THESIS

METHODOLOGIES IN SPINOZA AND ARISTOTLE:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

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For this project, I aim to identify a shared methodological structure in Spinoza's and Aristotle's accounts of human flourishing—particularly as developed in the *Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This structure consists of a progression that begins with the definition of a thing, proceeds to its natural activity, and culminates in an account of that activity's highest expression. In Chapter 1, I review the philosophical positions of Spinoza and Aristotle that are relevant to this analysis. In Chapter 2, I consider Spinoza's theories of essence, striving, and blessedness alongside Aristotle's theories of form, function and *sophia*, concluding that the similarities between these principles are limited. Finally, in Chapter 3, I analyze how the principles discussed in Chapter 2 ground separate accounts of the good life. I argue that despite their differences, these principles function in a parallel way methodologically, with each successive idea explanatorily reliant on its predecessor.

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Introduction:

At the beginning of the Early Modern period, high scholasticism, which had dominated the intellectual landscape of Europe for centuries, was in a state of decline. Many of the theories that were foundational to philosophical understanding in the Medieval Era were being challenged by naturalistic accounts of cosmology and theology. Gradually, concepts such as hylomorphism and teleology—which originated in Aristotle and were shaped by the scholastics—gave way to mechanistic theories of causation and bodily composition.

Among the most impactful figures to emerge from this period is Spinoza, who in the *Ethics* introduces a purely naturalistic account of God and human nature. In arguing for this account, Spinoza disputes many of the central commitments of his scholastic contemporaries—including the reality of a transcendent God (EIP18); [1] [2] [3] the existence of universals (EIIPs40s1/ G/II/121); the importance of empirically-based syllogistic deduction (EIIPs40s1/G/II/120); [4] the centrality of free will in moral decision-making (EIIP48); and the explanatory power of final cause (EI, App./G/II/80).

[1] All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* follow the standard shorthand notation, where "E" refers to the Ethics, Roman numerals indicate the Part, "P" indicates a proposition, "D" a demonstration, "L" a lemma, "def" a definition, "C" for corollary, and "schol" a scholium. Thus, "EIIIP7d" refers to Part III, Proposition 7, Demonstration. I borrow this notation style from Soyarslan (Soyarslan, *Blessedness*). However, following Lin, I will occasionally include references of the form "G/II/120" to indicate the exact location of passages (Lin, *Teleology*). Like Lin, I will only include these references in parts of the *Ethics* where the passages cannot be located by the proposition or demonstration number alone—these areas include, but are not limited to, premises and appendices.
[2] All references to specific passages in Aristotle include the abbreviated title of the work followed by the Bekker number, e.g., Physics 197b20–25 or NE 1098a1–5.
[3] Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)
[4] Hübner, Karolina. "Spinoza on Essences, Universals, and Beings of Reason*." Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 1, 26 Aug. 2015, pg. 68 See for a discussion about Spinoza's rejection of this kind of reasoning.

However, Spinoza's disputes are not with the scholastics alone. Much of scholastic philosophy draws directly from Aristotle, whose works were at the core of university curricula in Europe between the 11th and 17th centuries. [5] [6] Indeed, Descartes criticizes the extent of this influence in his introduction to the French edition of the *Principles*: "Those who have not followed Aristotle…have nevertheless been saturated with his opinions in their youth…and this has so dominated their outlooks that they have been unable to arrive at knowledge of true principles."[7]

Despite Aristotle's prevalence during this period, Spinoza largely refrains from addressing his works directly. Barring a handful of expository remarks in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Aristotle is virtually absent from his manuscripts. [8] [9] However, in *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza references a Latin translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that has been identified as part of an *in-folio* edition of Aristotle's collected works. This manuscript is listed in an inventory that was taken shortly after Spinoza's death.[10]

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[5] Marenbon "Medieval Philosophy." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 Edition.

[6] All the previously mentioned scholastic positions are also held by Aristotle, with the partial exceptions of those pertaining to God and free will. Though Aristotle believes that God is eternal and immaterial (Ross, *Aristotle*, 180), it is unlikely that he understands God to be *transcendent* in the Judeo-Christian sense (Wolfson, *Spinoza*, 70). While Spinoza's account of God as an immanent cause is inconsistent with both Aristotle and the scholastics, the scholastic understanding of God is not clearly rooted in Aristotle. Similarly, free will in the scholastic sense has Judeo-Christian origins and so differs from Aristotle's notion of practical deliberation.
However, much like his scholastic predecessors, Aristotle maintains that universals are properties that distinguish one thing from another (Categories, 2a1/14). Moreover, syllogistic deduction is the method that leads to knowledge of universals ((NE1139b25-32), and final cause is the mechanism by which all things pursue a determinate end (Physics, 200a21ff).

[7] *Principles of Philosophy* (Preface to the French edition, 1647). In *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. 9, pp. 1–2. Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1905. For the reference, see, Garber, Daniel *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992

[8] One of Spinoza's only direct rebukes of Aristotle is in a letter to Hugo Boxel, where he states: "The authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates does not carry much weight with me." (*Letter 56 to Hugo Boxel*)

[9] As Manzini notes, Spinoza cites Aristotle a total of 11 times throughout his works, which happens to be the second largest number of citations Spinoza makes of a single philosopher (Manzini, 11).

[10] Manuscripts of this kind would have been extremely difficult to acquire in the 17th century—especially for someone like Spinoza, who had little money (Manzini, 9).

Spinoza's possession of Aristotle's collected works is significant on at least two accounts: First, it reflects that he was exposed to Aristotle directly, and not secondhand through scholastic adaptations. This level of familiarity helps to explain passages in the *Ethics* and in *Theory of the Emendation of the Intellect* that seem to target Aristotle rather than Spinoza's scholastic contemporaries.[11] Second, it opens the possibility that traces of Aristotle's influence are present in Spinoza's works, if only subtly.

Despite Spinoza's frequent critiques of the Aristotelian worldview, many commentators have observed parallels between the two philosophers: Bennett compares Spinoza's theory of identity to Aristotelian substance[12]; Carriero likens *beatitudo* to Aristotle's ideal of theoretical contemplation[13]; Garrett and Lin separately argue that Spinoza's theory of striving is a teleological principle;[14][15] and Manzini posits that Aristotle was a major source of philosophical inspiration for Spinoza throughout his works.[16]

However, for every commentator that makes a comparison between Spinoza and Aristotle, there is another with a counterposing view. Hübner and Bennett maintain that teleology has no role in Spinoza's metaphysics;[17] [18] Soyarslan argues that comparisons between

[11] For instance, in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza denies the existence of universals and cautions us "neither [to infer] something real from [universals], nor [to infer] them from something real…" (TIE, 99). In this passage, we see an intentional contrast between Plato, who infers the existence of "real" things from universals, and Aristotle, who infers the existence of universals from "real" things.
[12] Bennett, Jonathan, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984. Bennett's comparison, like many of those made between Spinoza and Aristotle, consists of a brief observation rather than an in-depth analysis.
[13] Carriero, J. The Ethics in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In Kisner, M. J. & Youpa, A. (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (pp. 20–41). Oxford University (2014).
[14] Garrett, Don. "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism." *New Essays on The Rationalists*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 310–335.
[15] Lin, Martin. "Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 115, no. 3, 1 July 2006, pp. 317–354
[16] Manzini, Frederic *Spinoza: Une Lecture d'Aristote.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009 pp. 404
[17] Hübner, Karolina, 'Spinoza's Unorthodox Metaphysics of the Will', in Michael Della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 5 Sept. 2013) pp. 343-369
[18] Bennett, *Study*, 226

blessedness and theoretical contemplation are specious;[19] and Melamed believes that the extent of Spinoza's conscious integration of Aristotle into his works is unclear.[20]

While these disagreements help to advance the discourse around Spinoza's intellectual influences, they tend to focus on the degree of overlap between individual principles.[21] One area that has received relatively little attention is whether the methodological progression of Spinoza's ideas might resemble Aristotle's. Rousset gestures at this possibility when he claims: "[the order of books in] Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*…without speaking of their contents, is incontestably the determined scheme of the last two parts of the *Ethics*…"[22] However, Rousset seems to take this point to be so obvious as to require no further elaboration. Wolfson, too, boldly claims in his seminal work, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*:

> …Spinoza's discussion of the highest good, of human society, and of the virtues in Propositions XIX-LXXIII of Ethics IV, is based upon Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics…not because we discover in them certain similarities in individual terms or phrases; it is only because we discover in them definite literary similarities in the construction of the arguments. [23]

However, like Rousset, Wolfson leaves the reader wondering precisely what these argumentative parallels are.

Given this apparent gap in the philosophical literature, the aim of this project is to locate a shared progression of ideas between Aristotle and Spinoza—particularly in the *Ethics* and the

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[19] Soyarslan, S. "Spinoza's Account of Blessedness Explored through an Aristotelian Lens." *Dialogue*. 2021;60(3):499-524

[20] Melamed, Yitzak, *Spinoza: Une Lecture d'Aristote* (by Frédéric Manzini). *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2011): 126–127.

[21] Such as the extent to which conatus is a teleological principle and whether *beatitudo* resembles theoretical contemplation.

[22] Rousset, Bernard. "Recta Ratio." *Ethica 4*, Little Room Press, New York, 2004, pp. 1–15.

[23] See Wolfson, Harry A., *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning.* 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934. pp. 22

Nicomachean Ethics. In Chapter 1, I review the philosophical positions of Spinoza and Aristotle that are relevant to this analysis. In Chapter 2, I consider Spinoza's theories of essence, striving, and blessedness alongside Aristotle's theories of form, function and *sophia*, concluding that the similarities between these principles are limited. In Chapter 3, I analyze how the principles discussed in Chapter 2 ground separate accounts of the good life. I argue that there remain enough similarities in the content of these principles for them to function in a parallel way methodologically, because each successive idea explanatorily relies on the one that comes before it. This progression reflects a structural similarity of the kind that has been acknowledged but seldom investigated among Spinoza scholars.

This comparison is not meant to demonstrate that Aristotle's works directly influenced Spinoza. Though such an influence is possible, it is beyond the scope of this project to evaluate the biographical and historical facts necessary for establishing a connection of this kind. As such, I will discuss the methodological similarities between Aristotle and Spinoza in their own right, without speculating about their origin.

Chapter 1:

This chapter takes an expository look at the philosophical positions held by Aristotle and Spinoza that are relevant to our methodological analysis. For Spinoza, these commitments include essence, the *conatus* principle, power, virtue, and blessedness. For Aristotle, they are form, function, *telos*, *phronesis*, and *sophia*.

1. Spinoza:

In Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza introduces the *conatus* principle, which states: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives (*conatur*) to persevere in its being" (EIIIP6). Despite the foundational role this concept plays in Spinoza's metaphysics, there remains significant disagreement about its precise meaning.[24] EIIIP6 bears at least a *prima facie* resemblance to Descartes's first law of motion: "…each thing, as far as it can by its own power, always perseveres in the same state" (Principles, II, 37).[25] Considering Spinoza was himself a Descartes scholar, this similarity is likely more than a coincidence.

However, other propositions in Part III make it clear that *conatus* refers to more than the inertial property of bodies. In EIIIP12, Spinoza posits that: "…the Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body's power of acting" (EIIIP12). In the

[24] As I will discuss in Chapter 2, it is unclear whether *conatus* is a teleological principle, or if Spinoza's radical brand of naturalism precludes this possibility. There is also disagreement about the sense in which an individual can "persevere," and whether/to what extent such perseverance can amount to immortality (Nadler, *Eternity*, 224)

[25] This connection is observed by John Carriero in his discussion of the conatus principle. See, Carriero, John. "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza 1." *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, vol. 35, no. 1, Dec. 2011, pp. 69–92

proposition that follows, he adds that when the mind imagines things that diminish the body's power of acting, it strives to recollect that which "exclude[s] the existence" of those things imagined" (EIIIP13). As John Carriero notes, striving thus entails a kind of improvement that cannot be reduced to "just doing whatever it is you are doing" (Carriero, 71).[26]

To get a clearer idea of *conatus*, let us briefly turn to essence, which Spinoza defines as: "…that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away…" (EIIdef2). Considered by itself, there is little we can gather from this definition other than that for any *x*, the essence of *x* is necessary and sufficient for *x* to be posited. Fortunately, shortly after Spinoza provides us with his definition of essence, he offers some insight into how it relates to human beings: "…we clearly understand what is the difference between the idea of, say, Peter, which constitutes the essence of Peter's mind, and the idea of Peter which is in another man, say in Paul. For the former directly explains the essence of Peter's body…" (EIIP17schol).

