our purposes, as will be discussed at length in the next section of this chapter, the form of the individual is distinct from the individual itself, and it is the aspect of it which enjoys infinite existence.

⁹³ That from the infinite mode another *infinite* mode necessarily follows is clear from 1p28d. I will discuss this causal relation in more depth later on.

⁹⁴ Additionally, interpreters (e.g. Martin, 2008; Schmaltz, 1997) take infinite modes to be formal essences. I hold off on discussing this here for it is usually an additional identification of formal essences with whatever it is that infinite modes are (e.g., either laws of nature or eternal truths). Yet, my intention here is to provide a new interpretation of formal essences, which draws on the existing literature, but deviates from it in important respects. Thus, I wish to first discuss distinctive and important features of infinite modes, without yet identifying them as formal essences, and then explain how these distinctive features back up my own reading of formal essences as eternal, infinite kind-essences.

⁹⁵ While this would be too much of a diversion here, I want to briefly suggest that I believe most of the different accounts of what infinite modes are, are in fact not all that different. Take, for example, Primus' immutable natures vs. the “natural laws” reading (which Garrett and Yovel hold). One may ask, what are these laws exactly, how do they govern the extended world, and how particular are they exactly? Obviously, there are infinitely many laws, and “the principle of inertia” or “law of gravity” are only examples of them. As Yovel argues, “The examples that Spinoza gives in TIE [for natural laws] are indeed logical and metaphysical — the same kind (if not exactly the same items) of clear and distinct ideas that Descartes had used as general axioms about the world — for example, ‘that no cause can produce more than it has in itself’ or that ‘the weakest must yield to the strongest’ (KV II: 24)” (Yovel, 1991: 88). Natural laws, thus, include physical, mathematical, and metaphysical laws, i.e., everything which governs the extended world. In this sense, triangularity, or being triangular and having interior angles that sum to 180 degrees, is a natural law which enjoys an eternal and infinite existence (and thus

According to some scholars from each attribute only one infinite mode follows (or is caused) directly, and from this immediate infinite mode only one mediate mode follows, to infinity (Melamed, 2013: 117-120).⁹⁶ Since Spinoza is committed to “the same cause same effect” principle, and to the PSR, the argument goes, he cannot allow that from the same exact cause, i.e., the absolute and indivisible nature of the attribute of thought, there will be two distinct effects, i.e., two modes of thought (1p21d).⁹⁷ A different approach, which I myself endorse, is one according to which at every level of mediacy, infinitely many infinite modes exist. Melamed’s reasoning is supported by a reading of 1p22 according to which the mediate infinite modes stand in the same relation to their preceding ones as the immediate infinite mode stands to God’s attribute, meaning that they are *caused* by, or *follow* from them, as “modification of modifications” of God’s nature. Yet a closer reading of the cluster of 1pp22-23 may lead to a different conclusion. In 1p22, Spinoza says that “whatever follows from some attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which, through the same attribute, exists necessarily and is infinite, must also exist necessarily and be infinite”. Here, he seems to articulate the relationship between the *immediate* infinite mode and the *mediate* ones. In 1p23 Spinoza argues that infinite modes *in general* can follow either from the attribute, or from a modification of it. The demonstration reads:

“For a mode is in another, through which it must be conceived (by D5), that is
(by P15), it is in God alone, and can be conceived through God alone. So if a mode is

is similar to Primus’ true and immutable natures). There are, of course, differences between the views which I do not dismiss, yet their relevance to the current discussion is minor.

⁹⁶ See also Curley according to whom there is one immediate, and one mediate, infinite mode.

⁹⁷ For this to be the case, the effect, i.e., the mode following from the attribute, would have to be finite and limited by another mode of the same nature, which would mean, in turn, that the effect does not follow *necessarily* from God’s attribute. Additionally, without a further cause (other than the absolute indivisible nature of the attribute) to explain the two distinct effects, their existence would be a brute fact. For more on this convoluted demonstration see Melamed, 2013: 117-19; Primus, 2019: 13-15. See also Spinoza’s claim in the second app to the KV that there is “necessarily one” infinite idea which follows directly from God as an infinite mode (i.e., an immediate infinite mode). KV app §§3-4; G/I/117; C/I/152-3.

conceived to exist necessarily and be infinite, [its necessary existence and infinity] must necessarily be inferred, *or* perceived through some attribute of God, *insofar as it is considered absolutely*. Therefore, the mode, which exists necessarily and is infinite, has had to follow from the absolute nature of some attribute of God—either immediately (see P21) or by some mediate modification, which follows from the absolute nature, that is (by P22), which exists necessarily and is infinite” (1p23d; emphasis added).

What I want to focus on here is not so much what Spinoza says, but rather, what he doesn’t say. According to the demonstration, there are only two things from which infinite modes can follow — the absolute nature of the attribute (from which the immediate infinite mode follows) or the immediate mode itself, i.e., “some mediate modification, *which follows from the absolute nature*”. Notice that the last thing mentioned by Spinoza from which infinite modes may follow is the immediate infinite mode. In other words, Spinoza does not explicitly argue that mediate infinite modes follow from other mediate infinite modes to infinity, but only that there are infinitely many infinite modes following from the attribute (by 1p36&1p22), or a modification of it. If this reading is correct, then the “chain of infinite modes” is not merely an infinite linear chain of causes ($A \rightarrow IIM \rightarrow MIM \rightarrow MIM \rightarrow MIM \dots$) but one where after the first causal step, infinitely many things may follow directly ($A \rightarrow IIM \rightarrow (MIM_1, MIM_2, MIM_3 \dots)$).⁹⁸

⁹⁸ See also Bennett, 1984 §27.4 This is crucial for establishing the point that formal essences, understood as *ratios* of motion and rest, all follow from the infinite mode of extension “motion and rest”, and not from each other. Of course, in 1p36 Spinoza argues that “nothing exists from whose essence some effect does not follow”, meaning that each mediate mode which follows from the immediate one is also a cause of some additional infinite mode. What these effects are is a good question, yet I refrain from trying to answer it now. What is important for me to establish is that from the immediate infinite mode of “motion and rest” infinitely many modes can follow directly, and that these modes should be understood as *ratios* of motion and rest which are on a metaphysical par. The question now is: where does the “face of the whole universe” come into the picture and how does *it* relate to the infinity of formal essences? There are two possible answers to this question. One is to argue that, similarly to the way scholars take this mediate infinite mode to be composed of actual finite bodies, the face of the whole universe is in fact the “sum”, to speak loosely, of the infinity of formal essences, which together compose it. A second option is to admit an additional level of mediacy, meaning that from the immediate infinite mode the face of the whole universe follows, and from it follow the infinity of formal essences. This second option would have to mean, according to my reading, that there could be further mediate infinite modes at the first level of

What about the “same cause, same effect” principle Spinoza seems to be committed to? Well, importantly, the only thing which has “absolute nature” and is indivisible is God or the attribute itself, and not the modes following from it. In the letter “On the Nature of the Infinite” Spinoza argues that “some things are infinite by their nature... others [are infinite] by the force of the cause in which they inhere, though when they are conceived abstractly, they *can be divided into parts and regarded as finite...*” (Ep. 12; G/IV/60-1; C/I/205). In other words, the immediate infinite mode “motion and rest”, considered in itself and abstracted from its cause, may be divided such that different aspects of it may explain and give rise to different mediate infinite modes.⁹⁹ Thus, multiple mediate infinite modes can, and in fact do, exist on the same “level” of generality or “distance” from God’s absolute nature; they do not follow from one another,¹⁰⁰ but from the immediate infinite mode, and they are all equally necessary and enjoy an eternal existence.¹⁰¹

2.2 Their Actuality

Before proceeding to another important aspect of infinite modes, namely, their universality, a digression regarding their ontological status is necessary. It is important to make clear that arguing

mediacy, other than the face of the whole universe. Given that this causal chain exists under all attributes, this seems to be a quite natural reading. There is, also, the third option, which I dislike the most but should be mentioned, which is that Spinoza overlooked this issue, yet since it does not create any real tension in his system, this blind spot is both understandable and secondary in importance. For sake of simplicity and ease of exposition, I bracket this issue and discuss formal essences simply as mediate infinite modes following from the immediate one.

⁹⁹ See also Melamed, 2013 and Garrett, 1991: 196. Garrett argues for the possibility of finite modes following from the “absolute nature” of the attribute. He suggests that they do, to the extent that the attribute is qualified in different ways *at different places and times*, and he distinguishes such modifications from the infinite and eternal modifications, which must, according to Garrett, be completely pervasive. On this last point I disagree, and side with Primus’ understanding of infinity (see Primus, 2019). The important point is that the absolute nature *modified* may be expressed in diverse ways. On this see also Deleuze, 1992 ch. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Again, perhaps there are even further mediate infinite modes that do follow from the mediate ones in question, but this is beside the point.

¹⁰¹ They are all also infinite, and I discuss this in 3.3. See Primus 2019 for a different defense of a similar reading. According to Primus, the more immediate an infinite mode is, the more general it is, such that we need to understand them in order to understand the more particular ones (e.g., understand what is a rectangle in order to understand what is a cube).

that infinite modes necessarily exist and are true and immutable natures means also that they are *actual* in a specific way. Spinoza uses the term “actual” throughout his writings, and it is a central one for his philosophical enterprise as a whole. In 3p7, for example, Spinoza argues that a thing’s *conatus*, i.e., its striving to increase in power, is its *actual* essence,¹⁰² and in 2p13 he argues that the human mind’s direct object (in virtue of which it is distinct from other human minds) is an *actually existing* human body. In both these cases Spinoza ties together actuality and durational existence, which seems to mean that he understands “being actual” as “durationally existing”. Yet, in 5p29 Spinoza brings up the body’s essence, conceived under a species of eternity.¹⁰³ In the scholium Spinoza makes clear that “we conceive things as *actual* in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and *to follow from the necessity of the divine nature*. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, *or* real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essences of God (as we have shown in IIP45 and P45s)” (5p29s; emphasis added). Spinoza thus *contrasts* the actuality of durational existence and the actuality of things which follow directly from God’s nature, which we conceive as true or real when we conceive of them as actual and eternal. Thus, it is certainly not the case that for Spinoza being actual means merely “existing in space and time”; additionally (and perhaps even more so) being actual means following directly from God’s nature, existing formally, and being infinitely and eternally true.¹⁰⁴

To make this point Spinoza refers to 2p45 and its scholium, where he argues that the ideas of each existing singular (i.e., finite and determinate) thing involve the idea of an essence of God, i.e., of

¹⁰² More on this in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

¹⁰³ “Whatever the mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the body’s present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the body’s essence under a species of eternity” (5p29).

¹⁰⁴ 5p29s is a key passage in the *Ethics* and there are many open questions concerning it. I will return to this passage later on in the dissertation, when arguing, e.g., that the things we conceive as actually enduring and those that are eternally actual are two different things. For further, deeper, readings of this passage and particularly its relation to the eternity of the mind see, e.g.: Hübner, 2022; Primus, 2023; Matson, 1990; Alanen, 2011.

God's attributes (2p45&d). Importantly, here too Spinoza makes clear that "by existence [he] does not understand duration [but rather] the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things *because* infinitely many things follow from the *eternal necessity of God's nature* in infinitely many modes (see IP16)" (2p45s; emphasis added). While the causal connection here is not entirely clear,¹⁰⁵ what is clear, given the reference to 1p16, is that "the nature" of existence is attributed to singulars due to their following from God (rather than their following from other singulars) which is mediated by infinite modes. This, and the use of this passage in 5p29s, suggests that when Spinoza brings up the modes that follow from God in virtue of which singulars have this strict sense of existence (that involves God's essence), he refers to infinite and eternal modes (1pp21-23) that cause the singular enduring body to exist durationally while enjoying an infinite and eternal existence.¹⁰⁶

Despite the difficulties arising from the two different uses of actuality (and existence, and reality), it is quite clear that in Spinoza's necessitarian metaphysics, everything is actual. If there are infinite modes, and Spinoza explicitly argues that there are, these must be actual. Not only that, but these modes, as already argued and as I'll keep making clearer, have formal reality, i.e., are *not* mind-dependent ideas but are actual things, modifying God's absolute nature.

2.3 Their Universality and Relation to the Finite

Another aspect of infinite modes which is perhaps the most important for the matter at hand is their universality or generality, and how this affects their relation to the particularity and finitude of

¹⁰⁵ It may be thought of as a formal-causal relation which holds between singular things' formal essences and their finite, durational existence. This point will become clearer as the chapter unfolds.

¹⁰⁶ How infinite and eternal things cause finite and durational things to exist is a complicated matter that I will discuss later on. Whether Spinoza is entitled to this causal relationship is debatable. Leibniz first raises this issue in his *Comments on Spinoza's Philosophy* (Leibniz, 1989: 276-7). See also Joachim 1901; Primus, 2019; Bennett, 1984; Newlands, 2023; Curley, 1969; Garrett, 2018; Huenemann, 1999.

singular things. In the KV Spinoza explicitly refers to infinite modes as universals, when he argues that *Natura Naturata*, which includes “whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature... i.e., all modes of God’s attributes...” (1p29s; G/II/71; C/I/434), should be divided in two – “a universal and a particular. The universal consists in all those modes which depend on God immediately... the particular consists in all those singular things which are produced by the *universal modes*” (KV/I/8; G/I/47; C/I/91; emphasis added). The modes which follow immediately from God and produce the finite ones are characterized as eternal and immutable (KV/I/9), thus include all infinite modes (immediate and mediate alike) (KV/II/5);¹⁰⁷ these modes are “non-corruptible through their cause” (KV/II/5), meaning that they are infinite and eternal in virtue of their cause being so, i.e., in virtue of following solely from God’s absolute nature or his attributes. Spinoza explains that these infinite modes are the causes of the finite ones,¹⁰⁸ and argues that the “singular, changeable things depend so intimately, and (so to speak) essentially,¹⁰⁹ on the fixed things that they can neither be, nor be conceived without them” (*TdIE* §101; G/II/37; C/I/41).¹¹⁰ Thus, “although these fixes and eternal things are singular, nevertheless, *because of their presence everywhere...* they will be treated *like* universals [*erunt nobis tanquam universalia*], or genera of the *definitions* of singular, changeable things...” (*TdIE* §101; G/II/37; C/I/41; emphasis added). Infinite modes, according to these passages, are thus genuinely single entities, yet their presence is pervasive from the perspective of finite things, and so they are *to us* universals which pertain to the definition of singular things. While all finite extended modes have

¹⁰⁷ All the while, singular things “have not existed from all time” (KV/II/5) and are finite and determinate (2D7).

¹⁰⁸ He refers to the “modes which we have said are the cause of the singular modes” as the things “which are incorruptible only through their causes”, i.e., the infinite modes (KV/II/5)

¹⁰⁹ I will discuss the way in which the *essence* of the finite mode particularly depends on the infinite one in the following section.

¹¹⁰ In light of this passage, Wolfson argues that “the relation between [the infinite and finite modes], therefore, is like that between substance and mode, namely, the relation between the whole and the part or between the universal and the particular” (Wolfson, 1962: 250). There is something to this idea that finite modes follow from infinite modes similarly to how modes in general follow from substance. I will later argue that God’s essence serves as a formal cause of infinite modes, and that infinite modes (i.e., formal essences) are the formal causes of finite modes. Yet, as I understand this relationship, exactly because the infinite-finite relationship resembles the substance-mode relationship *it cannot be* a part-whole, or a simple universal-particular relationship.

motion and rest or are characterized by a *ratio* of motion and rest, motion and rest *per se* (and each and every *ratio* which modifies it) is one infinite and eternal thing which is infinitely expressed.

The universality or generality of infinite modes, it is important to emphasize, does not end with the immediate infinite mode and is applicable to mediate infinite modes as well. Yovel sheds light on this claim explaining that an infinite mode, which he understands as a law of nature in different levels of generality, “may well be a *global entity* with certain features that characterize it overall, that is, are universally present in it” (Yovel, 1991: 84). Importantly, a global individual does not need to be absolutely comprehensive, i.e., it can explain *some* aspects of God or nature, while still counting as universal. Yovel explains that attributes, for example, “may express only certain aspects of the substance (they may be infinite in some qualified way rather than being “infinitely infinite”) and yet count as real single entities or sub-totalities of substance. The same should hold true for even narrower aspects of substance, which are nevertheless global and infinite, such as the infinite modes and the laws of nature ‘inscribed in them’” (Yovel, 1991: 84; emphasis added). In other words, in the same way we think of God’s attributes as infinite, eternal, and pervasive while restricted (for the attribute of thought does not explain extension and *vice versa*), so could we think of the infinite modes’ universality.

While I do not argue that infinite modes are laws of nature, but rather that they are formal essences, I do think they do the same kind of work Yovel argues they do and make nature intelligible. I will explain exactly how that is in the next section but will provide an example here – the nature of a triangle – which is neutral with respect to what exactly infinite modes are.¹¹¹ Whether thought of as

¹¹¹ Using geometrical examples is helpful since Spinoza himself often uses them, and they are intuitive and simple to understand, especially with regards to the kind of universality in question. Yet it should be noted, and it will be discussed in length in 3.2 and 3.3, that these examples should be taken with a grain of salt. While there might be geometrical natures which infinite modes express (and geometrical formal essences), these do not exhaust all that that infinite modes (and formal essences) are, and do not accurately express what a formal essence is. I will discuss this issue further when discussing formal essences in particular.

a mathematical law of nature, an immutable truth, or an essence of certain kind of creatures, it is clear that the essence or nature of triangularity itself (and not any particular triangle) is a single nature. As such, the nature of a triangle is one unified essence, yet it can be expressed infinitely many times and, in this sense, general and pervasive. Additionally, it is clearly eternal, has no beginning or end, and does not exist in time.¹¹² Thus, it can be thought of as a mediate infinite mode which has a single-yet-universal-like existence.¹¹³

Infinite modes thus function as universals yet are in themselves single entities. They also, as the passages just discussed indicate, cause, in some way or another, finite things. Yet, since the infinite modes are infinite and universal, and their effects finite and particular, and since from the infinite only infinite things may follow, more needs to be said in order to truly understand this causal mechanism. This mechanism, I believe, will be much clearer once we understand infinite modes as formal essences, which are shared among finite particular modes, and are completely different from the actual essences of these modes (2p45s, 2D2), or from the finite modes themselves. With the different aspects and characteristics of infinite modes discussed in this section, I now turn to argue that this is in fact the case.

¹¹² It is also infinite in the sense that it is not actually limited by anything else, but a full expression of triangularity. I will discuss this point further later on, but see Primus, 2019 for a full explanation of the infinity of eternal natures. Admittedly, the infinity of a triangle, or even of triangularity is, to say the least, counter intuitive, as a triangle, being a particular shape or a way of being extended, is determinate and thus finite (see Ep. 50). In 3.2 (“the infinity of formal essences”) I will discuss this issue and explain why, notwithstanding this difficulty, a formal essence such as triangularity must be, for Spinoza, an infinite mode. To anticipate, I will argue that we should think about Spinoza’s realm of formal essences along the lines of a realist interpretation of Euclidian space, and that if we do so, due to Spinoza’s ontology, we must endorse the idea that formal essences are infinite modes, for they simply can’t be anything else. Yet more on this later.

¹¹³ The universal-like existence, as already mentioned, should be understood as describing the work such fixed and eternal entities do when viewed from a finite perspective. In keeping with Spinoza’s terminology, when defending the view that formal essences are such universals, I will refer to them as universal-like, or as functioning as universals, to emphasize that they are not mere abstractions or beings of reason, but real entities which have a formal reality distinct from the formal reality of their instantiations. In this sense, the account of universals I attribute to Spinoza is more Platonic than Aristotelian.

3. Formal Essences

3.1 That Formal Essences are Mediate Infinite Modes

In this section of the chapter I wish to provide textual evidence for the claim that formal essences are infinite modes for Spinoza. It will not be until the next section that I explicitly discuss their infinity and address the question of how come determinate natures could be thought of as infinite. For the time being it is important to bear in mind that even though these entities are called “infinite modes” they have further, no less important, features besides than their infinity, which are crucial for the view I am defending. That infinite modes are metaphysically prior to singular things and have universal-like characteristics is, for example, much more important for establishing the relationship of formal essences and finite things than their infinity. This uniquely Spinozist metaphysical notion, thus, should be thought of in the context of a broad metaphysical picture. And in fact, a good way to begin the discussion of formal essences as infinite modes is by asking why did Spinoza posit them to begin with, or what role is this novel metaphysical concept supposed to play? While scholars agree that what infinite modes are supposed to do within Spinoza’s metaphysics is to explain how the finite can follow from the infinite, or how the two realms of existence are related, they disagree on how infinite modes are supposed to bridge this gap, and whether they succeed.

As will become apparent, I take it that it is in virtue of them being formal essences that infinite modes relate the infinite to the finite. A different, rather common view holds that the mediate infinite modes, e.g., “the face of the whole universe”, is composed of finite modes, i.e., that finite modes are parts of the mediate infinite mode. This view is held by Garrett (1991: 104), Tad Schmaltz (1997: 210), Della Rocca (1996: 174 n.14), and Wolfson (1962: 243), among others, and is attractive in its simplicity and clarity. Yet taking an infinite mode to be composed of (and thus constituted by) finite modes is

problematic since it suggests that the infinite and immutable is dependent on the finite and mutable, which is absurd.¹¹⁴

A slightly different approach is taken by Melamed, who argues that in addition to explaining the derivation of the finite from the infinite, infinite modes have the role of “unifying” finite modes and thus explaining the causal interactions among them (i.e., among the finite). Melamed grounds his reading in letter 32, where Spinoza argues that things are “parts of a whole to the extent that their natures must adapt themselves to one another so that they are in the closest possible agreement” (Ep. 32; G/IV/170; C/II/18). Taking this into account, Melamed argues that infinite modes are the wholes which finite modes are parts of (Melamed, 2013: 131). Since God and his attributes are indivisible, were Spinoza not to posit infinite modes, finite modes would not be able to interact, for there would be no whole in virtue of which they are “adapting themselves” to one another and Spinoza’s metaphysical picture would end up being a form of occasionalism (Melamed, 2013: 131). In other words, infinite modes are needed not only to explain how the finite follows from the infinite, but also in order to explain how, or the fact that, finite modes interact.

I agree with Melamed that infinite modes unite finite modes, yet I disagree that the passage from letter 32 describes this kind of unification. The letter concerns “how each *part of Nature* agrees with the whole and how it coheres with others” (Ep. 32; G/IV/169; C/II/18; emphasis added). As such, it is treated in the literature, and rightfully so, as a passage about *individuals*, which are complex

¹¹⁴ Spinoza does not explicitly hold that parts constitute wholes, and so one might object here by saying that the fact that the whole is composed of parts does not mean it is dependent on them. Yet this proposal is also not in line with Spinoza’s philosophical commitments. Spinoza prioritizes (metaphysically, logically, and conceptually) substance, and thus eternal and infinite existence, over durational and finite existence, meaning that the infinite is by definition *independent* of the finite, yet not the other way around. Since this is the case, arguing that the infinite is composed of finite parts, whether they “receive” their parthood by participating in the whole, or literally constitute it, seems at odds with Spinoza’s deep philosophical commitments. Additionally, and more to the point, in the physical digression Spinoza is explicit about the fact that *ratios* are *not* constituted by the parts among which they hold. In fact, parts may come and go, be greater or lesser, move faster or slower; yet the form, i.e., *ratio* of the individual remains intact regardless. Thus, there is no reason to assume, especially when there are other available explanations, that mediate infinite modes are aggregates of finite ones. Cf. Newlands, 2018: 138-140.

bodies composed of parts. Yet, as already mentioned, the infinite individual, i.e., “the whole of nature” (2p13lem7s) is *not* the mediate infinite mode which Spinoza mentions in Ep. 64 – its *form* is. Thus, it is not the case that the infinite mode is a totality of finite modes which interact among themselves in virtue of being parts of the same whole. Rather, as I will argue from this point forward, infinite modes, or more accurately, mediate infinite modes, are *ratios*, forms which particular things can “take” or participate in, and it is in virtue of the similarity in form that they (i.e., the finite things) are able to interact. In other words, mediate infinite modes are formal essences. This non-mereological unification of finite things, the nature of which is at the heart of this section, may explain why Spinoza introduced the novel concept of infinite modes.

Let me now take a step back and provide textual evidence for the claim that formal essences are infinite modes. As in the case of infinite modes, Spinoza does not say much about what formal essences are exactly. He mentions *formal* essences scarcely throughout his writings,¹¹⁵ and what these entities are exactly is in great dispute. Yet, a close reading of these passages, with the discussion of infinite modes (and *ratios*) in the background, may make things clearer, at least with regard to their place in the metaphysical picture. In the second appendix to the KV (which is often taken to be an earlier version of the *Ethics*),¹¹⁶ Spinoza argues that “the most immediate mode of the attribute we call thought has objectively in itself the *formal essences of all things*, so that if one posited any formal thing whose essence did not exist objectively in the above-named attribute, it would not be infinite or supremely perfect in its kind” (KV app II; G/I/117; C/I/153; emphasis added). What Spinoza seems to be arguing for in this passage is that formal essences follow solely from God’s essence and are contained in the attribute such that nothing more (or new) may be posited without jeopardizing the attribute’s perfection. Formal essences, in other words, are eternal and thus are prior to the finite

¹¹⁵ Three times in the *Ethics* and eight times throughout his other writings, none give a definition of formal essences or explicitly discuss how they relate to actual essences or essences *tout court*.

¹¹⁶ Melamed, 2019; Viljanen, 2015.

things of which they are essences. For, Spinoza explains, if one were to posit a thing which doesn't *already*¹¹⁷ have an idea of its essence in God's infinite intellect (i.e., in the infinite mode of the attribute of thought), the essence, the thing itself, and the idea of this essence, would have to come into existence. Yet if this was the case, then the attribute, which is supposed to be infinite and supremely perfect, would lack something prior to the existence of the new essence.¹¹⁸ From 1pp21-23 we know that modes which follow from God's nature (immediately or mediately) are themselves infinite, meaning that the ideas of formal essences mentioned here are also necessarily infinite. Due to parallelism (2p7) we can infer that since there is an idea of a formal essence in God's mind which follows directly from God's nature, there is also a formal essence which enjoys the same kind of existence and follows from God in a similar way.¹¹⁹ If so, formal essences have formal reality and are not mere ideas. They are eternal, infinite, and are prior to, or indifferent to, the existence of any finite thing of which they are essences. Additionally, these essences follow solely from God's nature, mediated by "the most immediate [infinite] mode" of the attribute. As was discussed in the previous section, the kinds of things which fit this description are those Spinoza discusses in 1pp22-23, i.e., "modifications of modifications" of God's attributes, i.e., mediate infinite modes. Importantly, as 1p22 makes clear, these are the *only* things that fit the description. Thus, if formal essences are caused solely by God's nature and follow from God's attributes (mediated by an infinite mode) they *must* be mediate infinite modes, i.e., infinite, eternal, and universal-like entities.

¹¹⁷ This might be a misleading term and should be treated metaphorically. If formal essences are eternal in the strong sense of the term, they are a-temporal and thus should not be discussed in temporal terms. Yet even if they are merely sempiternal, the point is not that they are infinite due to existing prior to a certain moment, but due to them following from God.

¹¹⁸ The claim Spinoza makes here should not be confused with what he (allegedly) argues in 1p17s, i.e., that things are the way that they are *because* they exist objectively in God's infinite intellect. This claim (the one made in the *Ethics*) expresses a causal relationship between a thing's idea and the thing itself and should be understood to represent the exact opposite of Spinoza's own view (I will discuss it in length later on in this chapter). Here, though, Spinoza says something different, merely pointing out that in God's infinite intellect all infinite and eternal things exist objectively, without arguing that it is due to their objective reality that the things are what they are.

¹¹⁹ I will elaborate on this point further when discussing 2p8s2 - the relevant passage from the *Ethics*.

Spinoza seems to make a similar point later in the KV, where he explains that “it belongs to the essence of a mountain to have a valley, or the essence of a mountain is that it has a valley. This is *truly eternal and immutable* and must always be in the concept of a mountain, *even if it does not exist, and never did*” (KV/I/1; G/I/15; C/I/61, emphasis added). The essence of a mountain, thus, is what it is regardless of whether a mountain actually exists; it is an eternal and immutable truth.¹²⁰ An even more explicit statement about how formal essences follow solely from God’s essence, and are thus infinite modes can be found in the CM where Spinoza argues that “the formal essence neither is by itself nor has been created, for both these presuppose that the thing actually exists. Rather it *depends on the divine essence alone*, in which all things are contained. So in this sense we agree with those who say that *the essences of things are eternal*” (CM I.2; G/I/239; C/I/305; emphasis added). Spinoza is clear here about how the formal essence is prior, and independent of, the thing of which it is an essence, and how it depends on, and follows solely, from God’s essence alone. This way of characterizing formal essences is present throughout Spinoza’s discussions of the term, making it clear that formal essences enjoy an actual existence which is independent of the singular things of which they are essences. From God’s perspective, thus, formal essences are as real as can be, as they are infinite and eternal modifications of its absolute nature.

Moving on to the *Ethics*, Spinoza only mentions the term “formal essence” three times throughout the text, once in the first part (1p17s) and twice in the second part (2p8, 2p40s2). In none of these, though, does he explain or define what a formal essence is, or what its place is in the

¹²⁰ Based on this passage, Viljanen argues that at least in the KV, Spinoza regards essences as the “features of reality that make things the individuals they are” (Viljanen, 2015: 184). What that means exactly, with regards to the different individuality questions, is not entirely clear. In the context of the quoted passage, it seems that a thing’s essence determines its kind, i.e., that “making an individual the thing that it is” is making it a mountain rather than a river. Later, though, Spinoza argues that due to their different essences, Adam is different from Paul and Peter, suggesting that the essences in question make an individual this, rather than that, particular being. I will return to this point, and elaborate on it, when arguing that formal essences are kind-essences.

metaphysical framework. Still, there is something to learn from what Spinoza does and does not say in these passages with regard to them being infinite modes.

In 1p17s Spinoza argues that intellect and will are not part of God's essence. Spinoza explains that if the intellect as we understand it would have pertained to God's essence, it would have to be posterior (or simultaneous) to the things conceived by this intellect, yet that this is absurd since "God is prior in causality to all things (By 1P6C1)". On the other hand, it also cannot be the case that God's intellect is different from ours (i.e., that God's intellect is prior to the things conceived by it while ours is posterior) for then, they 'could not agree... in anything except the name' (1p17s; G/II/63; C/I/427). Such consequence, i.e., "the impossibility of admitting anything but a metaphorical conformity between the divine intellect and the human intellect, [will force us] to give up every possible analogy between God and man. Thus, we will not be able to say anything at all about God" (Koyré, translated in Marrama, 2014: 101). Additionally, as Mogens Lærke points out (2017: 25), this consequence is in tension with 2p11c where Spinoza says that "the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God".¹²¹

But how are formal essences relevant here? Well, in the scholium Spinoza brings up another absurdity that follows from the idea that God's intellect is part of its essence, as he argues that this would mean that "the truth and formal essence of things is what it is *because it exists objectively in that way in God's intellect*" (1p17s, emphasis added), meaning that God first had the idea of things and then created them, or that things are the way they are because of the idea of them in God's mind. There are numerous problems with this consequence for Spinoza's metaphysics. To begin with, it seems to

¹²¹ Some scholars read this scholium straightforwardly, taking Spinoza to be arguing that indeed, God's intellect must be completely different than our own. I believe the textual evidence is pretty clearly in favor of the *reductio* reading. As will be discussed shortly, I also believe that the naïve, straightforward reading results in consequences which are particularly problematic for the issue of formal essences. For examples of the naïve reading see, e.g., Lloyd, 1990; Games, 2012. Martin, 2008 is taken by Lærke, 2017 and Marrama, 2014 to also endorse the naïve reading. Yet, Martin discusses a different part of 1p17s as straightforward, namely, the part where Spinoza argues that there is a shared essence of Man. I think that on this specific point, Martin is correct, and I will argue for this point in length.

paint a picture very close to the Leibnizian one, where in God’s mind there are ideas, or concepts, of all possible things, from which God *chooses*, according to some principle (e.g., the principle of the best), which world to create.¹²² Obviously, Spinoza’s necessitarian metaphysics where everything follows necessarily from God’s nature is in stark contrast to the Leibnizian picture (1a3; 1p16&d; 1p17&d).¹²³ Additionally, and perhaps more straightforwardly, to argue that formal essences are caused by their ideas is in tension with Spinoza’s parallelism and the causal barrier between attributes (1p10; 2p6).¹²⁴ For formal essences to be caused by ideas they would also have to be ideas, since “the modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes...” (2p6). Yet, there is no reason to think that essences of, say, extended things, are ideas (for the exact same reason mentioned above).¹²⁵ Later I will defend the claim that a body’s formal essence is its *ratio of motion and rest*, which is clearly *not* an idea, but an extended mode. Even before I do that, it seems clear that formal essences are things, not merely ideas of things, and thus cannot exist due to their objective reality in God’s infinite intellect.¹²⁶ Thus, on the face of it, 1p17s does not reveal much about formal essences, and Spinoza seems to be making a completely different point when he brings up the notion of a formal essence.¹²⁷

Importantly though, the fact that formal essences are not ideas in God’s intellect in virtue of which things exist or are the way they are does not, by itself, mean that formal essences are not directly caused by God, or are not infinite and eternal modes which follow from God’s essence, and from

¹²² See Leibniz, *Monadology*, §§53-55.

¹²³ See Lloyd, 1990; Newlands 2023 on this point exactly, specifically about the impossibility of non-actual infinite modes existing in God’s mind prior to their “creation”. There are other issues with this idea of God’s choice, namely, Spinoza’s rejection of an anthropomorphic account of God and his view that God thoughts and actions are one and the same, or at least simultaneous (2p6c, see also 1p33, 2p7). Cf. Donagan, 1988: 81.

¹²⁴ See also Della Rocca 2002. Cf. Wolfson, 1962, Vol. 1 p. 350.

¹²⁵ See also CM/I/1/2; G/I/238; C/I/304-5 where Spinoza argues regarding essences, that “a thing that is conceived clearly and distinctly *or* truly outside the intellect is something different from the idea” and *TdIE* §33 where he explicitly distinguishes between the objective content of an idea, and its formal essence as a mode of thinking. Ideas, of course, also have formal essences, as all modes do, but the formal essence of things is clearly not their idea, i.e., objective content.

¹²⁶ This point becomes even clearer after reading 2p8, which I will do shortly.

¹²⁷ 1p17s is crucial for the claim that formal essences are kind-essences, and that they are shared among singulars. I will discuss this part of the scholium when arguing that formal essences are shared *ratios*.

God's essence alone. Thus, Mogens Lærke is right to argue that in 1p17s "Spinoza stresses that formal essences are not ideas in the divine intellect, but that they pertain to the modes of the attributes, modes of which the ideas in the intellect of God are only representations" (Lærke, 2017: 27). Yet he might be too quick to conclude that "Spinoza does not introduce the notion of formal essence in order to posit a separate domain of [infinite and eternal] essences" (Lærke, 2017: 27). Lærke seems to think about this "separate domain of essences" as a domain of possibilities, "a heaven of forms", or a "transcendentalist version of Platonism" which Spinoza actually aims to reject (Lærke, 2017: 28).¹²⁸ Yet, as I argue throughout this chapter, while Spinoza does object to the idea of *transcendental* Platonism, his metaphysics does leave room for fully actual and eternally existing formal essences, understood as infinite modes. In fact, as already suggested, the fact that formal essences are infinite, eternal, universal-like, exist prior to the things of which they are essences, and (partly) cause finite things, might be *the primary reason* Spinoza posited infinite modes. In other words, it is this "separate domain of essences" which gives rise to, and explains the necessity of, the notion of infinite modes.

While 1p17s' argument as a whole should be read as a *reductio*, to make his point (that God's intellect is not part of God's essence for it cannot be different from ours) Spinoza says a few things which actually strengthens the main idea he is advancing, when read as genuine statements. Thus, Spinoza argues that "what is caused differs from the cause precisely in what it has from the cause..." (1p17s; G/II/63; C/I/427), and hence, it cannot be that God's intellect is the cause of our intellect, for then the two would be different. God's intellect, thus, is not part of God's nature, which is, in turn, the cause both of our intellect's existence and our essence (1p25).¹²⁹ Spinoza gives an example to illustrate this statement, explaining that "a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but

¹²⁸ See the literary review of this chapter.

¹²⁹ Admittedly, it is not entirely clear to me what Spinoza means by this statement, i.e., that the effect is different from the cause in what it has from it. Perhaps Spinoza is thinking of the principle of the identity of Indiscernibles, arguing that if an effect would not have been different from the cause in what it "gets" from it, it would not be a separate new thing? Whatever Spinoza might mean, since he uses this idea to support the *reductio* conclusion, it should be taken at face value.

not of his essence, for the latter *is an eternal truth*. Hence, they can *agree entirely according to their essence...* for this reason, if the existence of one perishes, the other's existence will not thereby perish. *But if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other's essence would also be destroyed*" (1p17s; G/II/63; C/I/427; emphasis added). I will discuss this example again when arguing that formal essences are shared kind-essences. Here, it should only be noted that what Spinoza is saying is that a thing's essence is an eternal truth which does not perish when an instantiation of it does. And so, from 1p17s as a whole we learn that formal essences are not mere ideas caused by God's infinite intellect. Rather, formal essences are actual existing things which, being eternally true, are caused by God's (mediated) nature rather than finite things and are shared by particulars, i.e., function as universals. According to this scholium, thus, it seems clear that formal essences are infinite modes.

The next passage where Spinoza brings up formal essences is 2p8. In this proposition, Spinoza argues that "the ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes" (2p8). What Spinoza means by this proposition is in dispute, yet it is relatively agreed upon that, in some way or another, Spinoza here extends 2p7 — his parallelism doctrine according to which the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things — by establishing that even ideas of non-existent things have correlates in each of the infinitely many attributes. Thus, Lærke explains that 2p8 goes to show that "ideas about modes that do not exist are still ideas *about something*" (Lærke, 2017: 28), and Della Rocca explains that "corresponding to the idea of a non-existing mode of extension *y* there is, according to Spinoza, the formal essence of *y*" (Della Rocca, 1996: 189 n. 38). Similarly, Kristin Primus argues that the parallelism of 2p8 is "between *ideas of eternally formally real essences* and the *eternally formally real essences*", for "even things that do not *now* exist as *enduring singular things* have eternally formally real essences..." (Primus, 2023: 271; emphasis added). I will further discuss this proposition when focusing on the exact

relationship between a formal essence, which is eternal and universal, and the actual essence of a particular, finite, durational, singular thing.¹³⁰ For now though, what is important for establishing that formal essences are infinite modes which exist prior to the singular things of which they are essences is that formal essences, contained in God's attributes, correspond to or provide the content of ideas of *non-existent* finite modes, whatever they may be.¹³¹ To be more explicit, the ideas of "singular things that do not exist" are ideas about those things' *formal essences*, about formal essences period. To use Thomas Ward's words, "when Spinoza says that when things do not exist with duration but nevertheless exist as comprehended in the attributes of God, he means that the [formal] essences of things exist as comprehended in the attributes of God" (Ward, 2011: 33). Thus, formal essences exist prior to, and regardless of, the existence of singular things of which they are essences, and they follow solely from God's attributes as infinite modes do.

Ward calls the modal status of formal essences "necessary_b with respect to essence", (Ward, 2011: 34-7). He relies on Spinoza's taxonomy of modal notions in CM I.3 where Spinoza distinguishes the necessity of God, whose essence involves existence (necessity_a), from the necessity of things, the essences of which do not involve existence (i.e., everything but God), as well as between things that are necessary with respect to their essence or with respect to their existence, "for these two are distinct in created things" (CM I.3).¹³² Being necessary_b with respect to essences means that the essence of the

¹³⁰ To anticipate, my interpretation of this relationship draws on Primus' but differs from it in an important respect. According to Primus, X's eternal formal essence is the same (content wise) as its durational actual essences but enjoys a different kind of existence. As I see it, since the formal essence is general and the singular thing is particular, singular things and their actual essences are not, as Martin 2008 suggests, copies of formal essences, and actual essence are neither, as Garrett, 2002 and Koistinen, 2009 suggest, realizations of formal essences. Rather, particular things participate in formal essences; Their actual essence is related to their durational existence, while the formal one to their existence "under a species of eternity". Of course, there is more to say about how the two essences are related and correspond (and I will in chapters 4 and 5), but at this point it is at least unnecessary to see them as expressing the same thing or relating to the same "it" in the same way.

¹³¹ That singular things are necessarily finite and exist durationally, is a point I'll argue for in the next chapter. To anticipate, though, 2D7 in conjuncture with 1p21d and 1p28 yields this conclusion.

