

Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I propose a reading of Spinoza's theory of the eternity of the mind in light of his theory of essence and existence. Opposing in particular recent Platonist readings of this theory, rejecting the dichotomy between formal essence and actual essence, upon which they mostly rely, I argue that Spinoza's conception of the eternity of the mind must be grasped in terms of different aspects of one and the same existence. I moreover suggest that, for Spinoza, the mind was both sempiternal and eternal, without, however, those two aspects of the mind's existence being identical.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans cet article, je propose une interprétation de la conception spinoziste de l'éternité de l'esprit à la lumière de sa théorie de l'essence et de l'existence. En m'opposant en particulier à des interprétations platonistes récentes, et en réfutant la dichotomie entre essences formelles et essences actuelles sur laquelle elles reposent pour la plupart, je maintiens que la conception spinoziste de l'éternité de l'esprit doit être comprise en termes des aspects distincts d'une seule et même existence. Je maintiens en outre que, pour Spinoza, l'esprit est à la fois sempiternel et éternel, sans pour autant que ces deux aspects de son existence se confondent.

Keywords: Spinoza, eternity, sempiternity, duration, immortality, formal essence, non-existence

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1. Introduction

In EVP20S,¹ Spinoza announces that he will now turn to that “which concerns the duration of the mind without relation to the body.” In the following propositions, from EVP21 to EVP32, he goes on to provide a very complex and somewhat enigmatic account of the eternity of the mind, describing it both in absolute terms as a function of our having an essence, and in scalar terms as a function of the adequate knowledge we possess. How are we to understand this double doctrine of the eternity of the mind? One classic problem is the following: Spinoza argues that the eternity of the mind is not to be confused with indefinite duration or what is sometimes termed ‘sempiternity.’ Yet several passages imply or outright say the contrary. Over the last half century, commentators have, then, argued back and forth about to which side the textual and philosophical balance leans. In Sections 2–4 of this paper, I provide a possible solution to this difficulty, aligning myself with a reading recently proposed by Julie Klein, except in one important respect, by arguing that Spinoza’s distinction between eternity and duration does not involve two distinct levels of existence, or two distinct kinds of existence, but that they refer to really distinct and, therefore, compatible aspects of one and the same existence.² On this

¹ Abbreviations: CM = *Cogitata metaphysica*; E = *Ethics* (followed by Roman numeral for part number); D = Definition (when following a Roman numeral); A = Axiom; P = Proposition; D = Demonstration (when following a proposition number); C = Corollary; S = Scholium; PD = Physical digression (i.e., the long section on bodies inserted between EIIP13 and EIIP14); L = Lemma; Exp = Explication. Throughout this paper, I generally use Carl Gebhardt’s standard edition of the original language texts (*Opera*, Vol. I–IV) and Edwin Curley’s translations in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I–II. I do, however, sometimes modify Curley, especially with regard to the translation of the expression ‘*sub specie aeternitatis*,’ which I shall give as ‘under the aspect of eternity.’ I have indicated why in note 19 below. Moreover, generally, I have not followed Curley in reproducing the use of capital letters of the original edition in the *Opera posthuma* (OP), capitalizing terms such as ‘Mind,’ ‘Body,’ ‘Reason,’ ‘Love,’ etc. I do this, first, because Curley does not follow the OP consistently on this point (see, e.g., the term ‘body’ in EVP1D); second, and more importantly, it is unclear that the OP capitalizations stem from Spinoza. In fact, if we compare with the only extant manuscript available of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, i.e., the copy made around 1675 by Pieter van Gent, presumably copied from Spinoza’s original manuscript, recently found in the Vatican library, we see that this manuscript does not capitalize in the same way as the OP, and to a much lesser degree (see *The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza’s Ethica*). There is every reason to believe that the OP capitalizations are simply a result of 17th century editorial practices.

² See Klein, “Something of it Remains: Spinoza and Gersonides on Intellectual Eternity,” p. 177–203.

basis, I will argue that we need not choose between eternity and sempiternity of the mind but that both can, and do, co-exist within Spinoza's account in EV. Next, in Sections 5-7, I turn to Spinoza's distinction between two eternities of the mind, or what I will designate 'absolute' and 'scalar' eternity, which are, respectively, an eternity common to all minds and an eternity that increases in following the adequate knowledge a mind acquires. In this part of my paper, I will be building on, but also modifying, the readings of Spinoza's two eternities proposed by Daniel Garber, Steven Nadler, and Pierre-François Moreau.³ I will in particular stress how the Cartesian distinction between the formal and the objective reality of ideas can do much work in accounting for the difference between the absolute and the scalar eternity of the mind.