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[26] In Part II, Spinoza offers his definition of the "body or individual" (*corpus sive individuum*): "When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies" (EIIP13L3D).
According to this definition, the individuation of a body is determined by the interaction of smaller bodies constrained by one another either through stationary configuration, or through coordinated movement. We can thus understand an "individual" as such according to the arrangement of its composite bodies.
Of course, if we accept this definition, there doesn't appear to be a distinction between the composition of a body and its essence, which Spinoza defines as: "…that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away…" (EIIdef2). If a body is "distinguished from the others" by a determinate composition of smaller bodies, it is unclear in what sense the body would remain if there were a dramatic change in its composition. Spinoza seems to confirm this position in the preface to Part IV, where he uses form and essence interchangeably:
"…when I say that something passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not mean that it changes from one essence or form to another. A horse, for example, is as much destroyed if it is changed into a man as into an insect" (EIV/G/II/208)
Seeing as Spinoza describes form as "the parts [of the body that] communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed ratio" (EIVP39) and uses "form" interchangeably with "essence", it seems reasonable to infer that the essence of the body is indeed the same as the special configuration of its parts (Lebuffe, Anatomy, 194-195).

Consider the claim that the idea of Peter "constitutes" the essence of Peter's mind. The essence of Peter's mind is constituted as such because ideas are conceived through the attribute of Thought, of which Peter's mind is a mode. The essence of Peter's body is "explained" through the idea of Peter because, as Spinoza claims earlier in Part II, mind is the idea of the body, and the body is a mode of Extension (EIIP13). Because Thought and Extension are simply two attributes of God, Peter's mind and body have the same essence, conceived under these attributes. The fact that the idea of Peter constitutes the essence of Peter's mind suggests that the essence of Peter is not the kind of thing he is (i.e., a human being) but rather Peter himself. Spinoza's discussion of Peter and Paul is a revealing, if indirect, elaboration on how essence determines the definition of a thing *qua* its singular status as a finite mode.

Let us return to Spinoza's discussion of *conatus*. From EIIIP12 and EIIIP13 we see that the mind, through various means, strives (*conatur*) to enhance the body's power to act (EIIIP12) (EIIIP13). We also see in the demonstration to EIIIP28 that this power to act is "equal and at one in nature" to the mind's power to think (EIIIP28D). This position is grounded in Spinoza's claim that the mind is an idea of the body, and the body's power to act is expression of the mind's power to think. [27] The mind's power to think manifests in the form of adequate ideas, which Spinoza defines as ideas that, independent of anything else, contain all the aspects of a true idea (EIID4). On the other hand, *in*adequate ideas grant partial only understanding because they merely consist of some aspects of a true idea (EIIP35D/G/II/116).[28] This distinction reveals how the power to act is connected to adequate ideas. In EIIIP1, Spinoza claims that: "…[the mind]

[27]For an overview of this topic, see, Marshall, Colin R. "The Mind and the Body as 'One and the Same thing' in Spinoza." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 5, Dec. 2009, pp. 897–919

[28] "There is nothing positive in ideas which constitutes the form of falsity (by P33); but falsity cannot consist in an absolute privation (for it is minds, not bodies, which are said to err, or be deceived), nor also in absolute ignorance" (EIIP35d).

insofar as it has adequate ideas, necessarily does certain things, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, necessarily undergoes other things" (EIIIP1). One's power to act can thus be understood as a function of one's adequate ideas.

Furthermore, to act is to be an adequate cause (EIIIdef1), and to be an adequate cause, one must act according to one's nature: "…which can be clearly and distinctly understood through [itself] alone" (EIIIdef2). Clear and distinct knowledge results in an upswing of power because it originates in the subject and is not determined by external causes. If an effect is produced by an adequate idea, it is understood through itself and exists independent of any external causes (EIIIPdef1). Insofar as "effect" here is equivalent to "action",[29] we may conclude that we act from our adequate ideas, and that such action is not the result of external cause.[30] [31]

In addition to demonstrating a positive correspondence between the power to act and the acquisition of adequate ideas, Spinoza posits these concepts are closely connected to virtue. In fact, virtue is explicitly identified with power at the beginning of Part IV (EIVdef8). Moreover, in Part V, Spinoza claims that mind: "…acts most [when it possesses adequate ideas], so that though it may have as many inadequate ideas as the other, it is still distinguished more by those which are attributed to human virtue than by those which betray man's lack of power" (EVP20schol/G/II/293). A person's virtue is thus directly tied to their possession of adequate ideas.

[29] It is worth noting that Spinoza never directly identifies these terms with each another. In fact, when referring to "action", Spinoza uses the verb *ago*, *agere*, and when referring to "effect" he uses *effectus*. Nevertheless, from the phrasing in EIIIP1d we may safely infer that all effects can be understood as a certain kind of action.
[30] For a discussion of this point, see Kisner, Matthew J. "Spinoza's Virtuous Passions." *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 4 (2008): 759–83.
[31] We might be tempted to infer from the foregoing that adequate ideas and the power to act have a biconditional relationship. However, this may not be the case. Though adequate ideas clearly entail an upswing in power, it is never explicitly stated that each upswing in power results in an adequate idea. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we shall assume that adequate ideas are least positively correspondent to the power to act. Kisner offers some insight on how an upswing of power may occur unaccompanied by an adequate idea (Kisner, *Spinoza*, 772).

Spinoza also calls virtue: "…the very essence, or nature, of man" (EIVdef8). Given that striving is identified as the essence of a thing (EIIIP7), we may be tempted to infer that virtue is an exercise of striving. However, virtue can be more plausibly read as a particular manifestation of striving, such that all expressions of striving and all expressions of virtue are not identical. Though all things strive to persevere in their being (EIIIP6), one is only virtuous insofar as one acts according to the guidance of reason (EIVP24d), which dictates one pursues nothing but the acquisition of adequate ideas. Since adequate ideas always result in an upswing of power (EVP26), and power is what the Mind strives to attain (EIIIP12), virtue is thus a kind of "effective" striving—at least insofar as virtue is a function of the acquisition of adequate ideas.

Foundational to Spinoza's concept of virtue are the so-called "dictates of reason", which are an elaboration of how striving manifests as virtuous action (EIVP18sch/G/II/222). The dictates require that "everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead a man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can" (EIVP18sch/G/II/222). Notably, the first four dictates all appear to be expressions of the final dictum—namely, the *conatus* principle. As we shall discuss in Chapter 3, striving effectively is maximally useful and amounts to striving toward greater perfection. Moreover, "loving oneself" consists in an upswing of power accompanied by the recognition that this upswing was caused by oneself—an act that is itself a form of striving.[32] Accordingly, after introducing these four dictates, Spinoza claims that "the foundation of virtue is this very striving to preserve one's own being" (EIVP18sch/G/II/222).

[32] Spinoza defines "love" as an upswing of power paired with the idea of an external cause (EIIIDef.AffectsV/G/II/192). So, to "love oneself" would amount to the experience of an upswing of power along with the recognition that this upswing is caused by oneself. Indeed, Spinoza identifies loving oneself in this manner with "pride" and "self-esteem" (EIIIDef.AffectsXXVIII/G/II/197)

So far, we have established that "effective" striving[33] manifests both as virtue and as the acquisition of adequate ideas, which Spinoza defines as ideas that contain all the aspects of a true idea. Given the importance of adequate ideas in Spinoza's account of striving and virtue, it is worth providing an account of the two kinds of knowledge that are necessary to acquire adequate ideas: reason and *scientia intuitiva*.

Reason (*ratio*) helps us perceive the common properties of things (EIIP38), such as physical laws and bodily extension (EIIL2D). These commonalities are perceived when the human body encounters regularities among external bodies (EIIP39). Because properties common to all things are not essential to any one thing, reason does not give us knowledge of particulars (EIIP37). Nevertheless, to have knowledge through reason is to have an adequate idea of something insofar as it has a common property, making such knowledge necessarily true (EIIP41D).

On the other hand, *scientia intuitiva* arises from an adequate idea of God's attributes of Thought and Extension, and through the attributes, knowledge of singular things (EIIP40schol)[34]. This kind of knowledge is described as "intuitive" because it doesn't emerge from the deductive or scientific reasoning typical of the second kind of understanding. Rather, *scientia intuitiva* is an understanding of singular things as they proceed directly from God's attributes. As such, knowledge of this kind is only accessible to individuals who attain a certain level of intellectual cultivation (EVP42schol/G/II/308). Both reason and *scientia intuitiva* yield a distinct kind of adequate idea: reason yields knowledge of general facts and the commonalities between bodies,

[33] Though, as I discuss earlier, even one with inadequate ideas strives to persevere in their being—they simply fail to do so effectively (11).
[34] "…[intuitive knowledge] proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (EIIP40schol2).

and *scientia intuitiva* yields knowledge of finite particulars *via* an adequate understanding of the attributes.

With this, we are positioned to discuss one of the more perplexing subjects in the *Ethics: beatitudo*, or "blessedness." Spinoza understands blessedness as representing the highest manifestation of human striving, describing it as "[that] wherein our greatest happiness consists" (EIIIP49schol4/G/II/136). Though it is unclear the extent to which the second kind of knowledge is involved in attaining blessedness, Spinoza is clear the latter is closely connected to *scientia intuitiva*: "…blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind which stems from the intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) of God." (EIVApp.IV/G/II/267). The phrasing here (most notably "*aliud…nihil*")[35] seems to suggest that blessedness is just the upshot of acquiring *scientia intuitiva*. Of course, it remains unclear whether *all* instances of *scientia intuitiva* give rise to blessedness. Nevertheless, we may conclude that *scientia intuitiva* is *at least* necessary and *possibly* sufficient, because all instances of blessedness stem from *scientia intuitiva*.

Spinoza also claims that blessedness "consists [in]" our faculties of reason (*ratio*) (EIVApp.IV/G/II/267). If "reason" here refers to the second kind of knowledge, this could suggest that the second kind of knowledge is also necessary for blessedness. Thankfully, for the purposes of this project, we may pass over these interpretive challenges. What matters is that the acquisition of certain adequate ideas confers a state of blessedness, which constitutes the highest manifestation of human striving.

2. **Aristotle:**

[35] "*Aliud…nihil*" refers to the phrase "nothing but" in the passage above.

In Part I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that just as what is good for the flautist is unique to his or her function (*ergon*) *qua* flautist, what is good for a human being is unique to his or her function *qua* human being (NE1097b25).[36] While the function of a flautist is rather straightforward (i.e., to produce flute music), the function of something as complex as a human being is less obvious. To understand what the human function is, we must consider Aristotle's discussion of the human soul's three faculties: the nutritive, which governs "nourishment and generation" in all living things (*De Anima*, 415a23);[37] the perceptual, which governs the senses, separating plants from animals (*De Anima,* 413b1); and the rational, "by which the soul knows and understands" (*De Anima*, 429a10).

Though human beings act in ways that might be attributed to the nutritive or perceptual aspects of the human soul, the human function cannot lie in faculties shared by plants and animals (NE1098a5). Rather, the function of a thing is determined by its kind (NE1098a1). Therefore, reason—a quality that distinguishes human beings as a kind—must ground the human function (NE1098a1-5). To see how a person's rational faculties underlie his or her natural function, let us briefly examine Aristotle's notion of form, or *eidos*. Form refers to the elements of a substance that arise by virtue of the kind of thing it is (Physics, 194b27).[38] The form of an equilateral triangle is its three 60-degree angles, and the form of a cup is its distinct shape and size.[39] [40]

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[36] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2019)
[37] Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. and trans. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016).
[38] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2018).
[39] The scholastics debated whether all forms are universals, or if some forms are themselves individuated. Duns Scotus famously developed the concept of *haecceity*, which is an individual form that pertains only to individual things (Cross, *Medieval* SEP).
[40] In *De Anima*, Aristotle claims that a thing's form can be identified with its soul, provided it has one: "It is as if some tool were a natural body, e.g., an axe; in that case what it is to be an axe would be…its soul" (De Anima, 412b10-15). Thus, being that what distinguishes a person from, say, a basset hound, is the fact that the former possesses a rational soul.

Form is also understood in terms of the relationship between primary and secondary substance. In the *Categories*, Aristotle defines primary substance as: "...that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject". Primary substance does not constitute the general properties of individual things, but individual things themselves, such as: "…the individual man or the individual horse" (*Categories*, 2a1/14).[41] On the other hand, secondary substance is whatever species a primary substance belongs to, along with the "genera" of that species. While an example of primary substance might be some man, secondary substance is both the species "man" and the genus "animal" (*Categories*, 2a1/15). What makes "man" a determinate species is its *differentiae* from other species belonging to the genus "animal". In this case, the relevant *differentia* is the human faculty of reason. Since reason is only a faculty of the human soul, we may understand it as the *differentia* that distinguishes "man" from other species. Aristotle's account of form thus explains how species within a genus exist as determinate categories.