¹³² Clearly, the passage from the CM should be read carefully as, e.g., Spinoza obviously objects to the idea of "creation" mentioned here. Still, though, it is also relatively clear and easy to agree upon that modes, in contrast to God, do not have essences which involve existence. Thus, whether created by, caused by, following from, or contained in God, the distinction between the two kinds of essences and ways of existing holds.

thing is necessary in virtue of its cause, which is, in turn, necessary_a, i.e., an essence which follows solely from God's nature. Formal essences which are "contained in God's attributes" (2p8) regardless of the durational existence of the things of which they are essences, fit this description, which is also the description Spinoza gives of infinite modes, following from God's absolute nature (1pp21-23). If so, 2p8 helps establish the fact that formal essences are not mere ideas, and that they are contained in God's attributes regardless of the finite modes of which they are essences. Since they exist non-durationally, they are infinite or eternal and are not subject to the causal chain of finite, durational things, but follow solely from God's attributes. As one may recall, infinite modes, whether immediate or mediate, "receive" their infinity and eternity from their cause, i.e., from the fact that they follow from the infinite and eternal nature of God or God's attributes (Newlands, 2023; Melamed, 2013).¹³³

2p40s2 also suggests that formal essences are infinite modes that are eternally true and enjoy an eternal and infinite existence. There Spinoza argues that the third and highest kind of knowledge, i.e., intuitive knowledge, "proceeds from the adequate idea of the formal essences of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essences of things" (2p40s2; G/II/122; C/I/478). Recall 5p29. There Spinoza argues that "whatever the mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the body's present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the *body's essence* under a species of eternity" (5p29; emphasis added). Spinoza further explains that conceiving the body's presence means conceiving its durational existence (5p29d), and he contrasts this kind of existence with the eternal existence of the body's *essence*.¹³⁴ This

¹³³ 2p8 may be read as only suggesting that formal essences in general are contained in the attribute and not that each and every one is by itself an infinite mode. I address this possible reading in the next section and argue against it that since formal essences are things that have formal reality they must each be, on their own, infinite modes.

¹³⁴ Cf. Costa, 2025: 133-8. Costa takes 5p29 as evidence that a particular finite body has eternal existence and in doing so he disregards the explicit mention of the body's eternal *essence*. This serves Costa as evidence that there is merely an aspectual difference between a thing's formal and actual essence, grounded in an aspectual difference in their durational or eternal existence. I argue against the second claim at length in chapter 4.

essence which we conceive under a species of eternity is “contained in God and [follows] from the necessity of the divine nature” just as infinite modes and, according to 2p40s2, *formal essences* do.¹³⁵

3.2 The *Infinity* of Formal Essences

Thus far, I have focused on providing textual evidence supporting the claim that Spinoza identifies formal essences with infinite modes, or at least that he takes formal essences to have the same kind of existence as infinite modes do, i.e., formally real, actual, eternal universal-like existence which follows solely from God’s attributes regardless of the existence of singular, durational things. In this section I will attempt to show further that each and every formal essence must be, in and of itself, a distinct infinite mode; I will explain what exactly it means that formal essences are *infinite*, how we should understand their infinity, and what role it plays in the view I am defending. To anticipate, I will argue that due to the characterization of formal essences as eternally true and formally real, and given Spinoza’s metaphysical constraints regarding what actually exists (1ax1), formal essences cannot be anything but infinite modes.¹³⁶ Yet, I will also argue that their infinity *per se* is the least significant thing about them.

¹³⁵ In chapter 5 I will explicitly argue that the formal essence and the actual essence of a thing are necessarily different, since (i) formal essences are general and shared among many while actual essences are unique, and (ii) actual essences necessarily involve durational existence, while formal essences follow solely from God’s nature and are thus eternal and exist regardless of time. For now, in order to make the point that formal essences are infinite modes their relation to actual essences is of secondary importance. Cf. Wilson who claims that non-durational existence, i.e., the very nature of existence (2p45), could be identified with actual rather than formal essences (Wilson, 1999: 172). By arguing this, Wilson, who holds a Platonic reading of Spinoza’s metaphysics, seems to identify formal and actual essences (as most scholars who discuss Spinoza’s notion of formal essence do).

There is a question regarding whether the things conceived through intuition and those conceived through reason (and the imagination) are the same things conceived in different ways, or whether they are completely different. To my mind, since formal essences are infinite and eternal and are not duplicated when instantiated by singular things (as they function as universals) it must be the case that the objects of knowledge are different. Cf. Primus 2023; Schmaltz, 1997: 215-16.

¹³⁶ In short, if formal essences are eternally true and infinite, they must be infinite modes, while there might be infinite modes which are not formal essences. 1def3, 1def5, and 1ax1 rule out any other metaphysical locus for such entities.

Before delving into the question of the infinity of formal essences, Spinoza's reason for insisting that they are eternally true should be explicitly mentioned. Viljanen offers a clear and illuminating explanation, arguing that it is necessary that these essences are eternal and that they do not come and go in and out of existence, for otherwise they will not be the objects of real knowledge and the world would not be completely intelligible as Spinoza takes it to be (Viljanen, 2015: 186).¹³⁷ Identifying formal essences with infinite modes "locates" these essences within Spinoza's metaphysical framework and supports their independent reality.¹³⁸ This point will become crucial once the universality of these essences is explicitly discussed. As hinted already and as I'll argue in section 4, formal essences are universal-like, yet they are not mind-dependent. Identifying these unique metaphysical entities with infinite modes and accounting for their "place" in Spinoza's ontological framework is crucial for understanding this feature of them, their relationship to the finite, as well as for having a better grip of Spinoza's ontology in general.

Yet what does it mean that formal essences are infinite? After all, formal essences, being that they express *a nature*, say triangularity, express *a way* of being extended. Put differently, as a particular *ratio* of motion and rest, formal essences are in fact *a determination* of the immediate infinite mode of extension (i.e., of motion and rest),¹³⁹ and so it seems much more reasonable and indeed more intuitive to think of formal essences as finite rather than infinite. While this might be the case, there is both a good reason as well as a plausible way to accept their infinity.

¹³⁷ See Viljanen, 2011: 9-11 for more on this topic.

¹³⁸ And, as mentioned, this might be the primary reason Spinoza posits infinite modes to begin with.

¹³⁹ See Ep. 50. Two methodological points should be made here. The first is that the account, even though discussed under the attribute of extension, is attribute neutral, i.e., a parallel essence exists under each and every one of the infinity of attributes. Whether these essences are different expressions of numerically one entity, or whether there is a genuine plurality of parallel essences, depends on how one thinks of the distinction among attributes (i.e., as real or merely a distinction of reason). I lean toward a pluralist view of attributes, but cannot defend the view here. Second, as will become apparent shortly, the discussion of geometrical figures is, to a great extent, an analogy, or an approximation. For Spinoza, everything, formal essences included, expresses God *power*, and thus *ratios* of motion and rest should also be understood as power structures. While these may express a particular shape, they cannot be reduced to mathematical expressions or "frozen" shapes.

Kristin Primus takes an important first step toward accounting for the infinity of formal essences. Her discussion, though, should be read with a subtle, yet important caveat. As will become apparent shortly, Primus talks about formal essences as if they were geometrical figures, and she justifies this choice by Spinoza's own turn to geometrical figures as explanatory aids (in e.g., 2p8c; 1p17s).¹⁴⁰ I myself will also discuss Euclidean figures as a way of understanding the ontological status of formal essences. Yet, according to the view I am promoting (which Primus seems to be on board with) formal essences, as modes which follow from God's nature, express and modify God's power and thus should also be understood as power structures rather than static or "frozen" shapes.¹⁴¹ This is evident from Ep. 83 where Spinoza argues against Descartes who "defines matter badly by extension" (Ep. 83; G/IV/334; C/II/487). According to Descartes, "the nature of matter, or body... consists... simply in being something which extends in length, breadth, and depth" (*principles*/II/§4; CSM/I/224).¹⁴² Descartes further argues that motion is not "the action which is understood to exist in the body which produces or arrests the motion" (*principles*/II/§27; CSM/I/234), but that "God is the primary cause of motion" (*principles*/II/§36; CSM/I/240). Contrary to this characterization of extension, since for Spinoza extension is an attribute of God, i.e., God's essence, it is identified with God's power (1p34), and thus is innately dynamic, and productive, rather than static. As Ep. 83 makes clear, this is a crucial point which Spinoza explicitly insists on and thus should not be taken lightly. Extension, and so extended *bodies*, are not (or not only) geometrical figures.¹⁴³ The significance of this point will be clearer as the discussion unfolds. Thus it should be kept in mind that the role geometrical shapes play from now on should be considered as an analogy for a much richer structure.

¹⁴⁰ See primus, 2019: 11.

¹⁴¹ I will elaborate on this point further in the next section, when the content of formal essences is more explicitly discussed.

¹⁴² In §11, §12, and §21, among other places, Descartes uses extension and matter, or space, interchangeably, and attributes to the corporal substance, or to extension, the exact same static qualities of depth, length, and breadth. Thus, Descartes wrongfully understands matter in terms of extension, and he understands extension merely in dimensional, non-dynamic, terms.

¹⁴³ See also Peterman 2012, 2015; Viljanen, 2011.

Back to Primus' account. According to Primus, there are, for Spinoza, two ways to “not be a finite thing” – being indefinite (as the infinite individual of 2p13lem7s is) and being infinite in a “non-indefinite way” which pertains to the formal reality of the thing in question (Primus, 2023b: 445). A cube, for example, which exists durationally, is limited by other extended things, i.e., everything which is not within the boundaries of the cube, meaning that “it can be thought of as lacking some reality that it is consistent with its nature to have [e.g., it can be] bigger [or] endured for longer”. The eternal formal essence *cube*, on the other hand, is not lacking in the same way: it is a true and immutable nature in virtue of which it is in fact cubic. A finite thing, thus, is limited in the sense that its *existence* is limited and determined by something else (Primus, 2023b: 445-6, by 1p8s1). Yet, the nature of a cube, i.e., its formal essence, is not limited by anything in this particular way. The formal essence “cube” is entirely and completely real; it is limited by, say, a triangle in the sense that it does not have certain properties which triangles do, for it is only a cube. This kind of limitation, though, does not limit the *reality of the essence* of the cube in a way that make it finite or externally determined, and it does not make it less true or real either. In Primus' own words, a formal essence “is infinite in the sense that it, like extension, cannot be conceived as lacking some formal reality that it could have... The essence *cube* can be conceived as an infinite and eternal mode. The same goes for the essence of the human body, the essence of a human mind” (Primus, 2023b: 445-6).¹⁴⁴

This sounds right. An essence, given that it expresses what constitutes the thing and makes it the kind of thing that it is is in this sense complete and does not lack any formal reality. While a cube is not a triangle, and a human is not a horse, the limitations set on these natures are internal, rather than external, and necessary for the existence of the nature as such. Still, one might insist, *a* formal

¹⁴⁴ See Primus, 2019 for an argument for why infinite modes, which she takes formal essences to be, should be thought of as “true and immutable nature.” See Yovel, 1991 for a related yet somewhat different way of understanding the infinity of infinite modes in general. See also Martineau who argues quite similarly that “the essences of finite things are *not* finite, but still infinite: it is the *existence* of the things that is finite... no essence which we may define gives us more than the inner nature of a thing—its connotation without denotation” (Martineau, 1883: 203).

essence expresses *a particular nature*, hence it is, at least in some sense, finite.¹⁴⁵ Notwithstanding their eternality and truthfulness, formal essences have a clear and undeniable finite aspect to them, thus they cannot be *infinite* modes. A possible way out of this mess could be to think about formal essences along the lines of realist interpretations of Euclidian space, i.e., to take formal essences to be analogous to formally real geometrical figures which are eternal yet finite.¹⁴⁶ Put very broadly, according to such readings, Euclid’s geometrical figures may be considered as eternally true, *contained* within geometrical space, and as having mind-independent formal reality. Cubes, spheres, and triangles are all real and finite ways to dissect or limit space, or true ways in which space can be limited. According to this reading, each geometrical figure is, in and of itself, ontologically intermediate: it is “located” between the completely independent Platonic forms and the mutable sensible thing.¹⁴⁷ Thus, it is not an independent entity, yet it is prior to the mutable sensible objects and draws its actuality from the thing within which it is contained. Turning to Euclid is philosophically motivated by Spinoza’s (and other Early Modern philosophers) reliance on Euclid’s deductive method in his philosophical writing and thinking (Garrett, 2025),¹⁴⁸ and by the mathematization of nature characteristic of Early Modern thinkers such as Descartes, Galileo, Gassendi, Hobbes, and Spinoza himself, which is a form of mathematical realism best understood in geometrical terms (Homan, 2021: 6-15). Thus, it is tempting,

¹⁴⁵ It should be clear that by arguing in this way I do not mean to suggest that I take formal essences to correspond to singular things and express their unique essence, but only that each essence expresses a nature, or kind, and thus is particular from the eternal perspective. In contrast to my view, Primus does argue that formal essences are unique, and I will discuss the issues this idea gives rise to later on.

¹⁴⁶ Crucially, again, this is an analogy, a *theoretical tool* to better illustrate a possible ontological status of formal essences.

¹⁴⁷ This is an oversimplification of the issue, as there is a crucial on-going debate regarding the status of the construction of such figures in the *Elements*. For our purposes, though, it is enough to “locate” specific forms within the geometrical space as finite, formally real, not-entirely-independent-entities. See Harari, 2003; Blåsjö, 2021; Sattler, 2025: 17; Proclus, 1970: 4 for further discussions. Staller’s illuminating discussion is about Plato and his account of the ontology of mathematical entities, yet the reference to Proclus and Euclid suggests that she take this sort of reading of Plato to fit the spirit of Euclidian realism. For a non-realist interpretation see Rovetto, 2011. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, my reading is closer to the classic Platonic one, according to which formal essences are not “in between” entities, but are completely independent of the finite, mutable, realm.

¹⁴⁸ See also Bennett’s remark that “being a child of his time, Spinoza... assumed space to be Euclidean...” (Bennett, 1984: §21).

and to a great extent reasonable, to solve the issue of the ontology of formal essences by evoking such framework and comparing them with Euclidean figures.

Thinking about formal essences in light of this framework means taking them to be finite, for they are, as Euclid's geometrical figures, limitations or determinations (1D2; Ep. 50) of the mediate infinite mode "the face of the whole universe" (Ep. 64; G/IV/278; C/II/439).¹⁴⁹ Additionally, since these essences are contained in an infinite mode which follows directly from God's nature, they are also attributed eternal existence, and formal, mind-independent reality which is prior to, and is indifferent to, the finite things which instantiate them.¹⁵⁰ What's more, this description seem to be in accordance with Spinoza's language in 2p8, where he argues that formal essences are "comprehended" in the attribute, and with the example he provides for such claim in 2p8s, which is defiantly geometrical.¹⁵¹

As tempting as this may sound, Spinoza's metaphysical commitments are in tension with such reading, and for quite obvious reasons. According to Spinoza, everything that exists is either a substance or a mode (1D3, 1D5, 1A1). Since formal essences are clearly not substances (1p14), they must be, in order to be *something* (which has formal reality), modes, yet according to the Euclidean picture proposed here, they aren't.¹⁵² If we insist, as we should, that formal essences are real things, we are back to square one. As was already discussed, Spinoza insists that from an infinite cause a finite effect simply cannot follow (1p28d) and he is explicitly clear that the only things which follow solely from God's nature (either immediately or mediately) are infinite modes (1pp21-23). Thus, if formal

¹⁴⁹ Thus they express the totality of ways of being extended, and in this sense fit nicely with the reading according to which the face of the whole universe is the *form* of extended nature, rather than the totality of extended things.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Homan, who takes Spinoza to accept geometrical realism yet takes formal essences to only exist as, or through, *their instantiations*. I will discuss this possibility and argue against it in the next section.

¹⁵¹ "In a circle there are contained infinitely many rectangles which are equal to one another. Nevertheless, none of them can be said to exist except insofar as the circle exists..." (2p8s).

¹⁵² One could argue that they are not genuine things, of course. Yet this would also mean that they are not really essences and to not be genuine things is in tension with everything I have argued thus far regarding *ratios*, as well as formal essences. Since the crux of the issue here is these essences' infinity, it seems like a too radical, unnecessary, and irrelevant path to take in order to solve the issue.

essences are contained in the mediate infinite mode and follow solely from God's nature in the way just described, and if they do really possess formal reality and are actual mind-independent things, they must be modes, and necessarily infinite modes, whether we like it or not.

It is important to remember that the Euclid analogy is, well, an analogy. And as Spinoza himself admits, it is not a completely adequate one.¹⁵³ Thus, as mentioned above, while there is merit to thinking about formal essences along these lines, we should not be so quick to take the idea that they are geometrical figures at face value, and should not immediately think of them as limitations or determinations that are finite. What's more, thinking more deeply of the place formal essences occupy in Spinoza's metaphysical picture and the causal relations that obtain in it might lend further support for their infinity. Since formal essences are mediations of God's nature, they are nothing but modified expressions of God's power (1p34), or a particular way in which God eternally expresses its infinite causal power.¹⁵⁴ As such, they could be conceptualized as expressions of the one infinitely expressed power of God, the very same one which is also expressed by, say, the more general infinite mode of motion and rest.

This understanding of infinity is, of course, still vulnerable to criticism. Yet importantly, that formal essences are *infinite* does not play a crucial role in the picture I am promoting here. While I think there is no way around accepting their infinity, the exact way in which they are infinite is of secondary importance. What is crucial is that formal essences are infinite modes which follow solely from God's essence.¹⁵⁵ They are completely real, true and immutable natures, of things that might, and might not, durationally exist. These essences' reality (and perfection) is independent of, and is

¹⁵³ Spinoza explains that he "will, of course, not be able to give [an example] which adequately explains [how formal essences of non-existent singulars are contained in the attribute] since it is unique" (2p8s).

¹⁵⁴ In 2p45s Spinoza argues that singular things enjoy "the very nature of existence" insofar as they are in God, and he refers to 1p24c for further explanations on this point. In 1p24c Spinoza argues that God is the sole reason for the existence and persistence of things, which are caused by his nature, i.e., power, alone. If we understand singular things "insofar as they are in God" as those things' formal essences (see the discussion I held regarding 2p8, and Wilson, 1999: 169) we could infer that what the formal essences are is a continued expression of God's infinite power.

¹⁵⁵ See also Martin, 2008: 500-3. Cf. See Gueroult, 1974.

indifferent to, the existence of their instantiations; they function as universals (*TdIE* §101) and support Spinoza's thesis of complete intelligibility.¹⁵⁶ With their metaphysical and modal status at hand, it is now time to examine what formal essences are with regards to their content and how they relate to the finite things of which they are essences.

3.3 As Shared *Ratios of Motion and Rest*¹⁵⁷

Thus far, I have argued that formal essences are infinite modes, and thus that they actually exist in God's attributes and are indifferent to the existence of the finite things of which they are essences.¹⁵⁸ Here I wish to provide further content to my reading and to argue that formal essences are shared kind-essences, expressing a certain *ratio of motion and rest* understood as a power structure, and that due to their unique metaphysical characteristics they do not stand in a one-to-one relationship with singular things and their actual essences.

Identifying a thing's formal essence with its *ratio* is not unique to my view and is in fact held by many scholars who attempt to articulate the content of such essences.¹⁵⁹ Thus, e.g., Lærke argues that in order to understand what the formal essence "looks like", or what its content is, we need to understand Spinoza's notion of 'form' as laid out in the physical digression (Lærke, 2017:

¹⁵⁶ See n. 113 for a clarification of the statement that formal essences *function* as universals.

¹⁵⁷ It should be noted that everything that is said regarding the formal essences of extended bodies holds for minds as well. I restrict the discussion to the extended realm for reasons of clarity and brevity. The source of this choice may be traced back to the discussion of individuals, which Spinoza himself holds in the physical digression, yet in order to say something about the mind (2p13s). What is the equivalent of this physical structure that holds between ideas and which individuates the mind is a good question, yet even though it is difficult to think of, or imagine, I do not think it is philosophically problematic. Thus, again, whatever is said about the formal essence of the body should be taken to be equivalent to the formal essence of the mind. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I will discuss the implications of this idea regarding identity and personality questions.

¹⁵⁸ More accurately, I haven't said much about the reality of singular, finite things. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, whether these exist or not is a question I will deal with later on, yet it is metaphysically and epistemically secondary to the question of the reality of the infinite.

¹⁵⁹ There is also precedence for thinking of essences in Spinoza as expressing a kind-essence, e.g., Martin, 2008; Soyarslan, 2016; Hübner, 2017. I will explain how my view differs from these other accounts.

32).¹⁶⁰ Kristin Primus argues that a thing’s formal essence is a geometrical figure (Primus, 2023b: 450-1), which she identifies with *ratio* (Primus, 2023b: 452). Nadler explains that “the formal essence of any body specifies in conceptual terms only a quantity of extension distinguished by a certain proportion of motion and rest (what Spinoza calls ‘a fixed pattern of motion and rest’)” (Nadler, 2012: 234). Sebastian Bender argues that “Spinoza identifies the nature of a singular body—that is, its essence—with a particular ‘pattern [*ratio*] of motion and rest’” (Bender, 2022: 300).¹⁶¹ It should come as no surprise at this point that where my reading diverges from these is in the way they understand *ratios*, namely, *as unique* rather than general or shared forms.

Taking *ratios* to be unique is not, as I argued extensively in Chapter 2, strongly grounded in Spinoza’s text, and further problems arise when thinking of unique *ratios* specifically as formal essences. Take Lærke’s account for example. Lærke says very little about the nature of forms, claiming only that “the form of a given mode is the structure of the mode... the formal essence is the aspect of the essence of a thing that relates to this form. This invariable and eternal form is... contained in the attributes as existent or as non-existent...” (Lærke, 2017: 32). Lærke argues that the content of the ideas of formal essences of non-existent modes consists of the determinations of those things that brought about the non-existence of the singular thing in question; “it is *in virtue* of this *negative delineation* of non-existent things within the attributes that formal essences of things can be said to be ‘contained’ in the attributes...” (Lærke, 2016: 273; emphasis added).

¹⁶⁰ Lærke points out that this content is what we grasp of the formal essence “be it as existing or not existing” (Lærke, 2017: 32). I completely agree with Lærke that the content of a formal essence is determined whether the thing of which it is an essence durationally exists or not. Yet, as I’ll discuss next, his account of the content of a formal essence that does not exist is, I believe, highly implausible. This, I take it, is due to the identification of *ratios* with unique essences, which in addition to everything that was said in Chapter 2, creates a problematic picture regarding formal essences and their relationship to singular things that do not exist.

¹⁶¹ Bender does not discuss the question of formal vs. actual essences. He claims that his account of the essences of singular things holds for both, regardless of whether they are distinct or not. I will discuss his view in Chapter 4, as he draws a distinction between a singular thing and its essence, arguing that the latter cannot make the former fully conceivable. I agree with Bender that a thing’s *formal essence* cannot make a singular thing fully conceivable, but I think that it is exactly a thing’s *actual essence* which is identical to it, that makes it what it is.

What Lærke seems to be saying is that the idea of a non-existent essence is not really, or strictly, the idea of the *essence*, for, and Spinoza is explicit about this, the essence itself cannot express what brings about the non-existence of the thing (3p4).¹⁶² Yet Lærke also argues that the essence of the thing is unique to it, and thus perishes when the thing does (2D2), which means either that his analysis is in tension with what Spinoza says in 2p8, i.e., that the idea of the non-existent thing is equivalent to the existence of its *formal essence* (meaning that it is an idea relevant to the thing, but not because it is an idea of the thing's essence); or that he takes the idea of the essence to include what brings about its non-existence, which is in tension with 3p4. Put simply, Lærke's account seems to imply that while there is in God's mind an adequate idea of a non-existent human body (say, of the late Spinoza) it cannot be the idea of the *formal essence* of that body (i.e., of that body's *ratio* or "invariable form"), contrary to what Lærke suggests.¹⁶³ Yet, if one thinks of the formal essence of a particular thing as an independent entity which is unaffected by the thing's existence, there is no problem in arguing that there is in God's mind (i) an idea of a non-existent *singular thing*, the content of which includes the causes of its non-existence, and also (ii) an idea of an infinite and eternal formal essence of that thing, which corresponds to (iii) the formal essence as it is contained in the attribute, as 2p8 suggests.

The ambiguity around 2p8 calls for a more refined interpretation. Spinoza says in 2p8 that the ideas of things that do not exist are comprehended in God's infinite intellect *in the same way* as the formal essence of those things are. The nature of the relationship between the formal essences and the singular thing Spinoza describes here is not entirely clear, so much so that it is unclear what the idea in question is even of. Recall, for example, Primus' reading according to which the

¹⁶² Things that are of contrary nature cannot be in a singular thing exactly *because* their essence cannot exist. A circular triangle, e.g., cannot exist, either durationally or eternally. Yet the non-existent singular things Spinoza discuss in 2p8, which do have formal essences that are contained in God's attributes, are not impossibilities, thus, in light of 1p11d2, their non-existence should be explained in a way that *does not* involve their essence.

¹⁶³ See Costa, 2025: 125-7 for more issues with Lærke's interpretation.

relationship described in 2p8 is “between *ideas of eternally formally real essences* and the eternally formally real essences” (Primus, 2023: 271; emphasis added). According to Primus, thus, the “idea of a non-existent singular thing” is not really about a singular thing at all.¹⁶⁴ As also mentioned earlier, since formal essences are mediate infinite modes, they exist prior to, and are indifferent to, the singular things of which they are essences (and are infinite and eternal). Thus, it seems that the form or *ratio* a thing has should be unaffected (in terms of its content and its existence) by the singular thing which possess this form.¹⁶⁵

Primus’ account of what formal essences consist of is of some help here, as she further unpacks the meaning of *form*. According to Primus, a thing’s formal essence is a geometrical figure (Primus, 2023b: 450-1), which she identifies with *ratio* (Primus, 2023b: 452). As a formal essence which exists eternally and infinitely, “the *ratio*... is not conceived as a pattern that persists through changes in enduring finite parts of a body but is instead conceived as an eternal truth” (Primus, 2023b: 453). I agree with Primus on this point;¹⁶⁶ The formal essence of a cube (or being cubic) seems to be eternally true and to not be affected by the existence or non-existence of any particular enduring cube.

Somewhat surprisingly (considering her focus on geometrical figures), Primus takes *ratios* to be unique. Each body has its own particular *ratio* which, according to Primus, enjoys an infinite and eternal, as well as a finite and enduring, existence. Primus does bring up the issue of kind shared essences and explains that “the essences of particular human beings are... essences of particular bodies. [Yet] if the same set of properties of extension is part of each one of these

¹⁶⁴ In the next chapter I will defend a view according to which singular things necessarily exist durationally, i.e., the phrase “singular things that do not exist” must refer to something other than finite and determinate modes themselves.

¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that the entire discussion, in which I argued that the modal status of formal essences is necessarily actually existent, and that they have the metaphysical status of infinite and eternal modes, is held without a mention of the existence of finite things. This does not yet mean that forms is a shared kind-essence, but only that there is no reason to think of them as unique essence corresponding to singular things which do, or do not, durationally exist.

¹⁶⁶ But I disagree that *ratios* are best thought of as geometrical figures. I provide an alternative account in the following sub-section.

[particular human bodies] essences, then that set of properties is the kind-essence *human body*” (Primus, 2023b: 452 n.22). According to Primus, this kind-essence can be conceived as enduring if manifested in a particular human body, or as infinite and eternal when considered as an infinite mode (as all essences under Primus’ account could). While this view seems to be on the right track, it remains unclear what kind of similarity holds between the different particular cases of kind-essences, what relationship holds between the different particular bodies which share this essence, and what does it mean exactly that the same essence can enjoy these two distinct kinds of reality.¹⁶⁷ It also remains unclear whether these kind-essences are real or whether they are merely mind-dependent.¹⁶⁸ To be more exact, Primus argues that kind-essences are parts of infinite and eternal *ratios*, which she takes to be true and immutable natures, meaning that they too should be real and enjoy eternal existence. Yet, on the other hand, she grounds the uniqueness of these *ratios* on 2D2 where Spinoza argues essences and the things of which they are essences are co-dependent. If this is the case, it cannot be that *within* a particular and unique essence there is a real shared kind-essence which should both survive the destruction of a particular enduring individual and perish with it. The view, thus, seem to bring forth internal tensions which arise, at least partly, from taking formal essences, and the *ratios* they express, to be unique.

Due to these complications and the conclusions I reached in chapter 2 with regard to the work *ratios* are supposed to do for Spinoza, I think it is safe to say that, at minimum, thinking about formal essences as unique *ratios* is both problematic and unnecessary. There is, as I will now

¹⁶⁷ See, e.g., Primus’ claim that “there is just *one* order of essences... conceived as formally real *sub specie durationis*, the order is expressed as a transitive casual series of enduring things. Conceived as formally real *sub specie aeternitatis*, the order is expressed as an immutable order of eternal truths...” (Primus, 2023b: 450). As I will argue in the next chapter, singular things are constituted relationally, through their causal interactions, and as I have argued here (and as Primus agrees) formal eternal essences which follow from God’s absolute power are not externally determined. It is thus unclear how exactly these two extremely different kinds of existence and causal chains could yield “the same order of essences”.

¹⁶⁸ On this see also Hübner, 2015 and Newlands, 2015 according to which kind-essences are beings of reason born out of mere similarities. I’ll discuss Hübner’s view in the following section. Newlands take this to be evidence in favor of a strict nominalism in Spinoza, while Hübner takes this to mean that Spinoza rejects some universals but welcomes others.

show, substantial textual evidence to support the reading of formal essences as shared which, coupled with the idea that *ratios* determine a thing's kind, makes them straight-on kind-essences.

I argued above that 1p17s should be read as a *reductio* argument, but also that some parts of it should be read at face value, as such a reading supports the *reductio* conclusion. A particularly important such part for the matter at hand is the following,

“a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth. Hence, they can *agree entirely* according to their essence. But in existing they must differ. And for that reason, if the existence of one perishes, the other's existence will not thereby perish. But if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other's essence would also be destroyed” (1p17s; G/II/63; C/I/427; emphasis added).

What Spinoza says here quite explicitly is that two men share an essence. While a finite mode's existence is unique to it and caused (partly) by another finite mode, its essence is directly caused by God (i.e., it is an infinite mode) and is shared among other modes of the same kind.¹⁶⁹ Importantly, Spinoza insists that the essences of the two men can agree *entirely*, rather than be merely similar to one another. What this must mean and is crucial for the idea of a shared kind-essence, is that there is a genuine numerical identity among these essences, or that they are in fact one. For, if the essences were merely similar, and thus two numerically different essences, there should have been *some difference*

¹⁶⁹ There is, thus, an intersection of causal chains which cause a finite mode to exist. On the one hand, there is, as just mentioned, the infinite chain of finite modes bringing about the particular existence of a mode at a particular time and place (described in 1p28). On the other hand, the infinite and eternal formal essence causes the mode to be the kind of thing that it is, in this case, a human. See Curley, 1969; Watt, 1972; Garrett, 2018: 247; Matson, 1990: 87-8; Melamed, 2012: 191. Cf. Scribano according to whom there is, for Spinoza, an equivalence between causality and logical implication such that “what, within time, is a succession of before and after is, in the eternal dimension, a relation of implication outside of time” (Scribano, 2008: 44-5).

between them, given Spinoza's commitment to the principle of sufficient reason (1p11d2) and the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles (1p4).¹⁷⁰ If there were, though, it would have been unclear why, and in what way, the perishing of the one would make the other perish or in what sense the falsity of the one immediately entails the falsity of the other. For this to be the case it must be that between the two essences there is in fact complete identity, i.e., that they agree *entirely*.¹⁷¹

There are more than a few places in Spinoza's texts which support the existence of a human essence. In 4p35d, e.g., Spinoza argues that whatever follows from *human nature* must be understood through this nature alone and in 4p35c2 he argues that "when each man most seeks *his own advantage* for himself, then men are most useful *to one another*" (4p35cs; emphasis added). The corollary has a descriptive tone to it, suggesting that this is simply a state of affairs; when one acts such that she seeks her own advantage (i.e., acts from her own nature and according to the guidance of reason [4p35d]), she *in fact* seeks the advantage of others with whom she shares an essence (i.e., whose nature is also to act according to the guidance of reason).¹⁷² A few propositions earlier, in 4p30, Spinoza argues that "no thing can be evil through what it has in common with our nature...". He demonstrates this by arguing that "if a thing were evil for us through what it has in common with us, then the thing could

¹⁷⁰ On Spinoza's endorsement of these principles see Della Rocca, 2008: 4-12, 94; LeBuffe, 2026. For an insightful discussion regarding how, or if, indiscernibility can ground identity see Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2025; Elgin, 2024.

¹⁷¹ Recall also Melamed's claim that infinite modes are supposed to unite finite modes. Drawing on that idea, the unity in question must be a genuine one.

¹⁷² There seem to be a discrepancy here between the identity of the essence of the human body, which is given and shared by all human beings, and the identity of the human mind, which is dependent on whether one acts under the guidance of reason. Yet I do not think this means that there isn't such human essence in extension or that there are different identity conditions of essences under different attributes. It is important to remember that Spinoza's parallelism might not be as straight forward as it may first appear, and it is not entirely clear what exactly corresponds, under the attribute of thought, to "a *ratio* of motion and rest". Alternatively, since we necessarily have an inadequate idea of our "human body" as we experience it, it might be that the adequate one does in fact align with what Spinoza says about the mind in 4p35d. In other words, one may argue that to the same extent that a human does not act from the guidance of reason she also does not fully activate her *human* body and thus, to the extent that she is a finite mode, does not completely agree in nature with other human bodies. More on this point in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

I will discuss how this view fits with the *conatus* doctrine in Chapter 5. This is also the time to remind the reader that throughout Chapter 2 I argue for the existence of kind-essences in Spinoza, or more arcuately, for the fact that a thing's *ratio* determines its kind. The main focus here is thus to provide the metaphysical locus of these *ratios* and to show that they are the content of formal essences, which are mediate infinite modes, with all that this implies. Thus, even though this part of the chapter discusses the heart of the proposed reading, the chapter as a whole focus more on the metaphysical implications, background, and plausibility of the conclusions of Chapter 2.

diminish or restrain what it has in common with us. But (by IIP4) this is absurd” (4p30d; G/II/229). The reference to 3p4 is crucial here, for there Spinoza argues that “no thing can be destroyed except through an *external* cause”, (3p4; emphasis added) meaning that to the extent that two things agree in nature, they are not external to one another. If a thing destroys another in virtue of their shared nature, it actually destroys *its own nature*, which is in contradiction to 3p4. Thus, it seems that in fact, two things of the same kind (which share a nature) are two instances of the *same kind-essence*.

From 1p8s2 we can also infer that formal essences are shared kind-essences.¹⁷³ Spinoza argues that “the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined [and] no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals *since* [*quandoquidem*] it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined. For example, the definition of the triangle expresses nothing but the simple nature of the triangle, but not a certain number of triangles” (1p8s2; G/II/50; C/I/414-415; emphasis added). There are a few important things to pay attention to here. First, definitions are exclusively about essences. It is not only that a definition does not involve the existence or non-existence of a thing, but more deeply, it does not really concern *a* thing. Hence, the definition of a triangle really expresses triangularity, and the definition of a human expresses humanity. Notice that it is *due* to the fact that a definition is exclusively about essences that it does not express a number of individuals, meaning that the essence itself is something general in the sense that it does not disclose, and has nothing to do with, the number of things which have this essence (whether they exist or not is, again, a separate and additional question). And so, “if twenty men exist in Nature... it will not be enough... to show the cause of human nature in general...” (1p8s2; G/II/51; C/I/415).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ I discussed this passage Chapter 2 of this dissertation yet focused on different parts and aspects of it. Here my main focus is the relationship between a thing’s definition and its (formal) essence.

¹⁷⁴ The cause of human nature in general, just to clarify and concretize things a bit, should be the immediate infinite mode, say, motion and rest, from which a particular *ratio*, understood as a structure of power.

According to 1p8s2, then, Spinoza endorses a shared essence such as “human nature” which humanity’s definition expresses. This by itself does not seal the deal with regard to formal essences in particular being these shared natures, yet looking into Spinoza’s account of definitions might help. According to Spinoza, “the idea *or* definition of the thing expresses [its] efficient cause” (Ep. 60; G/IV/270; C/II/433). What this means, argues Della Rocca, is that “by seeing what brings x into existence, one will grasp what x is most fundamentally, what its nature is and thus what it can do...” (Della Rocca, 2008: 93). Since definitions express essences, a thing’s essence should be understood through its causes, as expressing a thing’s fundamental nature, and as accounting for what it can do.¹⁷⁵ This seems to be in line with what Spinoza says in 1p8s2. Yet, Della Rocca infers the uniqueness of essences from this thesis, since, he argues, if there are two things which exist, there must be a feature in virtue of which they differ (due to PII); that feature will be part of the explanation for their existence, i.e., part of their cause, which is built into their essence. Thus, for there to be two distinct things, they must have different essences (Della Rocca, 2008: 94).

Against such interpretations, I wish to draw attention to the fact that, again, 1p8s2 tells us that a definition, i.e., an essence, does *not* express any determinate thing, and surely cannot express its existence.¹⁷⁶ An existent thing, thus, requires an additional explanation for its actual being, one which is not grounded in its definition.¹⁷⁷ In *TdIE* Spinoza explains that a requirement which must be satisfied by a definition of a created thing is that it “will have to include the proximate cause” of the thing (*TdIE* §96; G/II/35; C/I/39),¹⁷⁸ and that in order to have true knowledge of things and nature as a

¹⁷⁵ Importantly, Della Rocca makes clear – “once x is caused to exist, it will undergo changes that are partly due to its own nature and partly due to other things...” (Della Rocca, 2008: 93). Cf. Bender, 2022: 296-7.

¹⁷⁶ Della Rocca himself acknowledges such tension (Della Rocca, 2008: 95). See also Hübner, 2015.

¹⁷⁷ I take existent to mean durationally existent and hence finite in this case, since Spinoza uses this discussion to contrast the definition of finite things from that of God (arguing that the latter’s *does* include its existence) and provides examples of durationally existing finite things (e.g., humans).

¹⁷⁸ The language of creation is problematic and may undermine just how much of this early discussion Spinoza holds can be attributed to his thought while writing the *Ethics*. Yet, I think it is safe to assume, at least with regards to this issue, that what in the *TdIE* is “created”, is in the *Ethics* a finite and determinate durationally existing thing.

whole we must proceed, “as far as possible, according to the series of causes...” (*TdIE* §99; G/II/36; C/I/41). Yet crucially, Spinoza also makes clear that “by the series of causes [he does not] understand the series of singular, changeable things, but only the series of *fixed and eternal things*... for [the singular thing’s] existence has no connection with their essences, *or*... is not an eternal truth” (*TdIE* §100; G/II/36; C/I/41; emphasis added).¹⁷⁹ If so, the cause which brings a singular thing into durational existence (another singular thing; 1p28) *is not* part of its definition.

Thus, the passages from the *TdIE* reinforce the distinction between a finite thing’s existence, which must be unique (and as I’ll argue in Chapter 5, identical with its actual essence), and its essence or nature, which is caused by *fixed and eternal things*. Since this is the case, recall, those essences too should be fixed and eternal, and they are, Spinoza reminds us, eternal truths. In sum, then, a thing’s definition, e.g., triangularity or humanity, is explained strictly by a series of eternal things, i.e., by God and its attributes, and the infinite modes which follow from them. In other words, the things which the definitions of finite things express are formal essences, understood as mediate infinite modes, expressing a fixed *ratio of motion and rest*. As such, the essences themselves (rather than, or in addition to, their finite instances) are numerically one; they are indifferent to whether and how many times they are instantiated and are metaphysically prior to the things which take part in them. While formal essences may be found in more than one singular thing, since these singulars can *entirely* agree in their nature according to Spinoza (4p18s), their instantiations are completely and genuinely united.

How exactly should we think of these shared *ratios* or *forms*? There are many different accounts in the literature, in addition to the geometrical one which was discussed here.¹⁸⁰ Considering everything

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Wilson, 1999: 115.

¹⁸⁰ Competing views regarding *ratios of motion and rest* are discussed in: Lin, 2005; Matheron 2020; Curley, 1988; Bennett, 1984; Deleuze, 1988; Garrett, 2018; Lachterman, 1977; Donagan, 1989; Della Rocca, 2006. Roughly, there are the readings that take Spinoza’s *ratio* to be a mathematical relation, and there are readings which understand it in a looser sense as more or less stable. Discussions regarding the stability question can be found in: Ep. 32; Newlands, 2018; Melamed, 2010; Peterman, 2015. According to my reading, *ratios* are essences which follow directly from God and enjoy an eternal existence. As such, they are stable and are not subject to the worries scholars often have about them.

that was argued for thus far, I suggest understanding Spinoza's use of *form* as a dynamic power structure, a system (i.e., *ratio*) of powers mutually influencing each other in a way that yields certain things, but not others, i.e., a particular nature.¹⁸¹ This structure, importantly, is nothing but God's own power or essence, modified in a certain way, which is infinitely expressed. It is one of the infinitely many things which follow from God's infinite nature, of which God is the immanent cause (1p16&c). By describing formal essences in this way, I follow Hübner and Viljanen in thinking of the causal relations obtaining between God and formal essences (and between formal essences and singular things) as Cartesian formal-causality. As Hübner puts it, according to this account "to 'cause' is for some essence to imply and produce certain properties, where the 'essence' of a thing is defined as a set of properties 1) necessary and sufficient for the 'actual' existence and conception of a thing, and 2) identical to a 'power'" (Hübner, 2015b: 212). Thus, formal essences follow directly from God's nature, *or* essence, *or* power; they are effects produced by God's essence alone, in virtue of which they actually exist and due to which they exhibit the properties that they do, i.e., they are modifications of causal power.

Viljanen explicitly ties this causal model to formal essences being *forms*, as he argues that this causal model "gestures toward the traditional view... according to which properties are caused by the substantial form from which they emanate" (Viljanen, 2011: 42). While overall I have a different account than Viljanen's of the relationship between a formal essence and an actual one (for him they have a one-to-one ratio), I agree that to the extent that a formal essence causes a singular thing, it causes it in this particular way.¹⁸² Thus, formal causality explains both how formal essences follow

¹⁸¹ See Lennox, 1976: 492-4. Lennox takes this structure to be identical to the *conatus*, i.e., a thing's actual essence, a point on which I disagree. Nonetheless, his account of what a *ratio* is and how it follows from God's power as a dynamic structure is useful.

