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Spinoza’s Epistemic Methodology

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ABSTRACT In “The Problem of the Criterion,” Roderick Chisholm argues that Spinoza is an epistemic particularist. By this, Chisholm means that, according to Spinoza, philosophical inquiry ought to begin with a set of particular knowledge claims. Chisholm contrasts the particularism he sees in Spinoza with the epistemic methodism he sees in Descartes and Hume, who, on Chisholm’s reading, thought that philosophical inquiry must begin with a method for distinguishing knowledge from mere belief. Today, Spinoza is commonly read as an epistemic metaphysicalist, that is, as a philosopher who begins philosophical inquiry with a metaphysical theory already in tow. I argue against these interpretations of Spinoza and show that the epistemic approach Spinoza takes in the Ethics is neither particularist nor metaphysicalist. It is instead firmly rooted in the methodism of Descartes. I show that the Cartesian criterion of clarity and distinctness lies at the foundation of Spinoza’s epistemology, and that Spinoza’s use of this criterion sheds light on how he understood the force and persuasiveness of his geometric method.

KEYWORDS Spinoza, epistemology, method, methodism, particularism, metaphysicalism, clear and distinct certainty

IN HIS SECOND LETTER TO SPINOZA, William van Blyenbergh expresses his dissatisfaction with Spinoza’s approach to philosophical inquiry. He writes,

Before I proceed to ask you to resolve certain other difficulties, you should know that I have two general rules according to which I always try to philosophize: the clear and distinct conception of my intellect and the revealed word, or will, of God.

Spinoza does not share Blyenbergh’s concern that the intellect may lead us astray from the divine truth. He responds,

‘Ep. 20/G IV.96, 27–30. All English translations of Spinoza’s works are drawn from Vols. I and II of The Collected Works of Spinoza, edited and translated by Edwin Curley. For citations to Spinoza’s works I generally give an abbreviation of the work’s title with the standard enumerations of the number or chapter and/or paragraph of the work, along with the pagination for the source of the passage in the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza’s Opera. For citations to Spinoza’s Ethics, I give only the standard geometric citation [e.g. E I P 13:dem] because the geometric form of the text makes this an easier way to find the passage in Gebhardt.

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But as for myself, I confess clearly and without circumlocution, that I do not understand Sacred Scripture, though I have spent several years on it. And I am well aware that, when I have found a solid demonstration, I cannot fall into such thoughts that I can ever doubt it. So I am completely satisfied with what the intellect shows me, and entertain no suspicion that I have been deceived in that or that Sacred Scripture can contradict it (even though I do not investigate it).  

Throughout their correspondence, Spinoza presents his epistemic approach in a decidedly Cartesian manner. He describes his own confidence in “the natural light of the intellect” as a “first principle,” and defends this first principle by describing the indubitability of such ideas.

That in this particular correspondence Spinoza appears to defend the Cartesian criterion of truth against qualification, is not, on its own, all that surprising. Blyenbergh contacted Spinoza under the pretense of being a free thinker who sought Spinoza’s expertise in Cartesian thought. But Spinoza’s treatment of the Cartesian criterion as a first principle of philosophy is not unique to these letters. Spinoza, for example, writes to Oldenburg that

In the Scholium just mentioned, I have also, unless I am mistaken, stated clearly enough the reason for this difference—especially for a Philosopher, who is supposed to know the difference between a fiction and a clear and distinct concept, and the truth of the Axiom that every definition, or clear and distinct idea, is true.”

In fact, Spinoza appeals to the Cartesian criterion of clarity and distinctness in all of his major philosophical works—the Short Treatise (KV), the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (TdIE), his work on Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy (DPP) including the Metaphysical Appendixes (MA), the Ethics, and the Theological Political Treatise (TTP). I argue that this Cartesian criterion underlies the developed epistemological and metaphysical thought of Spinoza’s Ethics.

A perusal through previous investigations into Spinoza’s epistemology suggests that such a thesis is contentious. Commentators have asserted that there is no important role for first-person introspection in Spinoza’s thought. Others have argued that Spinoza’s answers to epistemology are founded exclusively upon his metaphysics. It is in fact quite rare to find a study of Spinoza’s epistemology that does not seek to distance his approach from that of Descartes.

Against this interpretive backdrop, I argue that Spinoza endorses Descartes’s basic approach to epistemology. This is not to deny that Spinoza has serious disagreements with Descartes over the nature of knowledge, and over what in fact can be known. Spinoza does reject numerous aspects of Descartes’s thinking about knowledge, but, as I demonstrate below, this is not because he, contrary to Descartes, believes that “there is no need for a general standard of truth.”

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3Ep. 21/G IV.126, 1–28. For more on Spinoza’s defense of this principle in his Blyenbergh correspondence see Schneider, “A Spiritual Automaton,” 160–77.  
5See e.g. Bennett, A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics, 348.  
8Wilson, “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” 120.
accepts Descartes’s general standard of truth. He simply holds that Descartes applies this standard with insufficient rigor.9

To explain my position, I begin with a distinction presented by Roderick Chisholm in “The Problem of the Criterion.”10 Chisholm contrasts the epistemological approach he calls “methodism” (which he reads into Descartes and Hume)11 with the approach that he calls “particularism” (which he reads into Spinoza and Moore).12 As I shall argue, Chisholm’s reading of Spinoza is mistaken, but the distinction he draws between kinds of epistemological approaches is instructive.

I. THREE QUESTIONS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND THREE READINGS OF THE ETHICS

In the “The Problem of the Criterion,” Chisholm distinguishes between two pairs of epistemological questions:

A) What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?
B) How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?13

I suggest a third question pair to accompany these two:

C) What gives rise to the phenomenon of knowledge? What is the metaphysics of knowledge?

Each of these question-pairs identifies a distinct inquiry about knowledge. The first is an inquiry into the scope and content of what is known. The second concerns our interest in correctly distinguishing knowledge from mere belief. The third reflects our interest in identifying what knowledge, as a metaphysical phenomenon, actually is.

Chisholm notes that the first two of these question-pairs are interrelated: “If you happen to know the answers to the first pair, you may have some hope of answering the second.”14 And this seems right. If you had a list of some particular examples of knowledge, you might be able to discover inductively a method that could distinguish instances of knowledge from mere belief. Conversely, if you were already aware of a mark that distinguished knowledge from mere belief, then the task of identifying what is known would be much simpler. The third question pair is similarly entwined: an account of the processes that give rise to, or constitute, knowledge would likely shed light on marks or criteria for distinguishing knowledge, and possibly offer insight into the sort of things that can be known. Again, the converse applies as well.

While a clear answer to any one of these question-pairs would be helpful in the search for an answer to any of the others, it is important not to confuse an

9 Spinoza expresses this sentiment in the Preface to Part 5 of the Ethics: “Indeed, I cannot wonder enough that a Philosopher of his caliber—one who firmly decided . . . to affirm nothing which he did not perceive clearly and distinctly . . . should assume a Hypothesis more occult than any occult quality.”
10 Chisholm, The Foundations of Knowing, 61–75.
answer to one with an answer to another. Answers about what is known might not explain how knowledge is to be distinguished from mere belief, nor shed any light on what gives rise to this knowledge. Similarly, an account of the nature of knowledge might fail to offer any insight into what is known, and fail to produce a method for actually distinguishing cases of knowledge from belief.

Chisholm's point in distinguishing these question-pairs is to identify distinct approaches to epistemological inquiry. With the three question-pairs I have specified, we can identify, in addition to skepticism, three positive approaches to epistemology. Each approach corresponds to a prioritization of an answer to one of the question-pairs as a basis for developing answers for the other question-pairs. These four approaches to epistemology can be summarized as follows:

*The Skeptic*: Without a criterion, we cannot identify a set of things that we know or construct an account of knowledge. But we cannot discover a criterion without examining a set of known things or an account of the nature of knowledge. We therefore have no way of securing knowledge.

*The Particularist*: There is a set of things that we know. We can try to use this set to discover a method to distinguish between knowledge and belief, and to discover an account of what knowledge actually is.

*The Methodist*: We have a method or way of distinguishing between what we know and what we do not know. We can try to use this method to discover a set of things that we know and to provide an account of what knowledge is.

*The Metaphysicalist*: We have an account of what knowledge is. We can try to use this account to discover a set of things that we know and to discover a method for distinguishing between knowledge and belief.