With this, we can return to our discussion of *ergon*. Like form, Aristotle understands the function of something—or to be precise, the function of a kind of thing—as determined by the essence only it as a kind possesses. As Irwin observes in the notes of his translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, the function of something amounts to its *telos*.[42] Aristotle introduces *telos* as something connected to the goal of an activity, or that which something acts for the sake of: if an athlete were asked why they exercise, they might answer that it is to enhance their ability to

[41] Aristotle, "Categories," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[42] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2019) pp. 372 (Glossary)

compete (Physics, 194b32); if a botanist were asked why trees grow roots, they might respond that it is to absorb nutrients (Physics, 199a29).[43]

Thus, in addition to *telos* being an end or goal, it relates to some form of the good, insofar as absorbing nutrients is good for the tree or running is good for the runner. In the *Physics*, Aristotle claims that actions in accordance with *telos* "[are] better, not simply but with regard to the nature of each thing" (Physics, 198b8). This passage suggests both that *telos* is determinative of the good, and that what is good for one thing may not be good for another.

Thus, form determines the category to which a thing belongs, and *ergon*/*telos* determine what actions are good for a thing according to its category. Given that the ability to reason is something unique to human beings, Aristotle posits that the human function must be grounded in "some sort of life of action of the <part of the soul> that has reason" and that this function manifests either as "obeying reason" or "having reason and thinking" (NE1097a4-5). As we shall see, this latter manifestation of the human function serves as the basis for Aristotle's theory of human flourishing.

At this stage, it is worth discussing Aristotle's concept of virtue, or *arete.* In addition to its moral connotation, *arete* also denotes excellence or successful cultivation. This dual meaning is not incidental to Aristotle's usage of the term and reflects an important dimension of his ethical theory. Indeed, the extent of one's virtue is determined by how successfully one acts in accordance with one's function (NE1097a16). Thus, to fulfill one's function is to embody a kind of excellence. Aristotle posits that in the human case, to act virtuously is either to act in

[43] As David Charles notes observes, artifacts (such as knives and axes) and body parts also have a *telos*. However, like the activity of walking or growing roots, the *telos* (or goal) of an artifact or body part is "something needed or desired by the agent or organism in question" (Charles, *Teleological*, 230).

accordance with reason or to exercise reason as a faculty (NE1098a9-15). These manifestations of virtue are referred to as *phronesis* and *sophia*, respectively.

Phronesis—which commonly translates to prudence,[44] or practical wisdom—guides our deliberations about the good for ourselves (NE1140a25) and others (NE1107a1, 1178a16). However, deliberations of this kind change according to context—the right course of action for one situation may not be right in another (NE141a23). *Phronesis* is thus a disposition to reliably identify the right course of action through rational deliberation (NE1107a1). As Aristotle explains, practical wisdom emerges from an interplay between the rational and desiderative aspects of the human soul, such that the rational part shapes the ends one desires (NE1177b26).

On the other hand, *sophia* involves the contemplation of necessary, universal principles discoverable through topics such as physics, metaphysics, and mathematics. Aristotle describes the theoretical contemplation (*theoria*) typical of *sophia* as the most choiceworthy activity one can engage because it represents the highest form of human flourishing (NE1097b16).[45] *Sophia* is a combination of both "scientific knowledge" and "understanding about the things that are by nature most honorable" (NE1141b3). Let us discuss these components in turn: Scientific knowledge[46] arises from identifying principles and drawing conclusions through a deductive process. Therefore, it is necessary insomuch as knowledge of this kind remains true in all contexts. Although facts about the good life vary across genus and species, those available

[44] It is worth noting that "prudence" here does not connote its typical meaning of self-serving behavior. Although "knowledge of what is good for oneself is *one species* of prudence" (my emphasis) (NE1141b35) Aristotle also makes it clear throughout Chapter 8 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere that prudence also relates to how to the proper treatment of others.
[45] Because *phronesis* grants us the ability to determine what is good for ourselves, it is by the prescriptions of *phronesis* that the norms of practical reason work in service of theoretical contemplation (NE1145a6).
[46] It might be noted that Aristotle also uses *episteme* in a broader sense at certain points in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. These usages include references to crafts like medicine (NE1180b14). However, seeing as Aristotle claims that it would be "absurd" for someone to believe such practices to be "the most excellent" (NE1141a20), it is clear he has two separate notions of *episteme* in mind.

through theoretical contemplation, such as geometric formulas or mathematical axioms, remain constant (NE1139b20). [47]

The first principles of scientific knowledge do not emerge out of a deductive process, but *inductively* from "that which is already known" (NE1139b25-32). For instance, primary and secondary substance are fundamental metaphysical categories that, when paired with other inductive knowledge about, for instance, the rationality of man, yield certain facts about the differences between mankind and animal-kind (*Categories*, 2a1/14).[48]

Knowledge of first principles does not guarantee theoretical wisdom. Aristotle addresses this fact in Chapter VI of *Nicomachean Ethics* when he compares "wisdom in the crafts" to wisdom in general. To achieve wisdom in the crafts, one must have knowledge of certain universal principles, such as the maxims of Euclidean geometry[49]. However, what craftsmen derive from these principles is too narrow to qualify as wisdom: "…we call Pheidus a wise stone-worker and Polycleitus a wise bronze-worker…But we also think some people are wise in general, not wise in some [restricted] area, or in some other [specific] way…" (NE1141a15). When Aristotle posits that grasping "the truth of the principles" is necessary for attaining theoretical knowledge, he does not suggest that craftsmen aren't aware of *any* such principles. The carpenter may know the definition of equilateral triangle but can only harness this

[47] In fact, Aristotle understands the broader distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis* as a one between the recognition of necessary versus contingent facts (NE1141a20).

[48] For a useful summary of how knowledge of first principles (*nous*) is apprehended and utilized in syllogistic deduction to produce *episteme*, see Aydede, Murat. "Aristotle on Episteme and Nous: The Posterior Analytics." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 36, no. 1, Mar. 1998, pp. 15–46,

[49] Though there is no place in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle explicitly talks about first principles in the context of craft knowledge, a basic knowledge of mathematics is fundamental to virtually any trade (NE1141a15).

knowledge in the application of his craft. On the other hand, one with *sophia* understands equilateral triangles as part of a broader theoretical schema.

Chapter 2:

Spinoza's and Aristotle's philosophical positions have several *prima facie* similarities. Essence and form determine how something is defined; *conatus* and *telos* underwrite its goal-directed activities; and blessedness and *sophia* represent the highest manifestations of human flourishing. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that despite the scope of parallels between Spinoza and Aristotle, the *depth* of similarity in any of these individual concepts is minimal. Chapter 3 will proceed to argue that the most robust similarity to be found between Aristotle and Spinoza is how the principles discussed in Chapter 2 methodologically progress in a way that culminates in a full account of human flourishing.

1. **Essence and Form:**

Before considering the similarities and differences between form and essence, let us briefly review some of their basic features. Recall that Spinoza defines essence as: "…that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away…" (EIIdef2). From this definition we see to conceive of anything at all, one must know its essence, and to know a thing's essence is enough to know the thing itself (EIIdef2). Thus, essence is both necessary and sufficient for positing the existence of a thing.

On the other hand, form determines what makes something the kind of thing it is. The form of a tree is a woody plant with leaves and a trunk; the form of a circle is a shape with all points equidistant from the center, and so on. For human beings it is our rational soul, or the

ability to prudentially and theoretically deliberate, that distinguishes us as a kind of being. Given its dealings with kinds and generalities, Aristotle understands form as a universal, which he defines as is a property that applies to either all or none of something (Prior Analytics, Book I// 24a17). Let us consider some of the *prima facie* similarities between these accounts.

First, both essence and form provide the definition for a thing. As we discussed above, Spinoza maintains that to posit a thing is to posit its essence. Once the essence of a thing is taken away, so is the thing itself. Indeed, in Part III, Spinoza calls existence an entailment of essence—for something to exist, its essential properties must obtain. Similarly, in Aristotle, the species or *genus* of a thing is determinative of what that thing is. One cannot adequately describe an individual tree without reference to trees in general. Form and essence are thus analytically necessary in the explanation of a thing—no *x* can be understood without reference to its form or essence (Metaphysics, 1031b6) (EIIdef2).

Another similarity is that neither form nor essence can be derived from independent universals. Form, though itself a universal, is instantiated in particulars—not rooted in something metaphysically external. In fact, Aristotle argues that form *simpliciter* cannot be rationally distinguished from the formal properties that inhere in particulars:

> The absurdity of the separation [that is, the separation of form manifest in the subject and form as having independent reality] would appear if one were to assign a name to each of the essences [forms or universals]; for there would be another essence besides the original one, e.g. to the essence of horse there will belong a second essence.[50]

[50] Aristotle*, Metaphysics*, 1031b28.

If the essence of some *x* is separate from the essence that inheres in *x*—as is the case for Plato—there must be an infinite regress of forms inhering in forms. Therefore, the existence of form must be rooted in individual things. (Metaphysics, 1032a3).

Similarly, Spinoza's metaphysical commitments leave little room for the existence of Platonic-style forms. Some have argued that modes and attributes have such a relationship,[51] but this reading seems unlikely given Spinoza's commitment to the existence of only one substance (EIP14C1). Seeing as Platonic forms exist in a separate metaphysical category from individual things, it would be difficult to find an analogue in Spinoza's monist conception of the universe. [52] [53] Moreover, because the attributes of God are identified as his essence (EIdef4), essence *simpliciter* is posited without connection to a more generalized form. In other words, there is no independent essence of the essence that inheres in substance. Seeing as the Plato dictates that *all* things are rooted in an independent, formal reality, the essence of substance as it's presented by Spinoza is an implicit defeater to this view.[54]

So far, we have identified two similarities between form and essence: both are grounded in the existence of singular things, and both provide singular things with a definition. However,

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[51] See Haserot, F. (1950). "Spinoza and the Status of Universals", *Philosophical Review* 59(4), pp. 469–92. Hegel, G.W.F. (1995). Haserot argues that Spinoza rejects the existence of universals derived from sense experience because they are merely a byproduct of "confused perceptual pictures" (Haserot, *Spinoza* 478). While this position distinguishes Spinoza from Aristotle and the scholastics, Haserot contends that a "rational universality" nonetheless exists in Spinoza's ontology. For instance, in Part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza might be taken as saying that the essence of a triangle can be embodied in a multitude of things (EIP8schol, G/II/50).

[52] Though there is some disagreement as to the sense in which modes inhere in substance, it is widely acknowledged that modes are not parts of substance but rather states or properties (*propria*) (Melamed, *Building,* 65) In the words of Bayle, "[Spinoza] taught not that two trees were two parts of extension, but two modifications... One of the principal pillars [of Spinoza's metaphysics]" (Melamed, *Building*, 65). Seeing as there is no meaningful sense in which particular things can be thought of modifications of Platonic forms, it is difficult to see a robust similarity between Spinoza's theory of modes and attributes and Plato's theory of Forms.

[53] There is debate among scholars about whether there exists a formal-actual dichotomy in Spinoza's theory of essence. Though this dichotomy isn't strictly Platonic, it is often described as such. For an overview of this debate, see Lærke M. Essence. In: Hübner K, Steinberg J, eds. *The Cambridge Spinoza Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press; 2024:143-147.

[54] Karolina Hübner also makes this point (Hubner, *Spinoza*, *61*).

whether these similarities amount to a robust overlap is unclear. Commentators disagree about whether Spinoza allows for the existence of universals, or if he is committed to a nominalist position. If the latter is true, there is little that can be said of the similarities between form and essence beyond what has already been discussed. Aristotle explicitly understands the form of something as determinative of the kind of thing it is, and nominalism only accepts the existence of particulars. However, even if Spinoza does allow for the concept of universals, it is unclear if they apply to essence or resemble Aristotelian form. Let us first consider evidence for the nominalist reading:

In Part II of *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that the finite nature of the human mind leads us to attribute generalities to things when there are none:

> …when the images in the body are completely confused, the Mind also will imagine all the bodies confusedly, without any distinction, and comprehend them as if under one attribute… so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time…that they surpass the power of imagining…to the point where the Mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singulars (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body…And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word 'man', and predicates it of infinitely many singulars.'[55]

The mind cannot conceive of more than a determinate number of things, so any attempt to formulate universals—which are predicated of infinitely many things—is a confused exercise of the imagination. One can only come to know the essence of a thing by ascertaining how it follows from the attributes of God (EIIP40schol.2/G/122). This contrasts sharply with Aristotle, who claims not only that categories such as "man" and "horse" exist in a more metaphysically robust sense (such that they exist independently of the imagination), but that they are apprehended through empirical observation.