¹⁸² This complex picture better captures, I think, what *ratios* actually are for Spinoza, i.e., essences of animated, living things such as human bodies and human minds. It also ties together Spinoza's account of ratios in 2p13D, his discussion of "very nature of existence" in 2p45s, and his remark regarding the essence of the body conceived "under a species of eternity" (5p25d) as all referring to the same thing, i.e., an eternal formal essence. Thinking about formal essences or ratios in this way seems to also lend them a kind of generality or an ability to instantiate. This seems to mean that formal essences are

from God's nature, and (as I discuss further in the following chapter) their role in causing singular, finite things.

To conclude, Spinoza seems to take formal essences to be single, infinite and eternal entities. These entities are formally real and are completely actual. They follow directly from God's absolute nature, and thus necessarily exist. They express, under the attribute of extension *ratios of motion and rest*, that is, the forms *of* extended reality, existing in and of themselves, in a non-durational way. Finally, while they might be considered as the formal causes of singular things, since these also have unique essences (2D2) which are identified with them (CM I.6; G/I/248; C/I/314),¹⁸³ the formal essences cannot stand in a one-to-one relation with singular things or their essences.

4. Formal Essences as Concrete Universals

The description given above of formal essences results in their characterization as “universal-*like*” entities, which, even though they may be instantiated in many, are in themselves single entities which have their own formal reality. In this section, I will address this characterization directly and suggest a possible way to conceptualize their universality as concrete universals. In a sense, the view I will defend here occupies a middle ground between strict nominalist and realist readings of Spinoza's metaphysics. Drawing on Karolina Hübner's constructivist view (Hübner, 2015) I will argue that formal essences are in themselves single entities and, though they may be found in many singulars, they only seem to be universals, when viewed from a finite perspective. I will explain how, though, Hübner's view, according to which these essences are mind-dependent, is wanting, and I will offer a competing (or, perhaps, completing) account that attributes to these essences real, mind-independent, existence.

what they are regardless of whether, how, or how many times they are instantiated. What a formal essence expresses, or is, seems to be the ratio itself, a structure, or shape, that has a true and immutable nature.

¹⁸³ See Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

The common understanding of Spinoza's treatment of universals has been, for the most part, that he is a strict nominalist who rejects universals and abstractions altogether. As already discussed in Chapter 2, this reading of Spinoza is held by scholars who take Spinoza's remarks against abstractions without qualification (e.g., 2p40s1, 2p49s[III.B.(iii)]; G/II/135; C/I/489, §99; G/II/36; C/I/41) to mean that he rejects abstractions and universals entirely.¹⁸⁴ While some scholars argue for the universality of certain aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics (e.g., of the attributes),¹⁸⁵ most completely reject his acceptance of anything similar to the idea of Aristotelian species essences and the reality of universal natures.¹⁸⁶ These readings, though, are in tension with the conclusions I reached in Chapter 2 regarding the work that *ratios* are supposed to do in Spinoza's metaphysics and in tension with the ontological picture and the account of formal essences I provided in this chapter.

A different approach to the matter is proposed by Hübner, according to whom these strict nominalist or anti-abstractionist approaches are in tension with Spinoza's frequent use of the term "human nature" and with other general concepts crucial for his metaphysics and epistemology (e.g., common notions, the laws of nature, or the idea of motion-and-rest).¹⁸⁷ Hübner argues that Spinoza does not reject universals altogether, but only those born out of the imagination. She argues that he is wary of the confusions they may lead to between particulars that share general qualities and between the universals' and particulars' metaphysical status (Hübner, 2021: 210). She further argues that for Spinoza "to exercise reason is to 'form universal notions' on the basis of necessarily adequate common notions and of 'adequate ideas of the properties of things'" (Hübner, 2021: 211). According to Hübner, these reason-generated "good" universals are what Spinoza calls "beings of reason" i.e., mind-

¹⁸⁴ See, e.g., Peterman, 2014; Newlands, 2015; Della Rocca, 2008: 60-2; Carriero, 1995; Melamed, 2013. Melamed argues that for Spinoza, modes are tropes, i.e., highly similar yet numerically distinct properties of things. Thinking of shared qualities in this way, though, still does not suffice for viewing formal essences as genuinely shared in such a way that results in a real metaphysical union.

¹⁸⁵ Istvan, 2023; Fullerton, 1894: 222-24.

¹⁸⁶ See, e.g., Wilson, 2006. Cf. Bennett, 1984 §69.4; Martin, 2008.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Wolfson, 1962: 124-5.

dependent, yet ontologically real beings grounded in true, highly similar properties of particular things (Hübner, 2015: 74).

With regard to essences in particular, Hübner argues that in addition to unique essences, there are for Spinoza, “more general (less-determined) *mind-dependent* species essences [which] possess objective reality alone” (Hübner, 2015: 59).¹⁸⁸ According to Hübner, at the basic ontological level of Spinoza’s metaphysics exist properties which make up particular things’ essences; these are trope-like properties, yet they actually resemble one another independently of any finite mind’s activity (Hübner, 2015: 73). On a second level, which is *dependent* on the first one, exist things which *only* have objective reality and are mind-dependent, kind-essences included. Thus, “finite minds spontaneously tend to compare the properties of particulars... and, as a result, come to think of these particulars as the same in some respect” (Hübner, 2015: 73). Importantly for our purposes, Hübner argues that these kind-essences *are not* part of the metaphysical constitution of any particular entity (Hübner, 2015: 84 n. 58).

Hübner, it should be mentioned, does not deny the reality of these essences, as she argues that for Spinoza there are genuinely two ways to be, i.e., formally and objectively (Hübner, 2015: 74). Still, it is clear that her overall view of universals cannot be extended to Spinoza’s account of shared kind-essences as described in this chapter, for several reasons.¹⁸⁹ To begin with, Hübner takes these shared

¹⁸⁸ Hübner uses the terminology of “species essences” while I refer to these shared formal essences as “kind-essences”. The main reason I do so is in order to distinguish myself from Spinoza’s use of the term “species” in (CM I.1; G/I/234-5; C/I/300-1). There Spinoza brings us species as an example of a being which does not exist outside the intellect, i.e., a being of reason. Spinoza does not argue that these are species *essences*, and in fact, just a few lines earlier he brings up “species” as an example of a mode of thinking which merely helps retain things. Thus, it is a term associated with memory and with what Hübner identified as “bad” universals. Yet, the essences Hübner has in mind, must be closer to my kind-essences than the mere aids of the imagination (see Hübner, 2015: 78, 85 n.70). Thus, to avoid confusion with Spinoza’s mention of species as beings of reason, from now on I will refer to her species essences as kind-essences and assume that our accounts aim at the same entity in Spinoza.

¹⁸⁹ Most of Hübner’s textual evidence for her view support the ideas that beings of reason arise through comparisons (CM I 5), that Spinoza associates universals with abstractions (4p62s, 2p49s), or that he takes similarity to be necessary for the formation of a universal (*TdIE* §76) (Hübner, 2015: 75), thus they do not directly ground the idea that for Spinoza species essences are mind-dependent beings of reason. The exception here is 2p48s, where Spinoza argues against the formal reality of the faculty of the will and explains that it is to a particular volition as man is to a particular man, suggesting that the species essence man is also a universal we form based on similarities between particulars. While this passage does support Hübner’s view regarding species essences in particular, I believe the evidence I have in favor of thinking of formal

essences to be ontologically dependent on finite minds. Yet, shared kind-essences as I have described them throughout the chapter are formal essences, i.e., mediate infinite modes which follow from God and its attributes alone (mediated by immediate infinite modes). As such, they are not part of the chain of finite causes, and are *things*, not mere ideas. Additionally, thinking of these essences as grounded in mere (high) similarity between trope-like properties is either in tension with the PII (for they cannot be completely similar yet non-identical) or with them being metaphysically united. Both these possibilities were given counter evidence in previous discussions of this chapter. Even more straightforwardly, though, there seems to be an argumentative gap in Hübner's account. Say that we do, in fact, form ideas of shared kind-essences by abstracting from particulars which possess the properties that make up such essences. This fact, regarding the *epistemological procedure* we undertake, does not seem to have any bearing on the actual nature of the thing of which we form the idea. That is to say, the fact that we – finite modes with finite minds – reach certain ideas by abstraction, does not immediately imply that these ideas represent mere abstractions or mind-dependent universals. In other words, I think Hübner is too quick to reach a metaphysical conclusion from an epistemological observation.¹⁹⁰

Thus, I believe Hübner is not entirely accurate when she claims that “the fact that Spinoza holds *only* particulars have formal reality... rule[s] out as a possible interpretation of his position *any sort of Platonism* on which species-essences... could have formal reality *independently* of particulars” (Hübner, 2015: 69; emphasis added). If we think of formal essences in the way I have throughout the chapter, the inference from the first clause of this quote to the second is unnecessary and misguided. The Platonic reading I have offered fits perfectly with the claim that for Spinoza only particular things

kind-essences as mind-independent entities (which I discussed throughout this chapter and will continue to interpret in what remains) is stronger.

¹⁹⁰ Hübner herself says that her discussion of universals essences born out of abstractions is not about essences *per se* but of our representation of them. This seems to leave open the question of whether there are shared essences.

have formal reality *and* that formal essences do exist in a so-called Platonic realm, to the extent that they are single infinite and eternal modes expressing a *ratio* which holds regardless of its finite instantiations.¹⁹¹

Spinoza, in fact, says exactly that when he characterizes infinite modes, and thus formal essences, as “universal-like”. In a passage already discussed in this chapter Spinoza argues regarding infinite modes that, “although these fixed and eternal things *are singular*, nevertheless, because of their presence everywhere... they will be *treated like universals*, or genera of the definitions of singular, changeable things...” (*TdIE* §101; G/II/37; C/I/41; emphasis added). In other words, infinite modes, which include formal essences, i.e., shared kind-essences, are in and of themselves single.¹⁹² Yet Spinoza makes clear that they are also pervasive and thus are thought of or treated (from our finite perspective) *as if* they were universals.¹⁹³

While it may seem that Spinoza is (or that I am) attempting to have the cake and eat it too, there is a precedence to such a view in the history of philosophy.¹⁹⁴ In contemporary philosophy G. F. Stout has argued that common qualities and relations, which are regarded by realists as indivisibly single, should be thought of as a general kind or class of characters. Shape, thus “stands for ‘all shapes as such’, and squareness stands for all square shapes as such” (Stout, 1971: 154-5). Importantly for

¹⁹¹As already mentioned, from 1p8s2 it seems quite clear that Spinoza is committed to real, mind-independent shared essences. If definitions may be shared by many, and if they express a true essence, they seem to capture something real. Importantly, in this passage Spinoza does not distinguish between the definition of a triangle and that of humans, suggesting that we should not be so quick to take the later to be the fruit of our rational thinking and nothing more. What’s more, it should be emphasized that good universals according to Hübner are not born out of the imagination, but reason. Thus, the definition of humanity and that of triangularity have the same epistemological source, and status, they are both true and adequate to the same degree.

¹⁹² Spinoza’s use of “singular” here cannot be the technical use of 2D7, for he would be plainly contradicting himself. It must be, thus, that what he means by singular here is merely a numerically one, single entity.

¹⁹³ See Giancotti, 1991; Yovel, 1991: 83-4. Yovel, who takes infinite modes to be laws of nature contrasts them with the Aristotelian “generic forms”. I see Yovel’s point and agree to an extent, yet I think that Spinoza’s use of “form” which a formal essence expresses, even though not naïvely Aristotelian, is more similar to the Aristotelian notion than scholars take it to be. See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹⁹⁴ I do not intend to give a comprehensive account of the views I will discuss here, but merely to show that the idea of single entities functioning as universals is an existent one in the history of philosophy and thus could be attributed to Spinoza, whose views regarding universals and shared natures is highly ambiguous.

our purposes, this general kind cannot be reduced to mere resemblance between particulars, and their similarity cannot constitute it either (Stout, 1971: 154), meaning that it (i.e., the kind) is an actual unity, which is over and above the particulars which share it. Stout describes it as a “complex unity” within which resemblance of two or more items of the same kind fall. He argues that “Resemblance *presupposes* a complex unity of the peculiar type which [is called] the distributive unity of a class... The unity of the class or kind as a whole is not a relation at all... the universal is a distributed unity” (Stout, 1971: 156). I take it that this complex unity and the way it unifies the particulars which fall under it as a class or kind is at least in congruence with Spinoza’s account as described above. According to Stout, the kind being what it is is a prerequisite for the resemblance of particulars which are of that kind, and is, in and of itself, a genuine unity.

Another account worth bringing up in more detail here is Armstrong’s “Immanent Realism” (Armstrong, 1978). According to Armstrong, “different particulars may be... identical in nature” (Armstrong, 1978: 109), meaning that “particulars which have the same property are *not wholly diverse*. They are partly *identical in nature* and so are partly *identical*” and thus, the world is *unified* (Armstrong, 1978: 112; emphasis added).¹⁹⁵ The similarity to Spinoza’s view as I described it is clear. Armstrong discusses genuine identity that holds between the natures of distinct things, and identity which is, in some way, in the world (meaning that it is not mind-dependent). Interestingly, he brings up the same issue Spinoza discusses in 1p17s with regard to shared formal essences, i.e., the status of a shared essence in the case where one instance of it perishes. Armstrong solves the apparent paradox by arguing that when, say, a man who shares a nature with another man dies, it is the identity between the two, and not the nature itself, which is destroyed, as properties or universals are not the sort of thing which could be destroyed (Armstrong, 1978: 111-12). While Armstrong’s solution is different

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Scotus’ account of shared natures mentioned in Chapter 2 of this dissertation according to which the shared essence of particulars, while indivisible, exists to a lesser degree than the particulars themselves.

from Spinoza's (who, recall, draws a distinction between a man's essence and its existence which have different causes), his characterization of the shared nature as a genuine unity which is not apt for temporal destruction is close to the Spinozistic characterization of formal essences as infinite modes.¹⁹⁶

It should be noted that Armstrong situates his account in contrast with a Platonic view according to which universals exist completely apart from particulars in a transcendent realm (Armstrong, 1978: 68). This seems, *prima facie*, to put pressure on my reading (if it is to be supported by Armstrong's view) which I described as a form of Platonism. But the fact of the matter is that it simply calls for important clarifications, namely, that Spinoza's formal essences are not transcendent, but are in God in (roughly) the same way as finite modes are, and that they are in and of themselves single entities. If the reality of any realm of existence is called into question in light of my view, it is the reality of the finite *and not* of the infinite and eternal essences which can be easily "located" within Spinoza's metaphysical picture.

Looking back to the history of philosophy, we may find views, or interpretations of them, which paint a similar picture to the one I have proposed here. In the first chapter of this dissertation, notwithstanding the deep and crucial differences between them, I used Aristotle's notion of form to argue that for Spinoza, the individuating quality, i.e., a thing's *ratio*, is only meant to account for the kind of thing that it is. Here Aristotle's theory of substantial forms may become helpful once more. As discussed in Chapter 2, Aristotle argues that a thing's form determines the kind of thing that it is, and that it could be shared by many (Met. Δ. 6. 1016b; Met. Z. 8. 1034a) and this seems to suggest that according to him, forms are universals. Yet Aristotle also argues that forms are substances (Met.

¹⁹⁶ See Armstrong's comment that his account "does not open the door to Realist excess. It is compatible with the recognition that not every predicate which applies to many particulars applies in virtue of a universal, and that painful and extensive enquiry is necessary to determine what the properties and relations of a particular are" (Armstrong, 1978: 109). Translated to Spinozistic epistemology, this statement draws the distinction between genuinely shared natures or essences, common notions or attributes, and mere similarities which we form via imagination, perhaps, between "good" and "bad" universals.

M. 4. 1079a), and that substances are not universals, for they cannot be predicated of many (Met. Z .13. 1038b).¹⁹⁷ To resolve this tension Cohen and Reeve argue that what Aristotle implies in Z.13 is that “the thing with which [substance] is uniquely correlated... is the substantial form *itself*” rather than with its instances, meaning that the substantial *form* is an actual existing *thing*. A form (an Aristotelian substance) has, first and foremost, a unity with itself, and “a universal substantial form just *is* [the substance’s] essence” (Cohen and Reeve, 2025). While Spinoza’s forms, i.e., formal essences, are obviously not substances, there is no reason why they couldn’t also enjoy, as particular modes, a unity with themselves as single entities, regardless of them being shared by many. Triangularity, for example, has its own existence as a unified, single nature regardless (and prior to) the existence of durationally existing triangles.¹⁹⁸

While not exactly another discussion regarding the ontology of universal-like natures, Hegel’s concrete universal and its relation to individuality might better capture the essence of the view I am attributing to Spinoza and provide further support to the idea that a universal is not merely an abstract concept uniting alike instances.¹⁹⁹ According to Hegel, truth is “concrete universality” (Hegel, *Logic*: §210), which is quite the opposite of abstraction. As concrete, it “contains” the particular and the individual, which are moments in spirit’s path of knowing itself. The different moments, Hegel argues “are [for themselves] singular, and it is their spiritual unity alone which constitutes the force of their reconciliation... the last of these moments is necessarily this *unity itself*, and... it in fact combines them all into itself” (Hegel, *Phenomenology*: 456-7). Hegel calls this universality the “essence” of spirit, and in

¹⁹⁷ See Cohen and Reeve, 2025.

¹⁹⁸ Notice that there is no substratum here, meaning that I am not suggesting that each infinite mode has a form, but only that the form, as an infinite mode, has actual existence of its own, similar to the Aristotelian substantial form. For a detailed analysis of Aristotle’s theory of forms and its complexities, see Sellars, 1967: 73-124, esp. section VI.

¹⁹⁹ There is much to say about this central concept of Hegel’s philosophy, which I will not thoroughly discuss. My aim in bringing it up here is not so much to provide evidence of a similar metaphysical understanding of universality (as I did with Aristotle, Armstrong, and Stout) but to illuminate the philosophical motivation behind the proposed reading of Spinoza’s formal essences, as prior to their instantiations, and as uniting them on a deep metaphysical level, the ethical implication of which I will discuss toward the end of this dissertation.

it, i.e., in the third moment of unity the singular individual becomes pure knowing, or universal (Hegel, *Phenomenology*: 457). Hegel's dialectical move, thus, paints a picture of deep dependence and unification between the singular on the universal, allows room for both to really exist, and gives meaning to the unity of singular things as participating in one essence, without, on the face of it, risking either the singular's reality nor the universal's.²⁰⁰

In Spinozistic terms, the singular finite mode is, in some respect, one with the formal essence, yet it is not identical with it, and it is not *its own particular essence*.²⁰¹ As Spinoza himself argues, the “singular, changeable things depend so *intimately*, and (so to speak) *essentially*, on the fixed things that they can neither be, nor be conceived without them” (*TdIE* §101; G/II/37; C/I/41; emphasis added), yet they are not identical to them. As their causes, formal essences (or concrete universals) explain what the singulars are and how they came to be, while the singulars are incomplete at the absence of such unity.

Before wrapping up this section I wish to discuss a cluster of passages which might be especially helpful with Hegel in the background. While the following may be somewhat speculative, I think it at least complements my reading and motivates it from quite a different perspective. In 5p36c Spinoza emphasizes just “how much more powerful [intuitive knowledge] is than the universal knowledge.” While reason teaches us, by demonstration, that all things, the human mind included, depend on God, “that demonstration... still does not affect our Mind as much as when this is inferred from the *very essence of any singular thing which we say* depends on God” (5p36s; G/II/303; C/I/613; emphasis added). Now, in 2p40s2 Spinoza says that the third kind of cognition “proceeds from an

²⁰⁰ That is at least what he attempts to do. The question of whether Hegel succeeds in delivering a coherent view and any issues with his account are beyond the scope of this discussion.

²⁰¹ True, the equivalent entity in Spinoza to absolute spirit is God, not a formal essence. Yet as mentioned, I do not take the two views to be identical, to be motivated in the same way, or to argue for the same things. Instead, I take Hegel's view to provide us (i.e. me the writer and you the reader) a point of view which merely illuminates the essence of the complex relationship between universal natures and the singular things which partake in them, and the philosophical advantages of thinking of this relationship in a certain way.

adequate knowledge of the formal essences of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: *formal*] *essences* of things” (2p40s2; G/II/122; C/I/478; emphasis added). Thus, there is something about conceiving the formal essences of singular things in a non-derivative way that affects the mind and brings it blessedness.

In 2p30 Spinoza argues that we can only have *entirely inadequate knowledge* of the duration of our body (2p30; emphasis added) which “depends on the common order of Nature and the constitution of [finite] things” (2p30d). On the other hand, adequate knowledge of how things are constituted is in God, *insofar as he has the ideas of all of them, and not insofar as he has only the idea of the human body*” (2p30d; emphasis added). Adequate knowledge of the human body is, I take it, knowledge of all (human) bodies, which is the knowledge of how the human body is constituted (i.e., by a certain *ratio*) and how it *really is in God*. In other words, what we come to realize in intuition, which is the reason for its transformative power, is that all these singular things, e.g., human minds or bodies, share an essence, and are thus united (this is since necessarily, from God’s perspective, adequate ideas are *not* of particular things (2p30d)). Since formal essences are not essences of particular things, adequate ideas of them are adequate ideas of *all things*. Grasping this in intuition is thus transformative, for it places us “within” our formal essence, as participating in something that transcends our finite, determinate, durational, existence.

Chapter 4: SINGULAR THINGS

The Nature of Singular things, Durational Existence, and the Relationship of Singulars and Formal Essences.

1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have focused on the metaphysics of the infinite and eternal. I have argued that when Spinoza defines individuals in 2p13D, he is actually defining individuality, and that individuality, defined as a *ratio of motion and rest* can only explain what makes something the kind of thing it is, but not what makes it *this* rather than *that* particular individual. I have also argued that Spinoza takes formal essences to express this *ratio*, and that they are mediate infinite modes and thus are prior, and indifferent, to the singular things of which they are essences. Thus, I have developed a view according to which infinite modes are real, and actual, universal-like (yet numerically one) entities. I have argued further that the difficulty of grasping the ontology of these universal-like concrete universal entities is at least partly grounded in the presupposition that the thing, or the “*it*” which exists in the eternal realm is the same as the one that exists durationally. This idea, though, is not supported by the metaphysical inquiry I conducted, and does not have strong grounds in Spinoza’s texts. Up until now, questions regarding the reality, the unique essences, and the actuality of the singular, finite, and durationally existing entities were set aside, for they were secondary (metaphysically and epistemologically) to the subject matter. It is now time to look into Spinoza’s notion of singular things and attempt to better understand their metaphysical status and distinctive features, as well as their relationship to their formal essences.²⁰²

²⁰² In Chapter 5 I will focus on those thing’s actual essence, i.e., the *conatus*, and will explain how they relate to each other, and to formal essences and the eternal realm more generally. Here the focus is on the ontological status and features of singular things as defined in 2D7, and their place in the metaphysical picture I argue Spinoza is promoting. While I believe

One thing which may be concluded regarding singular things from the discussion held thus far is that since everything that follows directly from God's absolute nature must be infinite (1pp21-23) singular things, i.e., finite and determinate entities, cannot have the same ontological status, or exist in the same metaphysical realm, as formal essences do.²⁰³ In other words, it is not only that the identification of the durational and the eternal "*it*" is unnecessary, but that it is highly implausible. Spinoza argues for this bifurcation of the infinite and the finite in 1p28d when he says that "what is finite and has a determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God; for whatever follows from the absolute nature of an attribute of God is eternal and infinite" (1p28d). Scholars are of course aware of this issue and so they argue either that the same thing, i.e., the same singular mode, has two really distinct ways of existing,²⁰⁴ or that the finite mode is a realization of its formal essence, and thus stands in a one-to-one relationship to it.²⁰⁵ Both these views, though, take for granted that somehow, the *same thing* which has finite existence *also has* eternal existence.²⁰⁶

that the singular thing is identical to its actual essences, discussing the thing itself, or rather the concept of durationally existing things in Spinoza's metaphysics, is a slightly different task than discussing the essences of these things.

²⁰³ 1p21 does not exclude the possibility of finite things following *together* from God's absolute nature, but only that each and every finite mode cannot, by itself, be caused by God in the way formal essences do. This "following together" is often used by scholars to explain how, in light of 1p28 and 1pp21-32, finite things may be caused by God. See, e.g., Garrett, 2018; Primus, 2019; Shein, 2015; Vermeiren, 2023. See Newlands, 2023 for complications. It is important to emphasize that even if finite modes can together follow from God's infinite nature, still, a singular mode's relationship to God and its "place" in Spinoza's ontology must be different than that of an infinite mode which follows in a different way from God's absolute nature. This idea (of singulars following from God's absolute nature together) led scholars, e.g., Primus and Newlands mentioned above, to doubt the independent reality of any particular singular thing. Primus endorses a completely acosmist view, and Newlands a conceptualist one, wherein the reality of finites depends on the way they are conceived. While throughout the dissertation I remain agnostic with regards to the acosmism question, my chapter 5, where I provide my account of the *conatus* as relational and grounded in real causal interactions, may be read as a realist view.

²⁰⁴ See, e.g., Curley, 1988: 86; Garrett, 2018: 249-252; Primus, 2023b; Soyarslan, 2016: 35-9; Viljanen, 2011: intro; Costa, 2025: 127-9. Cf. Curley and Walski who argue that the existence of things under a species of eternity is the existence of "formal essence contained in God's attribute" of the thing as an "*abstract type*". This seems to be compatible with saying that the *singular* thing does not exist (Curley and Walski, 1999: 250).

²⁰⁵ As discussed in Chapter 3.

²⁰⁶ As mentioned in Chapter 3, this is true even for acosmist views which deny the reality of the finite (Primus, 2023b), or for views which take formal essences to be kind essences (Martin, 2008). There is textual evidence supporting such view, e.g., 5p29 which scholars read as a claim about two aspects of the same entity (the finite and the eternal). According to my reading, since the finite entity merely participates in the eternal, it is not identical to it, and thinking of the two entities as the same one from a different perspective is thus misleading and turns the metaphysical order upside down.

Contrary to this assumption, I will argue in this chapter that the singular thing which is finite and durational cannot have any other way of existing, and that since this is the case, it has, in and of itself, *no distinctive presence* in the eternal.²⁰⁷ Thus, following Primus 2023b I argue that when Spinoza refers to “singular things which do not exist” he refers to the formal essences of those things, which (as I have argued in Chapter 3) are shared among singulars, and do not fully express any singular thing as such.

This chapter will proceed as follows: in the second section, I will focus on Spinoza’s definition of singulars in 2D7 and its uses, and attempt to textually establish the exclusivity of the connection between singulars as such and durational existence. I will emphasize that for singular things *qua* singular there is only one possible way of existing — durationally — and that Spinoza is careful to use the term “durational” *only* when attributing existence to singular things.²⁰⁸ In the third section I will discuss the meaning of durational existence, the actuality of singulars, and the innate inadequacy associated with being finite and determinate.²⁰⁹ I will argue that it is not merely the case that singular things only exist durationally, but that durational existence is, strictly speaking, attributed exclusively to singular things. I will qualify this last claim in the fourth section by explaining how formal essences

²⁰⁷ Arguing in this way situates me among readings according to which there is a difference between the objects of the second and third kind of cognition, since formal essences of singulars can be exclusively cognized by intuition. Unfortunately, I will not be able to discuss this aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy here, yet see: Soyarslan, 2016; Curley, 1973; Allison, 1987; Naaman-Zauderer, 2020; Kisner, 2020; Wolfson, 1962; Della Rocca, 1996 for arguments for this view. For views according to which the same object is conceived in both kinds of cognition see Nadler, 2001; Hübner, 2022; Parkinson, 1964; Delahunty, 1985.

²⁰⁸ The idea that singular things only exist durationally is not entirely new. Thus, e.g., Garrett argues that “the singular thing, as a finite mode, can actually exist only – and also must actually exist – whenever and wherever there actually exist finite causes with the causal power to bring that singular thing into existence” (Garrett, 2010: 290). Grey, 2025 mentions that “the definition of ‘singular thing’ applies only to objects with an existence characterized by a “finite duration or figure” (Grey, 2025: 487), yet he does not explain what that means exactly, e.g., what is the relationship that obtains between a singular things and the aspect of it which we conceive under a species of eternity (5p29d), or between the thing and its formal essence. Thus, while these scholars acknowledge the necessity of durational existence of singular things, they in fact take the *same thing* to also exist eternally. In this chapter I aim to fully explicate the meaning of “applies only to durational things” and to argue that singulars as such do not have a way of existing eternally. Cf. Melamed according to whom 2p8 “makes an important point in clarifying that non-existing things constitute singular things...” (Melamed, 2010: 85), as well as Newlands, 2018: 25, and Renz, 2018a who take singulars to exist *sub specie aeternitatis*.

²⁰⁹ meaning the fact that singular minds are inadequate ideas, and singular bodies are inadequate causes.

are present in the durational realm. Before doing that, though, I reinterpret 2p8 and 2p8c and further unpack the claim I made in chapter 3 that ideas of “singular things which do not exist” are not really about *singulars* but about their formal essences. In the fifth and concluding section I will discuss the current state of my reading with regards to the motivating question of this entire project — what makes an entity *this* rather than *that* Q3 — paving the way for the following chapter where I provide an account of *conatus* and thus of Spinoza’s answer to Q3. Thus, by the end of this chapter what I aim to have accomplished is a clear metaphysical picture of the infinite, the finite, and their relationship, without yet fully accounting for how finite things endure, i.e., without providing an account of the *conatus* doctrine, and the identity of singular things this picture gives rise to.

2. What Are Singular Things and How Are They Used?

2.1 - The Definition of Singulars

Spinoza defines singular things as “things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing” (2D7). With regards to the first clause, one needs to get clear on what Spinoza means by “finite”, and what is “determinate existence”, that is, in what way and under what conditions is a thing’s existence determinate? Spinoza defines a finite thing in 1D2 as that which can be *limited* by another thing of the same kind, and in 1p21d, as well as 1p28, he talks about determinate existence as synonymous with durational existence, and as identical to finitude (Shein, 2015: 348). Determinate existence, thus, “is a term Spinoza uses to refer to existence that is subject to boundaries either in space or in time” (Grey, 2025: 487). Accordingly, the limitation of one finite mode by another is a limitation of the mode’s *existence*, rather than its essence (Primus,

2023b: 455-6; Melamed, 2012: 191-2).²¹⁰ Thus, as Noa Shein makes clear, “for a body to be finite, it must be bounded by other [external] bodies” (Shein, 2015: 348), and moreover, it is the mutual determination, i.e., the boundary setting and limiting of finite bodies which is the *cause* of their finitude (Shein, 2015: 350).²¹¹ According to such interpretations, being finite and having determinate existence are one and the same, or are closely related, both referring to things which necessarily exist *durationally* in the causal nexus of finite (efficient) causation.²¹²

An important passage for the issue of finitude and determinateness is Ep. 50, where Spinoza argues that “determination is negation”.²¹³ In his letter to Jarig Jelles Spinoza explains that shape pertains only to finite and determinate bodies, for “matter as a whole, considered without limitation, can have no shape”. Shape, Spinoza argues, indicates nothing but a determined thing, or rather how (or that) it is determined, i.e., limited, hence it is a negation of the infinite which gives rise to the finite (Ep. 50; G/IV/240b; C/II/406-7). How should we understand this statement and its implications for the metaphysical status of singulars, and how should we think about it in light of the discussion regarding infinite and eternal formal essences, which resemble (albeit only by analogy) geometrical shapes? What exactly does Spinoza deny by this infamous statement?

²¹⁰ This should be slightly qualified. The essence which is not subject to external limitation is a thing’s formal essence, which exists prior to the durational finite mode. The actual essence of a finite mode, though, perishes as the thing does (2D2) and thus, even though it is the *existence per se* which is externally limited, the thing’s actual essence is limited in the exact same way. I will discuss this further in chapter 5. To anticipate, I will argue that striving, i.e., a thing’s actual essence, should be identified with its life, and with the thing itself.

²¹¹ This means, according to Shein, that the mutual determination is what causes the singulars *tout court*. While she does not address the question of a thing’s essence directly (but only argues that essences of singular things cannot be the cause of their individuation) she seems to think that the essences of singular things too, are determined by external limitations. Cf. Melamed, 2012: 191, Bender, 2022: 304. I believe both views should be adjusted. Shein is correct that singular things are constituted by the causal nexus (as I’ll argue for in this chapter and in the following one) but fails to appreciate the work formal essences do (also, I am not sure her suggestion solves the problem she aims to solve, but that’s beside the matter). Melamed, in turn, is correct in arguing that 1p17s and *TdIE* §101 establish the idea that finite things do not cause other finite thing’s essences but fails to limit the scope of this claim to formal essences alone.

²¹² Garrett, 2018: 127; Alanen, 2011: 7.

²¹³ Hegel attributes to Spinoza acosmism on grounds of this passage, arguing that in Spinoza’s system all finite things are “cast down into [the] abyss of annihilation” Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: 288. Spinoza’s acosmism is somewhat beside the point here, yet see Melamed, 2012 and Hübner, 2015c for arguments against the acosmist view that is grounded specifically in the idea of negation.

Spinoza argues that matter as a whole has no shape, and thus that shape, or materialized shape (or a material thing that has shape), is a limitation or negation.²¹⁴ In other words, “shape pertains only to finite and determinate bodies” rather than to matter as a whole.²¹⁵ I take it that Spinoza limits the discussion here to enduring extended bodies, and not to extension (or shapes) at such.²¹⁶ If this is the case then what Spinoza says here is only that an *existing* shape *within nature* is what it is because it is limited (i.e., determined or bounded) by external things, echoing the distinction between a thing’s (eternal) essence and its (durational) existence. Accordingly, we may argue that a particular human is the particular human that it is because it is limited by others, or because it exists within the casual nexus.²¹⁷ Reading this passage in this way is in accordance with my reading (and Primus’) of formal essences, as well as with Shein’s (2015), and Melamed’s (2012) interpretation of finitude as restricted to existence alone.²¹⁸ This reading is also supported by 4ax1, where Spinoza argues that “there is no singular things *in Nature* than which there is not another more powerful and stronger”, meaning that durationally existing finite things (i.e., singulars) are always and necessarily externally limited. Contrary to formal essences (and eternal things in general), singular things are defined by Spinoza as finite, and

²¹⁴ Cf. Hübner, 2015c: 235-7. Hübner provides an argument against acosmist readings of Spinoza according to which finitude can be understood in a completely affirmative way, and that in such case, what we grasp is a thing’s *conatus*. I will return to Hübner’s account in the fourth chapter, but to anticipate, I believe the idea that by grasping the thing’s *conatus* we do not grasp the things which externally limit or affect it, or that this amounts to grasping it in a “completely affirmative way”, should be qualified. Granted, the *conatus* affirms and does not deny the existence of the thing (3p4). Yet if *all* causal interactions with external causes are understood in terms of limitation or determination, then there must be determinations which positively influence a thing’s power of acting and thus have representation within the idea of this thing’s actual essence. These are external determinations which contributes to the mind’s striving not only when it has clear and distinct ideas, but also when it has confused ones (3p9).

²¹⁵ See also 1p15s; G/II/59-60; C/I/423-4 where Spinoza argues that matter “is everywhere the same, and that parts are distinguished in it only insofar as we conceive matter to be affected in different ways, so its parts are distinguished modally, but not really”. Matter, though, it should be noted, is *not* an attribute of God, but “must necessarily be explained by an attribute which expresses eternal and infinite essence” (Ep. 83). Thus, the way it is negated, or that it is negated, already does not have bearing on what follows from God’s nature (i.e., formal essences). See Peterman, 2015.

²¹⁶ Recall a similar distinction I made in chapter 3 between the face of the entire universe understood as nature as a whole vs. its *form*.

²¹⁷ Again, Spinoza himself uses geometrical figures as approximations of formal essences and seems to draw on Euclidean geometry in developing his metaphysics in general, with the caveats discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, I believe it is fair to assume that something like “the shape of a particular human body” could be treated in the same way as a geometrical shape.

²¹⁸ And, as a matter of fact, with all Platonic readings. Cf. Lennox, 1976.

as necessarily limited by other finite things.²¹⁹ Spinoza makes clear that “a thing is said to be one or unique only in relation to its *existence*... we don’t conceive things under numbers unless they have *first* been brought under a common genus” (Ep. 50; G/IV/239b-240b; C/II/406; emphasis added), meaning that for a thing to be singular in the first place, it must already and necessarily be conceived among other, similar things, which externally limit its existence.²²⁰

In other words, for x to be singular is for x to be finite, to durationally exist, and be externally determined by the infinite chain of finite causes.²²¹ And while a singular thing’s shape is externally determined by a negation of the infinite, its formal essence is not. Thus, in Ep. 50 Spinoza discusses the nature of finite things, not the nature of shapes in general, which, as already argued for in chapter 3, are fully real and exist eternally.

Moving on to the second clause, Spinoza adds a causal condition under which things may be counted as singular. According to Spinoza, to the extent that things cooperate and bring about an effect, i.e., to the extent that together they are a single cause of a certain effect, they are considered as one singular thing. This causal composition condition has perplexed scholars and led many to doubt the stability and reality of singulars, as it seems to be extremely weak. Thus, e.g., Melamed argues that every random gathering of events leading to a certain effect may be counted as a singular thing

²¹⁹ A closely related term to determination, which is relevant for the singular thing being defined by its causal interactions, is “determined,” which is often used by Spinoza as a synonym for “compelled”, or to indicate that the thing is affected by external causes (1D7, 1p17, 1p28, 2post5, 2p45s, 5p5d). While the meaning of these two terms is different, the way of existing as determinate, necessitates also that the thing is externally determined to exist and act.

²²⁰ This fits the ordinary use of the term “singular”, yet Spinoza loads this term with more than merely pointing to the countable aspect of the thing, thus here it merely designates the boundaries of the discussion and limits the things that may be considered as such (thus leaving God and his attributes out of the picture). The “common genus” similarity here does not need to be a similarity in nature (discussed in Chapter 3) in virtue of which things are metaphysically united or agree. Rather, for things to causally limit one another they simply need to modes of the same attribute, e.g., extended things. See 1p3 where Spinoza argues that things which have *nothing* in common cannot causally interact, meaning that they merely need to have *something* in common.

²²¹ Recall the discussion regarding the infinity of formal essences, which is explained in exactly opposite terms. A formal essence, even though it expresses some particular nature, is infinite exactly because it is not limited externally in the way described above. Its formal reality is infinite in the sense that it expresses everything which makes it the particular formal essence that it is, i.e., it is not externally determined and its relation to other formal essences is not “under a common genus”.

(Melamed, 2010: 85-6), Newlands argues that singular things or individuals are metaphysically thin and depend on how we conceptualize the causal interactions which constitute them (Newlands, 2018: ch. 6), and Barbone takes Spinoza's definition of a singular thing to be extremely minimal and to merely mean that something can be counted as one single thing (Barbone, 2002: 90).²²² It is difficult to deny the plausibility of these readings, and I do not intend to evaluate them at this point.²²³ What is important for the current discussion is that the causal condition is a condition for a singular thing's *constitution*, i.e., that a thing is singular *in virtue* of being a cause of some effect, or participating in causal cooperation.²²⁴ Thus, the causal condition set in 2D7 should be taken as an integral part of the definition (rather than an addition to the first clause) and as further explicating "under what conditions do the *xs* compose an individual *y*" (Newlands, 2018: 137).²²⁵ Thus, for a thing to be singular *it must* be composed of parts which causally interact to bring about some effect.²²⁶

From the definition of singular it seems, thus, that singular things necessarily exist durationally, and that to the extent that a thing is a singular, it is an existent (rather than a non-existent) thing. After all, a thing cannot be externally caused to act if it does not exist, and it cannot concur in action as well. It makes little sense, then, to think of singular things *qua* finite and determinate, as non (durationally) existent entities.²²⁷ What's more, as was discussed throughout the previous chapter, only infinite modes follow solely from God's nature, and these modes are *not* acted on externally. Thus, the existence of singular things must be durational, and in order to be singulars they must causally interact, i.e.,

²²² Although he takes *individuals* to be much more metaphysically robust and to require an "inner structure" of a *ratio of motion and rest*.

²²³ My account of *conatus* will compete with these, as I will argue that the cooperation Spinoza discusses in 2D7 may bring about genuine metaphysical union when the individuals in question are identical in nature (see Newlands 2018: 144). Thus, while it might be that for Spinoza identity comes in degrees, what will count as a genuine part of a singular thing are only individuals of the same kind.

²²⁴ Cf. Grey, 2014: 453.

²²⁵ See also Grey, 2025. Melamed, 2010: 86, n. 46 provides further explanation for why the causal condition cannot be an addition to the definition of singulars as finite, but a necessary part of it.

²²⁶ See Renz, 2018: 56.

²²⁷ If fact, it makes little sense to think of any entity in Spinoza's metaphysics as simply "non-existent". A finite thing, I take it, may not exist *now*, meaning that practically, there is really no *thing* in question. Accordingly, there is no idea of *this* particular singular thing in God's infinite intellect. See 2p9, 2p9c, 2p9cd. I argue for this further in section 3 of this chapter.

durationally exist. It should be noted, though, that from the fact that singulars are externally constituted it does not follow that they have no internal structure. The way singular things strive, which I will discuss in the next chapter, explicates the relationship between these different aspects of singulars *qua* singulars, and it is there that I provide a detailed account of the actual existence of singular things. The focus here, however, is on the necessity of external things and causal interactions for the constitution of singulars as such.