Since this is partly a polemical paper, before delving into Spinoza's texts, I shall briefly explain against what I am arguing in the following. It is first of all the understanding of the eternity of the mind that one will find among commentators who consider Spinoza to be a kind of Platonist about essences. By 'Platonism,' I here understand a doctrine according to which essences and existences occupy two distinct ontological realms, so to speak, or an ontology that contains two distinct levels: a level where the essences of things can be found in some possible, ideal, or non-actual form; and another level where things have actual existence. This Platonizing approach to Spinoza's theory of essence and existence mainly hinges on a distinction allegedly found in Spinoza between the 'formal essence' and the 'actual essence' of things. I have elsewhere put considerable energy into demonstrating that this dichotomy between formal essence and actual essence is false.⁴ But, if I am right about that, it implies that interpretations of Spinoza's conception of the eternity of the mind hinging on this Platonizing interpretation of Spinoza's ontology must be equally false. This is particularly unfortunate to the extent that some recent readings of this variety have become very influential. I have in mind here in particular some recent articles by Don Garrett.⁵ Hence, my aim is to show, against Platonizing approaches, how Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind can be construed in a systematically superior way without taking recourse to ontological stratification. I will in particular stress how understanding both the difference between eternity and duration and the difference between absolute

³ See Garber, "A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less than of Death," p. 103-118; Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics. An Introduction*, p. 248-273; Moreau, *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*, p. 532-549.

⁴ See Lærke, "Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence. Formal Essence, Non-existence and Two Types of Actuality," [forthcoming].

⁵ See Garrett, "Spinoza's Theory of *Scientia Intuitiva*," p. 99-115; Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal," p. 284-302.

and scalar eternity in terms of aspects rather than levels or kinds can help achieve that.

2. The Mind without Relation to the Body

Let us first consider the nature of eternity itself and in particular the way it relates, or doesn't relate, to duration. As is often pointed out, there is something puzzling about the way that Spinoza in EVP20S introduces the set of propositions dealing with the eternity of the mind as a reflection on that which "concerns the duration of the mind without relation to the body." At the beginning of EV, in the first proposition of the part, Spinoza reminds his reader of the central parallelist doctrine stated earlier in EIIP7, according to which "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." But, given that one central consequence that Spinoza draws from this proposition is that the mind is the idea of the body (EIIP13), it seems at first strange and contradictory to suggest that there can be any such thing as the mind's duration "without relation to the body," since the mind just is the idea of the body and that, as we learn in EIIP7S, ontologically, the idea of a thing just is that thing, considered under the attribute of thought, just as the body just is that thing, considered under the attribute of extension.

I do not think, however, that this alleged contradiction between EVP20S and EIIP7 really is a problem. We note first that the expression "without relation to the body" does not necessarily imply that Spinoza believes that the mind can have duration while not having a body (although I do think he does believe that, as I will argue below.) Here, it may simply mean that he will now consider and explain something that has to do with the mind's duration without considering the body that the mind in fact has, but entirely in terms of the mind itself, or in terms of what we also, with a Cartesian notion, can call the 'formal reality' of the mind. This is in no way opposed to parallelism but is in complete conformity with it, to the extent that parallelism involves a real distinction between mind and body, requiring anything happening in the mind to be explained entirely in terms of the causal dynamics of the attribute of which the mind is a mode, i.e., the attribute of thought, without any consideration of the corresponding mode in the attribute of extension (see EIIP5). Thus, EVD20S does not necessarily suggest some kind of life of the mind without the body, but may simply remind us that the life of the mind must be explained solely in terms of the causal dynamics internal to the attribute of which the mind is a mode, i.e., thought, without relation to any other attribute, such as extension. In that case, there is nothing intriguing about the lack of relation Spinoza alludes to in EVP20S. In the world of Spinozism, it is in fact perfectly trivial.