The literature reveals no consensus about which epistemological approach should be attributed to Spinoza. No one, to my knowledge, has ever read Spinoza as a skeptic. But Spinoza is often contrasted with those in the early-modern period who took skeptical worries seriously. It is therefore worth noting that, despite Spinoza’s reputation for possessing an “unrivaled epistemic optimism,” he did think carefully about the scope and extent of human knowledge, and he often drew conclusions that count against treating him as simply epistemically arrogant:

I do not know how each part of nature agrees with the whole to which it belongs, and how it coheres with the other parts.

Further more, we are completely ignorant of the order and connection of things itself, i.e., of how things are really ordered and connected.

Since Spinoza is careful to acknowledge the limits of our epistemic powers, his rejection of skepticism likely did not stem from thoughtless arrogance, but rather from a considered preference for an alternative approach to epistemology. I argue here that Spinoza takes the approach of a Cartesian methodist. The majority of interpreters, however, read Spinoza as either a particularist or a metaphysicalist.

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15See e.g. Hubbeling, *Spinoza’s Methodology*, 35.
16Nadler, “Spinoza.”
17See Popkin’s description of Spinoza in *The History of Scepticism*, esp. 239, 245.
18Ep. 30/G IV.166, 13–15.
19See Popkin’s description of Spinoza in *The History of Scepticism*, esp. 239, 245.
For example, after drawing his distinction between particularism and methodology, Chisholm identifies Spinoza as a particularist in the vein of G. E. Moore or Thomas Reid. That is, he reads Spinoza as a philosopher who begins his epistemic inquiry by prioritizing answers to the first question-pair. Just as Moore famously insisted that the knowledge he had of his hand’s existence was far more secure and better known than any metaphysical theory or epistemic criterion that might confirm or reject this claim of knowledge, Spinoza, on Chisholm’s reading, begins with assertions that require no test or metaphysical theory. G. H. R. Parkinson, in *Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge*, sees Spinoza taking this line too.

He writes, “Ultimately, [Spinoza’s attempts to justify the basic principles of his deductive system] reduce . . . to the simple assertion that these principles are true. . . . Spinoza’s task, therefore, is restricted to showing what the axioms of his system are.”

Recent commentators, however, present Spinoza as belonging squarely within the metaphysicalist camp. Dominik Perler gives a clear articulation of this reading of Spinoza’s epistemology when he writes, “Spinoza’s entire discussion of epistemological questions is rooted in a particular conception of the mind-world relation, and his theory rises and falls with this conception.” On the metaphysicalist reading, Spinoza’s confidence in his ability to distinguish between knowledge and belief, as well as his confidence in his knowledge claims (for example, his axioms), are exclusively rooted in his confidence that his overall explanation of the nature of knowledge is fundamentally correct. According to this reading, once Spinoza shows how our intellect is embedded within the whole of Nature, skeptical problems are dissolved, and we can determine which of our ideas are necessarily true.

Only rarely is Spinoza read as a methodist. According to the methodist reading of Spinoza, it is our ability to distinguish between a true idea and a fiction—our ability to detect a mark of truth—that is supposed to show that his developed accounts of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology are true. Richard McKeon occasionally portrays a Spinoza who takes a methodist line:

> [Spinoza’s epistemic] method itself is not concerned with questions of beginnings, with the question of how we know, and how we can have had ideas that are clear and distinct and therefore adequate, but takes up only the consequences of the

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23So too does R. J. Delahunty. Delahunty unfortunately misreads Chisholm as claiming that Descartes was a particularist, such that the “particularism” he reads into Spinoza is idiosyncratic. See Delahunty, *Spinoza*, 15. Delahunty goes on to read Spinoza’s epistemic approach as being close to Descartes’s, and in this I agree, but in reading both Descartes and Spinoza as particularists he fails (in my opinion) to correctly explain either Descartes’s or Spinoza’s epistemic approach.
24Parkinson, *Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge*, 56.
25I read the following works (among others) as placing Spinoza in the Metaphysicalist camp: Wilson, “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” 92; Della Rocca, “Metaphysics of Scepticism”; Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, 59–60; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 21–23; Curley endorses this view as well in his notes in C1:403.
26Perler, “Verstümmelte,” 179. (My thanks to Naftali Weinberger for his help with this translation.)
fortunate fact that we do have clear and distinct ideas, that, namely, we can proceed in mathematical deduction to other clear and distinct ideas and we shall have no doubt of their truth. The certainty of the idea and the logical necessity by which it may follow from a principle are sufficient guarantee of the result. There is no need that one grow suspicious and test at each moment the metaphysical certainty that the order of ideas and things is the same. In the nature of things the mind explores essences and a true idea agrees with its object and a good method produces ideas in the same order as things are produced in nature, but the test of the true idea is to be found in none of these but in the form of the idea itself.\[27\]

Correctly identifying Spinoza’s approach in the Ethics as either particularist, metaphysicalist, or methodist is crucial if we are to understand the epistemological foundation of Spinoza’s system—his very confidence in his philosophy. It would also go some way toward explaining and resolving disputes about the justificatory structure of the Ethics itself.\[28\] If the epistemological approach of the Ethics is read as particularist, then the justificatory structure of the Ethics looks foundationalist. The un-argued axioms and definitions of the Ethics would simply be seen as known facts, which thereby serve as the foundation for our knowledge of the derived propositions of the work.

If the epistemological approach of the Ethics is read as metaphysicalist, then the justificatory structure of the Ethics would more likely be seen as hypothetico-deductive or coherentist in nature. Since on this reading it is the metaphysical account of the Ethics that secures the truth of both the starting points and the end propositions of the work, it would only be after the metaphysics of the Ethics is fully laid out that the propositions and axioms of the work would possess their full justification. Such a reading would support hypothetico-deductive interpretations,\[29\] as well as coherentist interpretations for how the Ethics comes to be justified.\[30\] Indeed, the metaphysicalist interpretation of Spinoza’s epistemology favors pretty much any view that attributes a holistic approach to justification in Spinoza’s thought.

But if the epistemological approach of the Ethics is methodist, then justification in the Ethics need not be either straightforwardly foundationalist or straightforwardly holistic. If Spinoza appeals to a criterion in order to secure the claims of the Ethics, the axioms and propositions of the Ethics attain their justification upon recognition that these axioms and propositions satisfy the appropriate criterion for knowledge. Hence the methodist interpretation is friendly to readings of the Ethics emphasizing a therapeutic or pedagogical nature to the work.\[31\]

\[27\]Richard McKeon, The Philosophy of Spinoza, 224, emphasis added.

\[28\]By “justificatory structure,” I mean the argumentative structure through which the truth of the Ethics is thought to be secured. Although I do not go into it here, views about Spinoza’s epistemic approach can also influence interpretations of individual arguments (e.g. the ontological argument of E IP7), and can influence interpretations of Spinoza’s use of principles such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). As an illustration, contrast the interpretation of Spinoza’s PSR in Della Rocca, Spinoza, with that presented in Schneider, “Spinoza’s PSR,” 109–29.

\[29\]For examples of hypothetico-deductive readings, see Bennett, A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics, 21–23; and Carley’s notes in CI:403.

\[30\]For examples of coherentist readings, see Hampshire, Spinoza, 17; Steinberg, “Spinoza, Method, and Doubt,” 211–24; Walker, “Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth,” 1–18.

\[31\]For examples of interpretations that emphasize the therapeutic aspect of Spinoza’s Ethics, see Amihud, “Human Affects,” 169–82; De Dijn, “The Ladder, Not the Top,” 57–56; LeBuffe, From Bondage
Assessing rival interpretations of the epistemology of the *Ethics* is no trivial task. Like Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry*, the *Ethics* does not begin with any explicit discussion of the underlying epistemological assumptions that motivate the layout of the work. Rather, it simply begins with definitions and axioms and proceeds with demonstrations. And while Spinoza scatters comments about knowledge and method throughout many of his writings, and even has an extensive—but unfinished—treatise about epistemic improvement (the *TdIE*), it is not obvious that this material is self-consistent, let alone helpful for understanding the approach of the *Ethics*. Spinoza’s *TdIE*, for example, has been charged with containing several “failed and aborted attempts” to justify first principles, and has been described as “a risky guide to the thought in the *Ethics*. Others have expressed these worries more precisely, claiming that while Spinoza begins the *TdIE* with what is more or less a Cartesian methodological standpoint, he later gives up the approach completely. Still others have claimed—I think correctly—“that in the main [the *TdIE*] continued to satisfy Spinoza for some years.”