Sebastian Bender has an account of singular things' essences which, although not exactly in line with my reading of essences, could be helpful in explicating the necessary durationality and determinateness of singular things and the relationship they bear to their formal essences given their finitude. Bender argues that for Spinoza, a thing's concept is different from its essence, since a concept includes an abundance of information that an essence does not (Bender, 2022). According to Bender, essences cannot make singular things fully conceivable, since adequately conceiving a singular thing necessarily involves knowledge of its entire causal history (1ax4), and taking essences to express such a history result in "overloading" them (Bender, 2022: 299-300). I think Bender is on to something here, but I think his account needs to be modified or qualified.²²⁸ What is definitely true is that *a singular thing's formal essences* do not make it, *qua* singular, fully conceivable, as it does not express the causal relations it bears to others. A singular thing, since it is constituted by being a part of the causal nexus, cannot be fully articulated by its shared *nature*.²²⁹ As I argued in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, saying that Spinoza is a man does not reveal all that Spinoza is. It also does not reveal whether Spinoza exists or has ever existed. This is because Spinoza – a finite mode – is the finite mode that he is in virtue of

²²⁸ I think he is wrong in not distinguishing a thing's formal essence, from which it is not fully conceived, and its actual essence, which (1) makes it what it is, (2) includes its causal history, and (3) makes it as conceivable as possible given the singular thing's innate inadequacy. I hold off from this discussion until Chapter 5, which is explicitly about actual essences.

²²⁹ Even if formal essences were to express a unique nature, i.e., a particular *ratio* which is not shared by many, this eternal fixed *ratio* by itself would still not amount to the full expression of a constantly evolving, causally interacting thing which has this *ratio*. See Spinoza's claim in Ep. 12 (G/IV/55; C/I/202) that from attending to the essences of modes we cannot determine whether they exist, or for how long they endure, meaning we cannot know much about their actual being. See chapter 3 on this point.

his causal interactions, which might be conditioned by his nature, yet do not exclusively follow from it. To the extent that Spinoza is a singular thing *the content of the ides of his singularity is vastly different than the content of the idea of his formal essence*.²³⁰ Additionally, as a singular thing Spinoza only exists durationally, as a finite mode (2D7). Since finite things are necessarily conceived inadequately (2p31), there isn't an idea of Spinoza *per se* in God's infinite intellect, but only of his formal essence. Spinoza, thus, exists durationally, and once he perishes, *he* completely disappears from the metaphysical picture.

If this account is correct and singular things and their ideas indeed only exist as enduring, how should we think about the ideas of things that have ceased to exist? What, one may wonder, is the metaphysical status of my idea of the late Spinoza? It is quite clear that I can form this kind of idea (it is in fact quite difficult to get rid of it), yet according to the account just proposed such an idea seems to have no place in Spinoza's metaphysics and so is impossible to have. This seems like a major drawback to my interpretation and as highly implausible. While Spinoza's epistemology is beyond the scope of this chapter, there is a point to be made which may alleviate the metaphysical worry. In 2p17c Spinoza argues that "although the external bodies by which the human body has once been affected neither exist nor are present, the mind will still be able to regard them as if they were present". When the mind forms memories (2p17sd) it conceives of things *as present*, even though the object corresponding to them does not exist. In the scholium Spinoza explains that these "affections of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things... And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines". (2p17s; G/II/106; C/I/465). Thus, when conceiving a thing which is not currently present, or when remembering a past encounter with an external thing, we conceive of the thing *as* actually existing (2p17);²³¹ We merely imagine it, i.e., form an inadequate idea of it (2p41d), which does not indicate the presence of an actually existing entity and has more to do with

²³⁰ I return to this point in section 4 when discussing 2p8 and 2p8c.

²³¹ I return to this point in section 3.1

our body and the way it is affected than with the actual thing (2p16c2, 4p9d). My idea of the late Spinoza is thus purely imaginative, inadequate, and confused, and since this is the case, it is quite clear that this sort of idea cannot be the one Spinoza mentions in 2p8 as being “comprehended in God’s infinite idea” (2p8). To summarize, Spinoza is able to explain in what way we form ideas of things that have ceased to exist, yet his account does not necessitate the reality of “non-existent singular things” or undermine the idea that singular things as such necessarily durationally exist.²³²

2.2 – The Different Uses of “Singulars” in the *Ethics*

Looking at Spinoza’s use of the term “singular” throughout the *Ethics* reinforces the idea that he restricts the existence of such things to durational existence.²³³ Since he uses the term extensively through the entire text, I will limit the discussion here to passages from which it is clear that he associates singular with durational existence exclusively, and contrasts them with eternal, formal essences. As this chapter unfolds, the relationship between a singular thing and its formal essence will be further fleshed out, as well as further complicated. Thus, establishing that singular things *qua* singulars are exclusively and necessarily durational is crucial for distinguishing them from the way they partake in their formal essences, and for distinguishing the representational content of their ideas from the representational content of infinite and eternal ideas.

In 2p9d Spinoza argues that God is the cause of the ideas of singular things “*not insofar as he is*

²³² This is, of course, not a comprehensive account of the issue, and there is more to say about, e.g., the ideas of non-existent things which we grasp *as non-existent* rather than as present, or the difference between ideas of things that had existed vs. ideas which are beings of the imagination and are purely fictitious. As mentioned, though, providing a complete account of this epistemological issue is beyond the scope of this chapter. My aim here is merely to show how, and where, such ideas are located, metaphysically speaking. For further reading see Marrama, 2016; LeBuffe, 2010 ch. 3; Della Rocca, 1996, ch. 6; Renz, 2018, ch. 12.

²³³ While there is merit in looking at earlier writings, such as *TdIE* §101 and different passages from the KV that were discussed in chapter 3, given that the causal condition is absent from these texts it is fair to assume that, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza has the most developed account of singularity, which is not in tension with what he does say earlier.

a thinking thing absolutely; [but] rather insofar as he is considered to be affected by another [NS: determinate] mode of thinking... Therefore, the cause of one *singular idea* is another idea, *or* God, insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea... to infinity” (2p9d; emphasis added). Spinoza here demonstrates that God is the cause of singulars *only* insofar as he is also considered a singular thing, i.e., finite, and externally determined.²³⁴ In other words, 2p9d reinforces the distinction between singular things as such and the infinite and eternal realm. It is important to note the difference between how Spinoza characterizes God in 1pp22-3 and in 2p9d. In the former, Spinoza argues (infinite) modes may follow from God’s modified nature which by itself follows from God’s absolute nature. In the latter case Spinoza insists that (finite) modes do not follow from God in the same way, but only to the extent that God is considered as *singular*. Thus, even though all modes are caused by God and are in God (1p15, 1p16c), 2p9d makes clear that the idea of any particular singular thing stands in a completely different causal relationship to God than infinite modes and that singular things necessarily exist durationally.²³⁵

In 2p31d Spinoza reminds the reader that “each singular thing, like the human Body, *must be determined* by another singular thing to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way, and this again by another, and so to infinity (by IP28)” (2p13d; emphasis added), and thus that “all particular things are contingent and corruptible” (2p31c). In 4p4 Spinoza argues that “it is impossible that a man should not be a part of nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone...” and in the demonstration Spinoza

²³⁴ I will return to the issue of considering God as a singular thing later on when discussing the inadequacy of the ideas of singular things. To anticipate, I will argue that since we only have inadequate knowledge of such things when considered in isolation from one another, thinking of them in this way is necessarily thinking of them as durationally existing. That being said, it should be noted that in general, I refrain as much as possible from discussing the question of whether singular things exist, i.e., the acosmist question. Whether the durational realm is completely illusory or whether it is real to a certain degree, the view I am promoting throughout the dissertation holds.

²³⁵ See also 4D3 and 4D4. In these definitions Spinoza explains that contingent or possible things are those which their existence cannot be deduced from their essence or cause. Non-singulars, i.e., infinite modes in general and formal essences in particular, which are eternal and follow from God’s nature do not satisfy these modal statuses, and Spinoza’s use of singular here makes this point exactly.

argues that “The power by which singular things (and consequently, [any] man) preserve their being is the power itself of God, or Nature (by IP24C), not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained through the man’s actual essence (by IIP7)...” (4p4d; G/II/213; C/I/548-9). Two important points implied by these passages are (i) Spinoza’s identification of *a* man which is *necessarily* a part of nature with a singular thing, and (ii) the idea that the existence of single man (which exists as part of nature) must necessarily involve external causes. Here too, this stands in contrast with the way infinite things follow from God.

2p11 and its demonstration are also of interest here. Spinoza argues that “the first thing which constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists”. In the demonstration Spinoza explains that the idea which constitutes a human mind must be of an *actually existing singular* thing since otherwise, by 2p8c, “the idea itself could not be said to exist”.²³⁶ In 2p8c Spinoza argues that “so long as singular things do not exist... their objective being, or ideas, do not exist... but insofar also as they are said to have *duration*, their ideas also involve existence...” (2p8c; emphasis added). Thus, from the reference to 2p8c it is clear that in 2p11 Spinoza is talking of a durationally existing singular, and hence finite and determined, mind.²³⁷ As such, the thing which the mind is an idea of is “not an infinite thing... [which] must always exist necessarily [*but*] a singular thing which actually exists” (2p11d; emphasis added). As I will argue more forcefully later on, that the objective reality of the singular thing is dependent upon its durational existence means that in fact, there is no reality to the thing (or the idea of it, i.e., the mind), objectively or formally, once it ceases to durationally endure.²³⁸ In other words, *a* human mind either exists durationally or doesn’t exist at

²³⁶ Cf. the discussion regarding the actuality of infinite modes the previous chapter.

²³⁷ Curley’s translation of “a human mind” rather than “the human mind” here is helpful, yet it should be noted, of course, that the Latin lacks the article.

²³⁸ In isolation from the entire causal nexus of which it is a part. Yet to the extent that a finite mind is merely part of another idea, the representational content of that idea is not of the mind *per se*. I discuss this issue further later on in this chapter.

all. Ursula Renz argues, on grounds of what Spinoza says at 2p8c, that the knowledge of the existence of the human mind is always (partly) empirical, and cannot be reduced to the mind's intelligibility (Renz, 2018: 137); I agree with Renz, yet I think an even deeper point should be made in light of these passages, namely, that the knowledge of the singular mind *tout court* is always, and indeed necessarily, partly empirical, precisely *because* the singular mind *only* exists durationally and so is simply not a copy of the fully intelligible infinite mode, i.e., formal essence of the thing.²³⁹

Another revealing passage is 2p19 and its demonstration. Spinoza argues that “the human Mind does not know the *human body itself*, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the Body is affected” (2p19; emphasis added). What should be noted here is that Spinoza claims that the knowledge of the singular human body, and not merely of this body's existence, necessarily involves (or as a matter of fact *is*) knowledge of external bodies. Since the human mind is nothing but the idea of the body, its own being as well necessarily involves external ideas. This seems to be perfectly in line with the idea that for Spinoza, being a singular thing is conditioned by causal relations, or that a singular thing *as such* is *constituted* by these relations. In the demonstration Spinoza explains that the Mind is in God “insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea *of a singular thing*, or because (by Post. 4) the human Body requires a great many bodies by which it is... continually regenerated (2p19d; emphasis added)”.²⁴⁰ The demonstration thus further establishes that it is not merely the knowledge of the body (i.e., the content of the mind as the objective being of the body) which necessarily involves causal relations, but that the mind, as the idea of a body, actually exists in virtue of it being part of the ideal nexus, i.e., in virtue of being the idea of a finite and externally determinate thing.

²³⁹ Partly, since their formal essences provide knowledge about the kind of a thing they are. Renz takes it that “it is still possible that the idea of an enduring thing is identical to an idea representing the very thing within the idea of God...” (Renz, 2018: 137), yet I think she is wrong about this point and that she misinterprets 2p8 (which she argues does very little work in the *Ethics*) and does not fully explicate what it means to *be a singular thing*.

²⁴⁰ 2post4 reads “the human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies...”.

A bit later in the demonstration to 2p19 Spinoza explains that “God has the idea of the human body... insofar as he is affected by a great many other ideas, and not insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, that is (by P11C) the human mind does not know the human body”. In 2p11c Spinoza argues that the human mind is part of God’s infinite intellect, and so “when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God... insofar as he is explained through *the nature of the human mind*... has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he *also has the idea of another thing* together with the human mind, then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partly, *or inadequately*” (2p11c; emphasis added). Notice that in 2p19d Spinoza contrasts the idea of a single human body with the *nature* of the human mind. In 2p11c Spinoza further distinguishes between the idea of the nature of the human mind, i.e., the formal essence of the human mind, through which God has adequate ideas, and the idea of the singular human mind which involves other ideas. It is only in this latter case that we may, improperly and inaccurately attribute inadequate ideas to God, i.e., only insofar as a finite, singular human mind is in God, may God, modified by this finite mind, have knowledge of a singular body. Thus, it is only to the extent that God is modified by a finite and determinate thing (i.e., a singular mind) *and not* through its absolute nature, that God has ideas of distinct singular bodies (1p28d). From these two passages we may conclude that the idea of the formal essence of the human body is in God only insofar as God has adequate ideas, i.e., insofar as he is modified by the formal essence of the human mind, and that this stands in contrast to the inadequate idea, which necessarily involve external things, of a singular human mind.²⁴¹

In 2p40d Spinoza argues that when we say that adequate ideas in the human Mind follow from

²⁴¹ Naaman Zauderer sums up this point quite nicely when she argues that for Spinoza “so long as the mind perceives things ‘from the common order of nature’ [i.e., durationally] rather than from the order of the intellect and is determined externally from fortuitous encounter with things, it has confused and inadequate cognition ‘of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies’ (2p29s)” (Naaman-Zauderer, 2024: 5-6). As already mentioned, I believe the claim here should exceed the epistemological point and be attributed to the existence of the singular human mind and body.

other adequate ideas “we are saying nothing but that (by P11C) in the Divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause, not insofar as he is infinite, nor insofar as he is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things, but insofar as he constitutes *only the essence* of the human Mind” (2p40d; emphasis added). Thus, again, Spinoza contrasts the idea of the essence of the human mind, which is eternal and thus part of the series of adequate ideas, with that of a human mind which follows from God “insofar as he is affected with ideas of great many things”. Importantly, “adequate knowledge of how things are constituted is in God, insofar as he has the ideas *of all of them, and not* insofar as he has *only* the idea of the human body” (2p30d; emphasis added), meaning that, again, so long as the subject matter of our inquiry is a singular *qua* singular, it does not exist apart from the causal nexus through which it is constituted. By itself, the idea of a singular thing is always inadequate, as the thing is always externally determined. The knowledge of a singular human mind, and of a singular human body, like the human mind and body themselves, are always and necessarily indexical, as they involve knowledge of other things and cannot be conceived as fully intelligible *a priori* ideas (Renz, 2018: 210). It should be made clear that singulars are *irreducibly* indexical (to borrow Renz’s terminology) since there are no ideas of them which are independent of their causal relations with others, and no existence to them that is not grounded in their causal interactions.²⁴² While the entire chain of finite causes may be, and is in fact, adequately represented in God’s mind as a whole, an idea of a singular thing in isolation is not. Bender thus rightfully argues that “What features a (singular) thing has depends on two things—(i) what the thing is like in itself, and (ii) its environment” (Bender, 2022: 303), substantiating the reading according to which it is not only that the knowledge of things as singulars necessitates the ideas of things external to them, but that the singular things themselves are thus constituted.

Another passage where Spinoza uses the term “singular” which should be discussed (even

²⁴² As I will argue in length in the next chapter, their essence, and their identity, is constantly constituted such that the singular *it* is in constant flux.

though it is at the heart of the next chapter) is 3p6d. In 3p6 Spinoza presents his *conatus* doctrine, arguing that “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being”. The demonstration reads “For *singular things* are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, *or* which takes its existence away (by P4)... Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to preserve in its being, q.e.d.” (3p6d; emphasis added). Why, one may ask, did Spinoza use the term “singular” here, rather than, say, “individual” or simply “thing” ([*res*] as he does in the proposition itself)? The reason is, I believe, that, for Spinoza, striving necessitates durational existence, or rather, that only durationally existing, finite things strive. While the proposition is meant to emphasize that *everything* (and not merely, say, organisms) strives, the demonstration makes clear that in order to strive, things must durationally exist. From 3p8d we can infer that the *conatus* (i.e., a thing’s actual essence) is the power by which a thing exists *durationally*; Spinoza argues that that striving does not involve a finite time “For if [the striving by which a thing strives to preserve in its being] involved a limited time, which determined the thing’s duration, then it would follow just from *that very power by which the thing exists* that it could not exist after a limited time...” (3p8d; emphasis added). The being, or existence, a thing strives to preserve is thus its durational being.²⁴³ In other words, striving is the essence of durationally existing things (Kisner, 2020: 39; Sangiacomo, 2015: 530 n. 27; Deleuze, 1988: 98-9), meaning that it is precisely *singular* things that strive. By using this term, thus, Spinoza makes clear that in order to strive a thing must be finite, determinate, and part of the causal nexus.²⁴⁴ Spinoza takes the thing and its striving to be identical, (CM I.6; G/I/248; C/I/314),²⁴⁵ and so if striving, i.e., a thing’s

²⁴³ And so, a thing’s actual essence cannot be identical to its formal one. But more on that later.

²⁴⁴ Why this is is, again, a question I take up in the next chapter, as it has to do with what it means to strive. The point here is merely to provide evidence for the fact that singulars are used to denote things that necessarily exist durationally. Cf. Della Rocca, 2008 according to whom God strives, albeit in a different, non-determinate way.

²⁴⁵ See also CM II.6; G/I/260; C/I/326, 3p9s, 3DOAIexp; G/II/190; C/I/531, 4p18s.

actual essence, is restricted to a thing *qua* singular (3p6d) and is identical to the singular thing, then singular, finite and determinate things are distinguished from infinite modes and their formal essences, and necessarily exist only durationally, as they have a distinct essence which expresses their durationality only.²⁴⁶

A further interesting passage is 4appIX where Spinoza argues that “nothing can agree more with the *nature* of any thing than other *individuals of the same species*... Again... among *singular things* we know nothing more excellent than man who is guided by reason...” (4appIX; G/II/268-9; C/I/589). why does Spinoza shift the terminology from “singular”, which is present throughout part four, to “individual”, and then back to “singular”? According to the view I am promoting here there is a satisfying, meaningful explanation. When discussing two things being of the same species, i.e., sharing a formal essence, Spinoza thinks of them from the point of view of their *ratio*, i.e., their individuality, which is eternal and is not subject to their unique durational existence, i.e., to them *qua* singulars. Yet, when he goes back to discuss their durational existence *per se*, i.e., their causal interactions within Nature, they are again discussed *as singulars*, which are constituted as such by these interactions. In other words, singular things necessarily exist durationally and thus are subject to the causal nexus; within this nexus, the things which are most useful to them are those with which they share an infinite and eternal nature, a nature which *isn't*, in and of itself, part of this durational realm of existence. This shared nature is, again, those things’ formal essence, enjoying its own actual existence as an infinite mode; as such, it is not identical to either singular, which merely participates in it.

To conclude this section, I’d like to bring up a piece of evidence different in kind than the ones I have been considering, namely the fact that the nature of singulars is implied by the scarce use

²⁴⁶ See also 4pre; G/II/209; C/I/546 for a similar use of the term. As I will explicate later, common properties, as well as formal essences which are shared among singulars, are preserved by the *conatus*. Yet the first do not constitute the essences of *singulars* (2p37), and the second, as I will argue in depth in the last section of this chapter are *part* of what a singular thing strives to preserve, and so are included in the above description of the *conatus*, but do not exhaust what striving is.

of the term by Spinoza; It is no coincidence that where Spinoza discusses the power of the intellect and human freedom in part 5 of the *Ethics*, he uses the term “singular” much less. This by itself is suggestive of the fact that human beings’ salvation, while it involves the mind’s duration (5p20s; G/II/294; C/I/606) does not strictly involve the entity which endures, but only its *essence* or nature. Thus, Spinoza argues in 5p36 that “the mind’s intellectual love of God [wherein our salvation consists (5p36c)] is the very love of God by which God loves himself... insofar as he can be explained by *the human mind’s essence...*”. In the scholium to this proposition Spinoza mentions singulars in relation to 2p40s (“how much the knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive... can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than... knowledge of the second kind (5p36s; G/II/303; C/I/613)) and so may seem to argue that singular things per se may be known intuitively and bring us to the intellectual love of God, which is problematic for my view. Yet, given everything that was argued for thus far, it is more reasonable to assume that what Spinoza wants to accomplish here is merely to remind us that, even though they are singulars, human beings all participate in the *human (formal) essence* which, as a distinct entity, loves God with the same love God loves himself, and that the knowledge of which is where our salvation rests.²⁴⁷

One final piece of evidence that supports my reading is the absence of the term “singular”. In 5p29, which was discussed in the previous chapter as well, Spinoza argues that we conceive things as actual either with relation to a time and a place, or as eternal (5p29). The fact that Spinoza did not argue that we conceive *singular things* as actual in two different ways (or any other type of thing for that matter) may suggest that he took there to be genuinely two different kinds of things: those conceived

²⁴⁷ This is because by knowing that we participate in this formal essence we understand the way in which we participate in God, as well as the way we are related to other human beings and nature more generally (I will not defend this view here as it is beyond the scope of the dissertation). Thus, cognition of singulars may be (very roughly) sketched as follows: via the first kind of cognition, we may conceive the singular thing itself and have a (necessarily) inadequate idea of *it*. Via reason we may have knowledge of those thing’s common properties and thus understand something about their common nature, yet not their essences *qua* singulars (2p44c2&d), yet it is only through intuition that we grasp how these formal essences are related to God, and how singular things make up or participate in these essences, and this knowledge is supposed to be liberating.

with relation to time and place, and those conceived as eternal. In other words, things can be said to be actual in two different ways, durationally or eternally.²⁴⁸ The durationally actual things are what Spinoza terms singulars, and the eternally actual ones are infinite modes, which are distinct from the former. From all of the above evidence, it seems pretty clear that throughout the entire *Ethics*, Spinoza uses singulars to designate finite, determinate, durationally enduring things, which stand in contrast to things which have an infinite and eternal existence and follow from God's absolute nature.

3. Durational Existence, Adequacy, and the Actuality of Singular Things

From the previous section it seems that Spinoza reserves the term “singulars” strictly for durationally existing things, and that in order for a thing to be singular it must be externally affected, in causal interactions with external things, and be part of Nature.²⁴⁹ If this is the case, there seem to be no good reason to take singulars to be identical with, or copies of, their formal essences, and there is also no way of thinking of things *qua singulars* as non-durationally existing. Additionally, as durationally existing and necessarily externally affected, singular things, and the ideas of them, are inadequate causes of both internal and external effects, and are thus necessarily represented by inadequate ideas, although they are still actual (5p29d). In this section I wish to unpack the notions of durationality, actuality, and adequacy (or inadequacy) in Spinoza in order to better understand the kind

²⁴⁸ Cf. Donagan, 1989.

²⁴⁹ There is a subtle issue here which should be flagged, namely that when referring to a singular thing, I am referring to an entity which is already constituted by causal interactions and thus, strictly speaking, not *externally* affected by the things which give rise to it. The particular parts of this singular entity are in causal interaction with external things, yet, to the extent that they bring about a single effect, these “externals” are internalized and make up the one singular entity. The entity in question here seems to be slippery and to move back and forth from the “perspective” of some part to the perspective of the singular. Yet it should also be mentioned that, according to Spinoza, singular things *as such* are also necessarily in causal interactions with externals (4ax1; 2p9d; Ep. 50), as they exist durationally. As I'll argue further in the next chapter, it is their causal interactions as singulars which sustains their identity, meaning that a singular thing is always in flux and continues to be constituted so long as it endures. Thus, when referring to the casual interactions that singulars stand in I will not systematically distinguish between interactions that constitute the entity in questions and interactions that it has with other entities. This point will make more sense by the end of Chapter 5.

of being singular things have, as well as its distinctive features and limitations.

3.1 – Durational Existence

Spinoza defines durationality in 2D5 as “indefinite continuing of existence”, and he explains that this kind of existence is “indefinite because it cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even by the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of the thing, and does not take it away” (2D5exp). Thus, durational existence is the continued existence of things which do not exist in virtue of their essence, or whose essence does not involve existence, i.e., it is the kind of existence attributed to modes (1p24) which continue and cease to exist due to external forces. The definition by itself does not seem to be restricted to the existence of finite modes, as infinite modes too are not self-caused, meaning that their essences do not involve existence (1D1). Indeed, some scholars argue that infinite modes may also exist durationally, as sempiternal.²⁵⁰ Yet it is important to bear in mind that even if infinite modes are merely everlasting and not eternal in the way God is, they follow directly from God’s nature (1pp21-23), and so their existence *is* necessarily infinite in virtue of their infinite cause (Melamed, 2013; Ward, 2011). On the other hand, the existence of finite modes, which are caused by other finite modes and exist durationally, is necessarily limited by external things. Thus, while it might be that infinite modes have only a durational notion of eternity, they have *unlimited* duration, and their existence seems to be of a different kind than the durational existence of finite modes.²⁵¹ What’s more, throughout the *Ethics* Spinoza attributes durational existence to finite things only, meaning that, all and all, he takes this way of existing to indicate finitude

²⁵⁰ See n. 85 of Chapter 3.

²⁵¹ While everything follows necessarily from its cause, the existence of infinite ideas can also, theoretically, be deduced *a priori* from their causes, while the existence of finite modes involves what Renz calls “indexical knowledge” and cannot follow, either directly or indirectly, from the definition of an eternal thing (Renz, 2018: 135). This, importantly, is not merely an epistemological point, but extends to the very nature of the existence finite things may enjoy.

(and thus external determinateness), and to stand in contrast with even the weaker notion of eternal existence. Spinoza argues, e.g., that “the *duration* of our Body *depends* on the common order of nature...” (2p30d; emphasis added); or that the *nature of existence* is *not* “duration, i.e., existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity, [but the existence of things] insofar as they are in God” (2p45s).²⁵² Thus, durational existence is bound up with, and should be understood as, existence which pertains to finite modes, and stands in contrast to the eternal (or indefinite) existence of infinite modes, and of course, God.²⁵³

As was discussed in the previous section, finite modes are necessarily externally determined, and thus the ideas of them are necessarily inadequate (2p30, 2p31). In other words, durational existence, as existence which depends on the “common order of nature” is, to speak loosely, existence which lends particular finite thing as such limited reality.²⁵⁴ To further unpack this point, let me look back at the causal condition of singularity.²⁵⁵ On the one hand, Spinoza argues that a singular thing is singular in virtue of its parts being the cause of a certain effect, which sounds as if the claim is that, to the extent that a thing is a singular thing, it is an adequate, i.e., complete cause of that particular effect. Yet, Spinoza also argues that finite things, and so singular things, are always and necessarily externally determined, and so that we only have inadequate ideas of them. And since singular things are *defined* and thus conditioned by their external determinations and causal interactions, the fact that they are inadequate causes has bearing on their inmost structure.²⁵⁶ This, of course, does not mean that singular

²⁵² See also 1p21d, 2p8c, 2p31d&c, 4pre; G/II/209; C/I/546, 4p62s, 5p22s, 5p23d, 5p34s, 5p29d. Spinoza makes a similar point in the CM where he argues that duration is the way “we conceive the existence of *created* things” (CM I.4; G/I/244; C/I/310).

²⁵³ See Renz, 2018: 135. It should be noted that durational existence is different from temporality for Spinoza, as the latter is nothing but a human construct (CM I.1; G/I/234; C/I/300), while the former is a genuine kind of existence (Costa, 2025: 114-116). Thus, notwithstanding its limitations, durational existence is a metaphysically real way to be.

²⁵⁴ But not actuality. I will discuss this point further shortly.

²⁵⁵ I speak of finite things in general and singular things in particular interchangeably, for there is a case to be made that since everything has a casual power and produces effects (1p36, 3p6), the definition of singular things extends to all finite things.

²⁵⁶ I will discuss this thoroughly in the next section. For now, it should be noted that adequate (or rather, inadequate) causality comes in degrees (Della Rocca, 2008: 155), meaning that things can be more or less the cause of a certain effect. Thus, some singular things the parts of which are more adequate in bringing about an effect, will form a stronger singular

things as such are imperfect (see 4pre; G/II/207; C/I/545) or that they are missing something they should have, but rather that since they are constantly externally determined, their durational existence should be understood in terms of this external determination.

Durational existence consists, thus, of causal interactions. These causal interactions, in turn, constitute, or give rise to the enduring entities. Emanuella Costa illuminates this relationship when he argues that “duration seem to constitute the very essence of the thing, insofar as the lack of duration implies a lack of existence, and insofar as the essence of things “posits” their existence” (Costa, 2025: 120).²⁵⁷ While a thing’s identity is partly determined by its formal essence (as this essence is also, yet not solely, preserved by the thing’s striving to persist in durationality, i.e., by its *actual* essence),²⁵⁸ it is insufficient to explain its unique being, i.e., its *singularity*, which is constituted by causal interactions and is expressed in its durational existence. Thus, durationality cannot be accounted for by looking into eternal and infinite, shared, kind-essences, and must be explained by causal interactions. And since this is so, we need to get clear on what Spinoza means by adequate causation: what does it mean to be an inadequate cause, and what can we infer from the fact that we only have inadequate knowledge of the duration of things (2p30)?

Before getting clear on these issues, it should be made explicit that whatever is true of the singular human body is true of the singular human mind. Spinoza says that “the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, *or* a certain mode of extension which actually exists, *and nothing else*” (2p13; emphasis added). Thus, when Spinoza argues that we only have inadequate knowledge of a human body, what he is saying is that our mind has only inadequate knowledge of our

thing. Additionally, since the cooperation of two things which agree entirely in nature results in genuine metaphysical union (4p18s), two singular things which entirely agree in nature will form the strongest singular, while still needing interactions with external things to continue durationally existing.

²⁵⁷ Importantly, though, he takes duration and eternity to be aspects by which we grasp the same thing and promotes an aspectual reading of Spinoza’s essences.

²⁵⁸ I’ll discuss this issue further in the last section of this chapter, as well as in Chapter 5.

own body, or that our mind *is* this inadequate idea. The human mind, Spinoza makes clear, has only inadequate knowledge of the existence of the human body (2p19), of the body's parts (2p24), its affections (2p28), or of the external bodies effecting it (2p25); as such, the human mind also does not (adequately) know itself (2p23d).²⁵⁹ As will become clear in 3.3, this means that a singular mind, like a singular body, is also always externally determined and constituted.²⁶⁰

3.2 – The Actuality of Singulars

It turns out that being inadequate, whether an inadequate cause or an idea, is built into and inseparable from existing durationally.²⁶¹ Thus, in order to better understand the kind of existence singular things have, one needs to better understand what Spinoza means by adequacy and inadequacy. Before explicating these notions, though, a word regarding the difference between singular things' reality and actuality should be made. In the previous chapter I argued that formal essences, as infinite modes, are completely actual (2.2.2). I have also argued that the kind of actuality eternal things have, which Spinoza brings up in 5p29, is different from the actuality he often ascribes to finite and durationally existing things. It is important to make clear, though, that even though singular things and infinite modes have different ways to be actual (i.e., to exist), their actuality should be understood along the same lines, i.e., as referring to their *being* not as a mere possibility, but as factually true.²⁶² The

²⁵⁹ I do not intend to make any substantive claims about Spinoza's psychology, his notion of consciousness, or his theory of representation, but merely to show the depth of the idea that singular things, minds and bodies alike, are necessarily inadequate.

²⁶⁰ Cf. Renz, 2018 ch. 8.

²⁶¹ Spinoza argues that something of the human mind is eternal (5p23) to the extent that it understands, i.e., to the extent that it has adequate knowledge (5p40s). I will discuss the notion of adequacy in the following section and explain how I interpreted Spinoza's claim regarding the part of the mind that is eternal. To anticipate, though, I will argue that to the extent that the mind has the idea of the formal essence of the human mind, it is eternal (as Garrett, 2010 does), and that this in turn means that it is the formal essence of the human mind which Spinoza argues "remains".

²⁶² Wolfson, 1962: Vol I, 349-50 argues similarly that actuality is meant to emphasize a thing's existence outside the mind (Cf. Lærke, 2017, 2025).

facts about a particular mode's actuality, i.e., the way or the extent to which it is actual, differs among different modes, since reality for Spinoza comes in degree (1p9, 4pre; G/II/208-9; C/I/546). Yet, while finite modes have less reality than infinite modes,²⁶³ they are equally actual, *qua finite*. Put differently, to the extent that a mode is real, it is actual, and while its reality may come in degrees, its actuality seems to be an all or nothing matter.²⁶⁴ Accordingly, a finite mode may be said to be actual only durationally, i.e., to exist only as causally determined by external things, and an infinite mode may be said to be actual only as following directly from God's nature.²⁶⁵ In both cases, though, modes are completely actual.

Why, then, does Spinoza often associate actuality with durational existence? Why does he term singular things' essences *actual essences*, and why does he suggest there are two different ways to be actual (5p29)? The answer, I believe, has to do with the distinction between actuality and reality just mentioned and with Spinoza's necessitarian commitments. In other words, exactly *because* everything that is necessary for Spinoza, there isn't, within his metaphysical framework, anything which is not actual. And since it is intuitive and tempting to think about things that are less real as also less actual, Spinoza emphasizes the actuality of the durational in order to prevent us from thinking in this way.²⁶⁶ In particular, Spinoza emphasizes that singular things, notwithstanding their inferior reality, are still actual. In 3p7 he emphasizes that singular things have an *actual* essence, i.e., that so long as they strive,

²⁶³ I will discuss this issue in the following section, yet I take it to be intuitive enough.

²⁶⁴ Whether actuality is binary or comes in degree is not a major worry. While Spinoza does not argue for actuality being a binary notion yet he *does* argue that reality may come in degree, I take it that if actuality is understood as the opposite of possibility and as closely associated with existence, then it must be the case that a thing is either actual or not, while it may be more or less real. Garrett, 2018 seem to hold the same view.

²⁶⁵ Conversely, a finite mode does not actually follow from God's absolute nature, and an infinite mode does not actually exist durationally.

²⁶⁶ As always, there is the acosmist option, which completely eliminates finite things' existence and actuality. While I attempt to remain as agnostic as possible regarding this question, I see how this line of interpretation may bring me closer to a realist position. While I am not against it, I do wish to clarify that since Spinoza himself attributes actuality to finite things, one could argue that *to the extent that finite things exist*, say, as beings of the imagination, illusions, negations or whichever acosmist route one chooses to take, they are actual. While this actuality will be different from the actuality of real things, the difference between the two is born not out of the actuality itself, but, again, from the degree of reality things have.

they exist,²⁶⁷ and it's exactly their durational existence as striving which constitutes their actuality.²⁶⁸ 5p29 is meant, again, to secure the idea that durational things are actual in their own right, even though they are less perfect and real than the things we conceive to be actual under a species of eternity.

2p17, its demonstration and corollary are an interesting cluster of passages to consider. There, Spinoza explain that the human mind must regard external bodies which affect the body *as actually existing* (2p17), even if they are not really present (2p17c). So long as the body is affected, Spinoza argues, the mind must imagine the presence of the external bodies, i.e., it must take them to be actual (even though they might not be so). Lærke takes these passages to indicate that Spinoza uses the term “actual” to refer merely to the mind’s representation of things, i.e., to the fact that the mind *perceives* things as existing (Lærke, 2017: 37-8). Yet I believe something different is going on here. True, the presence of external bodies may be false, and their actuality may be solely imaginative. Still, the emphasis is on the (alleged) *fact* that the body whose actuality is in question *is*, that it (is taken to) exist rather than not, and so can affect the body. Thus, when Spinoza uses the term “actual” he does not discuss “the relation of representation that exists between the existing thing and the mind that has an idea of it” (Lærke 2017: 36), but brings forth the presence, or the existence, of things, especially if such existence can be called into question.²⁶⁹

2p11 may also lend credence to my suggested reading. Spinoza argues that “the first thing

²⁶⁷ See *TdIE* §55 and §58 where Spinoza identifies actuality and existence. I do not intend to suggest that existence can be reduced to actuality or that this identification is fully preserved in the *Ethics*, but I do think that it is safe to say that what it means for a thing to be actual is that it *is*, and thus that it *exists*. More on this above. An interesting point to mention in this regard which might lend additional depth to Spinoza’s use of “actual” here is Garrett’s claim that, to the extent that singular things have essences and strive, they could be thought of as “quasi-substances” (Garrett, 2002: 138-9). If this is in fact the case, then Spinoza’s emphasis on the actuality of the essence of singulars is supposed to secure their status as real, independent-to-an-extent things. While I am also not sure that for a finite mode to be “in-se” means that it is really, to that extent, self-causing in a “quasi substance” way (as I will argue for in the next section and the next chapter), I agree, as I mentioned above, that to the extent that a *singular* thing strives, it is *actual*.

²⁶⁸ See Costa 2025.

²⁶⁹ Thus, I agree with Lærke that the term has a rhetorical use and that for Spinoza “there is no essence that is not actual and there is no existence that is not actual” (Lærke, 2017: 37). Yet, contrary to Lærke’s interpretation, I do not think that what a thing’s actual existence denotes is it merely being perceived as actual, or that the distinction in 5p29 is between the same thing’s actual existence and actual essence (Lærke, 2025: 146). As I’ll argue explicitly in the next chapter, the existing thing and its essence cannot part in the way suggested by Lærke. See further criticism of his account in Chapter 3.

which constitutes the *actual being (esse)* of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which *actually exists*” (2p11; emphasis added). As I understand it, Spinoza here emphasizes the relationship between a singular human mind’s unique being, i.e., the thing it particularly and actually *is*, and an existing body, such that it is the *actual existence* of the body which makes the mind what it is (rather than, e.g., the formal essence of the body). In other words, the actuality here is meant to draw attention to the fact that were the body in question non-existent, “the idea itself [i.e., the mind] could not be said to exist” (2p11d), as the body’s actual existence constitutes what the mind *actually is*.²⁷⁰

While this may not be conclusive evidence, I think it is enough to support the main point of my reading, namely, that everything is actual for Spinoza – finite and infinite modes included – and that since actuality is binary (as there seem to be no good reason to think otherwise) it should be attributed equally to the infinite as well as the finite, which nonetheless differ in their degree of reality or perfection and the way in which they exist.

3.3 – Being an Inadequate Cause, and Having an Inadequate Idea

As mentioned, a central component of what it means to be a singular body is being in constant causal interactions with external things. Being a singular mind, in turn, is being the idea whose immediate object is the singular body, constituted by these causal interactions. To complete the picture of what it is to be a singular thing and to only exist durationally, it is now time to look into Spinoza’s notion of adequacy and inadequacy, which play a major role in the account of singulars. Throughout this section I will argue that singular things *qua* singulars are always inadequate causes, of which there are always and necessarily only inadequate ideas, and I will suggest that cases of adequate causation

²⁷⁰ Notice that Lærke’s interpretation can only account for actuality Spinoza attributes to the body here, as he argues that what the mind *perceives* as actual constitutes its being. Yet this will not explain why or in what way the mind’s own being is said to be actual.

involving singular things may be attributed to them only insofar as they are an instance of their formal essence.²⁷¹

Spinoza defines an adequate cause in conceptual terms. He writes: “I call that cause adequate whose effects can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial, *or* inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood *through it alone*” (3D1; emphasis added). According to this definition, x is the adequate, i.e., the complete cause of y iff the idea of y can be *completely* understood through or explained by the idea x .²⁷² As was mentioned already, Spinoza argues that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (1ax4). Thus, being an adequate cause of some effect means having an adequate idea of it, and having an adequate idea of the effect means having knowledge of the entire causal chain which brought it about. Since singular things are necessarily part of the infinite chain of finite causes (4pre), having an adequate idea of them means knowing their entire causal history.²⁷³ Spinoza’s notion of activity is grounded in his notion of adequate causation and is likewise extremely strict. According to Spinoza, we truly act only when we are the adequate cause of the effect we bring about (3D2), and conversely, “we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause” (3D2). Thus, as long as we are not the sole cause of some effect, or that the effect cannot be completely *understood* through our idea alone, we are passive, acted on, and are an inadequate cause of an effect we bring about. The effects in question, it should be kept in mind, can be either external (the painting I paint

²⁷¹ In the following section I explicitly discuss how formal essences are present in durational existence. To anticipate, a singular mind may have adequate ideas, yet these ideas should be attributed to the formal essences the mind partakes in. Due to 2p7, this means that the human body may also be an adequate cause to the extent that it acts from its shared nature. Admittedly, this may be less intuitive or more difficult to imagine (for the view implies that the numerically same quality exists in two different spatio-temporal locations). Yet, as I will argue in chapter 5, and as was suggested already by Melamed and Newlands’ accounts, our imaginative way of distinguishing bodies may be called into question in light of Spinoza’s metaphysics.

²⁷² Conversely, if y is understood through x , then x is the cause of y (1p25d). For discussions regarding the relationship between causation, conception, and inherence see Della Rocca, 2003, 2008; 2008b; Garrett, 2001, 1994; Melamed, 2013; Newlands, 2010, 2018; Lin, 2019; Willson, 2014; Jarrett, 1978.

²⁷³ Cf. Wilson, 1999 ch.10 for a different reading of 1ax4.

using acrylics), or internal (the muscles I develop by lifting weights) to the singular body in question.