[55] Spinoza, *Ethics,* EIIPs40s1/G/II/120

Spinoza's rebuke of formal properties is not confined to his discussion of the human mind's epistemic limitations. In the same scholium from Part II, Spinoza claims that the belief in universals such as "Man, Horse, Dog…signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree" (EIip40s1; II/121). In Part IV, he implies that universals arise "more from prejudice than from true knowledge" (EIVpref; II/1206). In *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza posits that true knowledge can never be derived from "abstractions and universals," and entreats us "neither [to infer] something real from them, nor [to infer] them from something real…" (TIE, 99). In this passage, we see a direct rebuke of Plato, who infers the existence of "real" things from universals, and Aristotle, who infers the existence of universals from "real" things.[56]

Despite Spinoza's apparent rejection of universals, there is evidence that he does not dispose of them entirely. Several passages in the *Ethics* refer to "human nature," and even "…human nature in general" (E1p8schol2).[57] On several occasions, Spinoza refers to men who "are of the *same nature*," suggesting that individuals can belong to the same kind (P55D2/G/11/54). However, even more direct evidence for Spinoza's belief in universals is his claim that in Part IV that "it is not by accident that man's greatest good is common to all…because it is deduced from the very essence of man" (E4P36D).[58] Despite Spinoza's warning "neither [to infer] something real from [universals], nor [to infer] them from something real…" he seems to make precisely this mistake in the passage above. How do we resolve this discrepancy?

[56] Hübner cites this passage in a similar discussion about Spinoza's theory of essence (Hübner, *Spinoza*, 65)
[57] This quote is excerpted from a passage about essence and definition that provides even further support to the universalist reading: "…no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals, since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined" (EIP8schol2).
[58] For more discussions on this topic, see (Hübner, *Spinoza*, 65) (Laerke, *Essence*, 143) (Della Rocca, *Egoism*, 134).

One explanation—offered by Karolina Hübner—is that Spinoza's ontology has two levels. The first level consists of what is *actually there*, or what is real independent of the observations of finite minds. This level consists of modes, which require no finite mind to be posited. Modes can exist in this capacity because they follow directly from—and so are conceived through—God. It is on this level that Spinoza's theory of essence exists. The second level consists of "adequate general ideas" formed by finite minds (Hübner, 69). Adequate general ideas are created when the mind identifies regularities among finite particulars and abstracts them to represent less determinate entities, such as "horse", or "goose". It is in this *mind-dependent* sense that universals exist.[59] Though Hübner's reading seems like a promising solution to what could otherwise be a problem for Spinoza's ontology, it is still importantly non-Aristotelian. Let us take a moment to formally investigate why.

Spinoza maintains that essence is both necessary and sufficient for some *x* to be conceived. So, given the essence of *x*, essence entails *x*. But if some *y* has the same essence as *x*, then the essence belonging to *x* can be posited without necessarily positing *x*. If this were the case, Spinoza's definition of essence would be in contradiction. Thus, there must be a uniqueness of essences such that *no* essence constituting multiple particulars can be posited.[60] Spinoza's uniqueness of essences contrasts with Aristotelian form, which dictates that *x* is determined by the kind of thing *x* is. Indeed, it is precisely this disagreement that represents the most important distinction between form and essence: essence provides the necessary and sufficient conditions

[59] Huber, *Spinoza,* 73
[60] See DellaRocca "Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza" *Ethica 4*, Little Room Press, New York, 2004, pp. 123–147.

for an *x qua x* as a particular, whereas form provides the necessary and sufficient conditions of an *x qua x* as a kind.[61]

2. **Conatus and Telos:**

As we discussed in the previous chapter, *conatus* is the natural tendency of all things to persevere. In Part III, Spinoza introduces this concept in the form of the *conatus* principle: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives (*conatur*) to persevere in its being" (EIIIP6). Commentators such as Curley and Garrett have observed that the phrasing of this passage suggests that *conatus*, or "striving", is a goal-directed activity aimed at self-preservation.[62] [63]However, this characterization seems to be in tension with Spinoza's position that the universe is governed entirely by efficient cause.[64] Indeed, anything that is naturally goal-directed might be thought of as teleological. Hence, the aim of this section is to explore whether the *conatus* principle is teleological.

Telos refers to the process of an activity that aims at a determinate end or goal.[65] It is thus understood as a cause, insofar as goals provide the impetus behind actions performed in their pursuit (Physics, 194b32). This causal mechanism plays an explanatory role in forming an

[61] Hübner claims that Spinoza's ontology maintains something like species-essences and takes issue with the interpretation of essence I advance here (Hübner, *Spinoza*, 64). However, she also admits that even if species-essences exist, they are not (to use the Cartesian terminology) formally real, but contingent upon common notions formulated by finite minds (74). This too represents a major departure from Aristotle, whose notion of form can most certainly be thought of as formally real and mind independent.
[62] Garret, *Teleology*, 314
[63] Curley, Edwin. "On Bennetts Spinoza: The Issue of Teleology." *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, 1 Jan. 1990, pp. 39–52.
[64] It is worth noting that efficient cause is not inherently in tension with final cause—As I discuss in the previous chapter, Aristotle posits that final cause and efficient cause are both part of the full explanation of a thing. However, as we shall see, there are parts of the *Ethics* where Spinoza seems to rule out the existence of final cause.
[65] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 372.

account of why things act as they do. For example, let us examine two explanations for the defensive posture of a shellfish. First, the shellfish assumes this posture whenever the light above it is suddenly obscured. Second, the shellfish assumes this posture whenever it senses there is something it can do to avoid getting eaten. It is in this latter sense that an explanation can be thought of as teleological.[66] As David Charles observes, we can understand the logical form of this relationship is one of *hypothetical necessity*.[67] If there is a goal *G* such that it is or will be, and there is some set of actions *A* that are required to achieve *G*, then *A* necessarily is or will be.[68]

There is a significant question as to whether striving should be understood as a teleological principle. Some commentators, such as Bennett and Hübner, hold that striving can be explained in terms of a mechanistic framework that doesn't rely on final cause.[69] On the other hand, others, such as Garrett, and Lin maintain that the conatus principle describes a tendency to persevere that inheres in all things.[70]

As Bennett notes, we may understand the conatus principle in one of two ways: 1) if performing some behavior tends to preserve *x*, then *x* strives or 2) if some *x* strives, then *x* *happens to* preserve itself.[71] Notice that "2)" only allows us to infer from the act of striving that a thing preserves itself. We cannot infer from the fact that *x* preserves itself that *x* will strive in the future or is something likely to strive. Thus, any inferences we make about *x* concerning self-preservation must be from the fact that it is striving, and not from the fact that it has a self-

[66] I borrow this example from Bennett, *Study*, 229
[67] Charles, David. "Teleological Causation." *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 227–266.
[68] Aristotle makes this point in relation to housebuilding: "If a house is to be, and bricks and stones are required for the house, necessarily bricks and stones will come to be or be present" (Physics, 200a21ff) (Charles, *Teleology*, 233)
[69] Bennett, *Study*, 213; Hubner, *Spinoza*, 343
[70] Garrett, *Teleology*, 310; Lin, *Teleology*, 317
[71] Bennett, *Study*, 229

preserving tendency. For this reason, we can understand "2)" as a non-teleological account of the conatus principle.

Alternatively, "1)" allows us to infer from the tendency of a thing to persevere that it strives. It is this tendency to persevere that makes the striving of individual things teleological. Rather than self-preservation being the byproduct of mechanical interactions between singular things, there is a sense in which all things perform behaviors *for the sake* of self-preservation. Bennett's first reading thus frames *conatus* as the nature of any *x* to persevere *qua* its being an *x*.[72]

Perhaps the most widely cited evidence for the nonteleological reading is in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza claims: "Not many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions" (EI.App/G/II/80). [73, 74] In the same section, Spinoza argues that final cause reverses the order of explanation in a way that only serves to obfuscate and confuse: "…[f]or what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely" (EI.App,/G/II/80). Though neither of these claims is in reference to striving *per se*, a rejection of *telos* in all its forms would *a fortiori* be a rejection of the teleological reading of *conatus*.

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[72] The way I frame Bennett's position is borrowed from Garrett, who provides a summary of this position as well Garrett, Don, 'Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument', *Necessity and Nature in Spinoza's Philosophy* (2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 Oct. 2018) pp.362-390

[73] Spinoza argues that teleological explanation arises from the faulty inference that things exist to be used because people use things in a particular way. This mistake is in part a byproduct of two facts about human nature Spinoza takes to be uncontroversial: 1) that all men are "born ignorant of the causes of things" 2) that they "seek their own advantage" (EI/App/G/II/78). When Spinoza says we are "born ignorant of the causes of things", he is referring to our ignorance of the efficient causes that lead to certain effects. This fact, paired with our predilection towards self-interest, naturally disposes us to be satisfied with teleological modes of explanation. See Harvey WZ. "Spinoza and Maimonides on Teleology and Anthropocentrism". In: Melamed YY, ed. *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge University Press; 2017:43-55.

[74] Though, as Garrett notes, we might take Spinoza to mean here that final cause is only a human fiction as it relates to God (Garrett, *Teleology*, 315)

Another notable challenge to the teleological reading can be found in the Preface to Part IV, where Spinoza takes aim at final cause as it relates to human appetite:

> What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing. For example, when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites.[75]

In his discussion of the affects Spinoza defines appetite as the striving of mind and body together, making it "nothing but the very essence of man" (EIIIP9schol/G/II/148). Since *conatus* is the essence of a thing (EIIIP7), we may understand appetite as being interchangeable with human striving. However, if the goal-directed appearance of appetite is not determined by ends but rather a set of antecedent causes, then human striving is best understood as the byproduct of non-teleological, mechanistic interactions. This is indeed what Spinoza seems to suggest in the above passage when he denies that appetite itself could ever be a first cause and proposes that any such notion can be attributed to an ignorance of what caused the appetite in the first place.[76]

Thus, it is clear that Spinoza rejects teleological explanation in some form. However, the scope of this rejection remains ambiguous. In fact, if we were to understand Spinoza as doing away with teleological explanation altogether, he would appear to be in contradiction on several accounts. Consider, for instance, the language he uses in the Appendix to Part I : "Men act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want" (EIApp./G/II/76), and, "All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, *as men do*, on account of an end"

[75] Spinoza, *Ethics,* EIV, Preface, II/207
[76] Garrett offer a similar analysis, referencing the same passage from Spinoza (Garrett, *Teleology*, 321)

(EIApp/G/II/78) (my emphasis). Moreover, after *conatus* is introduced in Part III, it is regularly discussed with teleological language:[77]

> When we love a thing like ourselves, we strive (*conatur*), as far as we can, to bring it about that it loves us in return (EIII, P33)
>
> …the more we strive (*conatur*) to live according to the guidance of reason, the more we strive to depend less on hope, to free ourselves from fear (EIV, P47schol)
>
> We strive (*conatur*) to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness. (EIII, P28)

How do we make sense of this apparent discrepancy in the text? Bennett maintains that Spinoza's rebuke of final cause is so strong that any teleological framing of human action can be chalked up to theoretical inconsistency.[78] However, there are other readings that leave room for an attenuated teleology that's preserved despite Spinoza's rejection of final cause in certain contexts.

Garrett argues that teleological explanation can be a means to acquiring adequate ideas. Recall that adequate ideas consist of the second or third kind of knowledge. The second kind of knowledge, reason, pertains only to knowledge of the common properties we observe among singular things (EIIL2D). For instance, because we observe that bodies in motion will stay in motion unless acted upon, we can conclude that all bodies behave according to the Law of Inertia. However, though our knowledge of this fact contains all aspects of a true idea, it is only knowledge of a *property* of the singular things we observe. On the other hand, *scientia intuitiva*, the third kind of knowledge, pertains to the *essence* of a thing as it proceeds from the attributes of Thought and Extension. By understanding the essence of a moving body, we see it as a mode

[77] Garrett also makes this point (Garrett, *Teleology,* 314).
[78] Bennett, *Study*, 213

of substance that follows from extension, and therefore as subject to the natural laws that govern its behavior.[79]

Let us first consider final cause as it relates to the second kind of knowledge. Garrett argues that just as a mechanistic explanation can yield adequate knowledge concerning the properties of things—based on, for instance, observations about their common adherence to natural law—teleological explanation can yield adequate knowledge about the common properties of things based on their universal tendency towards self-preservation.[80] This tendency is exemplified in Spinoza's concept of love, which he defines as the experience of joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause (EIIIP13schol/G/II/151). One upshot of loving something is that we always strive "to preserve and keep present the thing[s] [we love]" (EIIIP13 schol/G/II/151). So, when a mother wishes never to lose sight of her child, she has adopted a goal-directed attitude that can be used to explain the manifestations of the same kind of behavior in other people. Seeing as this principle applies to all things capable of love, it qualifies as the second kind of knowledge. However, because such behavior is adequately explained in terms of ends rather than antecedent causes, it can be properly characterized as teleological.[81]

Garrett also suggests that teleological explanation can be used in service of the third kind of knowledge. This is in part because, as Spinoza makes clear in EIIIP7, the striving of a thing is identical to its essence. However, we must also understand how a thing's extensional elements give rise to this self-preserving tendency. Therefore, acquiring true knowledge of a thing is:

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[79] It is worth noting that one may not know which laws govern a singular thing simply by virtue of having knowledge of its essence. Though we may understand how the essence of a thing proceeds from the attributes of Thought and Extension, this does not entail knowledge of its nonessential properties (e.g., how it behaves while moving). Such properties are exclusively in the domain of reason.