It is indisputable that Spinoza’s position about the metaphysics of knowledge undergoes changes between his earlier works and the *Ethics*. It is also indisputable that by the time he wrote the *Ethics*, Spinoza rejected several particular knowledge claims that he previously held to be true. But despite the changes in Spinoza’s thought about the metaphysics and particulars of knowledge between the *TdIE* and the *Ethics*, he does not abandon the central claims of his earliest work. Epistemological themes of the *TdIE* are mentioned favorably in correspondence while the *Ethics* is in draft stage, and again after its completion. And, perhaps most tellingly, Spinoza appears to refer the reader to the *TdIE* in the *Ethics* itself. None of this would make much sense if there were a radical shift in Spinoza’s fundamental epistemological approach between these two works.

That said, there is no need for us to prejudge the issue in order to determine the epistemology of the *Ethics*. The arguments I present below reveal problems

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14 See Wim Klever’s introduction to his Dutch translation of Spinoza’s *TdIE*, in Spinoza, *Verhaling*. Yirmiyahu Yovel takes the same line as Klever in *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 5. For an excellent criticism of this view, see De Dijn, “Spinoza’s Logic,” 419–30.
15 See Carley, “Preface to *TdIE*,” 5.
16 Most notably, Spinoza reverses his position regarding the behavior of the intellect when we take part in the highest knowledge. In the *Short Treatise*, we have the highest knowledge when the intellect is completely passive, whereas in the *Ethics* and the *TdIE*, the highest knowledge occurs when the intellect is completely active. But even here the structural picture is roughly the same: when the idea is “purely in the intellect,” it is true and certain, and when the intellect is part passive and part active in relation to the idea, the idea is mutilated and doubtful.
17 One such change is that in the *TdIE* Spinoza places an emphasis on the necessary truthfulness of simple ideas. This emphasis is absent in the *Ethics*, where instead Spinoza focuses upon “common notions,” a conception that is absent in the *TdIE*.
18 See the 1666 Ep. 37/G IV.188–190.
19 See the 1677 Ep. 59/G IV.268–270, from Tschirnhaus, and Ep. 60/G IV.270–271, Spinoza’s reply.
20 See *E IIIP*40.
with the particularist and metaphysicalist readings of the *Ethics*. My arguments *do* make use of Spinoza’s other texts—but only to undermine the idea that these works offer support for either of these two readings. Of course, in presenting the case that Spinoza takes the approach of a Cartesian methodist in the *Ethics*, I cite freely from across all of his texts. I take it to be an advantage of the methodist reading that it reveals a significant consistency between his various works.

2.1. The Particularist Reading and Its Problems

There are two obvious reasons for reading a particularist approach in the epistemology of the *Ethics*. First, throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes numerous assertions that seem to rest upon neither a metaphysical account of knowledge nor any epistemic criterion. These assertions are simply described as being known through themselves. For example:

- *EIP1* alt dem: These things are evident through themselves.
- *EIP2* cor 2: For if they changed as to their existence, they would also (by *P20*) change as to their essence, i.e. (as is known through itself), from being true become false, which is absurd.
- *EIIp5* dem: The formal being of ideas is a mode of thinking (as is known through itself).

Second, the *Ethics* begins with “true” axioms⁴¹ and not with a criterion for knowledge.⁴² Since Spinoza argues from un-argued axioms, it is natural to think that the geometric method of the *Ethics* displays a foundationalist structure of justification grounded in particular knowledge claims. There is even evidence that Spinoza saw the geometric method in this light. In the introduction to Spinoza’s *DPP*, Spinoza’s friend Lodewijk Meijer, writing with Spinoza’s approval,⁴³ explains Spinoza’s decision to use the geometric method in the *DPP* on account of its utility in deriving unknown things from “things known certainly beforehand . . . as a stable foundation.”⁴⁴ All of this is suggestive of a particularist approach.

It is suggestive, but deceptively so. Particularism prioritizes “what is known” over any criteria of knowledge. As such, particularism is somewhat committed to a prioritization of what is “commonly known.” For if a particularist were to select only bits and pieces from what is commonly regarded as knowledge as actual knowledge, she would either (a) employ a criterion in making this selection—and thereby be a methodist, or (b) make this selection arbitrarily. Particularists like Chisholm, Reid, and Moore avoid this dilemma by maintaining a commitment to common sense. Indeed, particularists often cite the preference for keeping common sense as the motivation for favoring particularism over methodism. As Ernest Sosa writes, [W]e favor particularism as against the methodism of Descartes and Hume. For we reject the methods or criteria of Descartes and Hume when we realize that they

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⁴¹In Ep. 9/G IV.43, 34–35, Spinoza notes that axioms, as axioms, must be “conceived as true.”
⁴²While *EIIa4* does assert a condition for knowledge ("Knowledge of an effect involves knowledge of its cause"), this could hardly be considered as providing a criterion for identifying knowledge.
⁴³See Ep. 15/G IV.72–73.
spinoza’s epistemological methodism

plunge us in a deep skepticism. If such criteria are incompatible with our enjoyment of the rich body of knowledge that we commonly take for granted, then as good particularists we hold on to the knowledge and reject the criteria.45

Like Sosa in the above passage, Spinoza rejects skepticism. But he does not reject skepticism because he has a preference for enjoying “the rich body of knowledge that we commonly take for granted.” Spinoza is in fact highly critical of what is commonly taken for granted as our “body of knowledge.” In the TdIE for example, Spinoza discusses what he calls “knowledge from random experience” (cognitionem ab experientia vaga):

I know only from report my date of birth and who my parents were, and similar things, which I have never doubted. By random experience I know that I shall die. . . . And in this way I know almost all the things that are useful in life.46

Likewise, in the Ethics, Spinoza classifies knowledge from random experience as deficient “knowledge of the first kind”:

E IIP40s2: [W]e perceive many things and form universal notions:

I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect; for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience.

II. from signs . . . these two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination

In both the Ethics and in the TdIE, Spinoza rejects this kind of knowledge as knowledge at all. In the passage from the Ethics above, Spinoza equates this “knowledge” with opinion and imagination and then goes on to claim that “knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity” (E IIP41). In the TdIE, Spinoza claims that we can free ourselves from being deceived by this kind of knowledge “as long as we strive to consider all our perceptions according to the standard of a given true idea, being on guard, as we said in the beginning, against those we have from report or from random experience.”47

This creates problems for reading a particularist approach into the Ethics. Spinoza rejects much of common sense as mere opinion. Given that Spinoza is a philosopher who opposes unprincipled distinctions,48 we ought either to conclude that he employed a criterion in determining which of his ideas or beliefs he would select as “self-evident,” axiomatic, and true, or we should conclude that he made these selections in light of an underlying metaphysical account.49

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46 TdIE 20/G II.10–11, 23–3.
47 TdIE 75/G II.18, 27–29.
48 On this, see Della Rocca, Spinoza, 1–32.
49 TdIE 18/G II.9 suggests the former methodist approach: “The order we naturally have requires me to survey here all the modes of perceiving which I have had up to now for affirming or denying something without doubt, so that I may choose the best of all, and at the same time begin to know my powers and nature that I desire to perfect.” E IIP40s, by contrast, suggests the latter metaphysicalist approach: “With this [account of things equally in the part and in the whole] I have explained the cause of those notions which are called common, and which are the foundations of our reasoning. But some axioms, or notions, result from other causes, which it would be helpful to explain by this method of ours. For from these [explanations] it would be established which notions are more useful than the others, and which are of hardly any use.”
Although it is natural to think of the particular axioms of the *Ethics* as providing the ultimate justificatory foundation for the rest of the work, there is reason to be skeptical of this thought. On numerous occasions Spinoza grants that his proofs may not convince the reader:

*E IIP8s*: I do not doubt that the demonstration of P7 will be difficult to conceive for all those who judge things confusedly. . . . But if men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of P7.

*E IP11s*: Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause. For this reason I ask them to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all.

*E IP33Ss*: Of course, I have no doubt that many will reject this opinion as absurd, without even being willing to examine it. . . . But I also have no doubt that, if they are willing to reflect on the matter, and consider properly the chain of our demonstrations, in the end they will utterly reject the freedom they now attribute to God.

*E Iapp*: These are the prejudices I undertook to note here. If any of this kind still remain, they can be corrected by anyone with only a little meditation.50

Spinoza claims some of his demonstrations are likely to be rejected on account of the prejudices of the reader, the reader’s conceptual failures, or the reader’s consideration of an as-yet unanswered objection. And he expects that some of his readers will need to engage in a “little meditation,” “reflect on the matter, consider properly the chain of demonstrations,” and “continue on with [him] slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all.” This latter point emphasizes that the knowledge a reader is expected to attain from the *Ethics* need not flow exclusively from prior confidence in particular axioms or definitions. And so, while it must be granted that Spinoza intended to start his *Ethics* with claims that can be better known than the conclusions he derives from them, Spinoza also recognizes that a reader might come to know the truth of the propositions of the *Ethics* through reflection, meditation, and by considering the work as a whole.