What is more puzzling, however, is that Spinoza also says in EVP20S that he will now turn to the mind's *duration* without relation to the body but then goes on to propose a set of demonstrations that are concerned with the *eternity* of the mind. For, in both EID8 and EVP23S, Spinoza stresses that eternity "cannot be explained by duration or time, even if duration is conceived to be

without beginning or end.” And, in EVP34S, he explains that the common opinion about the immortality of the mind is in reality an inadequate and imaginary way of grasping the eternity of the mind that people “confuse with duration.” Some commentators, Martha Kneale and Alan Donagan being the classic examples, have nonetheless argued, by reference to the ambiguous EVP20S and some other passages, that Spinoza’s eternity of the mind is in fact best understood in terms of indeterminate duration, that is to say, ‘sempiternity.’⁶ Such sempiternity is in some respects similar to the kind of continued existence that is traditionally associated with the notion of immortality.

Like most commentators today, I do not think that can be right. It flies in the face of too many explicit statements that Spinoza makes. He is quite clear about the fact that the mind’s eternity does not consist in duration beyond the duration of the existing body: “Our mind [...] can be said to endure, and its existence can be explained through a certain time, only insofar as it involves the actual existence of the body [...]” (EVP23S). And yet, the fact is that there are other statements in EV favouring the notion that Spinoza conceives of some sort of perpetuation of the mind beyond the existence of the body. Hence, Spinoza speaks of what “remains” of the mind in EVP23 explains that the mind does not remember existing “before” the body in EVP23S. We can also point to EVP38S, according to which “death is less harmful to us, the greater the mind’s clear and distinct knowledge.” Finally, in EVD42S, Spinoza claims that the wise man “never ceases to be.” Some of these passages could possibly be explained away without any reference to duration, but others are indeed powerful indicators that Spinoza conceives of something like continued duration of the mind both before the generation and after the destruction of the body.

3. Two Aspects of Existence: Eternity and Duration

Should we, then, declare Spinoza confused or unresolved on the matter? I will suggest a possible way of solving the problem that will accommodate most, if not all, of the relevant passages. Many contributions to the discussion of this issue over the last 40 years tend to presuppose that one must choose so that Spinoza *either* holds that the mind is eternal in a sense unrelated to duration *or* holds that the mind is, in some sense, sempiternal. I am not so sure that we must. Certainly, Spinoza repeats that eternity and duration are entirely different and unrelated, or incommensurable. But formally, stating that some A is without relation to some B certainly does not imply that this A excludes B and *vice versa*. Quite to the contrary, lack of relation may instead be construed as the very condition of mutual compatibility, so that A and B can be considered compatible exactly *because* they are incommensurable. This would not be an

⁶ See Kneale, “Eternity and Sempiternity,” p. 227-240; Donagan, “Spinoza’s Proof of Immortality,” p. 241-258.

argumentative move unfamiliar to Spinoza who, incidentally like Leibniz, demonstrates the mutual compatibility of the divine attributes or perfections by demonstrating that the concept of a single being including all those attributes or perfections is possible because each of those attributes are in themselves and conceived through themselves, i.e., really distinct, and thus have nothing in common (the whole development can be followed in EIP1-11, with the key points of argument in EIP2 and EIP10S.)⁷ But what can we use that particular insight regarding real distinction and mutual compatibility for in this context?

Let us turn to the very definition of eternity, stated in EID8:

By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of an eternal thing.

Exp.: For such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explained by duration or time, even if duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.

It is noteworthy that Spinoza does not here speak about eternity and duration as qualifying different existences. Instead we have a notion of ‘existence itself.’ This expression strongly suggests that there is only one such existence. We can compare it with EIIP45S, where Spinoza refers to what he calls “the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things because infinitely many things follow from the eternal necessity of God’s nature in infinitely many modes” or “the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God.” I think we can safely assume that this ‘very nature of existence’ is identical to the ‘existence itself’ that he speaks of in the definition of eternity. So, things are conceived as eternal insofar as they are conceived as following from God (EIP18), presumably as opposed to things as they are conceived to follow from other things (EIP28). Next, in the definition, Spinoza indicates that eternity cannot be explained by duration. We should, however, be cautious about concluding from this that existence itself also, then, cannot be explained by duration either or that things, insofar as they endure, do not involve ‘existence itself.’ Nothing prevents reading in a restrictive sense the clause according to which eternity is only existence itself “insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of an eternal thing.”⁸ On that reading, Spinoza only says that existence itself is inexplicable by duration insofar as it is conceived to follow from God. But there might just be other ways in which

⁷ On this point, see the insightful analysis in Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, p. 21-32. See also Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu*, 169-176; Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*, 467-468.