We can now begin to see more clearly why and how being singular is so tightly connected with being inadequate, and what implications inadequacy has on the power, and inmost structure of each singular entity. Spinoza argues that “it is *impossible* that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” (4p4; emphasis added); thus “man is *necessarily always* subject to passions”, i.e., is passive (4p4c; emphasis added). According to Donald Rutherford this mean that “thinking... about cases of physical causation, we might doubt whether there exist any instances of acting in Spinoza’s sense” (Rutherford, 2008: 497). Since finite singular bodies are always externally determined, their causal activity necessarily involves external things, i.e., they are always inadequate causes of the effects they bring about. After all, to merely survive an organic body needs at least water and oxygen, meaning that it can never be the adequate cause of its continued existence (nor, of course, of it coming into existence). Accordingly, a singular mind, as an idea of a singular, actually existing body (2p13), is also necessarily an inadequate idea (see e.g., 2p19, 2p24, 2p25, 2p28).²⁷⁴ At the same time, though, the mind may be an adequate cause “insofar as it is modified by adequate ideas” (Rutherford, 2008: 498), i.e., insofar as it has, and is constituted by, adequate ideas. Spinoza explicitly says, in fact, that the mind may have adequate ideas (e.g., 2p45; 5p4d&c; 5p25; 5p38), that its actual essence involves both adequate and inadequate ideas (3p9), and that it is in the mind’s power of understanding wherein our salvation rests. The question is, then, in what way can a *singular* mind have adequate ideas? Or is there a sense in which singularity does not imply inadequacy?

Before attempting to answer this question, let me be clear on what it is exactly that we are after. When inquiring into the question of whether a singular mind can have adequate ideas, what I am referring to are ideas which *constitute* the human mind, rather than ideas that come and go which

²⁷⁴ On this see Willson, 1996; Wolfson, 1962; Grey, 1994.

are not part of what the mind essentially is.²⁷⁵ Meaning, when asking whether the mind may have adequate ideas, I am asking whether a singular mind, as a complex idea (2p15) of an actually existing body (2p13), can essentially and fundamentally be the cause of adequate ideas, i.e., whether adequate ideas can be completely understood through a singular mind alone and constitute its unique essence. In other words, what I am essentially after is whether a singular mind can *be*, in and of itself (yet to a certain extent), an adequate idea. Rutherford puts the issue at hand clearly when he observes that “parallel to any instances of adequate causation *involving finite ideas*, there must be instances of adequate causation *involving finite bodies*, yet Spinoza says nothing about the latter [since] ordinary physical interactions among bodies *always involve inadequate causes*” (Rutherford, 2008: 501 n. 28; emphasis added). In other words, while it may seem plausible to think about a finite mind actively producing adequate ideas (say, of common notions, gravity, or mathematical theorems), it seems less plausible to think about a finite body as being an adequate cause of, well, barely anything.

The tension is clear enough. Given parallelism (2p7) and the characterization of the mind as the idea of the body (2p13), how can the mind be adequate under certain conditions, while the body principally cannot? To relieve some of the tension around this issue I suggest taking a deeper look into the way in which adequate causation “involves” finite things, and to articulate exactly what such involvement comes down to. According to John Grey, “considered as the idea of the body, the mind

²⁷⁵ To the extent that such distinction exists (see Hübner, 2022). On the distinction between ideas that the mind *is* and ideas that the mind *has*, see: Wilson, 1999: ch. 9; Renz, 2018 esp. 145-9. Overall, I believe my reading is neither in tension with the mind being able to possess adequate ideas nor with this being strictly impossible. If the mind can have certain adequate ideas, say of common notions (2pp38-9), it still cannot represent any particular singular body adequately, but only qualities it shares with other bodies (e.g., extension), or formal essences, and thus is still, overall, an inadequate idea *of* a singular thing. Yet “it seems difficult if not impossible for the human mind to have adequate ideas” (Della Rocca, 1996: 183 n.29). Thus, if the mind cannot have any adequate ideas *at all*, than to the extent that I, for example, have an adequate idea of extension, it is only in virtue of my mind being part of God’s intellect (2p11c) i.e., due to my participation in a formal essence, which is what, metaphysically speaking, has the idea in question. To that extent, it is not really an idea possessed by a singular thing, but an idea possessed by an infinite mode which a finite mind partakes in. In other words, one may simply say that to the extent that a finite mind has an adequate idea, it is really God who has this idea. This will become a bit clearer as the discussion progresses and the way adequate ideas follow from one another is discussed. For further discussion see Della Rocca, 1996; Bennett, 1984; Marshall, 2013. See Grey 2014 for an interesting argument for why the mind cannot be *composed* of both adequate and inadequate ideas.

is finite and durational (just like its object), and includes all sorts of confused ideas (since its object has all sorts of passive states). Considered as the idea of the *essence* of the body, the mind is an infinite and eternal (just like its object) and includes only adequate ideas (since its object has only active states)” (Grey, 2014: 462; emphasis added).²⁷⁶ I agree with Grey on this issue, yet I think the first clause of his claim can, and should, be further unpacked. I have argued earlier that singular things are constituted by their causal interactions and that these interactions are necessary for the durational existence of thing as singular. Thus, when thinking of a singular body as a whole, and, correspondingly, of a singular mind, Grey’s description seems to be right. A finite body, as Rutherford points out, is always involved in inadequate physical interaction, and thus its idea is always and necessarily inadequate.

Yet recall that I have also argued (and will explain exactly *how* in the final section of this chapter) that a singular thing’s formal essence partly determines its unique identity and thus is expressed in its durational existence. What’s more, to a finite body belong different qualities which it shares with other bodies of the same kind (qualities which belong to it in virtue of its formal essence), as well as qualities which are more general, do not constitute its singular essence, and can only be conceived adequately, i.e., common notions (2pp37-9). To the extent that the mind has ideas of either of these kinds of qualities (which may overlap) it thus has adequate ideas of the body. We could, of course, refer to these ideas as ideas of the singular body, but, I wish to emphasize, this reference should always be qualified; We should remind ourselves that while it is a fact of the matter that, e.g., being extended is a bodily quality which is not externally determined by other finite bodies,²⁷⁷ when thinking of the singular body from this perspective we are not considering the body as a whole, nor are we considering what pertains to its durational existence as part of the causal nexus. Similarly, and I will

²⁷⁶ I completely agree with Grey on this point, yet disagree that “both of these are aspects of one and the same idea: the mind itself” (Grey, 2014: 462). Rather, I take it that the mind which has an adequate idea of the essence of the body must be an infinite human mind, i.e., the formal essence of the human mind, rather than the idea of a particular one.

²⁷⁷ It is caused by God, and the way a body is extended, i.e., its particular shape is externally determined, yet the fact that it is extended it not. Thus, according to 2p38, the idea we have of a specific body’s extension is adequate.

discuss this issue in length in Chapter 5, when considering the formal essence of a singular, durationally existing body, we are in fact cognizing its *shared essence*, and thus, again, not the singularity of a specific body which is the object of a specific mind. In the exact same way, as was mentioned in the discussion regarding 2p11c, when we say that a finite mind has adequate ideas, we are referring to ideas it has in virtue of its formal essence, i.e., in virtue of it partaking in an infinite and eternal essence, which is *shared*. In this sense only are finite things “involved” in adequate causation.

This qualified way in which a singular mind may have adequate ideas should be constantly kept in mind, and I will later explain exactly how a finite mind is related to its formal essence, through which it may have adequate ideas. What I want to focus on here, though, is the idea that so long as the mind is considered an idea of a durationally existing body, i.e., as a *singular mind*, it simply cannot *be* an adequate idea. This means that, first, the representational content of adequate ideas is never about finite, singular things *per se*; Since singular bodies are always inadequate causes and are externally determined, the mind as an idea of an actually existing, particular, finite body cannot be an adequate idea in the exact same way. Second, since a human mind is itself a singular thing which has its own formal reality, and, as it is also caused by other finite ideas (2p11c), it is not, when considered by itself (i.e., as a singular thing), represented in God’s infinite intellect and thus neither is a part of it, although its formal essence is.²⁷⁸

Michael Della Rocca’s account of Spinoza’s notion of intelligibility illustrates this point. According to Della Rocca, causation, intelligibility, and inherence are (at least) co-extensive (Della Rocca, 2003: 58-61). Thus, to the extent that I have a perception of a particular finite body, that perception is partly in me, and partly in the idea of the represented body, for we are both partial causes

²⁷⁸ Again, the issue of adequacy in Spinoza is a central, and complex one, and I will not provide a comprehensive account of it here. I will only say that, given everything that was argued for regarding singular things, their innate inadequacy is entailed, and this feature of them helps us better understand what a finite, durational existence consists in.

of this perception (Della Rocca, 2003: 61).²⁷⁹ Since I am merely a partial cause of the perception in question, it is only partially intelligible through me, and so (given 3D1) I am only an inadequate cause of it and only have an inadequate idea of it.²⁸⁰ What's more, "no matter how far back we go in the chain of finite causes of the perception, we will not arrive at an individual... that the perception is fully in" (Della Rocca, 2003: 61). A particular inadequate perception or a particular body thus cannot fully inhere in finite modes (individually or collectively) and therefore is necessarily inadequate when considered from a finite perspective.²⁸¹ Della Rocca's argument can easily be applied to the mind's representation of its own body as well. Since the body is always externally affected, and since the mind's knowledge of the body is restricted to the knowledge of these effects (2p19), the idea of its own body, likewise, does not fully inhere anywhere and is necessarily inadequate (2p13s).²⁸² Since the mind's essence is constituted by the idea of its own body (2p17s; G/II/106; C/I/465), the mind itself, as a singular finite mind, is essentially an inadequate idea.²⁸³ Crucially, the confused and inadequate perception we have of our body or other finite bodies cannot be fully in God when considered in isolation from the causal chain of which they are parts. This is because, ideas in God are always and necessarily adequate, yet the ideas in question are necessarily inadequate (Della Rocca, 2003: 62; 2p36d). And so, to the extent that an idea's immediate object is a finite body – to the extent that an idea is a finite mind – it is necessarily inadequate and thus is not part of God's infinite intellect and is

²⁷⁹ Della Rocca discusses a *sensational* perception, which is crucial for his point regarding the inadequacy of the perception. Without drifting too much to Spinoza's epistemology, I just want to flag that, after arguing for the necessity of external causal interactions for the constitution of any singular finite body, I think it is safe to take for granted at this point that any idea we form of a particular body is necessarily formed by the first kind of cognition, and thus is always inadequate and confused.

²⁸⁰ Thus, in Della Rocca's words, the perception is not fully intelligible.

²⁸¹ Thus, it is not only that I have an inadequate idea of a finite body, but that there *isn't* an adequate idea of this body to be found within the finite realm.

²⁸² There is, of course, a difference in the content of the idea I have of my own body and the idea anyone else has of my body (2p17s; G/II/106-7), yet the difference does not impact the fact that both involve other bodies, i.e., do not fully inhere in any finite mind.

²⁸³ Della Rocca argues that to the extent that a thing is unintelligible, it does not exist (Della Rocca, 2003: 63) and thus reinforces the overall picture I am promoting here (even though he promotes an extreme asosmist reading) – singular things necessarily exist durationally, i.e., they are necessarily externally determined, have limited reality, and thus are necessarily inadequate. To the extent that they are inadequate, they are unintelligible, and thus to that extent unreal.

not related to God “except insofar as [it] relate[s] to the singular mind of someone” (2p36).²⁸⁴

This reading of the inadequacy of finite minds is in accordance with Ursula Renz’s interpretation already mentioned, according to which the knowledge of singular things is always indexical. Renz takes 2p9c (“whatever happens in the *singular* object of any idea, there is knowledge of it in God, *only* insofar as he has the idea of the same object”; emphasis added) to mean that “this knowledge [of singular things or events] depends on how the situation is viewed by someone with a very specific, historically situated perspective”, that is, on a “view from somewhere” (Renz, 2018: 141). According to Renz, singular entities can be known *only* to a historically determined subject (Renz, 2018: 141), meaning that singular human minds as such, and the representational content they have of singular things (first and foremost their own body), are not part of God’s infinite intellect, as they are inadequate ideas. Given everything that was discussed thus far, it seems that just as in the case of a singular body, a singular mind too is necessarily inadequate. It is inadequate both with regard to its immediate representational content and with regard to the causal interactions it has with other ideas. As such, since God’s ideas are necessarily adequate, a singular human mind (and any singular mind for that matter) does not follow directly from God and is not part of God’s infinite intellect, but rather part of the infinite chain of finite ideas.²⁸⁵

How, then, should one understand Spinoza’s claim that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God (2p11c)? In the exact same way that *ratios of motion and rest*, i.e., formal essences under

²⁸⁴ This idea, or more accurately related ideas, can be in God in two different ways, namely, as part of the infinite chain of finite causes, or as the formal essence of the singular. Importantly, both are not, strictly speaking, the idea of the singular body, and thus have different representational content. See Della Rocca, 1996.

²⁸⁵ It is important to bear in mind that inadequate ideas are merely partial, and as such do not include anything positive due to which they are false (2p33, 2p35). And so, the fact that a finite mind is inadequate does not mean it is illusory or that it represents something fictional, but rather, that it represents something *partial*. I intentionally refrain from delving into Spinoza’s epistemology here, but point this out just to emphasize that just as in the case of the singular body, a singular human mind does indeed participate in the formal essence “humanity” (under the attribute of thought). This idea will play a more central role in the next chapter where I argue that striving, understood as causal activity which includes external causes, and constitutes the singular thing’s actual essence, reflects how this partiality comes into play with regards to a singular thing’s own identity, i.e., to Q3.

the attribute of extension, follow from the immediate infinite mode of extension. In Ep. 64 Spinoza identifies the “absolute infinite intellect” with the immediate infinite mode under the attribute of thought. Recall that, when explaining what he means by the mind being a part of God’s intellect Spinoza makes a crucial distinction, arguing that “when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, *but insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind*, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea... insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that *the human mind perceives the thing* only partially, or inadequately” (2p11c). Spinoza thus distinguishes the essence of the human mind, which is part of God’s infinite intellect, from *a* human mind, which conceives things inadequately. It is *only* in the first case, i.e., when the *essence* of the human mind is considered, that a human’s perception is actually God’s, i.e., when it follows from the immediate infinite mode. Yet, as I will argue further the following section, there is an important way in which formal essences are expressed in duration, i.e., by singular things. To that extent, a singular mind may be said to have adequate ideas, yet to the same extent, it is not, strictly speaking, singular. In other words, since formal essences are shared, eternal, and indifferent to the finite things which partake in them, to the extent that a singular thing is its formal essence, it “lets go of” or “loses” its singularity.²⁸⁶

To conclude, both in the case of the body and of the mind, being singular means existing durationally, i.e., being constituted by causal interactions with external things, and being an inadequate cause, or idea. The innate inadequacy of singular minds makes clear that, to the extent that we consider *singular things as such*, they cannot exist in the same metaphysical realm as their eternal and infinite formal essences. Being inadequate is being partial, and being partial is being false. And since false ideas must differ in content from true ideas, the *it* which exist durationally must be really distinct and

²⁸⁶ I will discuss this issue further in the following chapter, when distinguishing two kinds of unions born out of a similarity in nature – complete numerical identity where one’s identity is completely lost, and a partial union where one’s identity is united with another’s

different in its content from the infinite and eternal *it*. Singular things, therefore, only exist durationally and are not mere copies of the infinite and eternal formal essences which they partake in.

4. Singular Things and Their Formal Essences

The aim of this section is to recap what has been argued for thus far in chapters 3 and 4, and to make sense of the relationship between a singular thing and its formal essence. While this relationship cannot be completely fleshed out prior to the discussion of singular things' actual essences, which I will offer in the next chapter, there is much to say at this point to set the stage for the discussion of the *conatus*. I begin by looking into 2p8 and its corollary, where the notions of formal essences and singular things intersect. After providing a renewed reading of these passages I turn to explicitly discuss the way formal essences are present in durationally existing singulars.

4.1 2p8 Reinterpreted

Here are 2p8 and 2p8c in their entirety:

“The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God’s attributes” (2p8).

“From this it follows that [i] so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist insofar as God’s infinite idea exists. And [ii] when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration” (2p8c).

As was argued for throughout chapter 3, what Spinoza refers to in 2p8 as the “ideas of singular things that do not exist” are the formal essences of those things. To fully account for this claim and to further unpack it in light of everything that I argued for in this chapter, I begin by looking at the corollary, which I divided into two sections. The first section speaks to the fact that singular things that do not durationally exist, do not exist *at all*, and to the eternity and infinity of their formal essences. The second speaks to the fact that singular things which do exist durationally are distinct from their formal essences, and thus their own ideas are objectively different from their ideas in God’s intellect, i.e., from the ideas of their formal essences. Taken together, the passage supports my overall reading of the deep distinction between formal essences and singular things and begins to explicate their relationship.

In the first section Spinoza discusses the objective being of singular things which do not exist, and he argues that the *only way* in which ideas of such non-existent singular exist in God’s idea is as the ideas of those things’ formal essences. Given [i] and everything that was argued for thus far, we may conclude from the fact that the ideas of non-existent singular things are ideas of their *formal essences* that *non-existent singular* things have no objective being *as such*. This is because, aside from the ideas which correspond to their formal essences, which are infinite and eternal, there aren’t, in God’s infinite idea, ideas representing the non-existent singular things, for they simply do not exist. This, recall,²⁸⁷ is what Spinoza argues for in 2p11c – it is the formal essence of human minds which is a part of God’s infinite intellect, rather than any singular mind.²⁸⁸ For, again, since God has only adequate ideas, there cannot be inadequate ideas of non-existent singulars (and of singulars more generally, but I will have more to say about this shortly) in God’s infinite intellect. Additionally, since the idea of an actually

²⁸⁷ See the last paragraph of the previous section for an argument for the following claim.

²⁸⁸ That God’s infinite intellect and the infinite idea of God are one and the same thing is relatively agreed upon in the literature. See, e.g., Giacotti, 1991: 101; Melamed 2013: 133; Schmaltz, 1997: 223-5; Wilson, 1999: ch. 11; Wolfson, 1962 Vol. 1 239-41; Hübner and Klingspor, 2025.

existing body, i.e., a singular finite mind, only exists as long as its immediate object does (2p11d), i.e., only so long as the body endures, there aren't ideas of non-existent singular finite things elsewhere. Thus, non-existent singular things have no reality whatsoever in Spinoza's metaphysical picture.

Yet if Spinoza denies the presence of ideas of singulars in God's intellect in general, why does he explicitly deny the presence of the ideas of non-existence singulars? My reading, one might worry, seems to make [i] somewhat redundant or unnecessary. To answer this question, 2p8 and 2p8c should be put in context. These passages appear directly after Spinoza argues for his parallelism doctrine. Now, in the scholium to 2p7, Spinoza discusses a circle *existing in Nature* and its idea as an example of such parallelism (2p7s; G/II/90 ;C/I/451), arguing that God causes both in the exact same way, as his power of thinking is equal to his power of acting (2p7c).²⁸⁹ Since the example given there is one of an actually, durationally existing thing, it makes perfect sense for Spinoza to immediately "secure" this parallelism with regards to things that do not exist too. When these things are concerned, Spinoza makes clear, the parallelism is between their formal essences and the ideas of those essences only.

From [i] we may conclude, then, that singular things that do not exist have neither objective nor formal, durational, or eternal reality. This is because there are only inadequate ideas of singular things, and so there isn't, in God's infinite intellect, any idea representing them (in isolation, as *a singular*), other than the ideas representing their formal essences, which are infinite and eternal. Additionally, for there to be an inadequate idea of a singular thing, the thing must durationally exist. Singular things which do not exist, thus, have no reality whatsoever when considered in and of themselves.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Spinoza argues that the circle and its idea are "one and the same thing, which is expressed through different attributes" (2p7s). I refrain from accounting for this identity claim, as it is beyond the scope of the discussion and does not affect it in any significant way. For views which take this identification literally see, e.g., Curley 1988; Della Rocca, 1996; Melamed, 2013. For views which argue for two really distinct modes see, e.g., Bennett, 1984 §34.2; Marshall, 2009.

²⁹⁰ They have reality as a part of the infinite chain of finite modes, yet as I have argued earlier, thinking of them in this context is thinking of *them* improperly. Still, though, as was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, we may have inadequate and imaginary ideas of non-existent singulars. Thus, it is important for Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology to make sense of their metaphysical status. Cf. Peterman, 2012 who distinguishes between eternal essences, singular things

After dealing with the issue of non-existent singular things and their parallel ideas, in section [ii] of 2p8c Spinoza explicates the difference between existent and non-existent singulars, as well as that between singulars and their formal essences. Spinoza argues that the ideas of singular things that durationally exist include the “existence through which they are said to have duration”. The very idea of the singular durationally existing thing thus *internally includes* its durational existence.²⁹¹ This point echoes several crucial aspects of singulars, and the content of their ideas, which stands in contrast to the content of the ideas of their formal essences.²⁹² Durational existence, it had been argued above (3.1) is nothing over and above existing in constant causal interactions with external things, i.e., finite and inadequate existence (1p28). If the idea of a singular thing includes such a way of existing, it is, as was already argued, necessarily inadequate. Moreover, to quote Costa one more time, “duration seem to constitute the very essence of the thing, insofar as the lack of duration implies a lack of existence, and insofar as the essence of things “posits” their existence” (Costa, 2025: 120). Thus, if the very idea of the existing singular thing includes its durational existence it is *because* this way of existing pertains to the essence of the singular thing as such. The idea of a singular thing *qua* singular necessarily includes its durational, i.e., interactive, being. Yet, again, formal essences are infinite and eternal, and thus the adequate ideas of them cannot include durational existence. Thus, from [ii] it seems clear that the ideas Spinoza brings up in 2p8 *cannot* have the same content as the ideas he brings up in 2p8c, i.e., ideas of actually existing singular things. Nonetheless, and in contrast with the ideas of non-existent singular things, ideas of durationally existing singulars do exist. As Spinoza explains in 2p8s, using the example

simpliciter, and instantiated essences which limit one another in space and time (Peterman, 2012: 56-9). Peterman posits singular things *simpliciter* to explain why Spinoza argues both that things are individuated prior to their instantiation, but also through their causal interactions. I take issue with her first claim, and find the notion of such singulars highly problematic in light of everything I argue for here.

²⁹¹ Notice that readings which take formal essences to be possibilities of *not yet existent* singular things, or take the ideas of singular things that do not exist to be ideas of things that do not exist *now* would have to account for the multitude of ideas a singular thing has in God’s intellect and explain how are they connected. My reading, according to which formal essences are shared and non-existent singular things have no idea representing them, avoids this issue. I discuss this point further below.

²⁹² Cf. Viljanen, 2011: 21-32, Costa, 2025: 128-9.

of actually drawn triangles, “their ideas also exist now... insofar as they involve the existence of those rectangles” (2p8s).

Elhanan Yakira’s reading of 2p8 and 2p8c and their use in the *Ethics* is in line with my suggested interpretation. According to Yakira, Spinoza invokes 2p8c in 5pp21-2 exactly in order to distinguish the mind as the idea of the enduring body (5p21d) from the mind as an idea expressing the *essence* of the human body *sub specie aeternitatis* (5p22). Yakira argues that the two propositions should be read as a single unit, expressing an opposition in something like the following way: The mind can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the body endures (5p21) since the mind neither express the actual existence of its body... except while the body endures (by IIP8C) (5p21d) ... *Nevertheless* in God there is necessarily an idea that expresses *the essence of this or that human body* under a species of eternity (5p22; emphasis added). According to Yakira, “the opposition referred to [by “nevertheless”] is that between existent and enduring things and their ideas, on the one hand, and nonexistent nonenduring things and their ideas, on the other” (Yakira, 1994: 162). Those nonexistent and nonenduring things, I have argued, are in fact the formal essences of singular, whether they exist or not.

The existence of enduring things, Yakira argues “is what individuates particular things. Outside [it], things *are* insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes. But... actuality in the sense of having duration, is caused by God, ‘not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular things which actually exists’ (EIIp9)” (Yakira, 1994: 169). Thus, Yakira’s reading of how Spinoza uses 2p8 and its corollary fits my suggested reading. In the passages mentioned above Spinoza seem to sharply distinguish not only the kind of *existence* formal essences have (eternal) from that of finite singular things (durational),²⁹³ but he further argues that the ideas comprehended in God’s infinite intellect have completely different content, as they are *of* something

²⁹³ Pace the majority of Platonists (see Chapter 3)

entirely different, i.e., of formal essences *rather than* singulars.

The picture that I have been arguing emerges from the 2p8 cluster of passages is of a clear distinction between singular things and their inadequate ideas on the one hand, and their formal essences and *their* adequate ideas on the other. Before attempting to explain the exact way in which, despite this distinction, formal essences are present in durational existence of singulars (which I have argued is necessarily the case), I wish to discuss an important advantage of my suggested reading. As I have mentioned in chapter 3, endorsing such a reading puts me in the Platonic interpretive camp according to which there is, for Spinoza, a real distinction between essence and existence, and, more germane to the topic at issue, between the existence of finite things and the existence of their formal essences, and thus a real distinction between a thing's formal and actual essence.²⁹⁴ Yet, differently from almost all Platonic readings, I do not take the nature of the relationship between formal essences and their instantiations to be one of possibility and actuality, realization or copy.²⁹⁵ The representational difference between ideas of formal essences and ideas of singular things, born out of a genuine difference in what formal essences and singular things (and their actual essences) *are*, avoids what I take to be the most pressing issue other Platonic readings face – that of the double presence of essences.

Lærke justifiably argues that Platonic readings suffer from the doubling of “the essential presence of a mode within the divine attribute of which it is a mode” (Lærke, 2017: 22).²⁹⁶ According to Lærke, under a classic Platonic picture, where there is a one-to-one relation between a formal

²⁹⁴At this point, I hope to have convinced the reader that some form of Platonism is in order, and that aspectual, or perspectival readings are out of the question. Thus, I will only discuss the advantages my particular view has over competing Platonic readings.

²⁹⁵ These options were reviewed throughout chapter 3.

²⁹⁶ For an example of this see, e.g., Alanen who argues that “Singular things exist eternally *qua* formal essences included in God's essence, moreover, whenever these essences are instantiated in duration, they also exist *qua* temporal and contingent (E5p29s, E2p8c), with their corresponding temporally determined actual essences... [yet] there isn't any gap between the formal essence and the actual being of a thing in duration, but...the latter [is] a finite temporally definite instantiation of the former that is determined by the infinite eternal whole in which it exists and from which its essence flows necessarily” (Alanen, 2018: 375 n. 28).

essence and an enduring mode, once the mode enters into existence, together with its actual essence, two essences of the exact same mode are contained in the same attribute, and this is in obvious contrast with Spinoza's parallelism (Lærke, 2017: 22-3). I take it that this issue occurs even under the most charitable reading of classic Platonic readings, for, as Spinoza argues in 2p8c, when a singular thing durationally exists, its existence is an intrinsic part of its idea and is essential to it. Thus, so long as one takes a formal essence to be both eternal and the essence of a particular, singular thing (as most Platonists do), one cannot help but admit that there are two distinct essences of the exact same thing.²⁹⁷

According to my view, though, such doubling of essences never occurs. A singular thing (and its actual essence) is necessarily externally determined, is constituted by causal interactions, and since there cannot be an adequate idea of it, it is not part of God's infinite intellect. While, again, there is an idea of a singular thing in God in conjuncture with ideas of other singular things, the content of this idea does not represent the actual essence of the singular, but the entire causal chain of which it is a part.²⁹⁸ On the other hand, formal essences are infinite and eternal, exist prior to, and are indifferent to, the things of which they are essences; they follow from God's absolute nature, and their ideas are thus necessarily adequate and contained in God's intellect. Formal and actual essences, thus, do not express the same *entity*. The problem of the double presence of essences is not a problem for my view. Additionally, as I attempted to show in this section, I believe my reading makes 2p8 somewhat clearer and resolves some of the issues and ambiguities around the idea of non-existent singular things and the nature of the relationship between finite things and their eternal essences. Of course, it remains a task to get clear on how exactly shared formal essences are instantiated in many, and in what way are they present in the durational realm.

²⁹⁷ Notice that even if a classic Platonist admits that the actual essence is not in God in the way the formal essence is (for reasons argued for throughout this chapter) still, there are two essences expressing the *same entity* under the same attribute.

²⁹⁸ Thus, even if one insists that this is a proper way of talking about the presence of a singular in God's mind (and I don't think, so long that we are interested in the particular singular, that it is), its content is vastly different from the content of the idea of the formal essence of the thing.

4.2 – In What Way Do Formal Essences Endure?

It is time to discuss the relationship between formal essences and singular things explicitly, or to account for how, exactly, formal essences are present in the durational realm and are instantiated in singular things.²⁹⁹ It is important to make clear that I will not attempt to provide an answer to the question of how the finite follows from the infinite in Spinoza, but I will instead explain in what way, *given* that finite things have eternal shared essences, we should think of the relationship that obtains between them.³⁰⁰

The issue needing clarification is born out of the following – I have argued that formal essences are eternal and infinite, that they are universal-like, and thus may be shared by many singulars, and that their ideas are different in content from the ideas of singular things of which they are essences. I have further argued that formal essences enjoy eternal existence, and that they follow directly from God’s absolute nature, while singular things are finite and only exist durationally (and that they are the only things that enjoy this kind of existence). I have spent a substantive amount of time arguing for this claim, which puts pressure on the idea that formal essences endure. On the other hand, I have argued that formal essences are shared *kind* essences, meaning that they are in fact, in some way or another, expressed in singular things, e.g., as humanity is expressed in each and every singular human being. Thus, formal essences, i.e., *ratios of motion and rest* (and the parallel *form* under the attribute of thought), answer Q2 kind questions, i.e., they explain what makes a particular (durationally existing) entity the kind of thing that it is, and thus condition and constrain the thing and what it can or cannot

²⁹⁹ I have hinted at this issue at the very end of chapter 3 section 3.3. Now that the nature of singular things has been discussed, the account can be further articulated. A full account, as was already mentioned, will be fleshed out by the end of chapter 5, where I provide an explanation to the way in which things strive and how one’s striving is related to maintaining one’s formal essence.

³⁰⁰ Thus, I will not argue *that* finite things have eternal formal essences, but I will provide an account of *how* they relate to them.

do.³⁰¹ Clearly, then, formal essences do actually and practically influence, or cause, each and every enduring singular thing, and are present in its durational existence. The question now is how.

The key for understanding the way formal essences are present in the durational, or how singular things express these infinite and eternal essences, is focusing on their characterization as power structures which modify God's power, and the characterization of durational existence as inadequate. I suggest that, in the same way that formal essences express God's power in a determinate way, so too singular things express *the same power* in an even more determinate way. Yet, while formal essences, given that they are infinite modes, are complete causes of all the properties they entail (3D1; Hübner, 2015b), and of which there is an adequate idea in God's mind, singular things, given that their existence is externally determined, express that power only partially, or inadequately, as their singular existence is determined partly by this power, and partly by external forces. Let me unpack this claim further.

In section 3.3 of the previous chapter I argued that formal essences, expressed under the attribute of extension as *ratios of motion and rest*, should be understood as structures of causal powers, since they are infinite modes, which follow from God's essences, *or* power, and thus express and modify that very power.³⁰² I have also suggested that the causal relationship which obtains between God and formal essences, as well as between formal essences and singular things, is a kind of formal causality, wherein the essence of a cause brings about certain properties in its effect. Here is an example of the model I am putting forth – the formal essence “humanity” consists of the power to reason, or the power to live under the guidance of reason (4p35). This power is a unique and unified power,³⁰³ which is nothing but a modification of God's own infinite power (1p25c) expressed under the attribute

³⁰¹ See Chapter 2.

³⁰² In addition to 1p25c, which was cited already, see 5p36d for an identification between the mind's essence and God's thought.

³⁰³ Meaning that it is a single mode, rather than an abstract universal or a general idea.

of thought. Similarly, when a single human being comes into durational existence, it is in virtue of this (modified) power that she comes to exist *as human*, i.e., as an entity able to live under the guidance of reason.

As mentioned, my suggestion of how formal essences are expressed in durational existence draws on readings according to which Spinoza holds an account of formal causality, understood as a “relation of inference of a property from a thing’s essence” (Hübner, 2015b: 206). According to such views, this model of causality Spinoza endorses is in line with a model, common to Spinoza’s era, of geometrical truths as expressing formal causation (Viljanen, 2011: 44-5; Hübner, 2015b: 208). Under such a model, for example, that a triangle’s inner angles are equal to two right angles is an effect formally caused by the triangle’s essence.³⁰⁴ As Viljanen makes clear, formal causes do not merely entail properties, but “insofar as things are real, [this] essential causal architecture equals efficacy, i.e., bringing about *real* effects, states, or properties” (Viljanen, 2011: 45). Thus, as Hübner argues, a formal cause is both conceptual (explaining the properties of the effect) and productive (bringing about the actual existence of the effect) (Hübner, 2015b: 210-211). A formal cause, thus, is an essence which brings into existence the essential qualities of the thing of which it is an essence.

Applying this model to the matter at hand yields the following picture – from the infinite nature or the formal essence “human” singular humans “receive” their humanity. Since formal essences are real, actually existing infinite modes (rather than merely mind-dependent universals), their casual power is efficient, i.e., they in fact bring about the existence of such qualities, which are expressed in finite, durationally existing, things.³⁰⁵ Put differently, I suggest that finite things come into

³⁰⁴ According to Viljanen this model is the reason for Spinoza’s use of the triangle example in 1p17s to describe the way everything necessarily flows from God’s essence. See 1p17s; G/II/62; C/I/426-7.

³⁰⁵ Recall that the *fact* that there are singular things of a certain kind is not what I attempt to explain here but is a working premise. Given that this is the case, what I attempt to explain is what might in turn explain this fact, i.e., what the relationship is between a thing’s kind and its existence as an instance of this kind, and in what way does its kind-ness present itself in its finite existence.

existence from the conjuncture of finite causes – in virtue of which they come into existence at a certain moment as part of the causal nexus – and formal causes – in virtue of which they have (some of) the qualities that they do and are things of a certain kind.³⁰⁶

In a way similar to the way God’s essence causes the power to reason to be of its particular nature, the power to reason causes a further modification of *it* to be of a particular nature, e.g., to be human. Viljanen seem to endorse this view, as he suggests both that “calling the eternal essences precisely *formal* essences is a nod in the direction of the traditional notion of form, which also was considered a type of cause”, and that 1p17s, (where Spinoza argues that “from the supreme power...all things... always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows... that its three angles are equal to two right angles” (1p17s)) indicates that God is the formal cause of its modifications (Viljanen, 2011: 42-3). Thus, the modifications of the power to reason, *or* humanity for example, are finite, singular things, constituted in virtue of their causal interactions which limit their ability to fully express their (formal) essence, i.e., to be fully rational.³⁰⁷ Thus, it is not the essence itself or the causal relation it bears to the singular thing which limits its effect, and it is also not the essence itself which constitutes the singular thing *as such*. Rather, as a formal cause, the formal essence determines what the thing, existing as a part of nature, can or cannot do, i.e., what kind of a thing it is.

This limited expression of power is, crucially, not really distinct from the singular thing which

³⁰⁶ See LeBuffe, 2026: 23-4 for a similar idea, and his claim that “Ardern and Bloomfield are one insofar as they are human and are two, and distinguishable, in virtue of their different places in the order of the whole of nature” (LeBuffe, 2026: 28). I will propose a similar view in chapter 5. Cf. Hübner, who argues that formal causes are necessary and sufficient for the existence of their effects (Hübner, 2015b: 212). There are more subtle issues revolving around formal causation in Spinoza on which I disagree with Hübner (and Viljanen), yet my aim here is not to provide a full-blown account of formal causality, but to explain the way in which formal essences, as formal causes of finite things, endure.

³⁰⁷ This seems to be in tension with the idea that external things do not limit the essence of a thing but only its existence (1p8s1, see Primus, 2023b: 455-6), but it is merely an apperant tension. Since a finite human being is constantly limited and conditioned by external forces, its power, and not merely the length of its durational existence, is limited (see 4pre). Thus, by virtue of being finite it cannot absolutely express its power to reason. I will say more on this in Chapter 5.

expresses it, and it is not really distinct from the formal essence either.³⁰⁸ And so, a formal essence is present in durational existence to the extent that the *very same* power structure, i.e., a certain *ratio*, is *further* modified in finite and determinate ways. While the idea of the formal essence itself is adequate, the idea of the singular thing which is an instance of this essence is necessarily inadequate. Thus, there is a difference in the content of the idea representing the formal essence *per se*, and the idea representing the *singular thing expressing, inadequately, the same essence*, and correspondingly, a difference in the way this very essence is actually expressed. The inadequacy of durational existence, i.e., that singulars are always inadequate causes of which there are inadequate ideas, is thus crucial for understanding just how formal essences could be expressed in singular things, and it is also crucial to understand how they may be instantiated in many, or endure more generally, while still being infinite and eternal in and of themselves. Inadequacy, it was already mentioned, is understood by Spinoza as partiality. And so, we may say that the very same unified structure of powers which eternally exists and is in and of itself complete, is partially expressed in each of its finite instantiations.³⁰⁹ My power to reason is a partial expression of the infinite power to reason, and so is yours. Yet they are expressions of the very same power, and thus to the extent that they express it, they express the exact same thing (and to that extent, as I'll argue in the next chapter, they *are* themselves the same). And so, singular things express, or instantiate, formal essences since they are further modifications of the exact same power formal essences are. Yet, due to their finitude they express it only partially, i.e., they are not the complete causes of effects they bring about in virtue of this power.

According to this view, the power each finite thing expresses in virtue of its formal essence *is*

³⁰⁸ This may sound extremely close to how the *conatus*, i.e., a thing's actual essence, is related to it, and that's exactly right. In the next chapter I will argue that *part* of what a thing does while striving is maintaining its *ratio*. As I argued in the second chapter, and as I will argue again in the next one, between a thing's formal and actual essences there is a tight and intimate, perhaps inseparable, connection. Yet I will further argue that since a thing's formal essence is merely a condition for its identity, and does not exhaust it, that is not all the *conatus* does, contrary to how many scholars understand it (e.g., Garrett, 2018; Carriero, 2020; Lin, 2019; Viljanen, 2011 etc.)

³⁰⁹ Since this power is infinite, and may be infinitely instantiated, it is not the case that the "sum" of finite instances constitute, or make up, the power itself.

just the power of the formal essence. This, I take it, must be the case, since (as I'll argue in depth in the next chapter) Spinoza takes two instances of the exact same power to be numerically one, as he argues that "if two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful" (4p18s; G/II/223; C/I/556). For this to be the case, their nature has to be numerically one, i.e., the power of the formal essence which they both partake in.³¹⁰

A possible complication to this view is that the power by which a thing is of a certain kind – in virtue of which it may be an adequate cause and interact with things external to it – does not really and fully belong to the singular thing. If this is the case, one may wonder, how does a singular thing *qua* singular limit (and thus constitute) other singulars? While I see where this objection is coming from, I think it can be overcome; If one takes the fact that the power of singulars is the power of their formal essence modified to mean that singulars lack power of their own, then one must deny that anything other than God has power, and thus that anything other than God really exists. After all, whether finite or infinite, all things are caused by God (1p18), and this is because all things are modes of God. In the demonstration to 1p18 Spinoza grounds the claim that God is the cause of all things in 1p16c ("God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect") and in 1p15 ("Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God") which, in turn, is demonstrated by reference to 1D5 – the definition of modes. In other words, there is a sense in which everything is caused by God, and for the exact same reason. Thus, with regards to the question of whether being a modification of power necessarily denies a thing of being (to some extent) real, finite modes and infinite modes are on a par. For, again, the way in which infinite modes modify God's own power is the way in which finite things modify the power of infinite modes. While the latter do so inadequately, it is not in virtue of the relation to the formal essence that they do, but in virtue of them

³¹⁰ A non-literal reading of this passage seems to be in tension with the PII. If there are two things that entirely agree in nature, they must be numerically one. Cf. Barbone, 2002 argues on these grounds that the identity condition can never be met.

being finite things, constituted by casual interactions.

Thus, again, one can argue either that both infinite modes and finite modes, since they are all modification of power, do not own that power, or that they are all modifications of power, but that, as such, they may be considered as having that power. What might be helpful to bring up here is that for Spinoza, reality may come in degrees, and that, due to their finitude, singular things, even though completely actual, are not completely real. In this sense, it does not strike me as problematic (over and above the problems that degraded reality may bring with it) that singulars *qua* singulars own their power, which they have in virtue of being of a certain kind, to a limited extent.

Perhaps the best way to illuminate this complex metaphysical picture here is by an illustration, though it should be kept in mind that any illustration, rich and complex as it may be, will not be an accurate description of the entire metaphysical structure. The most crucial aspects which the illustration will fail to express is the infinity of substance and infinite modes, the fact that the relations among modes (whether finite or infinite) is not spatial, and the actual causal and conceptual relations which hold among the different ontological levels. The virtue of this model is that it captures the way things inhere in substance and in their causes, yet are still (to different degrees) independent or individuated.