[80] Garrett, *Teleology,* 324

[81] Of course, according to Garrett's reading, teleological explanations of human behavior are not confined to love. Indeed, insofar as all things strive to persevere in their being (EIIIP6) it stands to reason that all forms of human behavior, even if confused, can be explained in terms of the *conatus* principle

"…partly a teleological enterprise, but a teleological enterprise perfectly compatible with the mechanistic nature of extension".[82]

This reading preserves teleological explanation in Spinoza despite the otherwise mechanistic character of his metaphysics. However, Garrett's account still represents a significant departure from the classical conception advanced by Aristotle. Perhaps the most serious discrepancy has to do with whether teleological explanation is necessary for acquiring knowledge. In *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle is clear that a precondition for knowledge of a thing is an understanding of its cause (PA, I, 71b 9-15).[83] Moreover, he maintains that each of the four causes is necessary for acquiring knowledge of certain things (Physics, II, 194b 18-195a 4) and that, therefore, no one cause can explain all things. In Book II of *Physics*, Aristotle makes this point as it relates to efficient cause versus final cause:

> Such are the arguments (and others of the kind) [i.e., arguments that efficient cause can explain certain things in place of final cause] which may cause difficulty on this point. Yet it is impossible that this should be the true view. For teeth and all other natural things either invariably or for the most part come about in a given way; but of not one of the results of chance or spontaneity is this true…If then, it is agreed that things are either the result of coincidence or for the sake of something, and these cannot be the result of coincidence or spontaneity, it follows that they must be for the sake of something things (Physics, II, 198b 34-199a 6).

Those who deny final cause must explain the regularity with which certain natural phenomena occur along with the fact that these phenomena seem to be in service of determinate ends.[84] Since no one can meet this challenge, we are left with the conclusion that certain things can only be understood through teleological explanation. Aristotle's theory of final cause is not

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[82] Garrett, *Teleology*, 325

[83] "We think we understand a thing simpliciter (and not in the sophistic fashion accidentally) whenever we think we are aware both that the explanation because of which the object is is its explanation, and that it is not possible for this to be otherwise. It is clear, then, that to understand is something of this sort; for both those who do not understand and those who do understand the former think they are themselves in such a state, and those who do understand actually are" (PA, I, 71b 9-15).

[84] See Andrea Falcon's discussion of Aristotelian cause for a more complete discussion of this point Falcon, Andrea, "Aristotle on Causality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.)

merely a heuristic device for acquiring knowledge equally accessible through efficient explanation, but an irreducible fact about how things behave.

This position represents a sharp departure from Spinoza, even if we adopt Garrett's teleological view of striving. Though an understanding of the *conatus* principle may be *sufficient* for attaining adequate knowledge of certain human behaviors, it is not clear Garrett could maintain that such an understanding is also *necessary*—at least for the second kind of knowledge.[85] Unlike Aristotle, Spinoza leaves room for the possibility that adequate knowledge of something, though often attained through teleological explanation, can constitute a fact about the world that itself has the potential be understood mechanistically. For instance, we possess knowledge of a mother's protective attitude towards her child because all humans strive to preserve that which they love. However, there is nothing preventing us from making the same observation without reference to final cause. For instance, we might discover that a mother is protective of her child because a certain antecedent cause (i.e., the oxytocin-producing process of child rearing) leads to this disposition. Knowledge obtained in this way, though adequate, in no way relies on an explanation of the mother's goal-directed attitude towards her child.[86]

This point becomes clearer when we examine the doctrine of causal parallelism found in the *Ethics*. In Part II, Spinoza claims: "A mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways" (EIIP7schol). Not only do all modes of

[85] Garrett does not characterize teleological explanation as being merely sufficient for attaining the second kind of knowledge. Nonetheless, this characterization is consistent with his view.
[86] Garrett seems to believe that *scientia intuitiva* can only be achieved through an understanding of the simultaneously teleological and mechanistic nature of essence. So, as far as the third kind of knowledge is concerned, Garrett appears to maintain that teleological explanation is in fact necessary for true understanding. However, the claim that teleological explanation is merely sufficient for the *second kind* of knowledge is still at odds with Aristotle's account, which maintains that *no knowledge* attained through teleological explanation can also be attained through efficient explanation (Garrett, 325, *Teleology*).

Extension have a corresponding (and perhaps identical)[87] mode of Thought, but all modes of Thought are ideas of modes of Extension. When we pair this fact with Spinoza's mechanistic account of the behavior and composition of bodies (EIIIP13D) it seems possible to explain modes of Thought and Extension without reference to teleology. If the mind is an idea of the body, and the body is governed solely by mechanistic laws, then the activity of the mind, too, is governed in the same way.[88] [89]

If the foregoing is correct, any endorsement of final cause on Spinoza's part—to the extent it exists at all—is of a version substantially different than Aristotle's. For both, teleology describes certain facts about why things behave as they do. However, for Spinoza, these facts are explanatorily reducible to efficient cause. This cannot be the case for Aristotle, who views teleological explanation as a necessary means to acquiring certain forms of knowledge.

3. **Virtue, Blessedness and Sophia:**

[87] As I note on page 9, whether mind and body are metaphysically identical is a subject of debate (Marshall, *Mind* 897).

[88] Garrett acknowledges this point about mind-body identity (Garrett, *Teleology*, 323) but never discusses the extent to which it could pose a problem for his reading of the *conatus* principle. Of course, if my earlier suggestion is correct, and Garrett is merely arguing that forms of teleological explanation are *sufficient* for attaining adequate knowledge, then this observation about causal parallelism would not pose a problem. After all, the latter only shows that adequate ideas can be attained through efficient explanation and says nothing about teleological explanation one way or the other. However, if teleological explanation is *necessary* for attaining adequate ideas, then any reading purporting to show that adequate ideas can be achieved without reference to final cause would be problematic.

[89] Of course, it's clear that Spinoza did not think that one could attain adequate knowledge through the observation of bodies alone. In letter 83 to Tschirnhaus, he writes: "With regard to your question as to whether the variety of things can be demonstrated a priori solely from the conception of Extension, I believe I have already shown sufficiently clearly that this is impossible..." (Letter 83). Nonetheless, Spinoza's rebuke of purely empirical methods of inquiry is consistent with what I argue above. Though the mechanistic behavior of bodies allows us to explain their corresponding ideas in mechanistic terms, this fact does not confine our analysis to modes of Extension. Indeed, as Spinoza makes clear in EIIP7s, the existence of a body entails the existence of a corresponding thought.

One frequently overlooked similarity between Spinoza and Aristotle is their shared commitment to an ideal of human flourishing. In Chapter 10 of *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle claims that the good life consists of the contemplation of necessary first principles— an activity that bears at least a *prima facie* resemblance to the acquisition of adequate ideas in Spinoza. However, as in the previous analysis, we shall see that any similarities between these two accounts ultimately give way to important disparities.

Let us begin by reviewing Spinoza's theory of virtue, which he defines as: "…the very essence of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things" (EIVdef8). Given that striving is also described as the essence of man (EIIIP7), virtue might be thought of as nothing more than the exercise of striving. However, as we discussed in the previous chapter, virtue is more likely a kind of effective striving, guided by the "dictates of reason," which require that everyone: "…seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him… and, absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can" (EIVP18schol/G/II/222).

Virtuous activity is grounded in both the second and third kinds of knowledge (EIVP27D/G/ II/228). However, as early as Part II, we see it is the third kind of knowledge, *scientia intuitiva,* that constitutes "our greatest happiness" (EIIP47schol/G/II/135). Indeed, later in the *Ethics*, Spinoza calls *scientia intuitiva*: "…the ultimate end of the man led by reason, that is, his highest desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others" (EIV/App./G/II/267). The acquisition of *scientia intuitiva* gives rise to a love of God that Spinoza refers to as "blessedness" (EVP42D).

According to Aristotle, virtue, or *arete*, is grounded in the human function, which consists in the exercise of reason.[90] However, the occasional application of one's rational faculties does not constitute virtue. As we're reminded in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "…one swallow does not make a spring, nor similarly does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy" (NE1098a19). To be virtuous, one must cultivate a *disposition* that facilitates rational activity. Aristotle maintains that such a disposition has two forms: First is *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which deals with contingent facts about what is good for oneself and human beings in general (NE1140a25). Second is *sophia*, or theoretical wisdom, which pertains to an understanding of first principles and the demonstrative knowledge that follows (NE1141b3). Despite their different contents, both *phronesis* and *sophia* are parts of the rational soul (NE1139a5). However, because theoretical contemplation is the activity of the gods, *sophia* reflects "our supreme element" and therefore constitutes the highest expression of virtue (NE1178a1-8).

One similarity between Aristotle's and Spinoza's accounts of virtue lies in their respective bifurcations: practical and theoretical wisdom in Aristotle, and the second and third kinds of knowledge in Spinoza. In both cases, one form of virtue is regarded as superior, such that the ideal person is not defined merely by the degree of their virtue, but by the kind of virtue they possess. However, for these similarities to be more than incidental, there must be substantive agreement between the two accounts regarding the nature of virtue's manifestations. Let us examine some of these similarities in turn.

[90] See Chapter 1: "Aristotle" pg. 15

Just as the second kind of knowledge concerns general features rather than particulars, the aim of *phronesis* is to understand "what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general" (NE 1140a25). Although the second kind of knowledge is not limited to human affairs, it can include general truths about the good. This is evident in Part III of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza offers a detailed analysis of the affects and their relation to human striving (EIIIP59schol). Nevertheless, while this resemblance is not without interest, the differences between *phronesis* and the second kind of knowledge are substantial enough to preclude a strong parallel.

What distinguishes *phronesis* from *sophia* is its connection to "beings whose principles admit of being otherwise," a designation which amounts to contingent facts about the human good (NE1139a8). However, any endorsement of contingency is in direct tension with Spinoza's position that all things follow necessarily from God. This tension reveals *a fortiori* that *phronesis* is predicated on a category of reason that has no analogue in Spinoza's metaphysics.

There appears to be a stronger connection between *sophia* and blessedness. Both deal with necessary first principles, both constitute dispositions rather than merely virtuous behaviors, and both represent the highest expressions of human flourishing. Let us discuss these in turn: Blessedness arises from the acquisition of *scientia intuitiva*, which Spinoza defines as "knowledge that proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (P40schol2/G/II/122). Given that God is the efficient cause of all things (EIP25), to possess an adequate idea of God's attributes is to have knowledge of the most fundamental kind. Indeed, it is this knowledge that grounds our ability to understand singular things in the first place.

Similarly, *sophia* includes knowledge of necessary first principles that ground scientific deduction.[91] For example, we might identify "All human beings are rational animals" as a first principle concerning kinds. If there is a human being named Socrates, we can deduce from this principle that Socrates is a rational animal.[92] So, just as blessedness emerges from knowledge of particulars grounded in knowledge of the attributes, *sophia* pertains to scientific knowledge grounded in necessary first principles.

Both blessedness and *sophia* also appear to be dispositional states. This is certainly true of *sophia*, which Aristotle characterizes as a "disposition to demonstrate" (NE1139b31–32).[93] However, Spinoza appears to reveal a similar position when he introduces *scientia intuitiva* as a form of knowledge. There, he asks us to suppose there are three numbers and that we are tasked with determining a fourth that is to the third as the second is to the first. In a case where the numbers are such that we can immediately see the answer without any guidance—1,2, and 3, for instance—our experience of seeing the answer is analogous to the experience of one with *scientia intuitiva* seeing how singular things proceed from God's attributes (P40schol2/G/II/122). Spinoza's numbers analogy indicates that *scientia intuitiva* not only constitutes knowledge, but also a kind of quasi-perception. Indeed, one endowed with *scientia intuitiva* apprehends the essence of singular things "in one glance" (*uno intuit*) (EIIP40schol2/G/II/122). Insofar as a disposition is a tendency to be responsive to certain facts such that one acts in a certain way, blessedness thus appears to be a kind of disposition.[94]

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[91] Refer to page 36 for a more detailed discussion of this point.
[92] Gasser-Wingate, Marc. "Aristotle on Induction and First Principles." *Philosopher's Imprint*, 2016, pp. 1–20.
[93] When Aristotle says "to demonstrate", he is referencing the process by which one deduces scientific knowledge from first principles (see page 14).
[94] Unlike *scientia intuitiva*, is not clear that the second kind of knowledge can be characterized as a virtuous disposition. Though the acquisition of the second kind of knowledge is undoubtedly an *exercise* of virtue, Spinoza does not speak of it as a cognitive state. One might acquire some instance of the second kind of knowledge through

Finally, blessedness and *sophia* are both ideals of human virtue. In Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza refers to *scientia intuitiva* as "the greatest striving of the mind and its greatest virtue" (EVP25). Similarly, Aristotle remarks that the activity of *sophia* is "superior in excellence because it…aims at no end apart from itself" (NE1177b20). However, many of the same qualities that define blessedness and *sophia* point to a disparity in how Aristotle and Spinoza view virtue more generally:

Scientia intuitiva is the mind's greatest virtue because knowledge of God constitutes the highest good (EIVP28) and liberates us from the vicious passions that arise from confused ideas. Such knowledge amounts to a deeper understanding of the world, thereby enhancing our power to act (EIVP54schol; EVP40). Since singular things are merely determinate modes of God (EIP25C/G/II/68), the more one understands singular things, the more one understands God (EVP24). Accordingly, the ideally virtuous person, to the greatest extent possible, cultivates intuitive knowledge of singular things as they relate to God.