⁸ The same restriction can be found in EIIP45S, here once again expressed by means of the characteristic conjunction ‘*quatenus*.’

we can consider such existence itself, for example—which of course isn't just any example, but in fact the only other available option—insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of a non-eternal thing, or the existence of things not insofar as they are caused by God but insofar as they are caused by other things. This latter way of seeing existence itself, then, would not be existence itself insofar as it involves eternity, but existence itself insofar as it involves duration. The idea would, then, be that, in this case, the conjunction 'insofar as' works so as to distinguish two really distinct aspects of the same thing. If we follow that hypothesis, we should consider a thing's duration and that same thing's eternity as completely unrelated matters, a bit like, if we have red ball, the redness and the roundness of the ball are two entirely separate and unrelated properties or aspects of one and the same thing—properties that neither entail nor exclude one another but that are really distinct. This real distinction implies not only, as is most often stressed, that one cannot be explained by the other or *vice versa*, but also, as a point less often noted, that they are necessarily compatible as properties of one and the same thing, to the extent that there is nothing in one property susceptible to place limitations on the attribution of the other. I thus agree with Klein that we must see the difference between eternity and duration as an aspectual one.⁹ Contrary to what Klein suggests,¹⁰ however, I do not think that eternity and duration are just ways of contemplating things, two perspectives, so that there is no real but only a conceptual distinction between them. They are really distinct, but compatible aspects of the things contemplated, just like the redness and the roundness of a ball. On this reading, nothing precludes that "existence itself" can have both 'duration' and 'eternity,' or that those two properties can be attributed to the same thing, since they are entirely separate, upholding no relation whatsoever to each other. In fact, this very lack of relation is exactly what assures their mutual compatibility.

This provides a possible opening to explaining as simply unrelated to the question of the mind's eternity the curious allusions Spinoza makes in EV to some possible duration of the mind beyond the existence of the body. I will return to that point in the next section. But it also suggests something more general about the relation between duration and eternity, namely that we should not construct them as referring to different ontological *strata*, as if things can be conceived to exist on two distinct levels, i.e., eternally and durationally, or that they somehow all partake in two distinct forms of existence, i.e., eternity and duration. Rather, what we are dealing with are really two distinct aspects of one and the same existence, i.e., a single plane of existence upon which all things live and move and have their being, to paraphrase a passage from St.

⁹ See Klein, "Something of it Remains: Spinoza and Gersonides on Intellectual Eternity."

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 196, note 65.

Paul that Spinoza is fond of,¹¹ insofar as such existence can be conceived to pertain to things both *as* eternal and *as* durational. In this way, the analysis developed above constitutes a first rejoinder to the Platonizing readings of Spinoza's conception of eternity and a first attempt at disambiguating Spinoza's use of the term 'existence,' making his notion of existence univocal by conceiving of existential distinctions in terms of aspectual ones.

4. Sempiternity of the Mind

I have above argued that we must consider the question of whether the mind can somehow be considered sempiternal as simply unrelated to the question of the mind's eternity. Now, I believe that Spinoza does in fact ascribe some kind of sempiternity to the mind and, before discussing eternity proper, I will first consider briefly what such sempiternity could consist in. Spinoza writes in EVP23 that "the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal." Here, clearly, he envisages a situation where the body has been destroyed while the mind remains. It is often argued that the conception creates grave problems for Spinoza's parallelism.¹² I don't think it does. Here is the problem that needs solving: the mind is the idea of the body. But, in that case, how can there be an idea of something in the divine intellect that does not correlate with an existing thing, i.e., how can it be maintained that there is, in the divine intellect, an idea of my body, even though my body no longer exists?

We must here first consider another difficult point in Spinoza's doctrine, namely his reasoning about non-existent things in EIIP8S. Here, he argues that the ideas of non-existent things are comprehended in God's infinite idea, i.e., conceived in God's intellect, "in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes." So, insofar as my mind is the idea of my body, when my body no longer exists, my mind is still 'comprehended' in the divine intellect and the object of that comprehension, i.e., the thing of which this idea in the divine intellect is an idea, is the formal essence of my body, which is still somehow 'contained' in the attribute of extension even though my body does not exist. What does such containment consist in? I have provided elsewhere a fairly elaborate account of how I think we should read EIIP8S and I will not enter the details of that analysis here but simply summarize the conclusion I have reached on the matter.¹³ We must understand EIIP8S in light of the affirmation in EIP11D2, according to which

¹¹ See Acts 17:28: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being." Spinoza discusses the verse in Letter 73.