With these caveats in mind, here is a sketch of the metaphysical picture, as I see it, under the attribute of thought:³¹¹

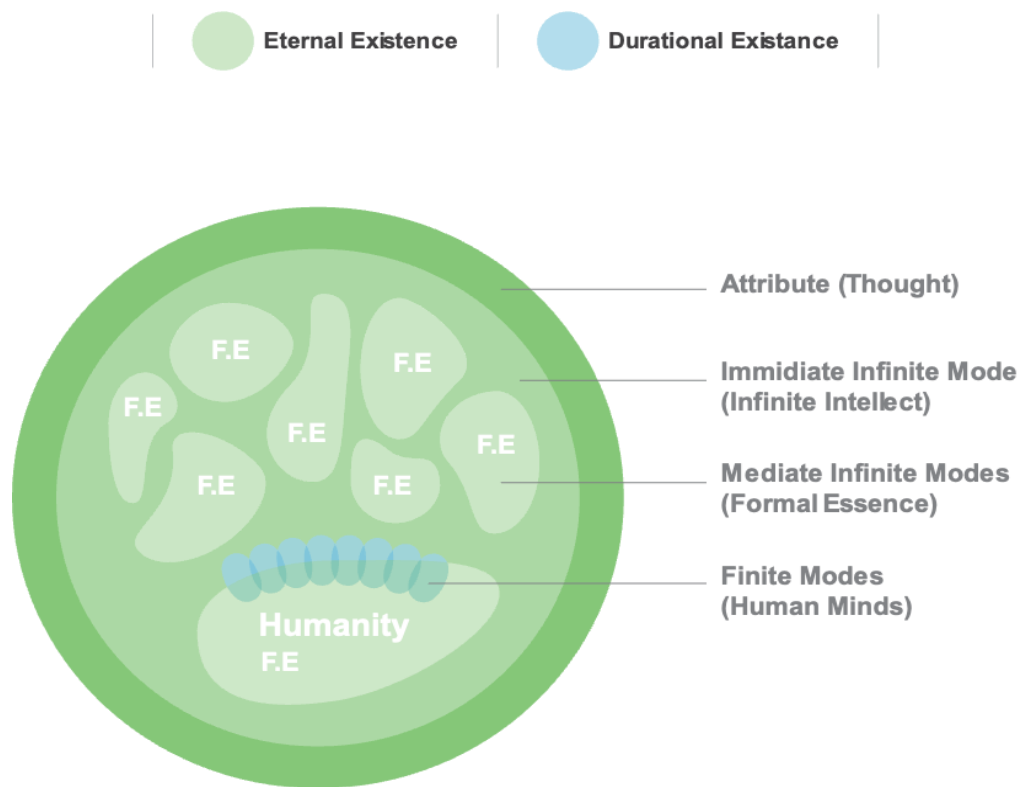


Illustration 1: The metaphysical picture

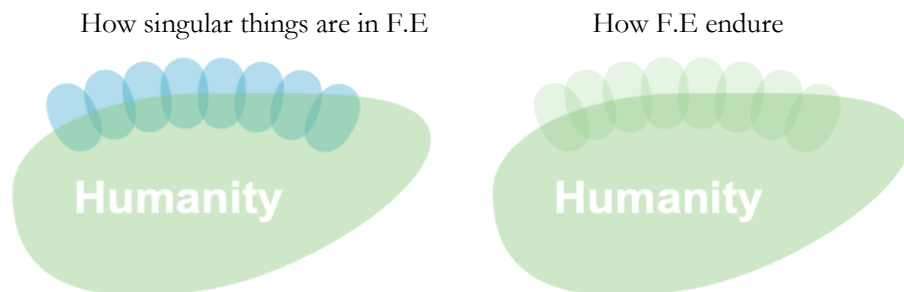


Illustration 2: Close up of formal essences' durational existence

³¹¹ I thank Noa Rabinovich Lalo for creating these illustrations.

Here is what is going on in the first figure: the outermost border stands for the attribute *or* the thinking substance. Immediately following from the attribute is the immediate infinite mode, i.e., God's infinite intellect (1p21).³¹² From the immediate infinite mode mediate infinite modes, i.e., formal essences, follow (1pp22-23). These, again, are infinite and eternal ways of the infinite intellect to be, or to express its power, i.e., they are modifications of modification of God's infinite power of thought. They are, so to speak, "parts of the infinite intellect" (2p11c). Nonetheless, as is clear from the illustration, they are real, meaning that they have their own formal reality and express God's power in a certain way. Notice that the formal essences do not externally determine each other.³¹³ While their infinity is difficult to capture through a two-dimensional illustration, one may try to conceptualize this infinity in terms of depth and causal power, rather than spatially, to relieve some the difficulty. From the formal essences, and from their interactions with external things, finite minds are caused. As the illustration makes clear, these singular things, to the extent that they express their formal essence, *are* their formal essence. Yet as singulars, in and of themselves, they express this very same essence in a limited way, as enduring finite entities. As finite parts of the infinite chain of finite causes, they are represented in God's mind, yet each and every one of them does not have its *own* idea in God's mind. The way in which, on the one hand, singulars participate in their formal essence and thus are (again, only to the extent that they are "humanity") infinite, and, on the other hand, formal essences may endure to the extent that they are expressed by singulars, is expressed in the second illustration. How and under what conditions a singular thing may unite with its formal essences, and when does it merely

³¹² The immediate infinite mode, i.e., the infinite intellect, is supposed to exhaust the first ontological level which follows from the attribute of thought, yet it is impossible to illustrate this point while keeping the two distinct. Similarly, formal essences are supposed to occupy the entire ontological level which directly follows from the immediate infinite mode, yet this also cannot be illustrated without making it seem as if one essence externally determine another.

³¹³ This is true for formal essences at the same level of mediacy. In this project, I do not address whether there are more or less general formal essences which might determine each other (as "shape" may be taken to determine "cube"). It should be mentioned that since Spinoza discusses human nature in particular (as opposed to other species), there is little reason to believe that he considered, say, "female human" or "mammal" to be formal essences or to be relevant for the identity of singulars in the same way.

express it while remaining finite, will be discussed in length in the following chapter.

To conclude, formal essences endure to the extent that singular things, which the formal essences are the formal causes of, endure. They endure since singular things express the exact power which formal essences are. Yet singular things are finite and are constituted partly by their formal essences and partly by external singular things and so express their formal essence in a limited and determinate way. Additionally, they are not the complete causes of the effects they bring about in virtue of this power, and this power cannot be completely understood through any particular singular thing. Thus, formal essences only endure in a limited, finite and determinate, way.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, in this chapter I attempted to articulate Spinoza's notion of singularity, and to begin explicating the way in which singular things relate to the infinite and eternal realm. I have argued that the definition of singular things (2D7) and the way Spinoza uses the term throughout the *Ethics* demands that we take singular things to necessarily exist durationally and to be constituted by their causal interactions with external things. I have further argued that as finite and determinate singular things, bodies and minds alike are necessarily inadequate, and thus that they cannot be identical to the formal essences in which they partake. Lastly, I have suggested that their inadequacy, combined with the account of formal essences as modifications of God's infinite power, sheds light on how formal essences participate in the durational or in what way singular things partake in them. I argued that singular things are partial, i.e., inadequate expressions of the complete, i.e., adequate structure of causal powers that formal essences are.

This characterization of the relationship between formal essences and singular things helps us further understand the way in which a thing's individuality, i.e., its *ratio*, or formal essence, answers Q2

type questions about singular things (i.e., what makes a thing be of a certain kind) but fails to answer Q3 type questions, (i.e., what makes the thing *this* rather than *that*). From the discussion held thus far we know how singular things are constituted as such, yet we still do not have a good grasp on how, exactly, they are individuated or in virtue of what do they have the specific identity that they do (either synchronic or diachronic). With these considerations in mind, I turn to provide the answer to the identity question by providing an interpretation of Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine, which is the last missing piece of the metaphysical puzzle. It is through a thing's striving, I argue in the next chapter, that singular things have their own, unique identity, and it is in virtue of their striving that they are *this* rather than *that*.

Chapter 5: *CONATUS* AND IDENTITY

The *Conatus* Doctrine as an Answer to Q3 – What Makes an Entity *This* Rather Than *That*

1. Introduction

This last chapter of the dissertation is meant to finally provide an answer to the question motivating this project as a whole, i.e., what makes an entity *this* rather than *that* (Q3)? I argued in the first chapter that the answers to Q1 and Q2 (what makes something an individual, and what makes something an individual of a certain kind) should not be taken to also automatically provide an answer to Q3. I have shown in chapters 2 and 3 that, indeed, Spinoza's answers to both the first and the second questions – having a certain *ratio of motion and rest* – *cannot* account for what makes something the particular thing that it is. In chapter 4, I provided a comprehensive account of the metaphysics and ontology of the entity whose identity is in question, i.e., of *singular things*. I also began to explain how a singular thing's shared formal essence is present in its unique, durational existence, and how and to what extent it influences its identity. It is now time to complete the picture and to look into a singular thing's *actual essence*, i.e., *its conatus*.

The structure of this dissertation had led me, by elimination, to the conclusion that it is in virtue of a thing's actual essence, i.e., its striving, that it *is* the unique thing that it is, or that it is *this* rather than *that* singular thing. In this chapter I will provide further, positive evidence that this is in fact the case, i.e., that it is the *conatus* which provides the answer to Q3, as well as explain what singular things do when they strive, and thus, in what way striving constitutes a thing's identity. As Spinoza explicitly argues, singular things are only rationally distinct from their actual essences (CM I.VI; G/I/248; C/I/314) and thus are completely constituted by these essences and are identical to them. What's more, it is important to keep in mind that for Spinoza, there isn't anything else which fully

determines a singular thing's identity.³¹⁴ Thus, whatever the nature of striving turns out to be, and whatever the nature, and identity, of the entity it gives rise to, will provide the definitive answer to Q3. To anticipate, I will argue that what Spinoza's theory of the *conatus* means is that singular things strive to increase their causal power, that they do so both when they act and when they are acted on, and that this causal endeavor constitutes their essence. Since this is the case, the identity of singulars is always developing, or is in constant flux, and is constituted by external forces as much as internal ones.³¹⁵ In other words, I will show that a singular thing's identity is determined both internally and externally, and, more crucially, that certain things with which a singular thing interacts, namely, things with which it shares a nature, i.e., which fall under the same formal essence, should count as a genuine part of its identity and as unified with it (and to that extent they are no longer completely external). According to my view, then, our first-person experience of ourselves as atomic individuals which are sharply distinct from one another is *not* the kind of identity Spinoza's metaphysics gives rise to. Our identity, I aim to show, is nothing other than our causal interactions and thus metaphysically, necessarily and fundamentally includes others.

Arguing in this way situates my reading alongside the "relational autonomy" interpretation of Spinoza. According to this line of interpretation, Spinoza promotes a non-Cartesian, "relational" account of autonomy, wherein a thing's freedom is not limited to self-determination and adequate causation and is greatly influenced by its environment, its interactions, and the society in which it

³¹⁴ As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, I argue that Spinoza's metaphysical commitments, as well as his epistemology, his naturalism and anti-humanism, undermine the commonsensical first-person experience of ourselves and the world around us as occupied by sharply distinct individuals. This means that whatever the nature of the entity whose identity is in question turns out to be, it will determine how we should think about synchronic and diachronic identity in Spinoza, even in the case of a highly counterintuitive view. Cf. Renz, 2018. Further more, the notions of "internal" and "external" will turn out to be rather different from how we normally think of them. Similarly to Armstrong, 2009, my view will entail that to the extent that things agree in nature and cause each other passive joy, they are not really external to each other. Whether something is internal or external, thus, is not a matter of spatial relations, but of agreement in nature.

³¹⁵ Things that contribute to a singular thing's causal power will directly be a part of their essence, things which decrease this power will indirectly affect their identity by determining what the singular in question cannot do, or where its particular essence ends (3pp4-5). I will discuss this important distinction thoroughly later on.

exists.³¹⁶ I am in complete agreement with these readings and take this chapter to be a contribution to this interpretive option which is gaining more and more power in Spinoza scholarship. My reading differs from the existing ones in two important respects, namely (i) in the metaphysical justifications behind it, which are grounded in the distinction between a thing's shared formal essence (i.e., its *ratio of motion and rest*) and its unique actual one, and the relationship that obtains between them, and (ii) in the exact role that relationality plays in constituting one's *identity*, which extends over and above one's autonomy.³¹⁷ According to my reading, there is hardly any identity prior to, or more fundamental than, the relational identity a thing's *conatus* brings about. Metaphysically speaking, *my* identity is constituted by and is shaped by *your* identity.³¹⁸

The picture which will emerge here, and its relation to the foregoing discussions, could be understood in the following way: In 2D7 Spinoza provides us with a definition of singular things and sets the causal condition for their constitution. Yet it is not until the third part of the *Ethics*, and the presentation of the *conatus* doctrine, that we truly understand what this causal condition is exactly, and how it gives rise to singulars *as such*. It is singulars, thus, which provide “specific content to the otherwise empty conception of ‘self’ that every self-preserving thing endeavors to preserve” (Garrett, 1994: 96-7), rather than, as Garrett argues in this quoted passage, individuals. The fact that Spinoza uses singulars in 3p6, and that he understands both the constitution of singulars and of actual essences in terms of causal power, is strong evidence that this is in fact the case. And so, according to the reading I develop throughout the chapter, there *is no singular thing*, and no particular essence, prior to,

³¹⁶ See, e.g., Armstrong, 2009; Balibar, 1997; Kisner, 2020; Williams, 2019; Tucker, 2019.

³¹⁷ I also think that the view of relational identity I propose here should have bearings on how we understand Spinoza's notion of personality. This issue, though, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, thus I will only briefly mention it in the conclusions of this dissertation.

³¹⁸ I will unpack this claim throughout the chapter but will argue for its specific meaning in the last section. The idea is that, while my experience of my self is an experience of a distinct person, who I really and fully am is something different, something more extended that includes, metaphysically speaking, those who I experience as others.

or separated from, the thing's causal interactions; a thing's actual essence is, I will show, constituted by its affects, i.e., by the active and passive expressions of its causal power.³¹⁹

This chapter will proceed as follows: I will begin, in section 2, by providing a general account of striving. I first show that the *conatus* doctrine is attributed by Spinoza to singular things (2.1). Since singulars are constituted by their interactions with external things, I then argue that striving should be understood as expressing causal power, and that singular things strive to increase in power by interacting and cooperating with others, and thus that striving should not be restricted to self-determination (2.2). To motivate the view, I first distinguish two ways to understand human freedom, which I call the dominant interpretation (DI), according to which striving consists in self-determination and adequate causation, and a competing reading according to which freedom involves passivity and interaction; I argue in favor of the latter on grounds of humans being singular things (2.2.1). Next, I explain how such an interpretation of human freedom supports my reading of the *conatus*, and provide evidence that, in fact, Spinoza understands striving as increase of power for which interactions are crucial and indispensable (2.2.2).³²⁰ In section 3 I discuss in further details *how* singular things strive and provide my main thesis; Building on the “constant essence constitution” reading, I explain exactly how different causal interactions and the affects they bring about constitute, or diminish, a thing's own essence, and argue that under certain conditions — where we experience passive joy by interacting with things with which we share a nature — a metaphysical unity between us and the causes of our joy occurs.

³¹⁹ It is important to emphasize that I am not arguing for the fact *that* singular things have distinct *conatuses* in virtue of which they are numerically distinct, and I take the plurality of singulars to be a working premise. My focus here is rather on what this *conatus* is exactly, and how it constitutes a thing's identity. Thus, two things have distinct ways of striving in virtue of which they are two, yet (as I will argue throughout this chapter) it is in virtue of their striving that they may also be united such that they mutually constitute each other's identity.

³²⁰ Importantly, as I will discuss in this section, while the discussion of human freedom helps motivate the view, such reading of the *conatus* is not restricted to the striving of humans. All things, I will show, strive in this way, yet, since, more often than not, the DI influences how scholars think about the *conatus*, providing an alternative picture of freedom is useful and, I believe, might help with possible immediate objections the reader may initially have.

By the end of the third section my understanding of the *conatus* will be fully fleshed out. To anticipate, I will show that with every causal interaction, whether we are an adequate or an inadequate cause of an effect we bring about, our actual essence is changed and developed, and that it is by interacting with things with which we agree in nature that we become more powerful and strive more successfully. In section 4, I discuss the implications of such a reading of the *conatus* for a singular thing's identity. I show that Spinoza is explicit about the identity of a thing and its striving, and that scholars are in complete agreement that it is in fact what makes an entity *this* rather than *that*. Thus, I argue that our identity should also be understood as constantly changing and developing in virtue of, and on grounds of, our relationships with others. Given everything that I have argued for in the dissertation, I argue, again, that this is true not merely psychologically (meaning that our personality is influenced by our environment) but that it is our metaphysical union under a shared formal essence which gives rise to this identity constitution, and thus that a metaphysical union among singular things is possible and is welcomed by Spinoza.

2. The *Conatus* Doctrine

2.1 As the Actual Essence of Singular Things

Spinoza presents his *conatus* doctrine in the third part of the *Ethics*, arguing that "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to preserve in its being" (3p6), and that this striving "is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (3p7). As noted already (chapter 4 section 2.2), Spinoza takes the *conatus* to be the power by which a thing exists *now*, suggesting that actual essences are essences of

things which durationally exist, and that it is in virtue of these essences that these things so exist.³²¹

Thus, it is no coincidence that in the demonstration of 3p6 Spinoza argues that "*singular things* are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determined way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34) things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts" (3p6d). Recall that in chapter 3 I argued that formal essences which are infinite modes that follow directly from God's essence also express God's power in a modified way. The fact that Spinoza uses *singulars* here, when presenting his *conatus* doctrine, may suggest that he wants to distinguish the way infinite things express God's power from the way finite things do when they strive.³²²

Deleuze puts this point in quite helpful terms when he argues that "precisely because modal essence [i.e., *conatus*] is not a possibility, because it is a *physical reality* that lacks nothing, it does not tend to pass into existence; but it tends to persevere in existing, *once the mode is determined to exist* [meaning that] to preserve is to endure" (Deleuze, 1988: 98-9; emphasis added). According to Deleuze, a thing's actual essence is constituted once the thing durationally exists, or it is the essence of things existing in a finite and determined way, and it consists of the thing's power to keep on existing *in this specific way*.³²³

³²¹ For an argument for this point, see Chapter 4, section 2.2. For more readings according to which only finite things strive, see, e.g., Sangiacomo, 2015; Primus, 2023; Rice, 1977; Lord, 2010; Nadler, 2020; Viljanen, 2011; Aksoy, 2021; Bennett, 1984; Lin, 2019; Kisner, 2011, 2020; Yovel, 1989. For readings according to which striving is not restricted to finite things, see Della Rocca, 2008. Most of these readings, it is important to point out, do not take formal and actual essences to be different from one another as I do. As such, most (excluding Kisner) take external things to mostly be in the way of the thing's realization of its formal essence.

³²² Cf. Lærke, 2017, according to whom there cannot be such difference since formal and actual essences are only aspectually distinct. See also Della Rocca, 2008: 152-3. The idea that God might strive, yet in a different way than finite things, does not affect my understanding of the striving of finite things at all and might even complement it (for it supports the idea that striving should not be thought of through discrete intuitive "atomic" entities, but more on this later). That both formal and actual essences are understood as modified expressions of God's power is an important feature of my view which will come into play later. As I argued in the last section of Chapter 4, and as I will further argue in this chapter, actual essences are *further* determinations of formal ones, and are all expressions of the one, infinite, and eternal power of God, by which all things are. Yet striving, since it is an expression of this power within the causal nexus, expresses God's power differently than formal essences do, by causal interactions and external determinations.

³²³ A similar idea of such identification of existence and power is presented quite clearly by Leibniz in *On Nature Itself*. Leibniz discusses the nature of existing, persisting things—i.e., monads—and whether they have any innate force. Leibniz argues that "the very substance of things consists in a force for acting and being acted upon" and that if this were not the case "no soul would remain numerically the same [and] corporal things... could rightly be said to be in constant change... no true entities at all would be left in bodies" (Leibniz, 1898: 159-162). According to Leibniz, force is essential for the constitution and the persistence of a monad, such that to be or to exist is to have and exercise such innate power. A monad's identity and existence are identical to or are grounded in its power of acting. Obviously, Leibniz and Spinoza

Deleuze's way of framing the *conatus* is reminiscent of 2p8c, and the distinction made there between singular things which only exist as comprehended in God's attributes on the one hand, and singular things which are said to exist also as they are said to have duration on the other (2p8c), and goes hand in hand with the interpretation I offered for such a distinction, i.e., that the former refers to singular things' *formal* essences, while the latter refers to those things themselves, and thus to their *actual* essences.³²⁴ I have previously argued that singular things, being finite, determinate, and constituted by the causal nexus, are necessarily different in content from their formal essences, which lack no formal reality, and are infinite and eternal. And so, if actual essences are the essences of durationally existing things, they too seem to necessarily be different in content from the formal ones, and thus to be something different than the maintaining of a *ratio*.³²⁵

Before focusing on exactly what it means that the *conatus* is a causal power of finite, durationally existing things, I wish to present a possible objection to my reasoning, according to which singular things do not strive and do not have a *conatus*, yet individuals do. Dominik Perler holds this position. According to Perler, Spinoza mentions no "common structure" in his definition of singulars (2D7), while he does when defining individuals (2p13D). Thus, "one can call a singular thing a *causal unity* and thereby distinguish it from an individual, which is a *structural unity*" (Perler, 2021: 173). Perler argues that only structural unities are preserved by the *conatus* (even though every individual is also a singular

disagree on the metaphysical status of forceful things, which are substances for Leibniz but are modes for Spinoza; yet there is reason to think they agree that these entities' existence *is* power, and that their identities are constituted in virtue of this power. Cf. Descartes, *Principles*, III, 56. Scholars tend to think of Spinoza's notion of striving as fundamentally Cartesian. While this is definitely true to an extent, thinking of striving in terms of existential inertia falls short of explaining its centrality to Spinoza's ethical project. Leibniz's understanding of striving, which subjects a particular entity's identity to its power to persist, seems more in line with what Spinoza means by striving. It should be noted, though, that the power Leibniz attributes to monads is completely innate, while I argue that Spinoza's *conatus* should be understood in light of a singular thing's embeddedness in nature and thus as the sum of its causal interactions.

³²⁴ See also Wolfson, 1962: II, 198-9.

³²⁵ For an insightful discussion regarding the apparent identification of striving with *ratio of motion and rest*, see LeBuffe, 2009: 194-7. LeBuffe provides a partial solution to the problem, distinguishing a thing's degree of power from its striving. I am not sure how such a reading could be supported by the text.

thing since it necessarily brings about effects (1p36)), while singulars are not. Perler and others who share this view provide intuitive examples to support their point. For instance, Perler argues that this distinction is exemplified by the difference between a single person and a group of people cooperating to bring about an effect (Perler, 2021: 174). Barbone (following Matheron) argues that a singular thing, as defined in 2D7, may be exemplified by, say, a flash flood, which is *not* an individual due to a lack of form (*ratio*) that an individual strives to preserve (*conatus*) (Barbone, 2002: 90-9). According to these readings, singular things *per se*, while expressing (and constituted by) a causal power, do not have a *conatus*. If they do, it is by virtue of them having a particular *ratio*, which their striving aims to preserve.³²⁶

Yet, as I have argued throughout the dissertation, the fact that a thing is an individual does not speak to it being a particular entity, but to it being an entity of a certain kind. Thus, it makes little sense to argue that *a particular individual* is one sort of thing while *a singular* is another, or that an entity has a *conatus* only to the extent that it is an individual.³²⁷ As the scholars mentioned above agree, a finite entity can be (or is) both an individual and a singular thing. However, according to my view, the relationship between these two aspects is importantly different from the one described above. We can speak of the individuality of the thing or of it being an individual when we attend to its form or to the fact that it is an entity of a certain kind. We can speak of the singularity of the entity when we attend

³²⁶ Thus, every individual has a *conatus* and is a singular thing, yet not every singular thing is an individual that has a *conatus*.

³²⁷ Notice that the distinction made by Perler and Barbone does not hold even if you reject my reading of *ratio* as shared kind essences. The main reason these scholars argue that singular things do not strive while individuals do is that they take the latter to be more metaphysically robust, and they ground this idea, to a great extent, in the common-sensical examples they provide. Yet, as Melamed argued in 2010, the unfortunate reality is that both of Spinoza's definitions aren't intuitive and are similarly weak, such that no real distinction in their metaphysical status may be extracted from the text. What's more, Spinoza takes striving to be a causal power (I'll argue for this in the following subsection), and he defines singulars in terms of causal power as well. There seem to be no textual grounds to distinguish these two causal powers, and so to the extent that a thing expresses a causal power (as singulars do), for as long as it does, it strives. See also Della Rocca, 1996: 33, who argues that Spinoza's definition of individuals is "frustratingly sketchy," and Garrett's 1994 permissive understanding of *ratio*, which does not even necessitate spatial proximity between the parts of an individual.

to its particular durational existence, which is constituted by its causal interactions.³²⁸ This distinction can be cashed out in terms of the relationship between a thing's formal essence and its existence as a singular thing, discussed in the previous chapter, and it can be further unpacked by distinguishing striving as an individual and striving as a singular thing, as I will now demonstrate.

A thing's formal essence is the quality in virtue of which it is an individual (since it expresses its *ratio*, or form). As was discussed in the previous chapter, it relates to the singular thing as a formal cause and thus constrains what the singular entity in question can and cannot do, as it determines the *kind* of power the thing is endowed with. In other words, a thing's formal essence internally determines its striving; it explains why it strives in the way that it does, e.g., why certain things increase its power while others decrease it, yet it does not explain the specifics of such striving, e.g., when, under what circumstances, or which singulars do in fact increase or decrease the thing's power. As such, even though a formal essence does not exhaust everything and all that a singular thing is, its continued presence, i.e., the maintaining of the *ratio* in virtue of which the thing is of a certain kind, is a necessary aspect of the thing's striving. In other words, the preservation of a thing's *ratio* is a necessary yet not sufficient condition for it being the thing that it is, and only partly explains what a thing does when it strives.³²⁹ To this extent, striving to maintain and preserve this *ratio* is the striving of the thing as an individual, and it has an important, yet not an exclusive role, in maintaining the singular entity's identity

³²⁸ Even though this is the first time I present this distinction in this way, there isn't really anything new here that requires argumentation over and above everything that was argued for in the previous chapters. My goal here is to set the stage for the idea of striving *as a singular thing*, which includes, as I will now argue, striving as an individual.

³²⁹ Thus, readings that understand striving as *ratio* preservation—whether they read the *conatus* as "existential inertia" or something more—while correct to point out the importance of maintaining the *ratio* for the identity of the finite entity in question, present a partial, and thus misleading, picture of what it means to strive. See, e.g., Bidney, 1962; Garrett, 2002; Carriero, 2011; Hampshire, 1951; Matson, 1969; Allison, 1987; Curley, 1990; Garrett, 1990; Della Rocca, 2008; Cook, 2011; Martin, 2008; Primus, 2023.

over time. To fully answer Q3 though, one must get clear on the actual, unique, way of striving each singular actually executes throughout its durational existence.³³⁰

Contrary to readings such as Perler's, it turns out that a singular thing has a distinctive *conatus*, which expresses its *singularity*, and not merely its *individuality*, and it is the actual essence of *singular things* in virtue of which they maintain in existence and have the distinct identity that they do. While perhaps in tension with our commonsensical idea of what things that strive are, or how stable and firm their essence should be, Spinoza's definition of singulars brings forth a view according to which the nature of such essences is, to a great extent, open-ended, and is determined by their ongoing causal interactions. In other words, to the extent that it is the identity of singular things which we are eventually after, their striving should be understood both in light of their formal essence and in light of their constitutive causal power, which, I will argue, they express both when they are active and when they are passive and acted on.

2.2 Striving as Expressing Causal Power

The first and most general thing I wish to get clear on is that the *conatus*, as the actual essence of singular things, should be understood strictly in terms of exercising causal power. That this is the case is clear from 3p6d, where Spinoza argues that the *conatus* is God's power, expressed in a certain and determined way, and that this is the power by which God is and acts (3p6d). Spinoza grounds this

³³⁰ This subtle yet crucial point is evident from 4p39s, where Spinoza argues that personal identity relies, to an extent, on kind-essence. Spinoza argues that by a change in *ratio* "the *human body* can... be changed *into another nature* entirely different from its own [such that] sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the *same man*" (4p39s; G/II/240). According to this passage, a change in *ratio* or kind brings about a change in identity, and so the continuity (or existence) of the latter is conditioned by the former. Interpretations vary as to how exactly a change in *ratio* brings about a "loss of personality." For discussions on this issue, see: Curley, 1988: 85–6; Nadler, 2001: 124–6; Rice, 1971: 656; Lin, 2005: 258; Carriero, 2020: 88–9. It should be noted that even though these readings vary in detail, they take the loss of personality to be the direct result of a change in *ratio*, where I take it that a change in *ratio* is a change in kind which results, unavoidably, in a change of *persona*, but is not equivalent to it.

claim in 1p34d where he identifies God's power with causal power.³³¹ In 1p36 Spinoza argues that "nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" since "whatever exists expresses... the power of God, which is the *cause* of all things" (1p36d; emphasis added). Spinoza refers to 1p36 in 3p7d, where he discusses a thing's actual essence in terms of its ability to *produce* things. Thus, the power which everything expresses by striving, i.e., the *conatus* each thing has (or is), is *causal power*, or the power by which it brings about effects.³³² According to Spinoza such causal power (*potentia*) is necessarily and always actualized, i.e., he denies the notion of a faculty which is anything over and above its particular expressions, and objects to the idea of potentiality or un-actualized power.³³³ This is clear, e.g., from Spinoza's claim that "we deny that the will is something stripped of every thought. On the contrary, we maintain that it is thought, i.e., a power of doing each one, of affirming and of denying. By a power... nothing else can be understood than a cause sufficient for each one" (CM II.12; C/I/346; G/I/280), or from his claim that it would have been absurd if things "could have been determined to produce an effect in another way" (1p33d). For Spinoza, then, there is no power a thing has that is not actually expressed; a thing's causal efficacy is equivalent to its power or essence, and whatever it does or fails to do is exactly what its essence amounts to. According to this view, claims we often make about our personal identity such as "I could have written a better dissertation if I'd had more time" or "I am a good mother, but often fail to show it" are meaningless; Who we are is nothing over and above what we in fact do. And so, it is crucial that we get clear on exactly what it is that we

³³¹ Kisner, 2020, n. 6; Viljanen, 2011: 100–101; Hübner, 2017: 37; Della Rocca, 2020.

³³² See Lin, 2014: 169.

³³³ Spinoza distinguishes *potentia*—the causal power attributed to things—from *potestas*—the authoritative power political institutes have. See Grey, 2025. My discussion of power is restricted to the first instance, i.e., to the power things have which is identical to their essence by which they bring about effects. For further discussion see also Viljanen, 2011: 59–67.

strive for, and what we do when we strive since, as I'll argue in 4.1, everything and all that we are, is nothing but our striving.³³⁴

Singular things may bring about effects on their own, i.e., adequately, or in cooperation with others, i.e., inadequately. As I discussed in chapter 4, since singulars are finite and determined and are constituted in virtue of them being part of the causal nexus, they are for the most part inadequate causes of the things they bring about, whether internally or externally. Importantly, this dependence on external things is *constitutive* of singulars as such, meaning that it is an inherent, necessary, and inseparable part of their essence and identity, rather than an unfortunate aspect of their existence that should be overcome.³³⁵ Thinking of the *conatus* from this perspective, I believe, goes hand in hand with readings according to which things strive to increase in power *through* their interactions with others.³³⁶

2.2.1 Human Freedom³³⁷

The dominant interpretation of the *conatus* doctrine is one according to which we strive to the extent that we are active, since Spinoza's ethical project revolves around us becoming as active as possible.³³⁸ Spinoza argues that virtue and power (i.e., striving) are one and the same (4D8), that the knowledge of God is the mind's greatest virtue (4p28), that blessedness is virtue itself (5p42) and "consists in the love of God [which] must be related to the mind insofar as it *acts*" (5p42d; emphasis

³³⁴ To borrow Della Rocca's "to be is to be intelligible" slogan, I suggest that when it comes to the identity of singulars, i.e., to the answer of Q3, "to be is to express causal power."

³³⁵ Recall that in God's mind there is no idea of any singular thing in isolation from its part in the infinite chain of finite causes. The implications of this point regarding their ontological status or their reality were discussed in Chapter 3, and so I will not address them at this point. Yet, regardless of whether or to what extent they are real, it is clear that their identity is determined by their interactions.

³³⁶ See Nadler, 2026: 194–5.

³³⁷ This subsection is not meant to provide an account of human freedom in Spinoza, but merely to set the background for the discussion of the *conatus* and to motivate the view according to which striving should not be understood merely in terms of self-determination.

³³⁸ See, e.g., Garrett, 1996; Viljanen, 2019; Naaman-Zauderer, 2020; Marshall, 2013&2014; Hübner, 2017. Cf. Kisner, 2011, 2020

added), and that freedom consists in causal independence (1D7). Thus, it seems, to the extent that a thing acts and is self-determinate, it strives, and to that extent it is virtuous and free. It is, thus, undeniable that Spinoza ties together being active and having adequate ideas with being virtuous, overcoming human bondage, and achieving true freedom or salvation. And so, it makes perfect sense for scholars to argue that "human beings, to a certain and limited extent, can...be free insofar as they are self-determined in their actions, meaning to the extent to which they produce effects by their own power of striving" (Naaman-Zauderer, 2020: 198).

Derivative of this ethical goal is an understanding of the *conatus*, according to which a thing strives only to the extent to which it is active, may be considered an adequate cause, or has adequate ideas. Recall that for Spinoza, we act "when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone..." (3D2). In light of this strict definition and the idea of self-determination, striving is understood as restricted to the extent to which a thing is the cause of some effect, or to the extent that the effect can be understood through its nature. In other words, things truly, or fully, or best strive only when, or to the extent that, they are active, and they strive to become as self-determined, i.e., active, as they can. Sleight, Robert Jr., Chappell, Vere, and Della Rocca most explicitly draw the connection between striving and self-determination as they argue that "a thing's power of acting increases to the extent to which it becomes *less dependent on external things* in the production of some effect. *A decrease in power of acting can be defined in a corresponding fashion.* Thus, when Spinoza says that each thing strives to do whatever will increase its power of acting, his point is that each thing strives to become less dependent on external causes" (Sleight, Robert Jr., Chappell, Vere, and Della Rocca, 1998: 1230-1; emphasis added).³³⁹ In other words, according to such a reading,

³³⁹ See also Garrett, 2002: 138; Lin, 2019: 139; Nadler, 2021, 355–6; Allison, 1987: 133–4; Rice, 1977; Hampshire, 1951; Della Rocca, 2021b.

an increase in power is equivalent to becoming more of an adequate cause or having more adequate ideas. Only to the extent that a thing is active in the strict sense does it successfully strive, and what it strives for is becoming more independent. Conversely, to the extent that things are passive, meaning that something happens to them of which they are not an adequate cause, or that something externally affects them, they do not strive, or their striving is necessarily *limited* or diminished. As the quoted passage makes clear, it is not the case that singular things, which are more often than not are inadequate causes, merely ever strive, but rather that the extent to which they express their own causal power, or the extent to which they are able to resist external forces and to maintain in existence "from within" or on their own, is exactly the extent to which they strive. Moreover, things strive to become less dependent, and the more they are dependent on external things, their striving decreases.

This reading, I believe, captures Spinoza's discussion of the mind's eternity, which consists in the third kind of knowledge, i.e., the knowledge and love of God (5pp30-33). The more the mind understands things in this way, Spinoza says in 5p38, the more it acts and the less it is acted on, and so it is true that the mind's eternity (and its freedom) is grounded solely in adequate understanding. I in no way intend to downplay the importance of adequate understanding to Spinoza's philosophy as a whole or his ethical project in particular, yet I do wish to restrict its role in answering Q3 with regard to singulars, which is at the heart of this dissertation. And thus, we should bear in mind that when referring to the mind's (or the body's) eternity, what we are actually discussing is the *formal essence* of the mind, which is, as argued in Chapter 3, something different from the singular enduring human mind and *its* actual essence. As Spinoza argues in 5p23 and its demonstration, it is the *essence* of the human body of which there is an idea in God, and thus the *essence* of the human mind is its eternal part. On the other hand, in 3p10d, while Spinoza presents and spells out his *conatus* doctrine, he explicitly discusses the mind's striving as the idea of an actually existing body. And so, the striving of singular things cannot be identified only with how they strive as instances of their shared formal

essence. While, as I explained in Chapter 4, singular things "receive" their power structure from their formal essence, they also express it only partially, or inadequately, as they are caused by it, as well as by other singular things. As this chapter unfolds (and as argued already), it will become apparent that our formal essence explains certain features of our actual one (e.g., with which things can we cooperate or why certain things increase our power while others diminish it), but that the latter is not identical to it (or for how it maintains in *its own eternal* being).

While it is obvious that Spinoza ties human salvation with adequate knowledge and self-determination, Spinoza's account of human freedom, as Kisner observes, may not be as straightforward as it might seem (Kisner, 2020: 44-8). Accordingly, the account of the *conatus* that will provide an answer to Q3 cannot merely be the one discussed above. In the definition of freedom provided in the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza does explain freedom in terms of action in the strict sense, i.e., as self-determination and adequate causation, as he argues that "that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone" (1D7). According to the definition, only God can be truly and completely free, for everything else is in God, is conceived by God (1p15), and is caused by God, such that God is the only free cause (1p16c1, 1p17c2). In other passages, though, Spinoza closely ties human freedom and humans' relations to each other. In 4p73s, Spinoza discusses the "true freedom of man" in relation to a person's choice to live "according to a common decision [rather than] in solitude, where he obeys only himself" (4p73), and he argues that "a man who is guided by reason *desires*, in order to live *more freely*, to keep the common laws of the state" (4p73d). Similarly, in 4p18s, Spinoza argues that "our intellect would of course be *more imperfect* if the mind were alone and did not understand anything except itself" (4p18s; G/II/223; emphasis added). In 4p71, Spinoza argues that "only free men are very thankful to one another", and in 4p37s, he argues that "the rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us to establish a bond with men" (4p37s1; G/II/236).

Scholars acknowledge the distinction between striving as a singular thing, on the one hand, and the mind's eternity (and its striving), on the other. LeBuffe, e.g., argues that there is a difference between the prescriptions of Part 5, which "everybody in all circumstances can and ought to follow" and the claims regarding the right way of living in Part 4, which are "norms for us to follow insofar as we are rational and depending upon our particular circumstances in the world" (LeBuffe, 2010: 183). While both the prescriptions of Part 5 and the norms specified in Part 4 aim for the same thing, i.e., human freedom, the uniqueness of each and every human, which is grounded in their singularity and durational existence within the causal nexus, brings with it a more nuanced account of the right way of living, which necessarily involves others and is influenced by their particular relationships. Other scholars, too, broaden the scope of what human freedom may consist in and how it might be achieved. Rutherford, e.g., argues that "[t]o be virtuous, or free, is to live from, *or according to*, the dictate of reason alone" (Rutherford, 2025: 126; emphasis added), meaning that human freedom may not consist solely in having adequate ideas, which are born entirely from one's own mind, but also in acting *as* rational, guided by inadequate ideas, which are in line with what reason dictates (Steinberg, 2009: 46-7); the latter necessarily include cases of passivity and cooperation.³⁴⁰

Whether or not humans may attain the kind of freedom Spinoza defines in 1D7 and discusses in the later part of Part 5 of the *Ethics*, it seems that, contrary to the general definition of freedom, human freedom (or the freedom of each finite, single, human being) involves or even necessitates passivity, i.e., interactions and cooperations.³⁴¹ I will not take a stand on the question of whether Spinoza advocates for activity and self-determination as an ethical goal or whether such a goal is achievable.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ See also Steinberg, 2025: 191-4; Kisner, 2011&2020: 53-7; Armstrong, 2009; Tucker, 2019. See Armstrong, 2009, and Rorty, 1987 for how the knowledge of the cause of our affects wherein we are passive translates into activity and *hence* freedom.

³⁴¹ See also *TP/II/7* where Spinoza argues that a man may be called free "insofar as he has the power to exist", i.e., insofar as he strives, and not insofar as he is an adequate cause and is fully self-determinate.

³⁴² I refrain from delving more deeply into Spinoza's ethics or notion of freedom and only bring this up to undermine the common reading of the *conatus*, which is grounded in Spinoza's understanding of freedom as activity. Yet see Hampshire,

What I do wish to emphasize is that the more complex or nuanced account of human freedom better captures the fact that human beings are singulars, i.e., that their actual essence as distinct finite modes, and thus their identity, is constituted by their existence in the durational realm.³⁴³ With this more nuanced account at hand, thus, I move on to argue that striving is an attempt to increase in power, achieved (partly, yet indispensably) by causal interactions with external things.

2.2.2 Striving to Increase in Power

Importantly for our purposes, when Spinoza presents the *conatus* doctrine, he does not bring up the definitions of adequacy or action (3D1, 3D2). Quite to the contrary, he seems to emphasize the relational aspect of singulars as an inseparable part of their striving.³⁴⁴ In 3p7d, Spinoza talks about "the striving by which each thing (*either alone or with others*) does anything..." as "nothing but the given, *or* actual, essence of the thing itself" (emphasis added). In 3p9, he argues that "both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives... to preserve in its being". These two propositions could (and should) be read very minimally, as meaning simply that to some extent, things strive when they are not completely active, and thus are in no tension with the dominant interpretation (henceforth DI). Yet, importantly, in 3p12 Spinoza argues that "the mind, as far as it can, *strives to imagine* those *things* that increase or aid the body's power of acting" (emphasis added), meaning that it increases in power *by* having inadequate ideas, and that it strives to have such

1951; Alanen, 2018; Yovel, 1989; Nadler, 2015; Naaman Zauderer, 2020; Koistinen, 2025: 188-191 for endorsement of freedom as self-determination.

³⁴³ Toward the end of this chapter, I will discuss how the two notions of freedom, or the two ways of striving (as a formal essence and as a singular thing), relate to each other. Yet the focus of this chapter is to provide an answer to Q3 and not to deliver a comprehensive account of the *conatus* doctrine. Thus, I aim here to show what at least *a* form of striving, i.e., the one relevant to singular things as such, consists of.