By contrast, theoretical contemplation is valuable because it is the activity of the gods, constituting the "supreme element" of human beings: "Hence if understanding is something divine in comparison with a human being, so also will the life in accord with understanding be divine in comparison with human life" (NE1177a30). What distinguishes *sophia* as a virtue is the activity of theoretical contemplation (NE1139a9). Unlike the practical deliberation involved in *phronesis*, which exclusively involves human affairs, theoretical contemplation is by its nature divine, and so of a metaphysically higher order.

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an observation of commonalities between singular things, but there is no reason to think that this instance of knowledge acquisition reflects a disposition to act.

As Sanem Soyarslan observes, it is precisely this distinction between *phronesis* and *sophia*[95] that reveals a disconnect between *sophia* and blessedness. For Spinoza, what distinguishes singular things from God is the fact that God is an infinite substance, and singular things are finite modes of that substance (EIP25C). However, this distinction does not imply an ontological gap between the two such that one can be thought of as transcending the other. On the contrary, singular things proceed directly from God's attributes (EIIP40schol.2/G/122). Therefore, the activity of human beings cannot be relegated to an inferior status, because human activity is an expression of God.[96]

Soyarslan also cites what Aristotle describes as the "useless" character of *sophia* as signaling another departure from blessedness.[97] Indeed, in Book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes the knowledge possessed by Anaxagoras and Thales—two men who possess *sophia*—as "extraordinary, amazing, difficult, and divine, but useless, because it is not human goods that [they] look for" (NE1141b3-10). By contrast, Spinoza maintains that blessedness is highly useful in practical affairs. Indeed, a significant portion of Part IV is devoted to discussing *scientia intuitiva*'s positive impact on others: "The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God (*scientia intuitiva*) is greater" (EIVP37). This outward-directed feature of a blessed disposition is absent from the practice theoretical contemplation, which is concerned only with the contemplation of necessary first principles (NE1141b3-10).

Thus, while there is some structural overlap between Spinoza and Aristotle's notions of virtue—such as the bifurcation of *sophia* and *phronesis* along with second and third kinds of

[95] Soyarslan focuses primarily on *theoria*, which is the activity of *sophia* (Soyarslan, *Blessedness*, 507).
[96] Soyarslan, *Blessedness*, 505-507
[97] Soyarslan, *Blessedness*, 517

knowledge—a significant disconnect persists between the practical and metaphysical dimensions of both.

Chapter 3:

So far, I have tried to show that despite similarities between the philosophical commitments of Spinoza and Aristotle, the extent of these similarities is limited. Essence and form both determine the definition of singular things, but essence determines the definition of an *x qua x* as a particular, whereas form determines the definition of an *x qua x* as a kind; *conatus* may be a teleological principle but is explanatorily weaker than final cause in Aristotle;[98] blessedness and *sophia* constitute ideals of human virtue but they are often opposed in how they manifest.[99]

In this chapter, I will argue that despite the lack of a strong parallel between these individual accounts, Spinoza and Aristotle employ a shared methodology in the development of their respective ideals of human flourishing. Accordingly, rather than compare individual principles, this chapter will investigate similarities in how these principles cohere as part of a broader philosophical system. The first section will discuss how Spinoza utilizes the concepts of essence and *conatus* to arrive at his account of blessedness; the second section will explore how Aristotelian virtue arises from form and *telos*; and the final section will argue that the strategies Spinoza and Aristotle use to arrive at their ideals of human flourishing have significant overlap.

1. **Spinoza:**

[98] Recall from Chapter 2 that even if striving can be explained teleologically, it is also explanatorily reducible to efficient cause. This position is inconsistent with Aristotle's claim that final cause is a necessary part of the explanation of a thing (32).

[99] Recall from Chapter 2 that Aristotle refers to *sophia* as "useless" in matters of human affairs, whereas Spinoza views blessedness along with the second kind of knowledge as the only means by which human beings can liberate themselves from the passions (39).

Essence and Striving:

In Part II of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines essence as: "…that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away…" (EIIdef2). As we've discussed, there is little we can gather from this definition by itself other than that for any *x*, the essence of *x* is necessary and sufficient for *x* to be posited.[100] Fortunately, in Part III, Spinoza posits that each thing's essence is the same as its *conatus*. Though the identification of essence with *conatus* plays a significant role in Spinoza's metaphysics, understanding how this equivalence is possible—and whether it should be understood as a true equivalence—will require some examination.

In the proposition immediately following his definition of *conatus*, Spinoza claims the following:

> The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing. (Dem.): From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by IP36), and things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature (by IP29). So the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—that is (by P6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself, q.e.d. (EIIIP7).

Here, Spinoza cites two propositions from Part I to demonstrate his claim that *conatus* is "nothing but the actual essence of the thing." First is EIP36, which states that some things follow necessarily from the essence of each thing. Second is EIP29, which states the only things that follow from the essence of a thing are those things that do so necessarily. Though these

[100] See Chapter 1: "Spinoza" pg. 7 and Chapter 2: "Essence and Form" pg. 19

propositions cohere with Spinoza's broader metaphysical commitments, it is not immediately clear why he takes them to entail an identity between *conatus* and essence.

Understanding this conclusion will require a brief detour into Spinoza's demonstration of the *conatus* principle, which takes place between EIIIP4 and EIIIP6.[101] This argument commences with the assertion that "no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (EIIIP4), a position Spinoza defends by claiming that the definition of each thing affirms, and cannot deny, its existence (EIIIP4D). Since the definition of a thing is simply the articulation of its essence, it cannot include anything that would negate its own existence—Spinoza makes this latter point in Part I when he posits that the definition of a square circle is in contradiction and so cannot exist (EIP11).

From EIIIP4, Spinoza proceeds to argue that two things of a contrary nature cannot be in the same subject (EIIIP5D). This proposition relies on what has already been established in EIIIP4: If two things contrary in nature were to exist in the same subject at once, then the subject would be the source of its own destruction, which is impossible. This conclusion leads Spinoza to EIIIP6, which includes his demonstration of the *conatus* principle:

> For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by P4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by P5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d. (EIIP6dem).

[101] Spinoza's argument for the *conatus* principle is controversial. Bennett has suggested that there are serious equivocations between EIII4 and EIII6. In contrast, Garrett argues that no such equivocations exist, but concedes that if Bennett are correct, Spinoza's argument would be "one of the most egregiously equivocal in all of early modern philosophy." While this controversy is significant, the alleged equivocations do not pose a problem for this project, which is only concerned with the methodological similarities between Spinoza and Aristotle. In this context, *how successfully* Spinoza develops his theory of *conatus* is less important than the manner in which he relies upon it in his account of the good life (Garrett, *Teleology*, 362).

To start, Spinoza cites EIP25 and EIP34, which establish first, that singular things are modes of God's attributes, expressed in a determinate way (EIP25), and second, that God's essence is his power (EIP34). From these propositions, Spinoza makes the intermediate conclusion[102] that all singular things are determinate expressions of God's power. Of course, this conclusion only follows if God's attributes constitute his essence—a point that is affirmed by EIP4 and EIP6.[103] With this hidden premise made explicit, Spinoza's inference is valid.[104] After establishing this point, Spinoza proceeds to cite EIIIP4 and EIIIP5 before arriving at his final conclusion that "each thing, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (EIIIP6D).[105]

Let us now return to the demonstration of EIIIP7, where Spinoza identifies essence with *conatus*. There, he claims that the striving by which each thing does anything is the same as its striving to persist, citing EIIIP6 (EIIIP7D). As Della Rocca observes, Spinoza's reliance on EIIIP6 here is by extension a reliance on EIIIP4 and EIIIP5, which advance a purely positive conception of essence.[106] When we consider the definition of a thing, there is nothing in the definition itself that would entail its destruction. So long as the essence of something is considered in and of itself, it is conceived as something that, without external interference, persists. It is precisely this tendency for each thing to persist in its own being that underlies striving.

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[102] "Intermediate conclusion" is a term I borrow from Garrett (Garrett, *Spinoza*, 378).
[103] If we represent Spinoza's reasoning syllogistically, we can see why this hidden premise is necessary. Let us start by showing an invalid version of the argument that excludes the hidden premise: **1)** Singular things are expressions of God's attributes (EIP25) **2)** God's essence is his power (EIP34) **3)** Therefore, singular things express God's power. This conclusion does not follow, because there is no premise identifying God's essence with God's attributes. Once we add this premise—which is substantiated by Eid4 and Eid6—the conclusion follows.
[104] Garret identifies this hidden premise in his discussion of the *conatus* argument (Garrett, *Spinoza*, 378).
[105] I draw the foregoing analysis of the conatus argument from Garrett, Spinoza, 362.
[106] Della Rocca, Michael. "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology." *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 234–281.

We are also in a position to revisit EIP36, which establishes that each thing necessarily has certain entailments, and by the same token, that there is no essence without entailments.[107] As we discuss in Chapter 1, how "effectively" one strives is a function of one's power to produce effects as an adequate cause.[108] Moreover, the extent to which one is an adequate cause determines the power of the effects one produces (EVA2). Effects that arise from one's power to act as an adequate cause amount to that person's entailments as a finite essence. It is in this context of effect-producing that essence is manifested both as striving and as a set of entailments.[109]

Striving and Blessedness:

Now that we have established how Spinoza identifies essence with striving, we can discuss how he utilizes these concepts to arrive at an account of human flourishing. Recall from the previous chapters that Spinoza refers to the mental aspect of flourishing as "blessedness", which he defines as the intuitive knowledge and intellectual love of God (EVP36schol). Spinoza also identifies blessedness as the highest good (*summum bonum*) the mind can achieve (EVP20D). It is perhaps easiest to see how essence and striving connect to blessedness by working backwards from this connection between blessedness and the *summum bonum*.

[107] Recall that Spinoza cites EIP36 in EIIIP7, where he identifies essence with striving
[108] See Chapter 1: "Spinoza" pg. 11
[109] Though Spinoza does not explicitly identify the striving of a thing with its entailments, this equivalence would explain the inclusion of EIP39 and EIP29 in the demonstration of EPIII7, which identifies essence with striving (See page 44). Recall that EIP39 posits that some things necessarily follow from the essence of each thing and EIP29 states that the only things that follow from the essence of a thing are those things that do so necessarily. If the striving of a thing *were not* equivalent to its entailments, it is unclear why Spinoza would cite these propositions.

At the beginning of Part IV, Spinoza defines "good" as "what we certainly know to be useful to us" (EIVdef1). While this definition allows us to infer that the *summum bonum* is *most* useful to us, it remains unclear to what end. Unsurprisingly, there is significant disagreement among commentators about the answer to this question. Curly argues that goodness and rationality can be understood in terms of a Hobbesian-style egoism, while others, such as Youpa, emphasize the role of understanding.[110] However, one indisputable feature of Spinoza's account of goodness is its connection to *conatus*—indeed, Spinoza calls each person's striving to persevere "the first and only foundation of virtue" (EVP22). Striving occupies this foundational role because of its connection to essence: "The striving to persevere itself is the very essence of a thing (by IIIP7). Therefore, if some virtue could be conceived prior to…striving, the very essence of that thing would be conceived prior to itself (by D8), which is absurd" (EVP22D). [111]

Because virtue has this basis in striving, anything conducive to self-preservation must be useful—and, by extension, good. Accordingly, Spinoza regards knowledge as good, and knowledge of God as the *summum bonum* because of their roles in the mind's self-preservation. While it would be reasonable to assume that knowledge acquisition is merely one of many ways to persevere, in Part IV Spinoza implies that, contrary to our confused imaginings, understanding is the only mechanism by which the mind persists: "…the Mind, insofar as it reasons, cannot conceive anything to be good for itself except what leads to understanding" (EIV26D).

[110] Youpa A. "Spinoza's Theory of the Good". In: Koistinen O, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press; 2009:242-257.
[111] Youpa makes the observation that the foundational role of striving in this context is one of the few points commentators agree on (Youpa, *Spinoza*, 243).

It appears, then, that attaining knowledge is not only important for, but constituent of the mind's striving to persevere. [112] [113] Moreover, since the striving of a thing is equivalent to what that thing *does*,[114] understanding is an essential expression of the mind's activity.[115]

The relationship between knowledge and activity plays a crucial role in Spinoza's discussion of self-preservation. In Part III, Spinoza claims that we only truly act when:

> …something happens, inside us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood by it alone (EIIId2).