¹² See, for example, Steinberg, "Spinoza's Theory of the Eternity of the Mind," p. 36-38; Matson, "Body, Essence and Mind Eternity in Spinoza," p. 82.

¹³ See Lærke, "Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence. Formal Essence, Non-existence and Two Types of Actuality," [forthcoming].

“for each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its non-existence.” The divine intellect conceives them all as he also conceives all the causal relations they take up with each other, including those that cause non-existence. There are thus, for Spinoza, not only determinate ideas in God’s intellect about the causal determinations that account for the existence of singular things when they exist, but also ideas about the causal determinations that account for their non-existence when they do not exist. When a singular thing exists, that thing is conceived by God *qua* existing by virtue of him conceiving also the determinate reasons for its existence. However, when a singular thing does not exist, that same thing is also conceived by God, but now *qua* non-existing by virtue of him conceiving also the determinate reasons of its non-existence.

The problem Spinoza takes on in EIIP8S is how such a conception in the divine intellect of a non-existing thing can be said to be not only adequate, but also true. How can the idea of a non-existing thing be said to ‘agree with its object’ in the way Spinoza characterizes truth in EIA6 and the Letter 60 to Tschirnhaus? What is the object or, what amounts to the same thing, how is the thing contained in the attribute without, however, existing? I think it is thus contained in virtue of the determinate causes of non-existence that the divine intellect comprehends when grasping the reasons of non-existence. Those causes of non-existence do in fact outline or delineate in a precise and determinate way within the relevant attribute the essential features of the thing whose existence they prevent. And it is in virtue of this negative delineation of non-existent things within the attributes that the formal essences of things can be said to be ‘contained’ in the attributes even when those things do not exist.

Apply now this same reasoning to the idea in the divine intellect that is the human mind, i.e., the idea of the body. When the body is destroyed, the reasons or causes of that destruction will be conceived by God, i.e., comprehended in the divine intellect. Hence, in God’s intellect, there will be, when the body is destroyed, an idea of that body *qua* destroyed, that is to say, an idea of my body as *not* existing for determinate reasons or causes that, for their part, *do* exist. In other words, when my body is destroyed, there will still remain in the divine intellect an adequate idea of my body *qua* non-existing. This adequate idea of my body *qua* non-existing is, I think, exactly what, according to EVP23, ‘remains’ of the mind after the destruction of the body.

We now know what Spinoza might be trying to say when suggesting that there is a kind of sempiternity of the human mind. No matter whether the body exists or not, God *always* has a true idea of the body, either *qua* existing or *qua* non-existing. The important thing here is to read carefully this temporal ‘always’ and avoid confounding the sempiternity of the mind that it expresses, i.e., the way the mind always ‘remains’ as an idea in the divine intellect, with the eternity of the mind. I simply do not think that they amount to the same thing. EVP23 could, however, here appear to say the exact opposite: “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it

remains which is eternal.” Does this not state what have I just denied, namely that to ‘remain’ just is what it means to be ‘eternal’? I think not. What remains of the mind is indeed eternal. But Spinoza does not say that this eternal part of the mind is eternal *in virtue of the fact that it remains*. He simply states that it remains and that it just happens to also be eternal, but not that thus remaining indefinitely and being eternal amount to the same thing or that one can be explained by the other. Hence, the passages in *Ethics* V such as EVP23 that do suggest a sempiternity of the mind are not necessarily inconsistent with Spinoza’s claims about the eternity of the mind, since he may very well be speaking of two entirely unrelated properties, indeed *really distinct* properties, as we already saw in the previous section.

5. Eternity and Eternal Truth

Let us now turn to the two eternities that Spinoza speaks of in EV, namely the absolute eternity that he ascribes to all things, including man and the human mind, and the scalar kind of eternity that he ascribes to the human mind to the extent that it has adequate knowledge of the second and third kind and which, when it makes up the greater part of our cognition, makes for “a mind whose greatest part is eternal” (EVP39).