³⁴⁴ See Hoffman, 1991 for an interesting discussion regarding 3D2 and whether finite things can actually actively interact with external things. On this point, see also Chapter 4, section 3.3.

ideas, rather than strives to avoid them. From these passages taken as a whole — wherein Spinoza introduces and spells out his *conatus* doctrine — and in light of the fine-grained view of human freedom, it seems that striving should not be restricted to self-determination, and that things are able to increase in power and strive more forcefully through, and thanks to, their interactions with others. Moreover, as I will argue in the rest of this section, singular things' striving should be understood as an attempt to increase in power which is not restricted to being an adequate cause or having adequate ideas.³⁴⁵

Following Kisner (2020), I wish to distinguish being an adequate cause from striving and to suggest that the former is only one way to express the latter (Kisner, 2020: 39). Thus, I will argue for a view of striving I will refer to as "Interactive Power Increase" (IPI)—a view according to which things strive to increase in power and do so by causally interacting with external things. According to Kisner, things may increase in their power of acting and thus strive more successfully while being acted on, meaning that the identification of striving and self-determination is misguided and that striving and being an adequate cause can completely depart (Kisner, 2020: 48-9). Since "the human body may be affected in many ways in which its power of acting is increased" (3post1) and since "our power of acting... can be determined, and hence aided or restrained, by the power of another singular thing" (4p29d), "things can make a transition to a state of greater striving in being passively affected" (Kisner, 2020: 50). I will explicate this position by discussing, first, how such a reading differs from DI, and second, by arguing that it is not only the case that singular things *can* increase in power, but that this is what it actually means for them to strive.

³⁴⁵ This seems to be a natural conclusion from the fact that a singular thing's *conatus* is a limited expression of God's infinite power. While God's power is not externally determined and is an infinite and eternal expression of power, and since power is always actualized and expressed by causal efficacy, a determinate expression of this power could be understood as bringing about more and more effects, i.e., as a constant attempt to causally cause as much as possible. As Spinoza argues in the preface to part 4, this drive to be more of a cause should not be understood in temporal terms, but in terms of perfection, i.e., by a thing's causal ability. I discuss this passage later on in this section.

With regard to the first point, a proponent of the DI might argue that the distinction to which Kisner (and I) allude is not in tension with their own position. After all, as mentioned, arguing that things strive to the extent that they are active does not deny the fact that things strive in cases of passivity wherein they are externally affected. To the extent that a thing expresses *a* degree of power, it strives, and so long as a thing exists, it executes some causal power. Thus, eventually, it *is* the case that a thing's essence extends to its actions, or to the extent to which it is an adequate cause of some effect, both when it is active and when it is passive. According to the DI as well, it seems, striving is different from being completely active. Yet that a thing always strives to some degree is obviously, even trivially, true, and thus it is not where the disagreement lies. Rather, the point is that according to the DI, cases of passivity and cooperation *could not* result in an *increase* in power and always *limit* a thing's striving. In other words, according to the DI, a thing strives even though it is affected, and not because it is affected.³⁴⁶ Since power is understood in terms of self-determination, an increase of power is accordingly understood in terms of an increase in self-determination, i.e., in becoming more and more an adequate cause or having more adequate ideas. Successful striving, and what things strive for, are thus cashed out in light of independence and activity in the strict sense, such that cases of passivity wherein the thing in question is externally affected, while involving striving, decrease or at least interfere with a thing's *conatus*. Yet according to the IPI view, cases of passivity and cooperation are welcomed, as they are genuine cases of successful striving, wherein one may increase in power regardless of its level of adequacy.³⁴⁷ The disagreement here is subtle, yet crucial, so let me restate it again: While according to both the DI and the IPI things strive when they are externally affected, such

³⁴⁶ According to such an interpretation, while an interaction wherein a thing is passive may cause it to be more active in the future (by making it more prepared to handle external threats for example), the interaction itself always and necessarily limits the thing in question. According to the view I develop here the interaction itself is valuable and *is* a genuine increase in power.

³⁴⁷ This distinction will become crucial for the account of identity I believe the *conatus* gives rise to, which I will discuss in the final section of this chapter. To anticipate, I will argue that since the *conatus* includes cases of cooperation in virtue of which our essence is constituted, the identity of the striving thing in question is likewise constituted by these interactions and metaphysically includes them and the things with which we interact. Yet more on this later.

interactions can never be, according to the DI, cases of true increase in power. Yet, according to the IPI, and as I will argue further below, it is not only possible that a thing may increase in power by being affected, but that such cases of successful striving are indispensable for its striving as a singular thing. Thus, while according to the DI being an adequate cause and striving necessarily align (i.e., the more a thing is an adequate cause the more forcefully it strives), according to the IPI striving and being an adequate cause can completely come apart.

With regards to the second point, I turn to provide textual evidence which supports the idea that things do in fact strive to increase in power and that their interactions with others are indispensable for striving successfully. (In the next section of this chapter, I will show that since this is the case—i.e., since singular things strive to increase in power by their causal interactions with others—their essences are constantly constituted externally as well as internally, and thus that external things genuinely and metaphysically constitute their identity). A key passage for my proposed view is (as mentioned above) 3p12, where Spinoza argues that "the mind as far as it can, strives to imagine things that increase or aid the body's power of acting". In the demonstration, Spinoza explains that "so long as the mind imagines those things that increase or aid our body's power of acting, the body is affected with modes that increase or aid its power of acting... and consequently (by P11) the mind's power of thinking is increased or aided. *Therefore* (by P6 or P9), the mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things" (3p12d; emphasis added). Scholars often take this claim regarding an increase in power to be grounded in things' encounters with external threats, meaning that a thing strives to increase in power merely *in order to maintain* its own existence.³⁴⁸ According to this reading, striving is fundamentally an attempt to survive, as increases in power arise solely due to the unfortunate circumstances wherein finite things exist (as described in 4ax1). Yet the demonstration quoted above may suggest a slightly

³⁴⁸ See, e.g., Della Rocca, 2008: 156; Lin, 2019: 144; Carriero, 2002: 81; Rice, 1977; Viljanen, 2011: 127-8; Schmaltz, 2018. For a different argument for the idea that striving is an increase in power, see Della Rocca, 2021.

different reading, namely, that *since* an increase in the body's power of acting is (by 2p7) an increase in the mind's power of thinking, the mind strives to imagine things that increase the body's, and its own, power. In other words, the reason for the mind's striving to *imagine things* that increase the body's power is a desire to increase power, i.e., a desire for joy. So understood, what 3p12 and its demonstration reveal is that the attempt to increase in power by causally interacting with external, beneficial things (and thus having inadequate ideas of these things and the interactions with them) is built into the notion of striving and thus supports IPI.³⁴⁹

Another helpful passage is 3p28, where Spinoza argues, similarly to 3p12, that "we strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will *lead to joy*..." (3p12; emphasis added). Martin Lin takes this proposition to mean that "increased power is always *helpful* for self-preservation and hence always good [and so] because joy conduces *to* self-preservation, the *conatus aims* at joy" (Lin, 2019: 163; my emphasis).³⁵⁰ Yet Spinoza explicitly argues that "joy and sadness *are* the desire, *or* appetite, itself insofar as it is increased or diminished... by external causes" (3p57d; emphasis added). And so, 3p28 should be read as saying that while striving, we are directed toward *things* that lead to joy, such as the indispensable positive interactions with others. If so, such interactions are an integral part of a thing's striving, as the joy that results from them *is* what striving successfully amounts to.³⁵¹ Similarly, in 4p19 Spinoza argues that "from the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by,

³⁴⁹ Recall that for Spinoza, imagination is necessarily inadequate cognition (2p40s2). Thus, it seems that the mind may increase in power by having inadequate ideas of a certain kind. 3p10, where Spinoza argues that "an idea that excludes the existence of our body cannot be in our mind..." also supports the IPI, to the extent that Spinoza distinguishes what could be part of a particular mind and what couldn't on grounds of increase and decrease of power, rather than on causal independence.

³⁵⁰ If so, according to Lin, our striving is *directed* toward an increase of power, i.e., joy, rather than joy being a case of striving itself. This means that if we are not anticipating an encounter with an enemy in the near future, there is no particular reason for us to strive to increase in power, but only to maintain ourselves in existence. Even if this is only a hypothetical possibility (given 4ax1), it is a strange position to hold, as it seems that only external things that can bring about our destruction (indirectly) cause, or at least explain, an increase in our power, since it seems that the *only* way to increase one's power of acting is by confronting it with something that may destroy it. Lin might be willing to accept that an increase can also happen when we are positively influenced by external things, yet this would also be cashed out as motivated by a possible future destruction.

³⁵¹ For similar views see Kisner 2020; Deleuze 1988.

what he judges to be good or evil", and he adds that "this appetite is nothing but the very essence, *or* nature, of man" (4p19d), meaning, again, that striving *is* joy and is directed toward *things* which increase one's power. Deleuze's reading seems to support the view I am promoting here, as he argues that, "the *conatus* is the effort to experience joy, to increase the power of acting, to imagine and find that which causes joy" (Deleuze, 1988: 101). Deleuze characterized the *conatus* in this way since he takes striving to be an ability to be affected and a tendency to maintain and maximize this ability (Deleuze, 1988: 99), i.e., as constituted by a thing's interactions and affective states.³⁵² In other words, what we strive *for* is not only joy (for joy is in itself a case of striving), but the occurrence of things which increase our power.

Additionally, any increase in causal power is equated by Spinoza with being more real and perfect, and should be understood, literally, as being a greater cause (either quantitatively or qualitatively), i.e., as being capable of doing more. In 4pre Spinoza argues that "when... someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite... his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished", as perfection is "reality, *that* is, the essence of each thing *insofar as it exists and produces an effect*" (4pre; G/II/209; emphasis added).³⁵³ Perfection is thus understood in terms of an increase in causal power which, in turn, is cashed out in terms of the ability to produce effects (not merely adequately); the more a thing causes the more perfect and real it is, and the more it is perfect the more it is able to bring about effects.

True, in 4pre Spinoza argues that a thing's perfection is related to its power "insofar as it is understood *through its nature*", which might be read as suggesting that only when a thing produces effects actively and adequately does it become more perfect and real, thus supporting the DI. Yet, as argued for in Chapter 2, Spinoza uses a thing's essence, nature, and *form* interchangeably. In fact, just

³⁵² See also Jaquet 2025: 12.

³⁵³ See also 2D6, 1p16d, and 1p34, which in conjuncture entail that the more perfect a thing is, the more it is able to bring about effects, i.e., to cause.

a few lines above, Spinoza argues that "when [he] says that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, [he does] *not* understand that he is changed from one essence, *or form*, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed, as much if it is turned into a man as if it is changed into an insect" (4pre; C/I/545-6; G/II/208). Since Spinoza explicitly argues that an increase in perfection *is not* a change in kind, it seems reasonable to read this use of "nature" as referring to a thing's formal essence. Thus, what Spinoza says here is that so long as a thing is able to do more as the kind of thing that it is (i.e., exercise its causal power), it is more perfect and real, and that perfection does not involve a transition into an (allegedly!) higher kind of a thing.³⁵⁴

From these passages, and the nuanced account of human freedom discussed above, it seems that Spinoza does not restrict striving to adequate causation alone. Instead, he seems to argue that singular things increase in power, and strive more successfully, as they interact with external things that bring them joy. Importantly, such interactions are necessitated by their status as singulars, yet they are not an unfortunate aspect of the reality of singulars, but seem to genuinely be what such things strive for.

What I have yet to explain is what joy is exactly, what it means that it *is* striving, and how, exactly, do interactions with things that bring us joy relate to our own essence. In the following subsection, I will address the first two issues, and in the next section, spell out in more detail how,

³⁵⁴ A word about how this view relates to the DI is in order. Recall the discussion in chapter 3 regarding a thing's actuality and reality. There, I argued that a thing's actuality is binary, yet that its reality and perfection are scalar. Since Spinoza equates a thing's level of perfection with its power and ability to bring about effects (see 2D6, 1p16d, 1p34, and 2p14), it turns out that striving to increase in power, which is cashed out in terms of being a greater cause, is closely related to, and perhaps should be identified at some point with, striving to perfect oneself. Viljanen (2011), Youpa (2003), and Yovel (1999), among others, read the *conatus* in this way, i.e., as a strive to *perfect oneself*. For Youpa and Viljanen, though, striving to perfect oneself is restricted to strict activity, and thus their accounts fail to capture the way in which striving is the essence of *finite things*. Yovel offers a two-stage reading, which allows cases of passivity, and ties together perfection and eternity—which striving ultimately aims for—with self-knowledge. Overall, I am sympathetic to Yovel's reading as it considers both the ethical goal of attaining intuitive knowledge (which must be understood as strict activity) and the fact that as singular things, we are more often than not externally determined, and that these determinations are valuable. What's more, Yovel's account provides an interesting perspective on how striving may be related to Q3 type questions, as it emphasizes the importance of reflexive knowledge striving in its highest form involves. Yovel's reading is focused more on the ethical aspects of striving, and the transformation and relations between the two stages, while my focus here is on how striving as a finite thing constitutes a thing's identity; thus, I do not discuss it here in depth.

exactly, our essence (and hence identity) is constituted by joyous interactions. Before doing that, though, I wish to clarify that while my view is partly motivated by the nuanced account of human freedom, the account of striving I develop here is universal and pertains to all singular things as such. In terms of textual evidence, I take it that nothing in the passages provided suggests that there is anything unique about humans on grounds of which we should distinguish the way they strive from the way everything else does. The discussion of human freedom, thus, simply lends more credence to the view (and provides evidence against the DI) but does not limit the account of *conatus* it gives rise to.

There is, in fact, fascinating research regarding the communication and mutual collaboration of trees which supports my reading and its universality. According to different research findings, trees are not isolated individuals but communicate and share information with each other, such that the forest, as a whole, could be considered one living organism. Trees, says Suzanne Simard in her famous 2016 TED Talk, "are not just Comparatos, but cooperators". Additionally, studies show that older, stronger "mother" trees transfer nutrients of their own to younger trees, and that those grow much stronger thanks to such nurturing (Liang, M., Johnson, D., Burslem, D.F.R.P. *et al.*, 2020). Simard had also shown that removing such "mother" trees results in the surrounding trees doing *worse* (Simard, S., Perry, D., Jones, M. *et al.*, 1997), contrary to the intuitive assumption that less competition for resources should result in an increase in the trees' ability to grow, thrive, and survive. Taken together, these findings suggest that trees also increase in power by indispensable interactions with others, and that, to apply the relevant Spinozistic terms, such causal interactions among them are built into their distinctive *conatus*, which may not be as distinctive as it first seems and is constituted by these interactions and cooperations.

2.2.3 Passive Joy

I have argued thus far that things strive not only to the extent that they act or are self-determined, but that striving should be understood in terms of an increase in power which, given the nature of singular things, more often than not necessitates causal interactions. Importantly, though, not all interactions influence a thing's essence in the same way, and not all are constitutive of it, as this section and the next will make clear. The first thing to discuss in order to make the view clearer is Spinoza's notion of affects in general, and particularly, the role passive joy plays in things' striving. In 3D3, Spinoza defines affects as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections. *Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections, I understand by the affect an action; otherwise, a passion*" (3D3). An affect, thus, is a *transition* to a higher or lower degree of power (3DOAIIIExp) accompanied by the idea of this transition;³⁵⁵ When we are the adequate cause of this transition and we are said to act, it is our action, yet when this transition is partly caused by something else and when we are acted on, it is a passion. According to Spinoza, there are three primary affects (3p11s)—desire, which he identifies with the essence of man (3p9s, 3DOAI), joy, which is "man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection" (3DOAII), and sadness, which is "a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection" (3DOAIII).³⁵⁶

The first important distinction made here is between two different dichotomies Spinoza draws, namely, actions and passions on the one hand, and joy and sadness on the other. According to Spinoza,

³⁵⁵Unless otherwise instructed, I will discuss affects as pertaining to the mind and the body together (3p9s) and will generally leave out the question of the relationship between the affection of the body and the idea of it, or questions regarding the psychological aspects of the affects, and their contribution to our practical reasoning or moral deliberation. See Rutherford (2020), Marshall (2025), and LeBuffe (2009) for discussions.

³⁵⁶ All other affects arise from these primary affects. Thus, "love is a joy, accompanied by an idea of an external cause" (3DOAVI) and hate is "a sadness, accompanied by an idea of an external cause" (3DOAVII).

we act when we are an adequate cause and have adequate ideas (3D2), and all of our actions necessarily bring to an increase in power, i.e., are cases of joy (3p10).³⁵⁷ Yet when we are acted on, i.e., when we experience passions, these can be either affects of joy or sadness, depending on whether the thing which acts on us aids or restrains our power of acting. Thus, a thing may be passive and still increase in power (e.g., by lifting weights at the gym and becoming stronger). As will be made clear as this chapter unfolds, such cases of *passive joy* are cases where a thing's essence is constituted by causal interactions with external things. Thus, the remainder of this chapter will, to a great extent, focus on the work passive joy does in constituting a thing's essence. Jumping the gun a bit, let me anticipate where this discussion is headed—I will argue that when external things increase a singular thing's power, they become, under different constraints, metaphysically united with it. Since the *conatus* is nothing but actualized causal power, and since a *singular* thing is constituted by its causal interactions, the argument roughly goes, all causal activity which increases a thing's power in fact constitutes its actual, unique, essence. Importantly, since nothing else in Spinoza's metaphysics is able to fully account for a singular thing's identity, nothing prevents such positive causal interactions, grounded in agreement in nature, from yielding a genuine unification of identities.

Back to the current discussion: As mentioned already, it is crucial for the account of identity I develop here that striving *is* nothing but affects, or that a thing's essence is constantly constituted by the affects it undergoes.³⁵⁸ I will delve into this claim in the following section, yet it can already be

³⁵⁷ 3p58d: "when the mind conceives itself and its power of acting, it rejoices. But the mind necessarily considers itself when it conceives a true, *or* adequate, idea... Therefore, it also rejoices insofar as it conceives adequate ideas, that is (by P1), insofar as it acts."

³⁵⁸ The reader may wonder how that is, since I have argued earlier that striving *is* causal power. It should be made clear that there is no real tension or contradiction here. Affects are, as noted above, transitions of a thing's power of acting, which might increase or decrease. A thing's power is always expressed and actualized and thus is a dynamic force of bringing about effects. In other words, a thing's power, or its *conatus*, is a causal power which is in constant change, and this change is expressed by the affects. Saying that the *conatus* is a causal power and saying that it is identical to a thing's affects is, thus, saying the same thing, while focusing, perhaps, on different aspects of it, or describing it from a different level of generality.

mentioned that according to Spinoza, "joy and sadness are the desire, *or* appetite, itself... That is... it is the very nature of each [individual]" (3p57d) and that "by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence, whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside]" (3DOAIexp; G/II/190; C/I/531). In other words, joy and sadness "are... a greater or lesser ability to bring about certain effects" (Della Rocca, 2008: 156)—they are particular expressions of the body's power of acting, or the mind's power of thinking, i.e., of striving.³⁵⁹ Thus, "each person is, and can be, *only* what her affects determine her to be" (Rutherford, 2020: 139).

Since striving is understood as causal power, and since joy, whether active or passive, contributes to this power, it seems that all instances of joy are instances of successful striving, wherein the thing increases in power. In other words, as discussed above, successful striving consists both of cases wherein we are active, *as well as* cases wherein we are passive. Whether we strive successfully or not, thus, has less to do with the distinction between our actions and passions, or the extent to which we are an adequate cause (as the DI holds), and more to do with the distinction between joy and sadness. As Hübner argues, "a thing's *essence* gives rise both to effects this thing can bring about by itself, and to effects to which it is able to contribute to a degree... so the power identical to a thing's essence *should not* be understood as consisting just in this thing's power to 'act'" (Hübner, 2017: 39; emphasis added).³⁶⁰ Hübner's observation seems to be exactly in line with the foregoing discussion, as it implies that a thing's essence genuinely causes effects of which it is a partial cause. Again, according to the DI, while a thing strives when it is passive, it does not do so successfully, and its power is *decreased* to the extent that it is passive, regardless of whether this interaction results in an affect of joy or sadness. Yet according to the Interactive Power Increase view I am advocating for, a thing may genuinely strive, i.e., increase in power, whether it is active or passive; Just how well it strives (as well as what it strives

³⁵⁹ Cf. Bidney, 1962: 100-6.

³⁶⁰ See also Armstrong, 2009: 54; Jonas, 1973: 278.

for) should be explained in terms of how causally efficacious it is, rather than how independent it is or the extent to which it is a complete cause of some effect. To give an example, I suggest that I strive more forcefully or increase my power of thinking to a greater extent while trying to understand the *Ethics* with the help of my committee, i.e., when I am passive, than when I understand my 4-year-old's favorite book entirely on my own, i.e., when I am active.

Now, since a thing cannot strive to bring about its own destruction (3p4), and since things that bring about a thing's destruction cannot be part of it (3p5), the only cases wherein a singular thing inadequately strives successfully are cases of passive joy—i.e., cases where it is acted on in a way that increases its causal power.³⁶¹ Spinoza argues that "the force of a desire which arises from [passive] joy must be defined both by human power and the power of the external cause, whereas the force of a desire which arises from sadness must be defined by human power alone. The former, therefore, is stronger than the latter" (4p18d). Thus, while things always strive (so long as they durationally exist), there is an important difference between the way in which they strive and in which their interaction with an external thing influences such striving when experiencing passive joy and when experiencing sadness. Crucially, this idea is meant to demonstrate that "*A* desire which arises from joy is stronger... than one which arises from sadness" (4p18; emphasis added), meaning that Spinoza treats the force

³⁶¹I will elaborate on the way things that decrease one's power determine its essence in the "constant essence constitution" section. One may worry that the notion of passive joy is in and of itself paradoxical for Spinoza. If we understand striving as acting in the strict sense, passive joy would seem to mean that we become more active by being passive or acted on, or that we become more adequate and have more adequate ideas (since acting is adequate causation, i.e., having adequate knowledge) by becoming more inadequate and having more inadequate ideas. If this is indeed the case, then indeed there is a paradox here. Yet importantly, this is a problem only if one restricts striving to activity and adequacy. Yet, as I argued, since there is no reason to deny that we successfully strive (i.e., increase in power) when we are passive, striving and acting in the strict sense should be decoupled, such that passive joy is completely coherent. As Kisner argues, any case of cooperation serves as a clear case of non-active striving, wherein the singular thing in question is passive but nonetheless exercises, and *increases*, its causal power (Kisner, 2020: 49). For other discussions and attempted solutions, see LeBuffe, 2009; Hoffman, 1991; Warsofsky, 1979.

of the desire arising from joy as a single, unified case of striving and attributes such force to the entity's (in this case, a man's) own *conatus*.³⁶²

This understanding of striving and the role passive joy plays in it is reinforced by 4p18s, where Spinoza argues that "our intellect would of course be *more imperfect* if the mind were alone... there are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account *to be sought*" (G/II/223; emphasis added). Thus, it is not only that our mind could benefit from things external to it (i.e., experience a passive joy, i.e., strive) but that we *should* seek to engage with those things, for our mind would suffer (i.e., be saddened or strive less powerfully) if left to itself. And so, it is not only that the mind strives both when it is active and passive, but that it may strive more forcefully when it cooperates with others. Thus, in the case of the mind as well, the *conatus* should not be restricted to action alone.³⁶³ In the next section, to which I now turn, I explain why this is the case, or how exactly cases of passive joy increase our power and constitute our essence.

3. *Conatus* — Constant Essence Constitution

I have argued thus far that the *conatus* is the actual essence of singular things, and that it should be understood as a causal power that singular things constantly execute and that constitutes them *as such*. I have further argued that since this is the case, the *conatus* should not be understood in terms of self-determination, but as an attempt to increase in power. Thus, cases of passive joy, wherein a singular thing is passive yet increases in power, are genuine cases of successful striving, and things strive to

³⁶² Similarly, in the PD Spinoza argues that "All modes by which a body is affected by another body *follow* both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body..." (2p13ax1"; emphasis added). According to this passage, it seems that the union grounded in causal interactions runs deep into Spinoza's physical theory as well. Thus, passive joy is not only defined by the power of both parties but literally follows from them *together*.

³⁶³ See also Sangiacomo who argues similarly that "Because every finite thing can exist and operate only insofar as it is determined by external causes (E1p28), the thing's *conatus* can strive to preserve its own being *only* by *increasing its agreement* in nature with external causes" (Sangiacomo, 2015: 540; emphasis added).

interact with whatever brings them joy. As the very last paragraph of the previous section makes clear, Spinoza is explicit about how positive causal interactions are not merely necessary-yet-unfortunate aspects of a singular thing's relational nature but are welcomed and, in fact, bring forth a real increase in the thing's causal power and, thus, in its level of perfection and reality (according to 4pre). The question is why.

3.1 What "Constitution" Means Exactly

In this section, I provide the final piece of the *conatus* puzzle and attempt to answer the "why" question. Building on the idea of "constant constitution", I argue that the *conatus* (understood as an increase in power which positively involves causal interactions) is constantly constituted by the affects one undergoes (actions and passions alike). Since this is the case, and in light of the fact that no other concept examined throughout this dissertation provides an answer to Q3, I argue that things with which we are in causal interaction and that increase our power should count as a genuine part of our essence, or that to the extent that we agree in nature, a metaphysical union holds between us and them. In the absence of any other way according to which we can determine a particular entity's identity, I argue (in the next section) that a thing's identity is really, metaphysically speaking, united with what intuitively seem to be distinct others via causal interactions and agreement in nature.

Before diving into the details of this account, it should again be made clear that I take the fact that there are multiple singular things in Spinoza's metaphysical framework as a working premise and do not intend to argue for it (whether these are completely real, completely illusory, or land somewhere in between these two extremes is a question I remain agnostic about throughout the dissertation, as my account is not directly affected by it). What I aim to get clear on, rather, is the metaphysical structure of such things' essence and, consequently, of their identity. While Spinoza is explicit about

there being a multiplicity of singulars (e.g., in 1p28; 2p19d; 4ax1), since we can only have inadequate ideas of them, what they are exactly and what their particular identity consists of is still an open question.

To understand exactly how one's essence is influenced and determined by its interactions with external things, let's take another look at Spinoza's definition of affects. Spinoza argues that "by an affection of the human essence we understand *any constitution* of that essence, whether it is innate [NS: *or has come from outside*]..." (DOAI; G/II/190; emphasis added). According to this definition, any affect is a particular case of one's essence constitution, meaning that a thing's actual essence is constituted or made up whenever that thing undergoes a change in its degree of power. Joy and sadness, recall, are desire, i.e., "the very nature of each [individual]" (3p57d), and so constitute "any of man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as man's constitution varies" (3DOAIExp).³⁶⁴ Our actual essence, i.e., striving, is thus always and endlessly in a state of constitution in virtue of its affective transitions or the causal power it exercises, alone or with others. When one experiences joy, its essence is literally constituted, and in case one experiences sadness, its essence is likewise destroyed. A thing's essence understood as causal power, thus, is constantly constituted by its causal activity, and its degree of reality accordingly changes. To use Balibar's words, "the essence of causality is the unity of activity and passivity... *within the same 'subject'*... a unity which *defines* the individual's singular *conatus* and relates it to an infinite multiplicity of other individuals" (Balibar, 1997: 15; emphasis added).³⁶⁵ The view I develop in this section takes this idea one step further, as I take the identity of the subject in question to be genuinely constituted by its causal interactions. In other words, while Balibar takes the subject

³⁶⁴ See also 3p56d where Spinoza argues that "each [man] is affected by external causes... that is... his nature is constituted in one way or another..."

³⁶⁵ Balibar's account, while appealing in essence, is an account of Spinoza's *individuality*, which I read in a completely different way, and as *not* constantly constructed by interaction. Still, I find the general sentiment of thinking of humans, and other finite things, as a process of constant constitution, appealing. It should be noted, however, that Balibar too, as Viljanen and Hübner (whom I now turn to discuss) distinguishes between an individual's identity and its variations, which he takes to belong to two different levels of constitution (Balibar, 1997: 17).

to be a prerequisite unity for causal activity, I wish to show that the causal activity determines who or what the subject is.³⁶⁶

Scholars acknowledge the constant constitution of an essence via its affects. Hübner argues that "for an affect to 'constitute' an essence is for this affect to *determine or modify* this essence (Hübner, 2017: 46; emphasis added). Similarly, Viljanen argues that "actual essences are constituted varyingly over time; [and] the way in which an essence is constituted seems to determine what Spinoza calls the actual being of a thing" (Viljanen, 2011: 151). According to Viljanen, throughout an entity's life (or durational existence), its nature constantly changes, within certain limits, such that the way it is affected by external causes determines which affects will arise in it (Viljanen, 2011: 151). Thus, e.g., "when we think that something external to us does us harm, our nature is inevitably so constituted that the feeling of hate follows" (Viljanen, 2011: 154). According to Viljanen, the constitution of a thing's essence occurs when external things trigger the entity's essence so that certain affects arise in it in light of the encounter and the entity's innate nature. With every such affect, the entity's essence changes and develops.³⁶⁷

I am in complete agreement with both Hübner and Viljanen that a finite thing's actual essence is constantly changing and that the changes it undergoes are determined by its causal interactions and the affects these give rise to; yet I think their views should be somewhat modified. Both, in different ways, argue that the constant constitution of a thing's essence only goes so far as to externally influence an entity's distinct and relatively "structured" essence. Yet, what my interpretation of Spinoza's

³⁶⁶ Notice that while God is not a subject, God's identity too is determined by its causal activity. God is the cause of itself (1p11d), and its essence is nothing but its power (1p34), i.e. what God is, and its particular nature *is* its causal power (1p33). In light of Spinoza's naturalism and the fact that the laws of nature are everywhere the same (3pre; G/II/138; C/I/492), it seems that the identity of things other than God should be determined in the same way.

³⁶⁷ See also Negri, who argues a thing's actual essence is an essence of "non-finalized existence" (Negri, 1991: 146), and Nadler, according to whom, "The power or striving that constitutes the essence of any individual, while always 'on' and steady, does not remain unmodified throughout a person's lifetime, but is constantly subject to change" (Nadler, 2006: 200).

metaphysics entails is that the question of the exact boundaries of this essence is still unanswered. What we know so far is that singular things, and their actual essences, are constituted by causal interactions and the affects they bring about. Prior to such causal interactions, though, no singular thing may be identified. A constitution of an essence by the affects, thus, must (or at the very least could) run deeper, as I will argue throughout this section.

According to Viljanen, "of [an essence's] innumerable constitutions there is one which is *ontologically privileged*; it is the perfect way of being one strives to attain as efficiently as one can—and would succeed in attaining, were one's power not always, to a certain extent, hindered" (Viljanen, 2011: 155; emphasis added). In other words, Viljanen takes it that external forces are in the way of a particular essence's perfect, ontologically privileged version and that they merely shape the ways in which a thing's own essence develops in light of its encounters, while the essence's core is *not* positively determined by its (passive) affects. Hübner holds a slightly different account, which is perhaps more friendly to the way external forces influence a single entity's essence, yet also does not go far enough. Hübner argues that even though affects constitute a thing's essence, they do not "bring it into being simpliciter, thereby destroying and generating individuals" (Hübner, 2017: 46). According to Hübner's account as well, affects determine an essence to an extent, while the essence, in its core, must be prior to them. Contrary to these tamed versions of constitution, the view I have promoted in this chapter in conjunction with my account of singular things as relationally constituted, and of formal essences as shared kind-essences, yields a more radical version of constitution wherein the essence of the singular thing is nothing but its causal power—determined, as mentioned throughout, by its shared formal essence (which sets its boundaries) *and* unique, ongoing, causal interactions (which fully determine it).

To see exactly how, I wish to adopt Hübner's account and to "charge" it with my understanding of the relevant concepts. According to Hübner, it must be the case that the constitution of the essence

is differentiated from the essence itself, for otherwise, Spinoza's account of the affects "undermines the possibility of robust diachronic identity for finite things in Spinoza's framework" (Hübner, 2017: 42). Hübner argues that contrary to this worrisome possibility, "affective changes in power... *require* the existence of [an unchanging essential nature] for their intelligibility" (Hübner, 2017: 44) and that "Spinozistic essences [are] at least in part intrinsically determinable [such that] what remains the same... is the *range* of degrees of power that this thing may have" (Hübner, 2017: 47).

Hübner grounds her first claim in the preface to part 4 of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza argues that a change in degree of perfection (i.e., causal power) should not be understood as a change "from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as it is changed into an insect" (4pre; G/II/209; C/I/545-6). As I have argued already, what we should take Spinoza to be saying here is that a change in degree of perfection (i.e., in a thing's actual essence) does not involve a change in its formal essence; i.e., it does not affect the kind of thing an entity is. In other words, the unchanging nature required for affective changes should only be understood as the singular thing's formal essence, or the *ratio* which determines it to be of a certain kind, a nature which it shares with others. It is true, of course, that to the extent that a *ratio* constrains or conditions what a thing can and cannot do, it partly determines the range of degrees of power the thing may have. Moreover, it is in virtue of being of a certain kind and sharing this nature with others that interacting with them yields a metaphysical union (4p18s). For, as argued in chapter 4, a formal essence is inadequately expressed in an infinity of finite modes which, to the extent that they are able to express it, are expressing the exact same thing. Yet importantly, while such a *ratio* is a necessary condition for a thing to have a diachronic identity, it cannot explain it or serve as grounds for it in the way Hübner wants it to, as it is a shared nature, unable to account for a particular entity's unique being. Within the boundaries of such nature, a thing is determined to act, and to *be* a certain way in virtue of its external

determinations, some of which constitute its essence by joyous causal interactions (and some destroy it by saddening ones).

And so, both these claims (about the unchanging nature and the innate determinateness of the range of degrees of power) do not bring forth a view in which the "robust diachronic identity" of finite things is preserved, at least not in the commonsensical way of thinking of such identity. This is because (i) things are identical with their essences, and as I argued thoroughly in Chapter 4, (ii) to the extent that a thing is singular and durationally exists, it is *constituted by* its causal interactions. The thing's formal essence, as it is infinite and eternal and is shared among many, plays an important role in explaining the particular thing's idiosyncratic essence, yet cannot, by itself, fully account for it. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, a thing's *ratio* and its formal essence were already ruled out as being able to answer Q3, i.e., as accounting for a thing's singularity. Since this is the case, there *is no singular thing*, and no actual essence which is separated from the thing's causal interactions; a thing's actual essence is wholly constituted by its affects, i.e., by its active and passive expressions of its causal power.

This sounds extreme, for what I am suggesting seems to entail that singular things do not have an essence "of their own" at all, and if this is the case, then it seems impossible to discuss, e.g., "two individuals of entirely the same nature" (4p18s; C/I/556 G/II/223). For, one may worry, if there is no privileged essence giving rise to the singular thing as such, what does eventually distinguish, to whatever degree, one singular from another? This is a legitimate worry, thus I wish to clarify: to argue that there is no ontologically privileged essence of singulars does not entail that there is no, temporally or chronologically speaking, original constitution of an entity and its essence, but only that this essence, as it endures, consists just as much of its (temporally) original parts, and the parts which compose it

in virtue of its ongoing striving.³⁶⁸ When a durationally existing thing comes into existence, it has a certain degree of power, and it participates in a certain formal essence. It is in virtue of this "original" amount of power that it is numerically distinct from others.³⁶⁹ Thus, I am not suggesting that Spinoza's durational realm is a soup of causal powers which at no point can be individuated or identified as "*this*" or "*that*" thing. What I am suggesting is that this "starting point" is conditioned, yet is not exhausted by a thing's *ratio*. Just as it (quite intuitively) always has the possibility of being completely destroyed and to perish, so too it always has the possibility to evolve, to exceed, and to keep constantly constituting, such that there is nothing about its original constitution which makes it ontologically "privileged" or more desirable.

This view may be more plausible than it first seems. Take parenting, for example. My essence before becoming a mother was one thing, quite different from the essence I have today, as giving birth is, without a doubt, an expression of power (albeit a passive one!). According to a commonsensical, or more intuitive, view, which Viljanen and Hübner seem to advocate for, the birth of my children does not literally constitute my essence but externally determines me to express my power in a certain way. Perhaps it determines me to increase in power as I am affected with love when lying next to my kids at night or when thinking about them during work. According to my view, the former (pre-motherhood) me and the current me are both equally me (numerically speaking), yet my essence is not quite the same, and thus what "me" stands for has transformed. My essence (and thus, as I will argue later on, my identity) evolves and develops to a degree, in accordance with my causal interactions.

³⁶⁸ When you think about it, if singular things cause the initial existence of another singular thing (by conception, pregnancy, and delivery) and thus constitute its essence and identity in this particular way, there is no apparent reason why, given Spinoza's metaphysics, other singular things which causally interact with such singular would not constitute it in a similar way.

³⁶⁹ E.g., when a human being is born in virtue of its formal essence, and the causal interactions among finite things, it has, as a helpless baby, a certain degree of power, i.e., a distinct actual essence. As it grows older, though, it could, if nurtured and loved by its family, i.e., if engaged in cases of passive joy, increase its power. When it does, what I think Spinoza's metaphysics necessitates, is that it becomes something *else*, and that the more it strives, the more united with others it becomes. This will become clearer in this section and the next.

Motherhood, and giving birth, brought about an increase in power which genuinely constituted my essence through the affect of love. Experiencing love (joy accompanied by an idea of an external cause (3DOAVI)) is nothing but my essence, which is, recall, completely constituted by my affects, whether they are innate or have come from outside (3DOAIexp). As I will argue for more in depth later, the love I experience toward my children can only arise in me to the extent that my children and I agree in nature (4p29) and is both in me and in my children. Thus, to the extent that I undergo an increase in my causal power due to the existence of my children, we are metaphysically united in virtue of this affect such that my essence includes, to that extent exactly, their essence.³⁷⁰

3.2 The Role of Passive Joy and Agreement in Nature

While the view of finite things' identity emerging here (which I will explicitly unpack in the next section) is not in line with our first-person, commonsensical view of ourselves, it does have strong organizing principles. Two important distinctions make the view clearer and more plausible than it may originally seem. The first is between the way in which joy constitutes an essence and the way in which sadness does, and the second is related to the extent to which the thing with which we are in causal interaction agrees with our nature. With regard to the first, recall that what constitutes a thing's essence cannot bring about its destruction (3p4), and that things of contrary nature cannot be in the same subject (3p5). Thus, it is not the case that identifying actual essences with causal power means

³⁷⁰ One might worry that the shared essence which my children and I have as humans is expressed by our ability to reason and thus is not directly related to the feeling of love. Yet, as I argued in the discussion regarding human freedom, it seems that we can agree in nature not only when we are completely rational, and that Spinoza actually advocates for close relationships, such as friendships, as an indispensable way of becoming freer. This, in conjunction with the essence constitution thesis and the fact that external things may genuinely bring forth an increase of our power while we are passively affected, suggests that humanity, or the way in which human essence is expressed in singular humans, is something broader than pure reasoning. In any case, I distinguish two different unions – born out of acting from the guidance of reason, and out of passive joy – later on in this chapter.

committing to the idea that "affects destroy and generate individuals" in a completely chaotic way. As argued already, things strive to increase in power, and Spinoza constantly argues that we strive for what brings us joy (e.g., 3p12, 2p28) and attempt to avoid those things that may bring about our destruction (e.g., 3p13). Thus, and this is the first crucial organizing principle—a singular thing's own essence is directly constituted by its joyful affects, and only indirectly constituted by sadness, to the extent that it resists the decrease in power. As Hübner justifiably argues, a thing's *range of power* is determined by its *ratio*, yet this determination is of less force than Hübner attributed to it and is not identical to the thing's actual essence, but to its formal one. As such, it determines which things are good for the striving entity, i.e., which increase its power, agree with its nature, and constitute its essence, and which are bad for it and threaten its existence.

It may sound a bit too easy saying that according to Spinoza, only when things strive successfully and in cooperation are their essence and identity constituted. This seems to imply that we may attribute to ourselves only what we do well and succeed in, or that we identify with our advantages and distance ourselves from our shortcomings.³⁷¹ I believe, though, that this obstacle can be easily overcome. As Spinoza explicitly argues in 3p4 and 3p5, there is nothing in a thing's essence which can bring about its destruction, and things of contrary nature cannot be in the same subject. And so, if what an entity amounts to is its power, it must amount only to cases where its power is increased, or where it resists decreases in power, and cannot be the cause of its destruction. Surely, though, we are responsible in

³⁷¹ On the positive account of essence, see also Della Rocca, 2026: 245-8. According to Della Rocca, such a positive account of essence results in a complete unification of a specific mode whose essence is in question, with God. Della Rocca argues that "Given the principle that essence is purely positive, there is no other way to coherently conceive of x" (Della Rocca, 2026: 247). This might be so, and might fit the way in which, as I argue later on, singular things which act solely out of their nature, i.e., are completely adequate, are united with their formal essence, and with God. Yet, I believe there is room to examine the "in between," i.e., the positive aspect of a singular thing's essence to the extent that the thing is *singular*, i.e., constituted by its causal interactions. From this perspective, which is the relevant one for the account of the identity of singulars which is of interest here, the union born out of the positivity of a thing's essence is with other singular things. Notice that Della Rocca argues that the union with God is the only *coherent* way to conceive x. Yet, as I have argued in chapter 4, there are only inadequate ideas of singular things *as such*. Thus, I take the two positions (Della Rocca's and mine) to complete, rather than compete (putting aside the question of the reality of the finite).

some way for our failures, losses, and decreases of power, and surely, our painful interactions with others shape who and what we are in some way.³⁷²

Here is how I understand the way in which passive joy constitutes my essence, versus how passive sadness influences it. As discussed above, my essence is constituted by my love for my partner or my children, as this love is genuinely a part of what I essentially am, what makes me, me. Yet my essence is also indirectly constituted by my fear of flights. I can face this fear in a few ways which relate to my essence differently. Say that I overcome my fear and get on a plane even though I am extremely anxious. To the extent that I overcome my fear, even though not completely and not on my own (I owe something to therapy) I experience passive joy and am active (in the non-strict sense, since I am an incomplete cause) in resisting that fear. To this extent, the fear, or more precisely, getting over it, directly constitutes my essence. Yet, to the extent that I still have that fear, while my essence must have something in common with whatever causes this sadness or fear of flights (4p29), my causal power does not, in and of itself, aid this fear in the same way as it does the overcoming, and thus it does not directly constitute my essence. If I am barely able to resist a fear when confronted with it, such interaction brings about a decrease in my power, and I strive merely to the extent that I resist it. Overall, one might argue, I am pretty weak in this specific scenario, and this fear does indeed shape my identity, yet only as an external cause. If, when confronted with a fear, I, so to speak, discover great power inside which eventually makes me stronger, my essence is thereby constituted. And as Spinoza argues in 4p18d, the force with which I overcome, or the joy I experience (i.e., an instance of

³⁷² Kisner argues with regards to a similar worry that if striving is limited to acting in the strict sense, i.e., if we may count as part of our striving only the extent to which we are active, and thus does not include cooperation and inadequate causation, "things are not active with respect to some effect when they endeavor to bring about the effect but fail to do so" (Kisner, 2020: 48). I am not sure I agree with Kisner on this point and that this is in fact the case, for, as mentioned already, the DI recognizes that things strive to the extent that they are active, and does not limit striving to activity in the strict sense. Thus, a proponent of the DI may argue that to the extent that I attempt to defend my dissertation I strive, even if I (God forbid) fail. The question is how exactly we are to conceptualize this attempt, what goes into it as a genuine part of *my* attempt, and where does *my* striving end.

my striving) must be defined by my power and the power of its external cause. Thus, we have a first way of distinguishing interactions with things that constitute our essence from interactions with things that externally determine it.