Activity only occurs when one is the adequate cause of the effects one naturally produces. To be an adequate cause, one must clearly and distinctly understand these effects through one's own nature. Spinoza's theory of adequate causation is closely connected to his position that knowledge of God is the *summum bonum*. In Part I, Spinoza claims that the more properties, or effects, that follow from the essence of a thing, the more reality that thing possesses (EIP16D). Thus, the extent of each thing's reality is a function of its activity. Youpa observes that when

[112] As we established earlier in this section, the goodness of a thing depends entirely upon whether it aids in self-preservation. Therefore, claiming: "…the mind cannot conceive of anything to be good for itself except what leads to understanding" is equivalent to saying: "the only things the mind can conceive as a conducive to its self-preservation is that which leads to understanding."

[113] At first glance, this position may seem implausible. Though pursuing greater understanding might be conducive to self-preservation, surely there are other actions with similar if not greater usefulness. Some advance a Hobbesian reading of Spinoza's moral theory that challenges the centrality of understanding to self-preservation altogether. However, as I argue later on, I believe that the Hobbesian reading on a series of mistaken assumptions about what Spinoza means when he talks about self-preservation.

[114] Recall from the previous section that Spinoza establishes this equivalence in EIIIP7: " the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—that is (by P6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself" (EIIIP7).

[115] Spinoza makes this latter point in Part III to serve as the basis for his theory of the passions: "Our mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, namely, insofar as it has adequate ideas…" (EIIIP1).

taken together, Spinoza's definitions of reality and striving support the conclusion that each thing's striving to persevere is ultimately a striving to participate in God's eternal nature.[116]

To illustrate this point, let us consider certain facts about striving and God: God's essence entails that God must exist (EIP11). The existence of finite modes does not follow from their own essence, but from God, which is their immanent cause (EIP16). Though finite things may act as determinate expressions of God, unlike God, no finite thing is truly self-caused. However, each finite thing has more or less reality depending on how grounded it is in its essence, which is equivalent to its striving to persevere and power to act (EIIIP7). The more essence or reality something has, the more effects it produces from its own nature (EIP16D). Thus, being an adequate cause allows one to participate in the infinite reality of God, because God produces infinite effects.[117]

This reading of Spinoza, which is shared among commentators such as Garrett and Yovel,[118] construes self-perseverance in a way that explains why, for example, acting and understanding are the only means by which the individual persists. One's degree of reality is not determined by the length of time one persists as a finite mode, but the extent to which the effects one produces are conceived through oneself alone. Spinoza thus appears to reject the notion that to effectively strive, one must focus on extending one's lifespan. Rather, self-preservation is grounded in activity, and activity is determined by one's existence as an adequate cause. Moreover, the extent to which one is an adequate cause shapes how fully one participates in the eternity of God.

[116] Youpa, *Spinoza*, 252
[117] Youpa organizes these propositions in a similar way in service of the same point (Youpa, *Spinoza*, 252).
[118] Garrett, *Spinoza*, 362; Youpa, *Spinoza* 242 243

Let us now return to blessedness. In EVP27, Spinoza claims that blessedness, or the intuitive knowledge of God, is "the greatest virtue of the mind" because one who possesses such knowledge "passes to the greatest human perfection" (EVP27D). Spinoza defines perfection as reality (EIIdef6), which means blessedness reflects the highest possible degree of reality a person can strive to attain. To understand why blessedness grants this degree of perfection, we need only recall that the mental aspect of an adequate cause is an adequate idea (EIIIP1dem). The degree of reality a person possesses is a function of their power to act and the extent to which their actions are conceived through their own nature. Blessedness emerges out of the knowledge that one proceeds directly from the attributes of God, which, by extension, is knowledge of one's own nature as a finite mode. Thus, attaining blessedness amounts to an adequate conception of oneself, which in turn confers the highest degree of reality one can strive to attain.

2. **Aristotle:**

Following the theme of this chapter, I will first outline the connection between form and function before exploring their relationship to *sophia*. As we shall see, this progression of ideas, starting with two metaphysical principles and culminating in a theory of human flourishing, closely resembles Spinoza's strategy in the *Ethics*.

Form and Function:

As we've discussed, form is determined by those qualities that distinguish one kind of thing from another. In *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle seeks to find the human function by determining what kind of thing human beings are. Although people engage in activities that

might be attributed to the nutritive or perceptual aspects of the human soul, the human function cannot lie in faculties shared by plants and animals (NE1098a1). However, reason *is* a quality unique to the human soul, which means that the human function must be grounded in the exercise of our rational faculties: "The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action of the <part of the soul> that has reason" (NE1098a5).

Let us investigate the relationship between function and form in greater depth. In Part I of *Nicomachean Ethics*, function—which we can understand as *telos*—appears to be an entailment of form, indexed to an object or activity according to its specific type.[119] A harpist is a kind of person that plays the harp, and the function of a harpist consists in the expression of that activity (NE1098a10). Conversely, if the function of a thing is always understood in relation to its form, then form is also an entailment of function—just as the playing of harp music entails the existence of a harpist.

In *Physics*, Aristotle claims there are cases where form and function causally collapse:

> Since, though, there are four of them [causes], the natural scientist should know them all, and to give the why in a natural scientific way must refer back to all of them—the matter, the form, the cause of movement, the for-sake-of-which. But the last three often amount to one, since the what-it-is and the for-the-sake-of-which are one, and the first source of the movement is the same in form as these (for human begets human)… (Physics, 197b 20-25).

Though an understanding of all four causes is necessary to adequately explain a thing, formal cause, final cause, and efficient cause often "amount to one". Here, Aristotle cites a phrase that

[119] Whether there is a true entailment relationship between form and function is unclear. There appear to be certain instances in nature that have no final cause, suggesting that final causality does not exist as a matter of metaphysical or explanatory necessity. Still, in the case of human beings, Aristotle is clear that form and final cause are both present.

appears throughout his works: “human begets human.” This statement is meant to illustrate two facts:

First, the goal of becoming a fully formed human is what drives the process of turning into one, which is to say, the final product of human generation is what causes the generation to occur, and not *vice versa*. Second, the goal of becoming a human being cannot be understood without also understanding what it means to exist as one.[120] If someone were to announce their intention of becoming an Olympian without having any concept what an Olympian is, the phrase would have little meaning, because the goal of becoming an Olympian is predicated on the idea of what an Olympian is.

This second point highlights the explanatory priority of form over function. Though form and function appear to be mutually entailing,[121] there is an important sense in which a formal explanation of something is required before its function can be ascertained. Indeed, as we discuss in Chapter 1, Aristotle posits that to understand what the human function is, one must first understand what category of thing human beings belong to (NE1098a1). [122] We can thus think of formal cause as coming before final cause in the order of explanation of a thing.

Function, Telos and Sophia:

Just as we explored the relationship between striving and blessedness, we will now discuss how function and *telos* connect to *sophia*, which Aristotle regards as the highest manifestation of the good life.

[120] Falcon, Andrea, "Aristotle on Causality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
[121] Recall the harpist example from page 52
[122] See Chapter 1: “Aristotle” pg. 15

In the first lines of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses how all decisions and activities "seek some good" and that *the* good may be accurately described as that which "everything seeks" (NE1094a1)[123]. If we were to examine a set of goal-driven activities within a particular craft or science, some would be subordinate to others, insofar as each works towards the highest goal of that craft or science (NE1094a10). In the same way, all human activities are ultimately subordinate to the goal of leading a good life.

If the good life constitutes the best thing one can hope to achieve, it must be both "complete" (NE1097a28) and "self-sufficient" (NE1097b8). An end is complete if it is both good in and of itself and never pursued for the sake of something else (NE1097a30) and self-sufficient if it makes one's life "choiceworthy and lacking in nothing" (NE1097b16). [124] [125]

Aristotle posits that what is good for a thing is determined by its function: "For just as the good…seems to depend on its function and characteristic action…the same seems to be true for the human being, if the human being has a function" (NE1097b). Moreover, the function, or characteristic activity, of human beings is grounded in our ability to reason (NE1098a5). So, that which is good for a human being in some important sense depends on his or her rational faculty.

However, the exercise of reason *per se* does not translate to leading a good life. There are many reason-requiring activities that do not constitute a good life. A person who is base or incontinent can rationally deliberate about how to advance their interests, though Aristotle calls deliberation of this kind "evil" (NE1142 15-20). Knowing the intricacies of a craft is not needed

[123] To be clear. Aristotle is not referring to a single good that all things capable of decision-making and activity seek. As we discuss in Chapter I, what is most good for the beaver is not the same as that which is most good for the tree (17).
[124] Aristotle calls the complete good self-sufficient (NE1097b6).
[125] Notably, the Greek word Aristotle uses for "complete"—*teleios*—is cognate with telos, highlighting the goal-directed nature of living well. Here I draw from Irwin's discussion of completeness in his glossary to *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, *NE*, 366).

to lead a flourishing life (NE1141a10) though knowledge of this kind is defined as reason directed towards production (NE1140a7).

Rather than identifying the good with reason *simpliciter*, Aristotle describes it as reason guided by virtue:

> Now we say that the function of a kind of thing, such as a harpist, is the same in kind as the function of an excellent individual of the kind, such as an excellent harpist. And the same is true without qualification in every case, if we add to the function the superior achievement in accord with the virtue; for the function of a harpist is to play the harp, and the function of a good harpist is to play it well. Moreover, we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely (NE1098a9-20).

Though the function of a thing may determine what is good for it, to perform one's function does not guarantee doing so *well*. As we discuss in Chapter 1, virtue, understood in its broadest sense, is the cultivation of excellence in the performance of an activity.[126] Given that the function of human beings lies in our rational faculty, virtue involves honing that faculty in a way that is conducive to leading a good life. The function of a thing is often identified with its *telos*, but there appears to be a slight distinction. While the function of a human being is simply his or her characteristic activity (NE1098a5) his or her end consists of the practice of that activity in accordance with virtue (NE1098a16)—at least insofar as acting in accordance with virtue amounts to flourishing, which is the highest good (NE1098b21).[127]

As we discuss in Chapter I, Aristotle posits two forms virtue: *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *sophia* (theoretical wisdom). *Phronesis* is the interplay between the rational and

[126] See Chapter 1: "Aristotle" pg. 15

[127] Reeve, C.D.C. "Beginning and Ending with Eudaimonia." *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 14–33. In the foregoing paragraph I draw directly from Reeve.

desiderative aspects of the human soul, such that the rational part shapes whatever ends one desires (NE1177b26).[128] *Sophia* arises from the contemplation of necessary first principles and engages only the rational part of the soul. Given that theoretical contemplation is the most virtuous activity one can perform (NE1178b26) it is constitutive of true *eudaimonia* (NE1097b16).[129] Moreover, it is the only activity that is entirely complete and self-sufficient (NE1177b20) which means it is the only activity that is pursued entirely for its own sake.

Aristotle considers theoretical contemplation the highest activity one can perform because it is the characteristic activity of the gods. Although human beings cannot contemplate first principles indefinitely, any exercise of theoretical contemplation is considered "divine" in comparison to the "merely human" activities governed by practical reason. *Sophia* thus occupies the top of a *telic* hierarchy,[130] insofar as all other activities are at least partially aimed at facilitating conditions that are conducive to the sustained contemplation of necessary first principles.

3. **Methodological Parallels:**

Chapter 2 argues that several of Spinoza's and Aristotle's core philosophical commitments have only partial overlap. In this section, I will argue that there is nevertheless enough similarity in the content of these concepts that they function in a parallel way methodologically. To make this argument, I will defend two central claims: first, that the methodological role of each commitment is the same as its counterpart; and second, that these

[128] See Chapter 1: "Aristotle" pg. 15
[129] Given that *phronesis* grants us the ability to determine what is good for ourselves, it is even by the prescriptions of *phronesis* that the norms of practical reason work in service of theoretical contemplation (NE1145a6).
[130] "Telic hierarchy" is a term I borrow from Reeve (Reeve, *Beginning*, 16).

functions, when considered together, reveal a shared strategy in Aristotle's and Spinoza's account of human flourishing.

However, before turning to these methodological parallels, it is worth clarifying what I mean by "philosophical methodology." In this context, I use the term to refer to the argumentative structure of ideas that cohere as parts of a broader theory. Precisely how ideas cohere in this way is a topic of debate, and involves questions of fittingness, sense-making, and epistemic coherence.[131] However, my analysis of Spinoza and Aristotle does not wade into this discourse, nor does it seek to find commonality in the type of method each philosopher uses in the development of their ideas—Aristotle, for instance, does not use Spinoza's style of geometric proof. Instead, I wish to argue that each component of Aristotle's and Spinoza's accounts of the good life has a methodological role—a kind of conceptual scaffolding—that supports the theory as a whole. In particular, I wish to demonstrate that essence leads to striving, and striving to blessedness, in much the same way that the human form leads to the human function, and the human function leads to the contemplative ideal, or *sophia*.