I will first say a bit about how some other commentators have approached the question. Rather than taking here the more straightforward polemical route and developing my position in direct opposition to the kind of interpretations with which I disagree the most, i.e., heavily Platonizing ones like Garrett’s, I will instead go for maximum precision by considering how I would differ from those available readings that I otherwise find very congenial. I will thus here mainly develop my interpretation in juxtaposition to three commentators who all, to my mind, have come a long way in getting it right: Moreau in *Spinoza. L’expérience et l’éternité* from 1994, where he distinguishes an ‘absolute’ from a ‘differential’ conception of the eternity of the mind; Garber who, in an article from 2005, distinguishes between a ‘minimal’ and ‘fuller’ notion of eternity; and, finally, Nadler who, in his two books, *Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (2001) and *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction* (2006), provide what is arguably the most developed English language commentary on the topic currently available. In all three readings, although they differ in other respects, absolute or, in Garber’s vocabulary, minimal eternity relates to the simple fact that all things have essences and that God’s intellect eternally includes ideas of those essences. The differential or fuller eternity, on the contrary, is subject to variation, is specific for human minds or minds of human-like complexity, and depends upon how much adequate knowledge such a mind possesses. I shall here refer to these two aspects of the eternity of the mind as, respectively, ‘absolute’ and ‘scalar.’

My aim in the remaining sections is to spell out the relation between these two eternities of the mind. I want to solve a problem that Garber, in his paper,

points to, although the solution I will suggest is somewhat different than his. Hence, cautiously, Garber remarks:

I should remark here that it is not absolutely clear that Spinoza carefully distinguishes what seems clearly to be a second kind of eternity from the minimal eternity I discussed earlier [...]. But despite the fact that Spinoza himself may not clearly distinguish these two grades of eternity, they really are quite distinct.¹⁴

Garber goes on to stress that all this is “enormously puzzling,” so I will not nitpick about the exact wording of his remarks here. But I do find it both important and possible to spell out a bit more what such a distinction in ‘kind’ can or cannot consist in. Most importantly, I believe we must, once again, try to avoid any Platonizing stratification and grasp the relevant distinction in terms of *aspects*, so that absolute and scalar eternity are two aspects of one and the same eternity and not two different eternities. I will in particular suggest that a distinction between the formal and the objective reality of the mind can prove helpful in achieving that goal.

For this purpose, we will need some basic metaphysical distinctions. Let me briefly return to the definition of eternity and to the ‘explication’ that follows that definition. According to the definition, eternity is “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of an eternal thing.” In the explication, he adds to this that “such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth.” I am interested in how those two passages relate. Why does Spinoza move from speaking about ‘eternal things’ in the definition to speaking about ‘eternal truths’ in the explication? Let us first recall what Spinoza understands by ‘truth.’ He provides no definition but, according to EIA4, “a true idea must agree with its object” and in EIID4 he defines an adequate idea as “an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea.” From those passages, it is clear that, by ‘truth,’ Spinoza understands the relation an adequate idea upholds to its object. In light of this, it seems reasonable enough to suggest that, in the context of EID8 at least,¹⁵ by an ‘eternal truth’ Spinoza understands an idea that represents an eternal object, or that the eternal truth about a thing X is an intellectual representation of what

¹⁴ Garber, “A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less than Death,” p. 107.

¹⁵ Elsewhere, in his correspondence with De Vries (Letters 9 and 10), Spinoza distinguishes, “as everyone generally does,” between eternal truths understood as bearing on singular things and affections, and ‘absolute’ (or abstract) eternal truths that “have no place outside the mind,” such as universal axioms. This distinction, which Spinoza introduces in order to accommodate normal usage, is irrelevant for our discussion here. We can safely assume that the sense in which Spinoza uses the notion ‘eternal truth’ in EID8 is the first one.

is eternally the case about X. My analysis here differs from Moreau's reading in *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*.¹⁶ Moreau stresses that, in EID8Exp, Spinoza does not affirm that the essences of all things *are* eternal, but only that such essences are *conceived as eternal truths*. He goes on to suggest that the essences of things may always be eternal truths without, however, the essences being themselves eternal. I have difficulties accepting the second point. According to EIA6, the truth of an idea consists in the fact that it agrees with its object. Consequently, being conceived as an eternal truth implies being conceived as having an object to agree with, eternally. It could seem, then, that, when Spinoza affirms that essences are conceived as eternal truths, it amounts to affirming also that the essences thus conceived are eternal. On this point, one can also consult a passage in CM where Spinoza explicitly "agree[s] with those who say that the essences of things are eternal" (CM II, i). I thus think that between EID8 and EID8Exp, there is a strict correlation between eternal things and the conception of those things as eternal truths. Hence, it appears that, between EID8 and its explication, Spinoza changes from an ontological register, concerning eternal things to an epistemological one, concerning eternal truths. In the explication, we are no longer dealing in eternal *things*, but in *representations*, that is to say, ideas about eternal things, or eternal truths. I think this double register that Spinoza appeals to when defining eternity in EID8 in terms, on the one hand, of the eternity of things themselves and, on the other, in terms of the eternal truth of the ideas bearing upon them, is crucial for explaining the difference between the two aspects of eternity of the mind that Spinoza later envisages in EV.