Consider a point Descartes makes in his *Second Set of Replies* concerning the application of the synthetic or geometric method to a problem of geometry in contrast to its application to a problem of metaphysics:

The difference is that the primary notions which are presupposed for the demonstration of geometrical truths are readily accepted by anyone. . . . In metaphysics by contrast there is nothing which causes so much effort as making our perception of the primary notions clear and distinct. Admittedly, they are by their nature as evident as, or even more evident than, the primary notions which the geometers study; but they conflict with many preconceived opinions derived from the senses which we got into the habit of holding from our earliest years, and so only those who really concentrate and meditate and withdraw their minds from corporeal things . . . will achieve perfect knowledge of them.51

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50See also *E IIIP2s, E IIIP5s, E VP36dem*.
51*CSM II.111/AT VII.157*. 
Spinoza’s use of axioms within the geometric form of the Ethics is, then, no strong evidence of a particularist approach to epistemology. If Spinoza took a metaphysicalist approach, the axioms would merely be convenient starting points from which his explanations begin—and not truths that require no justification. If Spinoza wrote the work as a Cartesian methodist, then the axioms are merely true doctrines which, generally speaking, are easily clearly and distinctly understood, and hence useful as the primary notions for his geometrical exposition.

The case for the particularist reading of the Ethics does not, however, rest with Spinoza’s use of axioms or his appeals to self-evidence. There are numerous remarks scattered throughout Spinoza’s writings that have been read as endorsements of particularism. In the Ethics, for example, Spinoza makes the following claims:

\textit{E II P43}: He, who has a true idea, simultaneously knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt of the truth of the thing perceived.

\textit{E II P43dem}: And who, I ask, can know that he understands anything, unless he first understands it? In other words, who can know that he is certain about some thing, unless he be first certain about it?

\textit{E II P21}: For as soon as someone knows something, he thereby knows that he knows it, and at the same time, knows that he knows that he knows, and so on, to infinity.

While these passages do sound like something a particularist might say, they can also be said in the spirit of Cartesian methodism. For example, if a Cartesian wanted to explain why clear and distinct ideas like the \textit{cogito} must be recognized as being true, he might appeal to the certainty experienced in the consideration of such ideas and stress that this certainty shows that there is no need for any further criteria beyond the clarity and distinctness of the idea itself. Of course, establishing the methodist reading of these passages takes a bit of work, but it is easy to see that these passages are compatible with the following doctrines of Cartesian methodism:

So long as we attend to a truth which we perceive very clearly, we cannot doubt it.\textsuperscript{52}

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true.\textsuperscript{53}

[T]he minds of all of us have been so moulded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth.\textsuperscript{54}

However, Chisholm also sees a specific endorsement of particularism in \textit{TdIE} 35 that demands additional examination:

[It is clear that, for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea. For as we have shown, in order for me to know, it is not necessary to know that I know, . . . Since truth, therefore, requires no sign, but it suffices, in order to remove all doubt, . . . it follows that the true Method is not to seek a sign of truth after the acquisition of ideas.\textsuperscript{55}]

\textsuperscript{52}CSM II.309/AT VII.460.

\textsuperscript{53}CSM II.48/AT VII.69.

\textsuperscript{54}CSM I.207/AT VIII A. 21.

\textsuperscript{55}TdIE 35/G II.15, 6–19. In “The Problem of the Criterion,” Chisholm neglects to mention \textit{TdIE} 39, which is even more suggestive of particularism. I discuss this passage below in note 59.
At first glance, this looks like a clear statement of particularism—or, at the very least, a denial of methodism. Indeed, other commentators have taken this to be a direct criticism of the methodism of Descartes. But TdIE 37 continues,

Again, the Method must speak about Reasoning, or about the intellecction; i.e., Method is not the reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things; much less the understanding of the causes of things, it is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions [sed est intelligere, qui sit vera idea, eam a caeteris perceptionibus distinguenda]; by investigating its nature, so that from that we may come to know our power of understanding and so restrain the mind that it understands, according to that standard everything that is to be understood.37

The claim here is not quite what we would expect from a particularist. Spinoza does not claim that we begin philosophical inquiry with a list of particular instances of knowledge because knowledge requires no criterion. Rather, he claims that we need to understand what a true idea is “by distinguishing it from other perceptions.” This is anything but a clear repudiation of Descartes’s epistemological approach. In fact, the TdIE 35 passage that Chisholm cites is actually suggestive of the methodism of Descartes. Spinoza begins by saying that “for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea.” By saying ‘no other sign’ (nullo alio signo), Spinoza indicates that true ideas have a sign that indicates their truth, and that this sign suffices for our epistemic needs. All this is very similar to Descartes’s own description of how his standard for knowledge is discerned through his method of doubt and his discovery of the cogito:

Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness were false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.38

Now there are, of course, complexities concerning both this passage and Spinoza’s own reading of it. Here, I simply want to stress that although isolated excerpts of Spinoza’s writings may look like clear endorsements of particularism, these passages can be read in a manner consistent with Cartesian methodism if one pays attention to Descartes’s arguments for his own methodism.39 With this in mind, given Spinoza’s rejection of the “common sense” approach to epistemology that motivates particularism, the case for Spinoza’s particularism (and his alleged opposition to Cartesian methodism) is much weaker than it initially seems.

584 JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY 54:4 OCTOBER 2016

56 For example, see Bolton, “Spinoza on Cartesian Doubt,” 379.
57 TdIE 37/G II.15, 22–28, emphasis added.
58 CSM II.24/AT VI.35, emphasis added.
59 Consider, for example, TdIE 39/G II.16, 13–14, “Before all else there must be a true idea in us, as an inborn tool; once this true idea is understood, we understand the difference between that kind of perception and all the rest.” This passage may look like it supports particularism, against Cartesian methodism, until one notes Spinoza’s account of Descartes’s discovery of the cogito in his DPP/G I.144, 2–5, “Hence because he [Descartes] had laid bare this truth, he had at the same time also discovered the foundation of all the sciences, and also the measure and rule of all others truths: Whatever is perceived as clearly and distinctly as that is true.”
Most contemporary interpreters see in the *Ethics* a metaphysicalist approach to epistemology. They read the *Ethics* as answering the questions of what we can know and how we can distinguish knowledge from belief with a metaphysical analysis of the mind and its relation to the world. This approach may seem prima facie absurd. After all, how could Spinoza ever *argue* for the truth of his metaphysics without presupposing some epistemic standards or claims? But the metaphysicalist readings of the *Ethics* do not claim that hypotheses and argumentation are impossible without a clear metaphysics of knowledge; rather, these readings claim that the hypotheses and arguments of the *Ethics* only yield *certain knowledge* after much or all of Spinoza’s metaphysics is revealed.

This transformation of Spinoza’s philosophical claims from mere hypotheses to knowledge can be understood in several ways:

(A) A hypothetico-deductive process: As Spinoza explains more and more of the world through the conclusions drawn from his axioms and definitions, we become more and more justified in taking his axioms and definitions as true.\(^6\)

(B) A process of increased coherence: Some interpreters have argued that Spinoza holds a coherence theory of truth, of justification, or both.\(^6\) On these views, it is the superior coherence of Spinoza’s system that accounts for why his claims should be considered knowledge.

(C) A process of undermining skeptical doubts: Interpreters have argued that the metaphysical system of the *Ethics* reveals the incoherence of skeptical doubt.\(^6\)

There is a textual basis for these sorts of readings. As I noted above, in the *Ethics* Spinoza occasionally asks readers “to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all,” and this seems consistent with the holistic approach to justification suggested by hypothetico-deductive or coherentism. Moreover, in the *TdIE*, Spinoza indicates that an account of the intellect is of crucial epistemological importance: “The chief part of our method is to understand as well as possible the powers of the intellect, and its nature.”\(^6\) Furthermore, there is little doubt that in the Second Part of the *Ethics* Spinoza gives a metaphysical account of the intellect and the cause of our common notions. Take the following examples:

\[E\, I\, I\, P_{43}\, \text{Dem: An idea true in us is that which is adequate in God insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind (by P\,1\,1\,C). Let us posit, therefore, that there is in God, insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, an adequate idea, A. Of this idea there must necessarily also be in God an idea which is related to God in the same way as idea A (by P\,2\,0 whose demonstration is universal). But idea A is supposed to be related to God insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind; therefore the idea of idea A must also be related to God in the same way, i.e. (by the same P\,1\,1\,C), this adequate idea of idea} \]

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\(^6\) Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 21–23; Curley’s notes in CI:403.