Let us start by discussing how the similarities between form and essence are strong enough to establish a shared methodological role. Recall that Spinoza posits that the essence of a thing is grounded in its existence as finite mode.[132] Aristotle, by contrast, maintains that form of a thing determines its kind. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the most important distinction between essence and form is that essence provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for an

[131] For a discussion of these topics, see Rescher N. Philosophy as Rational Systematization. In: D'Oro G, Overgaard S, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press; 2017:32-43. and Moore AW. Sense-making From a Human Point of View. In: D'Oro G, Overgaard S, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press; 2017:44-55.

[132] However, essences can also pertain to things that are not finite modes, such as the Attributes, which capture the essence of God (EID6).

x qua x as a particular, whereas form provides the necessary and sufficient conditions of an *x qua x* as a kind. However, this distinction also reflects an important similarity: both essence and form provide definitions of what makes some *x* an *x*.

Though Spinoza and Aristotle define particulars differently, both argue that the definition of a thing is foundational to all other facts about it. Striving assumes the existence of essence, because it is the essence of all things to strive. Function assumes the existence of form, because the activity of an *x* is determined by the kind of thing *x* is.[133] The relationship between essence and striving in Spinoza, and form and function in Aristotle, is thus a relationship between the definition of a thing and the activity it performs.[134] However, the fact that both philosophers ground their systems in definitions is not in itself a remarkable similarity. What is distinctive is the way in which they rely on the role of definitions methodologically. By providing a definition of what a human being is—whether as a finite mode with a particular essence or as a member of a natural kind—essence and form each serve as a steppingstone for understanding the nature of human activity.

Let us move on to human activity, which is the domain of striving and function. Though striving may not be goal-directed in a strictly teleological sense,[135] it nevertheless has a relationship to blessedness that resembles the relationship between function and *sophia* in Aristotle. Indeed, both Spinoza and Aristotle construct their accounts of flourishing around natural activity. Recall that Spinoza defines the good as "that which we certainly know is useful

[133] Refer to "Form and Function" in Chapter 3 and "Aristotle" in Chapter 1 for a complete discussion
[134] Here I wish to preempt a potential confusion: Essence and striving are identified by Spinoza as the same thing, so it is not immediately clear how one can be treated as being more fundamental. While it is true that metaphysically and logically there is no distinction between essence and striving, my analysis is strictly methodological. In *Ethics*, Spinoza defines essence well before his discussion of the conatus principle and relies on essence in his explanation of striving.
[135] Depending on the interpretation, for Spinoza, the final cause of a thing is ultimately a species of efficient cause (See "Conatus and Telos in Chapter 2).

to us" (EIVDef1) and later argues that something is useful only insofar as it enhances one's striving to persevere. Accordingly, when Spinoza describes blessedness as "the highest good which we can want" (EVP20D), he implies that its attainment constitutes the highest expression of the *conatus* principle. For Spinoza, blessedness consists in the mind's intellectual love of God—a state in which one partakes, to the greatest extent possible, in the infinite reality of God. Since this participation represents the fullest realization of our nature as finite modes, it also represents the highest end for a being striving to persevere. Here we see how striving provides the conceptual framework for Spinoza to discuss the good life: the good life is only good insofar as it is conducive to striving.

Similarly, at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle argues that the good life is one led in contemplation of necessary first principles. However, contemplation of this kind is only good because reasoning is the characteristic activity of human beings. For other living things, the good life takes on different forms. The activities that a beaver must perform to live well are not the same as those of a tree, because the natural activity of a thing depends entirely on the function of who or what is performing it. Function thus plays a crucial role in forming an intelligible conception of what a good life is.

Aristotle's and Spinoza's progression of ideas is not merely stylistic, but reflective of a commitment to the view that to live a good life, one must act in a way consistent with one's nature. For Spinoza, blessedness can only be thought of as good insofar as it is conducive to striving—indeed, whether something is good *simpliciter* depends on whether it aids in one's self-preservation. Similarly, Aristotle calls theoretical reasoning the most choiceworthy activity one can perform because it is the highest expression of the human function. In both accounts, any mention of the good life cannot be made without reference to natural activity. The

methodological role of striving and function is thus to define the parameters according to which the good life can be thought of as good in the first place.

Now that we have outlined some similarities in the methodological progression in Aristotle's and Spinoza's accounts of the good life, let us briefly examine potential problems with this comparison. To begin with, if the analysis in Chapter 2 is correct, then many of Spinoza's and Aristotle's philosophical commitments differ significantly. However, if these commitments differ too much, it is unclear how one could draw a comparison between the methodological roles they play—one should not expect to find a robust structural similarity in two theories whose principles do not meaningfully overlap.

Indeed, there is a sense in which the content of a principle shapes its role. If essence didn't determine what is analytically true of a thing, it would not serve as the foundation of the *conatus* principle. If function didn't pertain to a thing's characteristic activity, it would not lead to an understanding of *eudaimonia*. The entire progression of ideas in *Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* culminates in a theory of the good life, but if the substance of those ideas were to differ between the two accounts, then their roles would differ as well. Even if commonalities exist between two ideas, these commonalities may be too general to supply the same theoretical scaffolding. For instance, that two ideas constitute propositional statements, or contain semantic content, is not a meaningful observation.

However, as I discuss at length in Chapter 2, the principles I've discussed *are not entirely dissimilar*. Specific observations can be made about each commitment and its counterpart: form and essence supply the definition of a thing, function and striving determine its natural activity, and blessedness and *sophia* reflect that activity's highest expression.

Moreover, the progression of these ideas reveals a common strategy. Aristotle and Spinoza do not introduce their accounts of definition, natural activity, and the good life in a disjunctive manner. Each proceeding concept relies on the one before it to be made intelligible. Any concept that comes before another in this context can be thought of as *explanatorily prior* to the ones that follow: to adequately understand one component of a theory, one must first consider the elements of that component that are part of its explanation.[136]

Spinoza and Aristotle both rely on explanatory priority as they develop their theories of the good life. Form and essence provide the definition of a thing, which is necessary to infer anything about its natural activity. Function and striving—which determine a thing's natural activity—are fundamental to conceptualizing what it means to live well, because the ideals of blessedness and theoretical contemplation can only be understood in terms of natural activity. Thus, in both accounts, we see not only a similar progression of ideas, but a parallel in how these ideas explanatorily cohere.

[136] This model does not pertain to relationships of ontological priority—recall that Spinoza defines striving *as essence* (EIIIP7D). So, even if essence is explanatorily prior to striving, the two can still be identical ontologically.

Conclusion:

For this project, I have tried to show that the most robust similarity between Spinoza and Aristotle can be found in their philosophical methodologies. Before making this argument, I examined the principles underlying each philosophers' account of the good life, considering where they overlap and diverge. Namely, I investigated Spinoza's theories of essence, striving, and blessedness, and compared them to Aristotle's theories of form, *telos*, and *sophia*. Let us briefly review these in turn:

As we discussed in Chapter 2, essence and form both constitute a thing's definition. However, essence determines the definition of an *x qua x* as a particular, whereas form determines the definition of an *x qua x* as a kind. As such, even if we were to adopt a view of Spinozistic essence that allows for the existence of universals, it would remain distinct from Aristotle's theory of form. [137] [138] Striving and *telos* both determine a thing's natural activity, but the extent to which striving can be thought of as a teleological activity is unclear. Pro-teleological readings of the *conatus* principle, such as the one advanced by Garrett, argue that Spinoza adopts some form of teleological explanation. However, for reasons I discussed above, these interpretations offer only a weakened version of Aristotelian teleology. [139] Lastly, blessedness and *sophia* constitute the highest form of human flourishing and arise out of intellectual cultivation. Nonetheless, disparities between these accounts of flourishing reveal significant differences in how Spinoza and Aristotle understand the good life.[140]

[137] Recall that Hubner argues that Spinoza allows for "general essences" like "Man," but that these essences are ideas dependent on finite minds (Hubner, 73).
[138] See Chapter 2: "Essence and Form" pg. 24
[139] See Chapter 2: "Conatus and Telos" pg. 32
[140] See Chapter 2: "Virtue, Blessedness and Sophia" pg. 39

Given that there are only partial similarities between these principles, in Chapter 3 I argue that a more robust comparison can be made by examining the methodological roles each principle plays in Spinoza's and Aristotle's respective systems. Essence and form supply the definition of a thing, which determines its striving or function. Striving and function constitute a thing's natural activity, which sets the parameters for that activity's highest expression. The highest expression of a thing's natural activity constitutes its flourishing, which in the human case is referred to as blessedness and *sophia*. Moreover, each principle is explanatorily reliant on its predecessor. We cannot understand our natural activity without first determining what we are. Similarly, we cannot understand what it means to lead a flourishing life without determining our natural activity.

This methodological comparison does not rely on narrow interpretations of Spinoza and Aristotle to establish a parallel between the two philosophers, which distinguishes it from other comparisons in the literature that predominately focus on individual principles. For example, if we were to argue that teleological explanation is sufficient for acquiring adequate ideas, we would also have to contend with the commentators who maintain that Spinoza rejects all forms of teleology. By contrast, maintaining, as I have, that *conatus* is explanatorily reliant on essence and prior to blessedness simultaneously allows us to evade the teleology debate while also establishing a novel parallel between Spinoza and Aristotle.[141]

It is worth restating that this analysis does not make any historical claims about whether Aristotle's works influenced Spinoza's writings directly. Any comparisons between the two philosophers rely on the contents of the ideas themselves, not biographical facts about Spinoza's

[141] Of course, I am only using teleological explanation as an example. My point about avoiding debates in the secondary literature extends to disagreements about formal/actual essence and the potentially Aristotelian nature of blessedness.

intellectual influences. Of course, Spinoza was well-versed in the positions of his scholastic contemporaries and even possessed a copy of Aristotle's *opera omnia*.[142] Still, far more evidence would be required to establish a clear link between Spinoza's exposure to Aristotle and any parallels in their respective works. As such, this project has strictly been concerned with examining how elements of Spinoza's philosophy overlap and diverge with Aristotle's, independent of any historical influence.

Although the content of this analysis has been interpretive rather than historical, its findings have historical significance. Spinoza openly rejects the neo-Aristotelian worldview that, at the time of his writing, had dominated Europe's intellectual landscape for centuries. Moreover, his philosophical alternative in the *Ethics* arguably constitutes the most radical departure from scholasticism to emerge from the period. Nevertheless—and as many in the secondary literature have observed—Spinoza's apparent rejection of Aristotle does not change the fact that there remain important similarities in their respective systems.[143] This project maintains that the most significant of these similarities is methodological. However, *any* resemblance between the two philosophers is significant given the extent to which Spinoza distances himself from his neo-Aristotelian counterparts. Thus, the methodological similarity explored in this project is historically relevant independent of whether Spinoza was directly influenced by Aristotle's works.

On a purely interpretive note, if we are to adopt the reading of Spinoza offered in this analysis—namely, that his methodological progression from the definition of a thing to the

[142] See Manzini, *Spinoza*, 9

[143] Recall that Hubner posits Spinoza allows for the existence of "generalized essence" in his metaphysics despite his dismissal of universals (Hubner, *Spinoza*, 73), and Garrett argues that teleological explanation has a role in the formation of adequate ideas (Garrett, *Teleology*, 325).

highest expression of its natural activity—it may help us better understand his work. According to this reading, essence, striving, and blessedness explanatorily cohere in such a way that blessedness can only be understood in terms of striving, and striving in terms of essence. This order of explanation is in the spirit of Spinoza's geometric style of proof, which starts with metaphysical first principles and, through a quasi-deductive process, builds to a theory of the good life.

Rather than pursue questions of morality directly, Spinoza starts his analysis by identifying the most fundamental aspect of a thing—its definition—and develops a theoretical framework accordingly. In contemporary philosophy, moral theory is often driven by appeals to intuition. These appeals range from W.D. Ross's five *prima facie* duties to John Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium. However, it is a source of disagreement whether these intuitions can be relied upon, and why we consider them before other facts about human nature. Peter Singer offers a critique of moral intuition that summarizes this concern:

> Why should we not rather make the opposite assumption, that all the particular moral judgments we intuitively make are likely to derive from discarded religious systems, from warped views of sex and bodily functions, or from customs necessary for the survival of the group in social and economic circumstances that now lie in the distant past?[144]

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza challenges the reliability of our intuitions in much the same way that Singer does in this passage. Just as some of our moral attitudes may be remnants of outdated social practices, so too might our perceptions of God and human nature. In response to this concern, Spinoza looks beyond human intuition altogether and focuses instead on identifying the

[144] Singer, Peter. "Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium." *Monist*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1974, pp. 516.

metaphysical principles that govern all living things—principles that, in turn, serve as the foundation for his account of the good life. Perhaps, if one were to arm themselves with theories of definition and natural activity in keeping with recent developments in metaphysics, a new account of human flourishing would emerge.

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