6. The Absolute Aspect of Eternity

Let us first consider the absolute eternity of the mind in light of these distinctions. As most commentators agree, correctly I think, it relates to the fact that all things, including the body and the mind that form a man, are endowed with an essence. This essence is eternal. The idea of the essence is an eternal truth. As such, there is nothing scalar about that essence and nothing scalar about the eternity of the truth that is about it. What we have is a fixed and determinate formal essence contained in some divine attribute and, correspondingly, a fixed and determinate idea of that formal essence comprehended in the divine intellect. Now, as we have seen previously, such an essence is conceived as an eternal truth in the divine intellect no matter whether the thing exists or not. This is what I think the sempiternity of the human mind in Spinoza consists in: there is always an idea of all things in God, they are all comprehended in God's idea as Spinoza puts it in EIIP8, including of all human bodies, no matter whether those bodies exist or not. The difficulty consists in separating that constant presence in the divine intellect of the idea of the essence, i.e., the sempiternity of divine ideas, from the absolute eternity of essences. Garber, for

¹⁶ See Moreau, *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*, p. 511-513.

example, appears to me to confound them. Hence, he writes, “as I read Spinoza, my eternal existence is as an idea in God’s infinite intellect; I exist eternally insofar as my individual essence is an eternal object of God’s thought.”¹⁷ Similarly, according to Nadler, “the eternal part of the mind just is the idea of [...] a non-existing material thing.”¹⁸ But I do not see how this can be right, for two reasons.

First, I do not see how we can equate the eternity of the mind with the fact that the ideas of all things remain in the divine intellect. This constant presence is not eternity but sempiternity, or a kind of temporal permanence of ideas which are *always* comprehended in God’s idea, no matter whether the object of the idea *currently* exists or not. Second, Spinoza is adamant about the fact that he does *not* consider divine ideas to be essences. We see this in EIP17S in particular, where Spinoza, by a long argument *ad absurdum*, ferociously opposes making the intellect part of the divine nature, such as we find it in Maimonides, for example.¹⁹ Indeed, by declaring the divine intellect an immediate infinite mode rather than an attribute in EIP31, he is quite clear that, in the order of things, ideas in the divine intellect always come after essences as it were, or that divine ideas are ideas *about* essences the truth of which is grounded in the fact that those essences were there in the first place. Essences are not contained in any intellect, although they are comprehended, i.e., understood, by the intellect. They are contained in the divine *attributes*.

So, in sum, the absolute eternity of the mind cannot be equated with some constant presence of the idea of the body in the divine intellect, because it amounts to explaining eternity through indefinite duration and mistaking the divine intellect for the attribute of thought. It is important to stress, again, what Spinoza himself says in EVP23S, namely that “our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under the aspect of eternity, is eternal, and [...] this

¹⁷ Garber, “A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less than Death,” p. 103. I say ‘appears to’ since I am not quite sure how Garber understands the relation between God’s intellect (the immediate infinite mode of thought which is not a part of the divine essence) and God’s thought (the attribute of thought, which is a part of the divine essence.) Here, they appear to be somewhat conflated.

¹⁸ Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction*, p. 264.

