**Study Guide to help you review Spinoza’s *Ethics***

**Ethics, Part I**

Spinoza is concerned with the nature of existence or ‘being’: *what is substance?* (What are the basic constituents of reality, and how do other less basic things depend on them.)

Substance is defined as “in itself” (i.e. it is ontologically basic in the sense that it doesn’t depend for its existence on something else—as, e.g., qualities do), and also as “conceived through itself”—meaning that it can be understood or explained without reference to anything else. (**Def I.3**) For Spinoza relations between ideas reflect relations of dependence in the world. In this case, $X$ is a substance (is not dependent on anything else) if you don’t need to look outside the idea of $X$ in order to explain it.

Because substances are by definition conceptually independent, they are also ontologically independent in the sense that their essence involves existence (**Prop I.7**) so that they are self-caused.

Each substance is characterized by its **attributes**, what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance. (**Def I.4**) In light of the correspondence between ideas and reality, an attribute is not just a subjective aspect of a substance, but really does constitute its essence. Furthermore, a substance may have more than one attribute—i.e. a substance may be conceptualized in different completely independent ways.

The ordinary things we encounter do not satisfy this very stringent criterion for what it takes to be a substance. (For example, since any of us can be conceived of as not existing, we owe the explanation for our existence to something outside ourselves.) Spinoza will classify them as **modes**: a mode is something which cannot exist independently but only in some other thing on which it depends. (**Def I.5**) According to this very broad definition, not only are properties and relations modes, but also individual things (not to mention facts and processes).

Spinoza argues that there can be only one substance—it consists “of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence”—which he calls God. (**Props I.11 & I.14**) (Of particular interest is his second proof of **Prop I.11** in which he argues from the possibility of God’s existence to God’s necessary existence.) The familiar ‘substances’ we encounter in our everyday lives must all be “in” God. (**Prop I.15**) Hence, they are not in fact independent substances at all, but depend on God for their existence: they are merely **modes** of substance.

This is not the personal God of Judaeo-Christian tradition, however, and Spinoza makes light of those who anthropomorphize God. (See the **appendix** to Part I.)

The universe is an expression of God’s nature (**Prop I.17**) and God is its **immanent** cause. (**Prop I.18**) This means that God is identical with the universe, not something outside it.

Everything that happens is determined **necessarily** by the divine nature (**Prop I.29**). (The apparent **contingency** of some events merely reflects our ignorance of their causes—see **scholium 1** to prop 33.) God is like a system of immutable natural laws, since things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been (**Prop I.33**; see in particular **scholium 2**).

However, this does not impinge on Gods freedom: he is, in fact, the **only** ‘free cause’. (See **Corollary 2** to **Prop I.17**, and the **scholium** that follows it.)

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**Prop I.4** refers to the fourth proposition of Part I; **Def II.4** is the fourth definition in Part II; **Ax I.6** is the sixth axiom in Part I, and so on. In some translations, the **scholia** are referred to as **notes**.
**Ethics, Part II**

Although God has an infinite number of attributes, the only two which we can know are thought and extension. (Props II.2 & II.3) That these are both attributes of the same substance explains why it is that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” (Prop II.7; see especially the scholium following this proposition.) Ideas ‘correspond’ to their objects because they are one and the same thing, conceived under one or other of God’s attributes.

A (material) body is defined by Spinoza to be a “mode that expresses in a definite and determinate way God’s essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing.” (Def II.1) Distinct bodies are different modes of one and the same attribute.

The way in which they differ is explained in the sketch of a physical theory to be found in the scholium to Prop II.13 and in Prop II.14. (What is described here is a sort of corpuscular theory of matter, except that the ‘corpuscles’ are not independent substances, but modes.)

Just as bodies are complexes of simple modes of extension, so individual minds are complexes of simple modes of thought, namely ideas. See II.15 and the definition of idea, II.D3, which explains that ideas are something active.