\(^6\) *TdIE* 106/G II.38, 15.
A will be in the Mind itself which has the adequate idea A. And so he who has an adequate idea, or (by P34) who knows a thing truly, must at the same time have an adequate idea, or true knowledge of his own knowledge. I.e. (as is manifest through itself), he must at the same time be certain, q.e.d.

E IIP38: Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately.

Moreover, in both the TdIE and the Ethics, Spinoza also stresses the epistemological importance of investigating things in the proper metaphysical order:

Finally, it [deception] arises also from the fact that they do not understand the first elements of the whole of Nature; so proceeding without order, and confusing Nature with abstractions (although they are true axioms), they confuse themselves and overturn the order of Nature. But we shall not need to fear any such deception, if we proceed as far as we can in a manner that is not abstract, and begin as soon as possible from the first elements, i.e., from the source and origin of Nature.

Spinoza repeats this warning in the Ethics (E IIP10s), and he clearly seems concerned in this work to follow his own advice. In Part One of the Ethics, Spinoza begins with a discussion of God, otherwise known as, “the source and origin of Nature,” and in Part Two, he demonstrates his account of truth, falsity, and knowledge through an analysis of this divine nature. It is clear, then, that Spinoza sees metaphysics as playing a role in determining the proper order of inquiry. But for several reasons I think it is also clear that for Spinoza the epistemological role of metaphysics is not the role claimed by the metaphysicalist interpretation.

First, although the metaphysicalist interpretation does make sense of the occasional demand in the Ethics to “withhold judgment,” the work simply cannot be read as though its propositions achieve final justification only after the metaphysical account of the mind and its place in nature is revealed. Spinoza claims to have proven things with absolute certainty well before he presents his entire metaphysical account of our mental apparatus:

EIP33n: I have shown, more clearly than the sun at noonday, that there is absolutely nothing in things on account of which they can be called contingent.

EIP11s: For inasmuch as his essence excludes all imperfection, and involves absolute perfection, all cause for doubt concerning his existence is done away, and the utmost certainty on the question is given.

If confidence in the truth of the Ethics were grounded upon the coherence of its metaphysics, or its explanatory power, or its systematic inconsistency with skepticism, then claims like these would not be appropriate. Indeed, although

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64See also E IIP3, E IIP32, E IIP34, E IIP38dem.
66“Other objections might also be raised, but, as I am not bound to put in evidence everything that anyone may dream, I will only set myself to the task of refuting those I have mentioned, and that as briefly as possible” (E IIP49n).
Jonathan Bennett endorses a metaphysicalist hypothetico-deductivist reading, he grants that this view cannot make sense of how Spinoza takes himself to have shown his propositions to be certain: “It is to be assumed that it is not like swallowing a philosophical tranquilizer, a pill to make skeptical doubts dissolve.”

Second, Spinoza is quite explicit that a metaphysical account of the mind and of its relation to God or Nature is unnecessary for his epistemology. In a letter to Johan Bouwmeester (which was composed while the Ethics was in a draft stage), Spinoza writes,

> It is quite clear what true method must be and in which it should especially consist, namely, solely in the knowledge of the pure intellect and its nature and laws. To acquire this we must first of all distinguish between intellect and imagination, that is, between true ideas and the others—fictions, false, doubtful, and in sum, all ideas which depend only on memory. To understand these things, at least as far as the method requires, there is no need to get to know the nature of the mind through its first cause; it is enough to formulate a brief account of the mind or its perceptions.

And so, when Spinoza suggests in the TdIE that “the chief part of our method is to understand as well as possible the powers of the intellect, and its nature,” he does not mean we must understand the intellect and its powers in terms of its relationship to the infinite intellect of God or Nature: “It is enough to formulate a brief account of the mind or its perceptions.” As he notes clearly in the TdIE, “Method [in this case the method of discerning a true idea] is not the reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things; much less the understanding of the causes of things.” In short, Spinoza is quite insistent that we do not confuse the method of distinguishing “true ideas from the others” with the sort of causal reasoning needed for metaphysical explanations.

Third, when Spinoza defends his confidence in his philosophical system from attacks by Blyenbergh and Albert Burgh, he makes no appeal to its metaphysical coherence, explanatory power, or success in showing the incoherence of skepticism. Instead, he defends his confidence by emphasizing the sort of certainty experienced when one considers valid proofs or basic geometric theorems:

> I am well aware that, when I have found a solid demonstration, I cannot fall into such thoughts that I can ever doubt it. So I am completely satisfied with what the intellect shows me, and entertain no suspicion that I have been deceived . . .

> I know that I understand the true [philosophy]. Moreover, if you ask how I know this, I will reply: In the same way as you know that the three Angles of a Triangle are equal to two right angles.

In these letters, Spinoza is clear that it is the certainty he finds in some of his ideas that grounds his commitment to his metaphysics—and not the other way around.

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68 Bennett, A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics, 21–23.
69 Ep. 37/G IV.188, 33–189, 22, emphasis added.
70 For more on this passage, see Van Cauter and Schneider, “Spinoza: A Baconian?”
73 Ep. 76/G IV.320, 3–6.
74 As I discuss below, Spinoza uses his metaphysical system to explain the cause and nature of this certainty. The point here is that he relies on the epistemic security provided by this certainty in order to give his metaphysical explanation.
Noting this asymmetry clarifies the import of passages that otherwise might look like endorsements of the metaphysicalist approach. Consider, for example, TdIE 80:

Further, if someone proceeds rightly, by investigating [first] those things which ought to be investigated first, with no interruption in the connection of things, and knows how to define problems precisely, before striving for knowledge of them, he will never have anything but the most certain ideas—i.e., clear and distinct ideas. . . . From this it is [to be] inferred that doubt always arises from the fact that things are investigated without order.75

This passage explains what would happen were we to hit upon the correct order of investigation naturally: we would have only "the most certain ideas," that is, "clear and distinct ideas." Now, given that the goal of our philosophical investigation for Spinoza is to know the order through which all things follow from the divine nature,76 he cannot be claiming that our grasp of the correct metaphysical order serves as our epistemic guide. For if this were his claim, then what exactly would we need a guide for? We would already possess that which we seek. Spinoza’s claim here is simply that certainty provides a mark that we are proceeding rightly, and that confusion and doubt—an absence of clear and distinct ideas—is a mark of our failure to do so.

The apparently metaphysicalist passages of the TdIE (e.g. 75, 79, 80, and 104) and of the Ethics (e.g. E 2P10s) are really just reminders that we should strive to carve nature at its proper joints. Spinoza warns that if we fail to do so, we are likely to run into confusions and contradictions. Thus, his advice to choose proper starting points and define terminology in a productive way is not a strong endorsement of metaphysicalism. It is rather just good advice for any philosopher. Spinoza is quite clear in the TdIE that the ability to distinguish between truth and fiction comes prior to our recognition of the proper metaphysical order of investigation:

[T]he Method must, first, show how to distinguish a true idea from all other perceptions, and to restrain the mind from those other perceptions; second, teach rules so that we may perceive things unknown according to such a standard; third, establish an order so that we do not become weary with trifles. When we came to know this method we saw, fourth, that it will be most perfect when we have the idea of the most perfect being. So in the beginning we must take the greatest care that we arrive at knowledge of such a Being as quickly as possible.77

Note that it is only after we become capable of distinguishing truth from fiction that we come to see the epistemological importance of distinguishing a true idea of the most perfect being (God).

It might be thought, however, that in the Second Part of the Ethics Spinoza clearly uses his metaphysics to derive his epistemic claims regarding truth and certainty:

EIIP3: In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything that necessarily follows from his essence.

EIIP3 2: All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true.

EIIP3 4: Every idea that in us is absolute, or adequate and perfect, is true.

75TdIE 80/G II. 30, 26–34.
77TdIE 49/G II. 18, 33–19, 5, emphasis added.
Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately.

He who has a true idea at the same knows he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing.

It is inarguable that, taken together, these claims and their demonstrations are intended to provide a metaphysical explanation for how it is that we possess true and clear and distinct ideas, and why it is that our adequate or clear and distinct ideas must correspond with their objects. But this does not at all entail that Spinoza held these explanations to be necessary for us to know that we have clear and distinct ideas or to know that when we have a clear and distinct idea we are certain of its truth. In this same part of the Ethics, for example, Spinoza explains the causes of memory and sensation. Yet surely no one would think Spinoza believes that these explanations are necessary in order for us to recognize that we have memories or sensations and that they can deceive or confuse. A look at Spinoza’s summaries of the relevant demonstrations verifies that he takes himself to be explaining the causes of ideas whose truth or deceptiveness is already recognized:

And from these [truths] we can . . . see the cause why we have only a completely confused knowledge of our Body.