The second principle has to do with the fact that things may constitute our essence only to the extent that they agree with our nature. Spinoza argues that "if things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other" (1p3), and that "no thing can be either good or evil for us, unless it has something in common with us" (4p29); "because we call good or evil what is the cause of joy or sadness... a thing whose nature is completely different from ours can be neither good nor evil for us" (4p29d). Thus, nothing is "more excellent than those things which agree entirely with our nature" (4p18s; G/II/223; C/I/556), and "the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful for us, the more it agrees with our nature" (4p31c). Agreement in nature, thus, can come in degrees (Della Rocca, 2010: 178), and it is only to the degree of agreement that a thing can causally interact with us such that it may be considered good for us, and constitute our essence.³⁷³ And so, an idea cannot causally interact with a body, and a rock, e.g., which agrees with a human body's nature only since they are both extended, may be good for a person in certain circumstances to a minimal extent, and to that extent only, it may constitute its essence.³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Our identity is thus constituted by that thing for the same degree. I discuss this further in section 4.

³⁷⁴ To the extent that a human and a rock are together the cause of one effect (say, the breaking of a window), they are, according to 2D7, one singular thing. The singular thing a stone and a human may give rise to is, I take it, the sort of "problematic" singulars Melamed (2010) has in mind when he criticizes Spinoza's physics, or the kind of singular Perler (2020) and Barbone (2002) deny has a *conatus*. While I think it has to be the case that, indeed, a rock and a human being may form an ad-hoc singular (which to a very limited extent strives), I also think that this is not as metaphysically interesting as it may seem at first, given Spinoza's monism and the ontological status of finite modes. What is more philosophically interesting and fruitful is, I suggest, the union which comes about from the joining of two things (humans in particular) which *share a nature* and thus can more deeply metaphysically unite. These kinds of unions seem to be of most interest to Spinoza, as they have crucial bearings on his ethics and the possibility of human freedom, and thus they are also the focus of the discussion held above and the motivation behind the desire to answer Q3. As will become clear shortly, the fact that some causal interactions are grounded in a shared nature plays an important role in the way causal interactions differ with regard to the question of essence (and identity) constitution.

Two human beings, Spinoza argues, may agree in nature to a great extent (4p35d), and they may even *completely* agree. Spinoza argues that "there is no singular thing in Nature which is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason" (4p35c1); that "nothing can agree more with the nature of any thing than other individuals of the same species" (4appIX), and so that "to man... there is nothing more useful than man" (4p18s; G/II/223; C/I/556). Thus, in accordance with the IPI reading of the *conatus*, "the rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us to establish a bond with men" (4p37s1; G/II/236-7; C/I/566).³⁷⁵ A fellow person, Spinoza argues, may to a great extent constitute our actual essence by aiding us to increase our causal power. Moreover, Spinoza argues that "if... two individuals of *entirely the same nature* are joined to one another, *they compose an individual* twice as powerful... Man... can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all *should agree in all things* that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, *one mind and one body*." (4p18s; G/II/223; C/I/556; emphasis added). In 4p18, the proposition leading to this scholium, Spinoza argues that a desire arising from joy is stronger, all things being equal, than a desire arising from sadness. As discussed, Spinoza demonstrates this point by explaining that the force of a joyful desire is *defined* by the power of both the human experiencing the increase in power *and* the external cause of the increase (4p18d). In other words, joy is always and necessarily stronger than sadness *because* it is literally the effect of *joined forces*, which are two instances of the *same* nature, expressed, together, in one single affect. And since this is the case, as argued in the scholium, two men who are joined to one another literally compose a twice as powerful individual.

Scholars tend to resist the literal interpretation of 4p18s (according to which agreement in nature results in a metaphysical union) for different reasons. Barbone, for example, argues that the condition Spinoza sets for a true metaphysical union here—a complete identity in nature—can never hold

³⁷⁵ While Spinoza's focus is the human case, this account extends (at least theoretically and to a varying extent) to all striving things, as the trees example (section 2.2.2) makes clear.

(Barbone, 2002: 94). Ursula Renz argues that while this passage may be taken literally when pertaining to collective bodies, "Spinoza is more cautious when it comes to the question of whether or not states and social groups have one singular mind." According to Renz, the unity in question should not be understood in the strict sense (Renz, 2018: 59-60) because subjectivity (or for our purposes, the identity of a single person) cannot be delegated (Renz, 2018: 127).³⁷⁶ Hübner takes Spinoza's statement to mean something slightly different—i.e., as evidence that there are, for Spinoza, common essences (Hübner, 2014: 127). Yet, she also takes these to be merely beings of reason and thus does not read the union in question as truly metaphysical. Contrary to these views, the metaphysical picture I promote throughout this dissertation as a whole, and especially the suggested reading of the *conatus* as an essence which is constantly constituted actively and passively, leads to a different interpretation. Instead of either embracing or rejecting the union mentioned in 4p18s, I suggest unpacking it further by distinguishing two kinds of metaphysical unity similarity in nature gives rise to.

As Della Rocca argues, "to the extent that you and I agree in nature... anything that I do that stems from that shared nature also *stems from your nature...*" (Della Rocca, 2010: 178-9; emphasis added).³⁷⁷ This interpretation is complemented by what I have argued in chapter 3—the nature singular things share, e.g., humanity, is one; it is *a* formal essence which finite modes partake in. To the extent

³⁷⁶ Renz's account, as is clear from the introduction to her book, rests primarily on our first-person experience and our common-sensical intuition of ourselves as discrete persons (Renz, 2018: 1-16). As such, her methodology is in direct contrast to the one I follow in this dissertation as she sets herself to explain *how* human experience is possible in Spinoza (and why it is important) and not whether it is possible. Thus, she posits, e.g., a distinction between *mens* and *anima* (See Renz, 2018: 170), arguing that Spinoza holds the concept of mind specifically for humans, which seems to be in tension with anti-humanism and metaphysics in general. See also Hübner's review of Renz's book (Hübner, 2019) which touches on exactly these issues. For other views which, for some reason or another, deny real metaphysical union among singular individuals, see Renz, 2019: 37; Bennett, 1984; Den Uyl, 1983; Rice, 1990; Solé, 2025 does not overtly deny such union, but argues that it is merely ideal.

³⁷⁷ According to Della Rocca, this identity in nature is not restricted to cases of cooperation but happens whenever two things act from the same nature, whether they are aware of each other or not. I agree with Della Rocca on this, as the psychological aspects of our striving, or whether we are aware or conscious of our and others' expression of power, do not have bearing on whether we actually express such power. I limit the discussion to cases of cooperation and partial agreement since I believe they are most relevant for Q3 and provide a useful starting point for the matter at hand. The way in which we are psychologically affected by our interactions with closer or more distant external things will be discussed in the conclusions of this dissertation.

that two things act solely from their entirely shared nature, thus, they act from, literally, the *same* nature.³⁷⁸ A formal essence, I have argued, is an infinite and eternal power structure which modifies God's infinite power. Finite things and their actual essences further modify—inadequately and partially—this very same power. Yet if, or to the extent that, finite things are able to adequately express such power, there is no difference, really, between them, or between them and the formal essence in which they partake. As Della Rocca makes clear, since Spinoza is committed to the PSR and to the PII, the non-identity of two distinct objects must be explained by their qualitative difference, and conversely, "perfect similarity entails identity of objects" (Della Rocca, 2010: 185). And thus, to the extent that two things act solely from their entirely shared nature, i.e., express their formal essence adequately, they *are*, really, that formal essence and are numerically united with it and with each other.

Importantly for our purposes, though, when such a union occurs, a singular thing's identity seems to vanish or to dissolve into its formal essence. In other words, to the extent that the mind has adequate ideas—i.e., is active in the strict sense and fully expresses its formal essence—those ideas are not, strictly speaking, of this particular mind but are shared among all finite minds as they are, in fact, ideas of their formal essence. As Spinoza argues in 2p34d, "[w]hen we say that there is *in us* an adequate and perfect idea, we are saying nothing but that (by P11C) there is an adequate and perfect idea *in God* insofar as he constitutes the *essence* of our mind" (2p34d; emphasis added), i.e., the mind's formal essence.³⁷⁹ Thus, adequate ideas (and whatever their counterpart in extension may be) and the numerical identity of singulars involved in having them do not explain what makes an entity *this* rather

³⁷⁸ One might worry that while this view might make sense with regard to human minds, it is less intuitive when it comes to the body. Two bodies acting from the same nature do not, suddenly, form one single body, an objector to my suggestion might point out. I see the worry; yet, (i) I am completely open to the possibility that in the same way that our first-person experience of our mind does not reveal much about who and what we are, so does our first-person experience of our body. (ii) I believe Garrett's permissive view of *ratios of motion and rest*, according to which there need not necessarily be a physical proximity between the individual's parts, is helpful here (Garrett, 1994: 90). In line with such view, a response to such objection is simply that when two things act from the numerically same nature, this nature, or form, or *ratio*, is numerically one, yet is spatially discontinuous, to use Garrett's terminology.

³⁷⁹ See Garrett, 2018: 402-3; Della Rocca, 1996: 54-7; Marshall, 2014: 24-6.

than *that*. I have argued in chapter 4 that finite minds are complex ideas (2p15) and thus that they may include both adequate and inadequate ideas, yet also that overall, considered as *an* idea of an actually existing body, a finite mind is always and necessarily inadequate, as there is no idea of an isolated singular in God's mind. The current discussion sheds further light on the structure of such a mind and the relationship that obtains between its different parts, and the way it relates to its formal essence; to the extent that there are adequate ideas constituting a finite mind, that part of the mind is not, strictly speaking, finite and expresses the way in which a particular mind may be eternal and participate in its formal essence.³⁸⁰

There is, though, a different kind (or degree) of metaphysical unification that is relevant for the question we are after. As Nadler points out, "reason prescribes that we should strive to possess 'many things outside us which are useful to us' (IVp18s)" (Nadler, 2015: 108). Spinoza also argues that free men (who are guided by reason) are joined in close friendship (4p71d) and that "a man who is guided by reason is *more free* in a state... than in solitude" (4p73). Thus, it seems that acting in accordance with one's own nature does not necessarily imply acting in the strict sense and is restricted only to having adequate (and thus numerically identical) ideas. In other words, and in accordance with the view I developed throughout this chapter, humans can agree in nature (and thus increase each other's power) not only to the extent that they are completely rational, or "perfectly similar." Agreement, which is expressed by inadequate activity or cognition, brings forth a unity that comes about, to varying degrees, by *any* case of an increase in power. Thus, e.g., friendship brings humans to "strive to benefit one another with equal eagerness for love" (4p71d), i.e., brings humans to increase each other's power, as a mother's love for her children results in her increased power and essence constitution.

³⁸⁰ Thus, to the extent that the mind is eternal (as described in the second half of part 5 of the *Ethics*), i.e., considered as expressing a formal essence, it lacks individuality. See Nadler, 2001: 111-131; Cf. Della Rocca, 2008: 259. Of course, adequate ideas arise both from reason and intuition, yet it is the third kind of knowledge in virtue of which the mind is eternal. See Nadler's discussion.

These increases in one's striving, which arise from interactions with external things, are, again, affects one undergoes which, quite literally, constitute its essence. As such affects inhere in (as Della Rocca argues) and are defined by (4p18d) all the different singular things causing them, the essence constituted by them is an essence wherein those singulars are metaphysically united.³⁸¹ Spinoza brings up such union in Ep. 17 where he argues that "a father so loves his son that he and he beloved son are, as it were, one and the same... because the father, by the union he has with his son, is a part of the said son, the father's soul must *necessarily participate* in the son's ideal *essence*, its *affections*, and *consequences*." (Ep. 17; G/IV/77; C/I/353-4). While the use of "as it were" here may suggest that the union between the father and the son is not genuine (as argued by Renz, 2018: 59), it might be that it is only metaphorical to the extent that a complete numerical identity is in question, yet that a metaphysical unity, as the rest of the passage clearly describes, wherein the two essences constitute each other and are thus united, is in fact the way in which the father and the son relate to each other. And so, the reason why a thing of entirely the same nature as ours is most useful to us (as Spinoza argues in 4p18s) is that by causally interacting, or by mutually causing the constitution of each other's essences, the two essences are metaphysically united and thus constitute a twice as powerful essence.

There are (at least) two possible objections to the proposed view. To begin with, one may argue that if the affects which constitute a singular thing's essence do not adequately express its shared formal essence, then any causal cooperation wherein there is any similarity in nature (say, between a human and a dolphin) contributes to the constitution of an essence in the same way, and thus the work formal essences do in explaining such interactions, and the entities they give rise to, is minimal to non-existent (and thus, that we are again left with Melamed's weak individuals problem). Yet, it is

³⁸¹ Armstrong (2009: 55-6) similarly argues that what is internal to the individual is what agrees with her nature, and what is external is what is in contrast to it. Thus, to the extent that things agree in nature, they are "internalized" and become, so to speak, part of that essence. Importantly, as I argue next, it is not the case that one thing "swallows" another, but that there is a mutual constitution of a united essence.

important to remember that Spinoza explicitly argues that man is God to man (4p35s), and that the entirely identical nature does play an important, indispensable, role in the power things may have in virtue of interacting with others. In addition to the abundance of evidence provided to support the uniqueness of the connection which obtains between things of the same nature, we may look at 3p57s, where Spinoza argues that "the affects of the animals which are called irrational... differ from men's affects as much as their nature differs from human nature" (3p57s; G/I/187; C/I/528), as evidence for the fact that the affects which things cause in others are determined by their kind. Lastly, as argued above, humans' interactions with each other seem to play, for Spinoza, a central role in their ethical lives and possibility of attaining freedom. Thus, it seems clear that Spinoza (i) takes complete agreement in nature to be significant to the way in which external things constitute one's essence, and (ii) acknowledges that this significance is not restricted to cases where it is adequately expressed in each of the interacting parties. In other words, affects of passive joy which are grounded in a shared formal essence are cases of genuine essence constitution which brings forth a metaphysical union.

An additional worry may be that in any causal interaction there is an agent and a patient. My daughter increases *my* causal power, perhaps in a similar way to how a mother tree nurtures the young trees around. If this is the case, a union which results in a shared *conatus* may not be the best way to describe what is going on here, as there seems to be a non-reciprocal asymmetrical relationship wherein *I* increase in *my* power in virtue of the existence of my child. To overcome this difficulty, it is important to remember that this causal story, of an agent and a patient, is partial and inadequate. For, if I increase in power in virtue of my relationship with my daughter, she does too! As this increase is the result of a joined, shared nature, it simply cannot be the case that what is good for me is not good for her; any increase in my power is also, necessarily and simultaneously, an increase in hers. And while neither of us may automatically and immediately experience this metaphysical unity, what the proposed reading of the *conatus* entails is that in fact, when things of the same nature cause each other

to experience (passive) joy, as they mutually constitute each other's essences, these essences unite and strive as joined, and thus are (or rather, is) twice as powerful.

It should be mentioned that, while in debate, some scholars agree that states, e.g., have a single *conatus*.³⁸² Similarly, in light of 2D7, one may argue that a sports team, wherein different humans strive to achieve a shared goal – and thus are the cause of one effect – are one singular thing. What I am suggesting here is simply that the exact same thing happens at the very basic individual level, i.e., that it is not only that such instituted collections may be considered as genuine metaphysically united entities, but that our everyday lives, and who we most fundamentally are, should likewise be thought of as flexible and constituted in virtue of our connections with others, such that our actual, unique essences are, to the extent that we interact with others, relational. In other words, it is not only that the team players constitute a team, which has its own *conatus*, but that every player's identity is likewise constituted by being part of the team. No *it*, thus, is external to the constant essence constitution thesis. As I will now further argue, since between the thing and its actual essence there is only a difference in reason, a singular thing's identity is nothing but the sum of its causal interactions, and thus necessarily includes those things with which it casually interacts and which entirely agree with its nature. The answer to Q3, thus, is more complex than we intuitively seem to think, or first-handedly feel.

4. The Answer to Q3

At this point, I hope to have provided a complete account of the *conatus* of singular things, as an essence which is constantly constituted and is determined by a thing's causal interactions, such that cases of passive joy grounded in a shared essence bring about a metaphysical unity between the things

³⁸² See, e.g., Tucker, 2013; Steinberg, 2019; LeBuffe, 2021; Zellmer, 2025.

which causally interact. In this section, I wish to draw out more explicit implications this view has on a singular thing's identity, i.e., on what makes them *this* rather than *that*. In order to do so, I will first show that Spinoza himself takes the *conatus* to be everything and all that a thing's identity is, and that scholars overwhelmingly agree on this point. I will then provide a relational account of identity in light of my reading of the *conatus*, which is in line with existing relational autonomy readings.

That the *conatus* doctrine is a central component of Spinoza's philosophical project as a whole is clear. Part of what makes this doctrine so central is the fact that Spinoza closely ties it to a thing's identity. Just how tight the relationship between a thing's identity and its striving is, is perhaps best illustrated in CM I, where Spinoza argues that "though the thing and its striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason... *they are not in any way really distinct*" (CM I.6; G/I/248; C/I/314; emphasis added). Spinoza provides an example which illustrates this point, as he explains that "if I say that in this body, A, there is nothing but a certain quantity of motion, it follows clearly from this that, so long as I attend to A, I must always say that it is moving. For if I were to say that it was losing, of itself, its force of moving, I should necessarily have to *attribute to it something else...* through which it was losing *its nature*" (CM I.6; G/I/248; C/I/314; emphasis added).³⁸³ According to this explanation, any decrease in a thing's power, i.e., anything which happens to (or within) a particular thing that is contrary to its *conatus*, is caused by something other than the *thing itself* (yet as we now well know, not everything external to the thing brings about its destruction) and should necessarily be attributed to an external cause; the thing and its striving to preserve are thus *one and the same*.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Cf. 3pp4-5 where Spinoza seems to make a similar point. Spinoza argues that "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (3p4) and that "Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other" (3p5). In other words, here too Spinoza argues that the thing itself cannot be the cause of its own destruction or of a loss of power. If a thing's nature is to move, e.g., its motion can only be decreased externally. The fact that Spinoza expresses the very same idea in these two different texts is by itself an indication of his commitment to the relationship between a thing's striving and its identity, and evidence that what he says in the passage from the CM represents his own view, rather than Descartes'.

³⁸⁴ And so, if a thing's striving involves others, they are, to the extent that they constitute it, also "one and the same."

How this identification extends to the different aspects of a thing's identity is expressed in many different passages throughout Spinoza's writings. A bit later in the CM, Spinoza says that life *is* "the force through which things preserve in their being" (CM II.6; G/I/260; C/I/326), suggesting that an entity's entire existence is nothing over and above its striving or power.³⁸⁵ In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that desire is (conscious) striving (3p9s) and also that it consists of all of "man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as man's constitution varies..." (DOA I; G/II/190), suggesting that striving is both what constitutes a particular man and what explains a person's characteristics.³⁸⁶ In 4p18s, Spinoza explains "that the foundation of virtue is this very striving to preserve one's own being..." (G/II/222; C/I/555-6), subjecting a person's ethics to their striving. In the same scholium, Spinoza argues that a thing's striving consists in seeking what is useful to it, or what agrees most with its nature. And thus, as suggested in the previous section, Spinoza's remarkable statements that if "two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one" (4p18s; G/II/223; C/I/556), might suggest that it is not only the case that a thing's striving is indistinguishable from it, but that it actually *determines the boundaries* of the entity with which it is so intimately united.³⁸⁷ In other words, it is not that there exists an entity x which, by

³⁸⁵ Spinoza immediately adds that "that force is different from the things themselves," which seems to contradict the previous passage quoted above. Yet Spinoza also distinguishes the way in which life is attributed to things other than God and the way God is life, arguing that in the case of God, specifically, "the power by which [he] preserves in his being is *nothing but* his essence" (CM I.6; G/I/260; C/I/326; emphasis added). The "nothing but" attributed to God's power to exist may suggest that the distinction here, between the way life relates to God and to things, has to do with the issue of self-causation, meaning that things other than God require external causes to have a life (i.e., to exist), and to that extent they are not completely identical with their life and power to preserve it, while God, being that he is self-caused, *is* life. If this is correct, then it might still be the case that the thing's *conatus* is identical to its actual *life*, such that once it comes into existence, it is all that the thing's actual life consists of. Cf. Bidney, 1962: 97–8. I take it that the same rationale applies to a possible tension between 1p24 and 3p7, i.e., a thing's *conatus* is its essence *qua* existing; thus, it involves existence, yet does not guarantee it. In other words, the *conatus* *is* the thing's existence and thus in this respect involves or necessitates it. Yet this essence by itself does not necessitate *that* the thing exists. A finite thing's formal essence, which determines the kind of thing that it is and (partly) causes it to exist, does not involve the finite thing's existence and is in fact completely indifferent to it.

³⁸⁶ Will is nothing but desire related to the mind alone, and appetite is desire related to the mind and body (3p9s). The entire conative realm of humans, thus, is explained by their striving. See Schmid, 2014: 256–8.

³⁸⁷ For more expressions of the relationship of striving and different aspects of identity, see 4p22c and Spinoza's discussion in the *TTP* XVI, where he argues that a thing's right extends as far as its power does, thus drawing the connection between the *conatus* doctrine, identity, and political philosophy.

striving, maintains in existence and preserves or develops its identity, but that the entity, its existence, and identity *is* its striving.

Scholars across the board acknowledge the relation between the *conatus* and a thing's identity, notwithstanding differences in their interpretation of the doctrine or in the details and nature of this relation. Beth Lord argues that the *conatus* "is what makes each particular thing what it is" (Lord, 2010: 90). John Carriero explicitly argues that the thing and its *conatus* are the exact same thing (Carriero, 2002), and Yirmiyahu Yovel argues that finite things "all *exist as* this striving" (Yovel, 1989: 155). Don Garrett, Martin Lin, and Valtteri Viljanen take the *conatus* doctrine to be grounded in the idea of "essence realization," meaning that a thing strives to realize its formal essence (Garrett, 2002: 137; Lin, 2019: 139; Viljanen, 2011: 125–7), and what it actually *is* is this realized essence (Garrett, 2002: 139–40).³⁸⁸ Thus, it seems that by striving, each thing affirms, or rather constitutes, its own identity, and to the extent that a thing strives, it is truly and genuinely itself. Michael Della Rocca argues that the *conatus* doctrine is "the most important" metaphysical claim for the issue of human psychology in Spinoza (Della Rocca, 2006: 193). He further argues that "for Spinoza the striving of a thing to persevere in its being is equivalent to its striving to preserve *itself*" (Della Rocca, 2006: 194, emphasis added), and that "the striving for self-preservation is *in some way* built into the notion of... complex individuals" (Della Rocca, 2006: 206).³⁸⁹ Noa Naaman-Zauderer argues that "the causal power or striving that constitutes a thing's essence [i.e., the *conatus*] *structures... the character...* of its particular actions ... thus, when considered in the essential sense, a thing's causal power or striving *constitutes its idiosyncratic nature...*" (Naaman-Zauderer, 2024: 20; emphasis added). Clearly, according to Naaman-Zauderer, the *conatus* is

³⁸⁸ More accurately, Garrett argues that a thing has both properties, which follow from its essence, and accidents, which do not follow from its essence. Hence the thing and its essence are not identical, yet the more a thing has properties, "the more conceptually and causally self-sufficient it will be," meaning the more it is "in se," a term which Garrett takes to point to subjectivity and substance-like being (Garrett, 2002: 139–40).

³⁸⁹ See also Della Rocca's discussion of how a thing's self-preservation is equivalent to Davidson's account of a person's rationality (Della Rocca, 2006: 209–10).

tightly connected with a thing's identity, as it is what gives rise to its unique being, capacities, and interactions it has with others.³⁹⁰ From these very preliminary remarks, it is clear that, in one way or another, scholars see a close relationship between a thing's identity and its *conatus*. With the account of the *conatus* I have developed in this chapter at hand, I turn to articulate the account of identity of singulars it gives rise to, which this brief discussion made clear, extends to a thing's synchronic, diachronic, and personal identity.

What my reading implies is that singular things' identity is constituted by their causal activity, and this necessarily means that their identity is partly constituted by and through others' *conatuses* and their identities. As mentioned earlier, I take for granted that there is, in Spinoza's metaphysical picture, a plurality of singulars; yet what my project reveals is that the distinctions among them and the way they are individuated do not correspond to how we commonsensically take them to. Again, while finite things come into existence with a certain amount of power which they strive to increase, there is little about this "original" power which limits what they may become. Spinoza's metaphysics, thus, gives rise to a different account of identity, which does not support any isolated, Cartesian-like identity humans experience themselves having. As a singular thing's essence is originally constituted by the structural power of its formal essence and by finite causes that bring it about as singular, throughout its durational existence its essence is constantly constituted by its interactions with external things and the amount of causal power it executes, whether alone or with others. To the extent that things interact with other things of the same nature, their essence, in virtue of this causal cooperation, is unified, and thus their identity, i.e., who and what they most fundamentally are, is deeply and metaphysically united as well.

This idea of relational identity is not entirely unique and is meant to contribute to an existing and growing reading, which emphasizes the centrality and importance of sociability to Spinoza's

³⁹⁰ See also Schmid, 2014: 259; Bennett, 1984: chapter 10; Curley, 1988: 87; Garrett 2002: 130 and n. 5.

philosophical project. One of its most explicit advocates is Aurelia Armstrong, who argues that Spinoza expands the boundaries of individuality "to encompass cognitive and corporal relations with the environment [such that] the Spinozistic individual *is* her ongoing bodily and mental relations" and that "it follows that not all otherness can be regarded as external to her" (Armstrong, 2009: 55). Armstrong's inspirational view comes extremely close to the one I am promoting here, as she "internalizes" external things with which an entity interacts in accordance with the degree of agreement in nature that holds between the two entities. According to Armstrong as well, to the extent that things agree with an agent's nature, they do not really act on it externally, such that one thing's autonomy is dependent on another's. Yet, following Deleuze, Armstrong argues that "we can understand the Spinozistic notion of agreement in terms of collaboration that preserves and respects *each individual's own relations* and world" (Armstrong, 2009: 59; emphasis added),³⁹¹ meaning that she also (as Hübner and Viljanen mentioned above) works with an idea of an ontologically privileged identity, which necessarily requires others for its own preservation.³⁹² Thus, Armstrong does not argue for a relational *identity*, but for an account of autonomy which is entrenched in humans being part of nature and society and necessitates interactions with others. According to my view, since our essence is equally constituted both internally and externally, and is predetermined by a *shared* nature, the entity which Armstrong identifies as "each individual" is much less metaphysically robust and is more deeply constituted by its causal interactions.

According to Armstrong, "the identity of each individual is determined in the first instance by a certain ratio of motion and rest... for the individual to maintain this identity—or exist—it must necessarily be connected to other[s]..." (Armstrong, 2009: 55). This endeavor to maintain a thing's

³⁹¹ See Deleuze, 1988: 126.

³⁹² See also Tucker, 2019; Williams, 2019. Both views are even less "extreme" in how influential they take external things to be constitutive of a single entity's essence.

particular *ratio* is what grounds, notwithstanding the internalizing of external causes, the unique identity of the single entity. Yet, as I have repeatedly argued, such a *ratio* does not constitute a particular thing's identity but merely sets its (very broad) boundaries. Since this is the case, I insist, a thing's *ratio* cannot by itself ground its particular identity. And in fact, other than its *conatus*, nothing can, as singular things are *defined* by their finitude, durational existence, and constant causal interactions with external things.

Thus, it is definitely true that a Spinozistic individual, or rather, a singular thing, is nothing but its ongoing bodily and mental relations, or the sum of its active and passive affects. This is a necessary outcome of the constant essence constitution interpretation I offered of the *conatus*, according to which striving is open-ended and may change and develop by virtue of the specific encounters a thing experience throughout its durational existence and the affects such encounters bring about. It is also true that since a thing's striving is cashed out in terms of its causal power—expressed actively and passively—things with which it cooperates to bring about effects (external and internal) are internalized by it, in accordance with the degree to which they agree in nature. And so, in the absence of a unique *ratio of motion and rest*, or any other concept capable of grounding a singular's identity *qua* singular, it is by virtue of their causal activity that they are *this* rather than *that*.³⁹³ Since this activity includes others, and as the affects which constitute a thing's striving are both in the affecting and the affected singulars, affects which bring about an increase in power, i.e., cases of passive joy wherein things act from their shared nature, are cases wherein two singulars are metaphysically united and mutually constitute each other's essences and identities. Put simply, if the *conatus* is constituted by affects, and if affects inhere in both their causes, then affects of joy grounded in agreement in nature

³⁹³ As I have suggested, motherhood, or the love I experience in virtue of my children's existence, is a genuine (and central) aspect of my identity which is defined both by me and them. While this is an intuitive view to hold, Spinoza's metaphysics as I understand it entails that this is not only a psychological aspect of my identity, but that it involves a deep metaphysical union between me and my children.

bring about a shared *conatus*. If the *conatus* determines a thing's identity, the thing's identity is to that extent shared.

Finally, in these very last paragraphs of this dissertation, I wish to make a general remark regarding the case of the human mind and human identity in particular. Part of what motivated my project as a whole is the commonsensical assumption regarding our own identity with which scholars enter their reading of Spinoza, an assumption for which I could not find strong textual grounds in the text. This "naïve" account is perhaps best described and promoted (as discussed in the introduction) by Ursula Renz, according to whom Spinoza's theory of the human mind in particular should be analyzed "according to the way in which it takes into account *the assumption that human experience is explainable*" (Renz, 2018: 2; emphasis added).³⁹⁴ While other scholars are not so forcefully motivated by the desire to align Spinoza's theory of mind with their everyday experiences, they hold similar suppositions, taking the basic unit that makes up the human mind to correspond to our everyday experience of ourselves as discrete persons. Thus, as discussed above, even relational readings, which take Spinozistic individuals to be constituted within society or nature, do not give up on the basic or fundamental construct of a commonsensical, Cartesian, mind. Interestingly, readings that are less sympathetic to Spinoza's account of the human mind criticize it exactly due to their commonsensical assumption of what the human mind is supposed to be. Thus, Margaret Wilson argues that Spinoza fails to deliver a better version than the Cartesian one of a human mind, and that in general, Spinoza's theory of the human mind has "extremely exotic implications of its own, that it *fails to capture ordinary notions of the mental*, and that it suffers from internal imprecision and inconsistency. In short, it does not work at all" (Wilson, 1999: 130-9; emphasis added).

³⁹⁴ Meaning that, even though a person's experience is always, necessarily, and in an irreducible way *hers*, i.e., from her own private perspective, it is still intelligible and can be fully explained to others.

What I hope to have shown in this chapter is that such bugs in Spinoza's theory of the human mind (which were not discussed here) are natural features of his more general metaphysics of singular things, and that there is no real reason to assume anything about the human mind that could not be attributed to singular things in general. If singular things are constituted in virtue of their causal interactions, and if these include others and their particular identity, then a human being's identity, and what *she is*, is not a discrete quasi-substance entity, but *is*, rather, a process of constant affective changes in virtue of which she unites, at different moments and in different respects, with others. Spinoza's notion of the human mind, thus, is not supposed to "capture ordinary notions of the mental", in the same way that his notion of God, or, say, of prophecy or miracles, are not supposed to correspond to how we ordinarily think of them.³⁹⁵ Since our first-person experience of ourselves is not epistemically privileged, there isn't a strong reason in virtue of which we should prefer it over Spinoza's theory of mind, and deem the latter as unsuccessful.

It is undeniable that one can accept everything that I have argued for and still *feel* and *experience* herself as a discrete individual (I am the first example of such a case). I believe an inquiry into the gap between the metaphysics of human identity and our lived personal identity may be fruitful and interesting. This, though, is not so much a metaphysical inquiry and is beyond the scope of this project. What I do wish to suggest in this regard is that the metaphysical account I have proposed here may serve as grounds to rethink also who we are and how we relate to others at the psychological, daily level, as well as to be in the background of an inquiry into Spinoza's notion of personal identity (to the extent that he had one). For, since most fundamentally humans are singular things which are on a

³⁹⁵ Spinoza argues that "natural knowledge can be called prophecy" and that prophetic knowledge does not "extend beyond natural knowledge..." contrary to the way it is ordinarily understood (TTP I; C/II/77; G/III/15). He also argues that "the term "miracle"... means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by example of another familiar thing" (TTP VI; C/II/155; G/III/84).

metaphysical par with all other finite modes, they should be understood within and in light of the metaphysical considerations, and not as competing against them. At the basic metaphysical level, humans are united in virtue of their shared nature and causal interactions, whether we feel this unity or not.

CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation I have provided an account of Spinoza's metaphysics of finite, singular things. As a relatively clear picture of substance emerges from Spinoza's monistic metaphysics, it was much less clear to me, entering this research, what he takes finite modes to be, what their identity consists of, and how exactly they are constituted. Since my aim was to reach a universal, metaphysical account of the identity of the finite, which extends to all singular things regardless of their kind, I attempted to conduct a neutral interpretation of the relevant concepts, as they are defined and employed by Spinoza in his masterpiece, the *Ethics*.

In Chapter 2, I looked into Spinoza's notion of an individual, which he defines in terms of a *fixed ratio of motion and rest* which obtains between the individual's parts (2p13D). I have first distinguished three basic questions associated with the notion of an individual, namely, what is an individual (Q1), what makes an individual be of a certain kind (Q2), and what makes an individual *this* rather than *that* (Q3). I argued, contrary to most interpretations, that Spinoza takes a thing's *ratio of motion and rest*, i.e., its individuality, to answer Q1 and Q2, yet not the question of identity, i.e., Q3. In other words, I argued that a thing's *ratio* may speak to the kind of thing that it is (e.g., a human or a fish) yet that it cannot, by itself, account for what makes a singular entity the particular entity that it is. And so, throughout the rest of the dissertation, I explored further key concepts aiming to eventually provide a positive and comprehensive answer to Q3 and to account for the identity of singular things.

In Chapter 3, I looked into Spinoza's notion of a formal essence and offered a few key theses. After providing a thorough account of the distinctive features of infinite modes, I showed that formal essences should be understood as occupying this metaphysical locus; that is, that they are infinite and eternal, follow directly from God's absolute nature, and thus are prior to and indifferent to the finite things of which they are essences. I also argued that formal essences are forms or natures that express

ratios of motion and rest, and that these, in turn, should be understood as dynamic structures of power that modify in a determinate way God's infinite power. Building on the previous chapter, I argued that formal essences are kind-essences that are *shared* among finite things, and thus that they should be thought of as "concrete universals," meaning that each and every formal essence is in itself a mediate infinite mode, which may be expressed in many finite modes, yet exists regardless of the finite modes of which it is an essence. This interpretation situates me among the Platonic readers of Spinoza, according to whom formal essences exist in a separate realm than the things of which they are essences and are really distinct from actual essences. Yet, I argued, while my reading has Platonic features, it differs from most Platonic readings in that it does not take formal essences to be possibilities of actual things, nor does it take actual essences to be realizations of formal essences. Rather, my account of formal essences entails is that there is a real distinction between formal and actual essences, that they differ in content, and do not stand in a one-to-one relation to each other.

After providing a comprehensive account of formal essences and reaching the conclusion that they are not the particular essences of finite things (and thus cannot provide a complete answer to Q3), in Chapter 4, I turned to discuss singular things and their distinctive features. I focused on the definition of singulars as finite and determinate, and on the causal condition of their constitution, and argued that singular things are necessarily durational, meaning that they only exist durationally (and that only singular things exist in this particular way) and in virtue of their causal interactions with other finite things, meaning that they are *relational entities*. Since this is the case, I argued that there can only be inadequate ideas of singular things *as such* (and that they are inadequate causes of the effects they bring about), and that taken in isolation, there is no idea of any particular singular thing in God's mind. Lastly, I articulated the relationship between a singular thing and its formal essence, and argued that formal essences are the formal causes of singular things, in virtue of which they are of a certain kind.

Singular things thus inadequately, i.e., partially, express the same infinite power structure which originally stems from God's essence.

With this characterization of singular things in mind, I turned, in Chapter 5, to discuss their actual essences, which provide the answer to Q3. I provided an interpretation of the *conatus* according to which singular things strive to increase in power, rather than to become self-determinate, and that they do so by causally interacting with others. I had shown that things strive successfully both when they are active and when they are passive, i.e., when they are inadequate causes of the effects they bring about, and that such cases of passivity are indispensable for their striving as singulars, in accordance with how I characterized singular things in the previous chapter. I explained how this mechanism works exactly—I argued that a thing's actual essence is constantly constituted by the affects it undergoes, and that these affects inhere in, and their power is defined by, all of their causes taken together. I distinguished between affects of joy and of sadness and argued that in light of Spinoza's positive account of essence, cases of passive joy genuinely and directly constitute an entity's essence, while cases of sadness only indirectly and externally affect it. From the constant essence constitution thesis, in light of the nature of singulars as relational, and in the absence of anything else which may provide an answer to Q3, I argued that a singular thing's identity is determined by its causal interactions such that, to the extent that things agree in nature, i.e., share a formal essence, and cause each other passive joy, they metaphysically unite such that the identity of the one constitutes the identity of the other. In other words, I argued, in line with the relational autonomy readings of Spinoza, that the core identity of singular things is relational.

Singularity, according to my proposed account, consists of the following: singular things are finite and determinate entities for Spinoza, which exist in virtue of their causal relations with others and are necessarily part of the causal nexus. As such, they are fundamentally different from their formal essences, which are infinite modes that follow directly from God's absolute nature. As

relational entities, singular things have no reality outside the order of nature, and thus their interrelations with others are essential to them. And so, singular things' actual essences, i.e., their *conatus*, necessarily involve causal interactions with others. Since the *conatus* is the only thing in virtue of which singulars have the particular identity that they do, i.e., are *this* rather than *that* particular thing, their identity is also relational, and they are metaphysically united with others on grounds of similarity in nature and causal cooperation. While Spinoza's *Ethics* is focused on human freedom, and thus his *conatus* doctrine revolves mainly around humans, this doctrine, at its core, is universal, and so is the view I have proposed. All finite things are relational for Spinoza, as they all exist durationally, as parts of the causal nexus.

My view, I believe, has strong textual grounds, and it avoids, for the most part, leaning on presuppositions external to Spinoza's text and which are foreign to it, such as the intuitive experience of ourselves as discrete individuals. While perhaps counterintuitive in its conclusions with regard to the identity of singulars such as ourselves, I believe it stays true to Spinoza's general metaphysical commitments and to his radical, uncompromising philosophical temperament. Notwithstanding the virtues of my proposed reading though, there are questions my account gives rise to which call for further consideration. First, speaking from a metaphysical point of view, different things which are external to me but with which I share a nature constitute my actual essence as a singular thing in the exact same way. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 5, there *is* a difference between the kind of union a complete agreement, which occurs when things act adequately or have adequate ideas, and the partial agreement, born out of passive interactions give rise to. The former consists in numerical identity and does not provide a positive answer to Q3, whereas the latter explains exactly what our identity as singular things actually consists of. I have discussed this difference, yet it is clear to me that more work on the relationship between these two kinds of metaphysical union needs to be done. In particular, in future projects I hope to account for how these two kinds of union are born from one another, and

how *together* they are expressed in a singular thing's identity. For, to the extent that we can have adequate ideas, and to the extent that more or less of our mind can be eternal (5p23; 5p40c), it seems that we can simultaneously have an identity *as* singulars, but also that parts of our mind can be completely united with our formal essence and thus lack distinct identity. The intersection of these two states is a territory I wish to further explore.

Second, this project is intentionally general, and its conclusions are supposed to hold universally for all singular things. Yet, to the extent that humans' personal identity is, in some way or another, conditioned by or grounded in the structure of their synchronic and diachronic identity, my reading calls for an account of the concept of personal identity Spinoza's metaphysics gives rise to. While according to my reading, my children and teachers metaphysically constitute my identity in the same way, surely there is a difference in how they shape and determine my *personal* identity, or who I take myself to be. To this extent, one might still want to insist that I haven't provided a complete answer to Q3, at least not as it extends to the human case. That's fine, for again, accounting for the human case in particular was never my intention. Still, to make my account useful and more attractive, I must focus, in future projects, on Spinoza's account of the human mind as he articulates it in 2pp10-13 and will draw more specific conclusions regarding personal identity in particular.

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