Particular things are defined in Def II.7 and although Spinoza does discuss briefly how they are to be individuated, i.e. distinguished from other such things, in the scholium to Prop II.13, this topic is dealt with fully until Part III.²

Spinoza proposes a novel solution to the problem of the relationship between the human mind and its body: the mind is the idea of the body, and our mental processes just are certain bodily states, viewed under the attribute of thought. (See Props II.11-13 and the scholium that follows.) This view is reminiscent of the modern idea that intentional descriptions (i.e. in terms of beliefs, reasons, emotions etc.) of behavior are just descriptions of bodily processes in terms radically different from those employed in the natural sciences. Hence, there is no causal interaction between mind and body. (Recall the scholium to Prop II.7.)

Given the correspondence between ideas and their objects, how is error or falsehood possible?

²To explain what individuates those finite modes of God that we ordinarily think of as distinct individual substances, Spinoza introduces the notion of conatus or endeavor. While only God is truly independent and self-sustaining, finite things too have a lesser version of this characteristic, being more or less able to maintain themselves in existence ‘in themselves’.

Prop III.6: Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being. This is best illustrated by organisms: animals avoid injury, and even restore themselves when injured; they endeavor to persist in their own being—more so than do stones, for example, but this is a difference of degree. It is conatus that constitutes the individuality of finite things

Prop III.7: The endeavour, wherewith everything endeavour to persist in its own being, is nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question. and enables us to speak of them as though they were substances.
(Since Spinoza discounts the existence of free will, and does not distinguish between will and intellect\(^3\), he cannot endorse what Descartes says about the sources of error.) According to Prop II.35: “Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge, which inadequate, fragmentary, or confused ideas involve.” (In the scholium which follows, Spinoza gives some examples of errors and explains how they arise.)

While every idea has an object, we may be mistaken about what that object is unless the idea is adequate. Adequate ideas are defined in Def II.3, and how inadequate ideas arise is explained in a series of propositions culminating in the corollary to Prop II.29. (See in particular Props II.19, II.25, II.26 and the aforementioned corollary.) It turns out that what we take to be ideas of external objects are really ideas of bodily states and do not supply us with adequate knowledge of external bodies.

Notice that, according to Def II.4, a true idea possesses some intrinsic characteristic by which we can recognize it as true without having to refer to its object. (See also Prop II.43.) On the other hand, according to Ax I.6, a true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea. How is one to reconcile these two claims about truth?

Inadequate ideas of external objects supply a low grade kind of knowledge, called opinion or imagination by Spinoza. In fact, ‘imagination’ extends even to generalizations obtained from particular knowledge through experience. What makes this sort of knowledge inferior and fallible (Prop II.41) is that it is knowledge of effects, without knowledge of their causes. However, there is a second grade of knowledge called reason. This is based on our adequate ideas, and is certain. Reason grasps the necessary relations between things (Prop II.44—see also corollary 2) and supplies only universal knowledge. These two kinds of knowledge are described and illustrated in scholium 2 to Prop II.40.

Spinoza’s theory of knowledge also has an ethical dimension which emerges from his consideration of a third kind of knowledge, intuition. This is briefly discussed in scholium 2 to Prop II.40. Apparently intuitive knowledge has the following features:

1. It yields necessary truths
2. It understands \textit{sub specie aeternatis}
3. It yields particular knowledge
4. It is immediate (non-inferential).

\textit{Ethics, Part V}

The role of intuitive knowledge emerges in Book V. What Spinoza calls “the intellectual love of God” is knowledge of the third kind. (See the scholium to Prop V.36.) Prop V.25 explains that to know things in this way is the highest virtue of the mind. Prop V.27 explains that from it we derive the highest contentment of mind. Prop V.32 and its corollary explain the pleasure such knowledge gives us and how it gives rise to an intellectual love of God.

It is also through knowledge of this kind that human beings are capable of obtaining a measure of freedom and immortality. By gaining some understanding of reality as an integral whole, i.e. of God, and recognizing our place within it, we come to participate in the divine nature. Thus, we acquire a measure of freedom in that we now \textit{act} naturally in accordance with those necessary laws of the universe that the unenlightened perceive as external constraints. (See the concluding propositions of Part V, especially Prop V.40, V.41 and V.42 and their respective scholia.)

\(^3\) For Spinoza, to have an idea of something is already to make a judgment about it—e.g. to entertain the idea of a winged horse is already to judge that the horse has wings. (See Props II.48-49.)