We see, therefore, how it can happen (as it often does) that we regard things as present things that do not exist.

From this we clearly understand what Memory is.

With this I have explained the cause of those notions which are called common, and which are the foundations of our reasoning.

The case against the metaphysicalist reading is quite strong, then. Spinoza clearly believes that the truth of an idea can be recognized prior to our grasping his metaphysics.

But there remains a claim that first appears in the TdIE and is then repeated in the Ethics that seems to contradict this conclusion, and which seems to demand that we read the Ethics as taking a metaphysicalist approach. In the TdIE, Spinoza holds that we can call true ideas into doubt as long as we lack knowledge of God, the fundamental being of Spinoza’s metaphysics. And in the Ethics, Spinoza states explicitly that knowledge of God is crucial for our knowledge of anything.

In the next section I shall say a bit about how the methodist reading can make sense of this doctrine. Here, however, I simply wish to note that this doctrine does not entail a metaphysicalist approach to epistemology. Descartes, for example, also holds that we must have knowledge of God to have knowledge of anything, yet nobody (at least as far as I am aware) considers Descartes to be a metaphysicalist.

\(^{79}\)See E IIP\(138\), E IIP\(178\), E IIP\(18s\).

\(^{79}\)Emphasis added.

\(^{80}\)Emphasis added.

\(^{81}\)First emphasis added.

\(^{82}\)TdIE 79/G II.30, 11–28.

\(^{83}\)See E IIP\(5\), E IIP\(25c\), E IIP\(40s\), E VP\(24\).

\(^{84}\)See e.g. CSM I.197/AT VIIA.9.
Consider also Spinoza’s expression of his doctrine that “knowledge requires knowledge of God” in the *TdIE*:

From this it follows that, only so long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God, can we call true ideas in doubt by supposing that perhaps some deceiving God exists, who misleads us even in the things most certain. I.e., if we attend to the knowledge we have concerning the origin of all things and do not discover—by the same knowledge we have when, attending to the nature of the triangle, we discover that its three angles equal two right angles—anything that teaches us that he is not deceiver [NS., the doubt remains]. But if we have the kind of knowledge of God that we have of the triangle, then all doubt is removed. And just as we can arrive at such knowledge of the triangle, even though we may not know certainly whether some supreme deceiver misleads us, so we can arrive at such a knowledge of God, even though we may not know whether there is some supreme deceiver.\(^85\)

The position expressed here is rather complicated.\(^86\) But here I will simply focus on three clearly anti-metaphysicalist points. First, this argument is roughly the same that Spinoza gives in defense of the methodism of Descartes, that is, it is an argument that Cartesian methodism does not lead to a regress or circle.\(^87\) Second, in this argument, it is the Cartesian criterion of knowledge, that is, clarity and distinctness (admittedly applied to our idea of God), that does the important epistemic work in establishing our complete certainty. And third, the argument specifically claims that we arrive at “knowledge of the triangle” prior to our attainment of “knowledge of God.” Spinoza’s doctrine that we need to have a clear and distinct idea of God in order to have knowledge of anything is by no means a clear endorsement of metaphysicalism.

2.3. *The Methodist Reading and Why It Should be Endorsed*

I have already shown that several passages in the *Ethics* hint at Spinoza’s methodism. Let us consider a few more. In the appendix to the First Part, Spinoza writes,

They therefore laid down as an axiom, that God’s judgments far transcend human understanding. Such a doctrine might well have sufficed to conceal the truth from the human race for all eternity, if mathematics had not furnished another standard of verity in considering solely the essence and properties of figures without regard to their final causes.\(^88\)

Spinoza’s views on mathematics are rather complicated and worthy of a separate discussion.\(^89\) Here, however, it is enough to recognize that he presents mathematics’ provision of a standard for truth as a significant enough event that it enabled the human race to progress beyond superstition. This suggests that Spinoza treats a grasp of the correct criterion for knowledge as the crucial starting point for epistemic progress.\(^90\)

\(^{85}\) *TdIE* 79/G II, 30, 11–28.

\(^{86}\) The literature offers numerous exegeses on this passage and Spinoza’s other responses to skepticism and the Cartesian Circle. While I disagree on some points, I think Willis Doney is essentially correct in his explanation. See Doney, “Philosophical Skepticism,” 634–35.

\(^{87}\) See the Prolegomenon to Spinoza’s *DPP* G I, 146, 23–149, 15.

\(^{88}\) Appendix to Part One, *Ethics*.

\(^{89}\) See Schliesser, “Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science” (forthcoming).

\(^{90}\) I believe this passage also suggests that it is a mistake to think of Spinoza’s appeals to self-evidence as providing evidence of particularism. Spinoza does not take just any kind of obviousness or self-evidence as a sign of knowledge, but rather demands the sort of self-evidence associated with the clarity and distinctness of mathematics.
A more significant sign of methodist leanings comes from Spinoza’s definition of an adequate idea:

_E IID4_: By adequate idea, I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties or intrinsic denominations of a true idea.

Explanation: I say intrinsic to exclude that mark which is extrinsic, _viz._ the agreement of the idea with its object.

Adequate ideas are central to Spinoza’s philosophical system. Spinoza equates adequate ideas with true ideas in _E 3P5 8dem_, he equates true ideas with clear and distinct ideas in both _E IIP8s2_ and _E IIP43s_, and he equates all three in _E 2P36_ and its demonstration. Admittedly, the relationship and significance of these three terms ends up being a bit more complicated than simple equivalence. But it is indisputable that Spinoza defines an adequate idea (and thereby a true idea) in terms of its “intrinsic marks,” and not in terms of correspondence, identity, or any other metaphysical theory of truth. At the most foundational level, a true idea is distinguished from fiction on account of its own intrinsic features. And this, of course, is precisely what a methodist would say.

The intrinsic marks by which Spinoza believes a true or adequate idea can be distinguished seem to be the “clarity and distinctness” present within a true idea. Spinoza appeals to the criterion of clarity and distinctness at least twenty-four times in the _Ethics_. Further evidence that Spinoza is referring to Descartes’s criterion can be found once it is recognized how, according to Spinoza, clarity and distinctness serves as a mark of truth. Consider _E IIP43s_: “For no one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty. For to have a true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way.” This passage, along with others, suggests that “the highest certainty” is involved in the intrinsic features of a true idea. Spinoza is explicit in _E IIP43 dem_ that adequate or true ideas must have this mark of certainty. “He who has an adequate idea . . . (as is manifest through itself), he must at the same time be certain.” And Spinoza is explicit in _E IIP49s_ that false ideas lack this mark: “A false idea, insofar as it is false, does not involve certainty.”

While certainty may thereby look like an alternative to clarity and distinctness as a mark of truth, recall the definition for clarity and distinctness that Descartes provides in his _Principles_.

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91I have yet to work out all of the details of this relationship, but the literature has been over zealous in trying to claim a significant break between clarity and distinctness and adequacy. See for example, Mark, “Truth and Adequacy,” 11–34. Mark argues that clarity and distinctness cannot be the intrinsic marks of truth or adequacy for Spinoza because Descartes’s criterion requires an external argument before it can be taken as a mark of truth, while adequacy for Spinoza does not. Mark’s argument, however, ignores Spinoza’s own reading of Descartes’s criterion of clarity and distinctness as specifically _not_ requiring external confirmation, as well as the passages of Descartes that support Spinoza’s reading. For Spinoza’s view of Descartes’s position, see _DPP_ Prolegomena/G I.146–149. For sources of Spinoza’s view of Descartes, see _CSM II_ 24–25/AT VII.35–36; _CSM I_ 197/AT VIII.9–10; _CSM II_ 100/AT VII.140–41; _CSM II_ 31–36/AT VII.47–52.

92It is noteworthy that in the _Ethics_ (as compared to the _Short Treatise_) it is an axiom (not a definition) for Spinoza that a true idea agrees with its object (_EIAy_).

93See Deveaux, _The Role of God_, 82.

94See Matheron (“Ideas of Ideas,” 83–91), who argues that in both the _Ethics_ and in the _TdIE_ certainty must be a property that holds at the level of ideas, and not at the level of ideas of ideas.
I call a perception “clear” when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception “distinct” if, as well as being clear, it is sharply separated from all other perceptions so that it contains within itself only what is clear.\(^9\)

For Descartes, the clarity of an idea describes the manner in which the idea is present in the mind and “stimulate[s] it with a sufficient degree of strength.” The “clarity” of a clear and distinct idea describes the force with which the content of an idea strikes us. The “distinctness” describes the precision with which this force is constrained to precise content. Given Spinoza’s explicit statement that “in the Mind there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea” (*E* II P49), it is not much of a stretch for Spinoza to identify the persuasiveness or indubitability of an idea with its clarity and distinctness, and to equate “the highest certainty” with the possession of a clear and distinct idea. Indeed, as noted above, Descartes himself “introduces” the criterion of clarity and distinctness in terms of the indubitability he finds in his grasp of the *cogito*, and he identifies clarity and distinctness with certainty in numerous other passages.

Now, Spinoza does give a rich metaphysical argument explaining *why* it is the case that true ideas strike us as certain, and this metaphysical explanation is part of the project of the *Ethics*. But Spinoza is careful to indicate that the certainty, which distinguishes truth from fiction, does not rely on our grasp of his metaphysics. It is, rather, “manifest through itself.”\(^9\)

To summarize, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s definition of an adequate or true idea relies upon the internal features of these ideas, these features are recognizable prior to a grasp of his metaphysics, and these features bear a remarkable similarity to those identified by Descartes as the distinguishing characteristics of our most certain ideas. Hence, the textual case for reading the *Ethics* as taking a methodist approach to epistemology is quite strong. An examination of the *TdIE* only supports this reading. Consider the following passages:

[Method] is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions; by investigating its nature, so that from that we may come to know our power of understanding and so restrain the mind that it understands, according to that standard, everything that is to be understood.\(^9\)

If, therefore, we wish to investigate the first thing of all, there must be some foundation that directs our thoughts to it. Next, because Method is reflexive knowledge itself, this foundation, which directs our thoughts, can be nothing other than knowledge of what constitutes the form of truth.\(^9\), \(^9\)

\(^9\)CSM I 207/AT VIII A. 21–22.


\(^9\) *TdIE* 105/G II. 38, 1–7. In *Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge*, 11, Parkinson misunderstands the import of Spinoza’s description of the method as “reflexive knowledge.” He writes, “Spinoza sums this up by saying that the method is essentially reflexive knowledge: it consists in thinking about what is known, rather than in trying to prove that a given proposition is known.” But Spinoza’s claim here (and elsewhere, e.g., at *TdIE*, 38/G II. 15, 30–16, 4) is not that we must think about the particular content of a true idea, i.e., “about what is known,” but rather that we must discern a criterion by considering the “form of truth,” i.e., the intrinsic characteristics of a true idea.

\(^9\) See also *TdIE* 69, *TdIE* 91/G II. 34, 1–3.
There is no evidence that Spinoza changed his mind on these views during the writing of the *Ethics*. In fact, *TdIE* 105 (the second passage above), looks to be a clearer statement of the methodism Spinoza leaves implicit within the rhetorical questions of *E IIP* 43:

_E IIP* 43: [W]hat can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.¹⁰⁰

There is, however, more than just direct textual evidence for the methodist reading. I have argued that there are problems with both foundationalist and holistic interpretations of the justificatory structure of the *Ethics*. One advantage of the methodist reading is that it makes sense of the otherwise puzzling claims and argumentation of the work.

On the methodist reading of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza believes a proposition or demonstration can easily be clearly and distinctly understood, he declares his proofs perfectly certain. Where he considers a clear and distinct grasp of a proposition or a demonstration to be difficult or hampered by prejudice, he asks the reader to continue and meditate upon the work as a whole until a clear and distinct grasp of the proposition is achieved. On the methodist interpretation of Spinoza’s epistemic approach, the goal of the argumentation of the *Ethics* is to assist the reader in forming clear and distinct ideas of its doctrines. For, according to Spinoza, once the reader has such ideas, these doctrines will be accepted as certain.

This pedagogical reading of the work is no mere tidy conjecture. Spinoza says in the *TdIE* that “the object aimed at [in perfecting the intellect] is the acquisition of clear and distinct ideas such as are produced by the pure intellect.”¹⁰¹ And Spinoza expresses in the *TTP* how such ideas can serve in a work like the *Ethics* to persuade and convince:

> If someone wants to persuade or dissuade men of something not known through itself, to get them to embrace it he must deduce it from things which have been granted, and convince them either by experience or by reason, viz., either from things they have experienced through the senses as happening in nature, or from intellectual axioms known through themselves. But unless the experience is such that it is clearly and distinctly understood, even though it convinces a man, it will still not be able to affect his intellect and disperse its clouds as much as when the thing to be taught is deduced solely from intellectual axioms, i.e., solely by the power of the intellect and its order in perceiving. This is particularly true if it is a question of a spiritual thing, which does not in any way fall under the senses.¹⁰²

It is hard to read this passage as anything but a comment upon the geometric method of the *Ethics*. Spinoza notes that experience does not have such a strong effect on the understanding because it is not clear and distinct, and explains that this is precisely why it is preferable to deduce conclusions through intellectual axioms (i.e. clear and distinct ideas). Indeed, Spinoza here equates “clearly and distinctly understood” with the “force of the intellect and its orderly apprehensions.”

¹⁰⁰ Similar sentiments are expressed in *KV* xv/G I. 79, 1–20.
¹⁰¹ *TdIE* 91/G II. 34, 2.
¹⁰² *TTP*, 35/G III. 76, 33–77, 05 emphasis added. This passage also clarifies why Spinoza abandons the geometric method when discussing topics such as biblical history, textual exegesis, political analysis, etc. For in regard to these topics, our clear and distinct ideas are lacking.
Finally, the methodist reading of Spinoza’s *Ethics* makes sense of Spinoza’s points of agreement and disagreement with Descartes. Meijer, in his preface to Spinoza’s work on Descartes, notes that Spinoza does not accept all of Descartes claims about what is known or knowable:

Though he judges that some of the doctrines are true ... nevertheless there are many that he rejects as false. 

What is found in some places—vis. that this or that surpasses the human understanding—must be taken ... as said only in behalf of Descartes. ... For it must not be thought our Author offers this as his own opinion. He judges that all those things and even many others ... can not only be conceived clearly and distinctly but also explained very satisfactorily.

It is also clear that Spinoza and Descartes do not acknowledge the same metaphysics of knowledge: Descartes believes that some of our knowledge is due to the fact that a benevolent, non-deceiving creator impressed clear and distinct ideas upon our minds. Descartes believes that the intellect and will constitute two distinct faculties, and that we possess knowledge when we use our absolute and free power of affirming and denying correctly. Spinoza denies all of this.

The philosophical disagreement between Descartes and Spinoza over both the nature of knowledge and what is known and knowable is substantial. Yet they both agree that the clarity and distinctness of an idea serves as a mark of its truth. That they agree on this point while disagreeing significantly about both the particulars and the metaphysics of knowledge suggests that both philosophers took this criterion for knowledge as their epistemological starting point, and from this shared starting point developed divergent accounts of the nature and extent of knowledge. It would indeed be quite surprising if Spinoza and Descartes did not share the same methodist approach, but somehow, despite all their radical differences, came to accept the same criteria for knowledge.

There is no need, however, to consider this unlikely possibility. Spinoza read Descartes as a methodist; and he accepts and defends the methodist approach that he ascribes to Descartes. To see this, consider first how Spinoza presents Descartes’s thought. He explains Descartes’s use of skeptical doubt in the following way:

To discover the true principles of the sciences he [Descartes] asked whether he had called everything into doubt which could fall under his thought. ... And if he did, by doubting in this way, discover something which could not be called into doubt by none of the preceding readings, nor by any other, he rightly judged that he should set it up as the foundation on which he might build all his knowledge. ... And when he considered it accurately he discovered that he could not doubt it [that he was a thinking thing] ... in whatever direction he turns in order to doubt, he is forced to break out with these words: I doubt, I think, therefore I am.

Spinoza sees Descartes’s use of hyperbolic doubt as a means of discerning a belief that is certain and which can thereby serve as an epistemic foundation. But notice

103 *DPP* Preface/G I.31, 23–35.
105 *CSM* I 35/AT VII, 5.
107 See E IApp and E IIIp49, respectively.
how Spinoza believes Descartes’s discernment of an indubitable belief provides an epistemic foundation:

Hence because he [Descartes] had laid bare this truth, he had at the same time also discovered the foundation of all the sciences, and also the measure and rule of all others truths: Whatever is perceived as clearly and distinctly as that is true.\(^{109}\)

For Spinoza, the insight gained through the method of doubt is the recognition of real certainty—that is, the clarity and distinctness of a true idea.\(^{110}\) Once a clear and distinct idea is distinguished, then “a measure and rule of all other truths” has been found. Spinoza is saying here, in a far less obscure manner, exactly what he says in the *Treatise of Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise*, and in the *Ethics*: truth is the standard of truth.

Spinoza sees the discernment of the standard of truth to be far more important to the Cartesian project than the discovery of one’s own existence. This is evident from how Spinoza describes the Cartesian procedure for building a set of certain knowledge:

Now to be completely certain of matters in the sciences nothing more can be sought or desired than to deduce all things from the firmest principles and to render them as clear and distinct as the principles from which they are deduced. So clearly whatever is equally evident to us, whatever we perceive as clearly and distinctly as the principle we have already discovered, and whatever so agrees with this principle, and so depends on it that if we should wish to doubt it we would have to doubt this principle as well, must be held most true.\(^{111}\)

Spinoza claims here that the goal is to deduce all things “from the firmest principles,” that is, to deduce things not directly from the *cogito* but from any principle that is conceived just as clearly and distinctly as the *cogito*. Spinoza even goes further and claims that there are principles that can be perceived “not only with equal evidence and clarity [than the *cogito*], but even, perhaps, more distinctly.”\(^{112}\) For Spinoza, it is clearly the standard of truth that lies at the foundation of Descartes’s epistemology, not a particular proposition or belief.

So Spinoza read Descartes as a methodist; more importantly, Spinoza defends this methodism.\(^{113}\) In the preface to his work on Descartes’s *Principles*, Spinoza offers his own unique argument to show that Cartesian methodism does not lead to an epistemic regress.\(^{114}\) And, perhaps more to the point, Spinoza presents this same argument for his own use in the *TTP*, a work written after an early draft of the *Ethics* was complete:

So long as the idea we have of God himself is not clear and distinct, but confused, we doubt God’s existence, and consequently we doubt everything. For just as someone

\(^{109}\) DPP Preface/G I.144, 2–6.

\(^{110}\) But, as Spinoza states in *TDE* 44/G II.17, 16–20, if someone is already familiar with real certainty, the method of doubt is superfluous.

\(^{111}\) DPP 145/G I.153, 17–25.

\(^{112}\) DPP 145/G I.154, 3–5.

\(^{113}\) I disagree then with Margaret D. Wilson when she argues that, for Spinoza, “Cartesian ‘hyperbolic doubt’ is misguided” and that “no general standard [for truth] is required” (“Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” 120).

\(^{114}\) DDP Preface/G II.146, 23–149, 15.
who does not properly know the nature of a triangle does not know that its three angles are equal to two right angles, so one who conceives the divine nature confusedly does not see that it pertains to the nature of God to exist. But for us to be able to conceive God's nature clearly and distinctly, we must attend to certain very simple notions called common notions, and connect with them those pertaining to the divine nature. If we do that, it becomes evident to us: first that God exists necessarily and is everywhere; next that whatever we conceive involves in itself the nature of God and is conceived through it; and finally that everything we conceive adequately is true. But on these matters see the preface of the book entitled *The principles of philosophy demonstrated in the geometric manner*.\(^{115}\)

This passage not only describes the arguments of the first part of the *Ethics* as a procedure for attaining a clear and distinct idea of God; it also explains how we can use “simple” (elsewhere established as “clear and distinct”)\(^{116}\) axioms to see that all our adequate (clear and distinct) ideas are true. The passage is quite complicated, and there are a variety of ways of interpreting it.\(^{117}\) But to establish Spinoza’s Cartesian methodism, I need only press a couple of points. First, on any reading of this passage, Spinoza clearly takes himself to be following Descartes in the attempt to use clarity and distinctness to secure our knowledge of God—hence his citation to his work on Descartes. Second, despite the significant differences between Descartes’s and Spinoza’s respective demonstrations of the claim that all of our knowledge depends upon knowledge of God, it is clear that both thinkers hold that it is only by using our clear and distinct ideas that any such demonstration can be achieved.

### 3. Conclusion

There is a trend in the literature to downplay the importance of Cartesian epistemology to Spinoza’s thought, ranging from Hampshire’s sweeping declaration that “to introduce Spinoza’s philosophy . . . as primarily a development of Cartesianism or of any other pattern of thought is demonstrably wrong”\(^{118}\) to Margaret Wilson’s more nuanced warning that “efforts to subordinate Spinoza’s treatment [of epistemology] to the Cartesian tradition can all too easily distract us from coming to terms with the basic thrust of his system.”\(^{119}\) I have argued that this trend is, to a significant degree, mistaken.\(^{120}\) But my purpose here is not simply to show that there is a sense in which Spinoza’s epistemological approach should be described as Cartesian. If what I have argued here is correct, then the fundamental epistemology behind Spinoza’s *Ethics* has often been misunderstood. Consider, for example, the following claims of Leon Roth in his influential “Spinoza and Cartesianism”:

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115TTPvi, Adnotationi VI/G III, 252–53.
116In *TDE* 64/G II.24, 29–30. Spinoza connects simplicity with clarity and distinctness: “For if it [fiction] were simple, it would be clear and distinct, and consequently true.”
117For two interesting interpretations of this argument, see Bolton, “Spinoza on Cartesian Doubt”; and Mason, “Ignoring the Demon.”
120This is not say that the differences between Descartes and Spinoza’s methodisms are insignificant. But the general trend in the literature is to misdiagnose these differences. Gilles Deleuze, for example, after correctly noting that Spinoza holds that a clear idea of an effect will not yield a clear and distinct grasp of the essence of its cause, concludes that “Spinoza does not believe in the sufficiency of clarity and distinctness.” This general conclusion is unwarranted. See Deleuze, *Le problème*, 136–37.
The foundation of Spinoza’s logic is fundamentally different from that of Descartes, and it must therefore be regarded as a new and distinct theory.

To Spinoza . . . the universe must be such that it can yield its secrets to thought; thought must be capable of discovering those secrets.\(^{121}\)

There are echoes of these claims throughout the literature:\(^{122}\) both are problematic. At the foundation of Spinoza’s epistemological thinking one does not discover a logic—or method—that is significantly different from that of Descartes. Spinoza is a methodist, as is Descartes. And this has consequences. Spinozism—as much as Cartesianism—faces the problem of the *dialelus*.\(^{123}\) To fully understand and evaluate Spinozism, we must fully confront and evaluate Spinoza’s methodism and his response to the problem of epistemological regress. As I have noted, Spinoza’s response does involve an idea of metaphysical import (the idea of God). But since it is the *clarity and distinctness* of this idea that allows it to play this epistemic role, Spinoza’s response must be understood as a defense of his methodism, and not as a retreat into hypothetico-deductivism or coherentism. The certainty of clarity and distinctness remains the foundation of his epistemic thought.

Against Roth’s second claim, my arguments here show that Spinoza does not assume or demand that “the universe must be such that it can yield its secrets to thought.” Spinoza no more assumes the intelligibility of the universe than Descartes assumes that a non-deceiving God was his maker. Spinoza concludes *via* his clear and distinct ideas *that* his clear and distinct ideas are the ideas of an infinite intellect, which is coextensive with all of Nature. To put this metaphysical discovery—or any other metaphysical principle—at the foundation of Spinoza’s epistemology is to turn his epistemology upside down, and to take what, according to Spinoza, is first in his epistemology—certainty—to be last.\(^{124}\)

**ABBREVIATIONS OF TEXTS AND EDITIONS OF DESCARTES’S AND SPINOZA’S WORKS:**

*Descartes*


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\(^{121}\)Roth, “Spinoza and Cartesianism (II),” 168.


\(^{123}\)This, I think, is why Spinoza spends so much time trying to answer the regress problem. For examples, see *TdIE* 30/G II.13, 18–23; *TdIE* 35/G II.15, 6–19; *EIIIP* 21; *DDP* Preface/G II.146, 23–149, 15; *TTP* vi, Adnotatio VI/G III, 252–53.

\(^{124}\)Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the South Central Seminar in Early Modern philosophy at Texas A&M, and at the Finnish-Hungarian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. I am indebted to the participants at these meetings for their helpful suggestions. In addition I wish to thank Steven Nadler, Henry Southgate, and the anonymous referees for the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, along with Eric Schliesser, Jo Van Cauter, Jason Flatoicz, Paula Gottlieb, and Alan Sidelle for useful comments and criticisms.
Individual works of Spinoza collected in these volumes are abbreviated as follows:

- CM: Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts.
- DPP: Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy.
- E: Ethics.
- Ep.: Letters.
- KV: Short Treatise.
- TTP: Theological-Political Treatise.

Other sources


[“Metaphysics of Scepticism”]