¹⁹ EIP17S has often been misread by commentators in the affirmative. The classic commentary correcting this mistake is Koyré, “Le Chien, constellation céleste, et le chien, animal aboyant,” p. 50-59. A much-needed English translation by O. Marrama, including a helpful introduction, has recently appeared in *The Leibniz Review* 24 (2014), p. 95-108. Other commentators who follow Koyré’s lead are Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu*, p. 272-295, and Alquié, *Le Rationalisme de Spinoza*, p. 152-156. On the reading and misreading of EIP17S since Spinoza’s time, see also Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*, p. 763-779; Lærke, “Leibniz on Spinoza’s *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*,” p. 106-120.

existence it has cannot be defined by time or explained through duration.”²⁰ We must rigorously avoid any association of eternity to temporal categories, avoiding any connotation to some kind of existential permanence. Indeed, eternity can last as long as you want, for a moment or for a long time, it is simply irrelevant to its constitution which is rigorously a-temporal. As Spinoza already writes in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, “noone will ever say that the essence of a circle or a triangle, insofar as it is an eternal truth, has endured longer now than it had at the time of Adam” (CM II, i). But this is an insight that even readings insisting most strongly on the a-temporality of eternity often do not manage to fully incorporate. We see it, for example, when Nadler, after having stressed that eternity is not sempiternity, writes about the mind insofar as it is the idea of the essence of the body, that “this aspect of the mind is eternal. It is, *therefore*, a part of the mind that remains after a person’s death.”²¹ My grievance here, of course, bears on the unfortunate ‘therefore,’ which quite straightforwardly involves an illegitimate inference from eternity to prolonged duration at a crucial point in his account.

So what is eternity, then, if it is not what Nadler suggests? Maybe, in order to understand, instead of insisting on ontological categories, we should turn to modal ones and focus on Spinoza’s assimilation of *eternity* to *necessity*. In the demonstration of EIIP44C2, where Spinoza first introduces the expression ‘*sub specie aeternitatis*,’ he explains:

[...] it is of the nature of reason to regard things as necessary [...]. And it perceives this necessity truly (by P41), i.e., (by IA6), as it is in itself. But (by IP16) this necessity of things is the very necessity of God’s eternal nature. Therefore, it is of the nature of reason to regard things under this aspect of eternity.

²⁰ We encounter here a classic translation problem concerning the expression ‘*sub species aeternitatis*.’ Curley translates the expression as “under a species of eternity,” Shirley as “under a form of eternity.” Curley’s translation lends to the idea that eternity can be conceived as a kind of existence distinct from other kinds of existence. Contrary to this, many French language commentators (Gueroult, Alquié, Levi, Jaquet, Severac, *et al.*) and at least one French standard translation (Pautrat) prefer “*sous l’aspect de l’éternité*,” i.e., “under the aspect of eternity.” I will not here consider which translation is the most accurate from the purely grammatical point of view—as far as I can judge, they are equally possible—but simply point to the fact that the most commonly used English translations may have unduly encouraged Platonizing interpretations by suggesting that eternity should be conceived as a different existence than existence in duration, rather than seeing eternity and duration as two distinct aspects of one and the same existence. I have throughout this text preferred to modify Curley and translate “under the aspect of eternity.”

²¹ Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction*, p. 264; my italics.

This same close connection, or even identity, of eternity and necessity, is also clear from EIVP62D, where Spinoza writes this (please note the revealing use of the conjunction ‘*seu*’):

Whatever the mind conceives under the guidance of reason, it conceives under the same aspect of eternity, or necessity [*aeternitas, seu necessitate species*] (by IIP44C2) and is affected with the same certainty (by IIP43 and P43S). So whether the idea is of a future or a past thing, or of a present one, the mind conceives the thing with the same necessity and is affected with the same certainty.

From these two passages it is clear enough that, for Spinoza, to regard things under the aspect of eternity is nothing but grasping what is necessary about those things. Modally, we should presumably understand such a conception of necessity in opposition to the kind of incomplete conception that Spinoza, in EIVD4, defines as ‘conception as possible.’ In other words, conceiving things under the aspect of eternity amounts to grasping that those things necessarily are what they are and that they cannot be otherwise.

Now, for Spinoza, a thing or individual is what it is, or can be said to be and remain identical to itself, in virtue of what he calls its ‘form.’ This is a notion he, true to his Cartesian heritage, develops in deliberate opposition to the scholastic conception of form in terms of faculties and finality as something that rather relates to the thing’s mechanical or causal properties. Such mechanical properties do not express the nature of things in terms of faculties, potentiality, possibility or finality, that is to say, in terms of what the thing *can* or *should* be, but rather express what a given thing actually *is*. When it comes to bodies, this actual, mechanically defined form is, for Spinoza, described as a characteristic ‘*ratio*’ of motion and rest. Hence, according to some well-known passages in the so-called physical digression (PD) in *Ethics* II, “what constitutes the form of the individual consists in the union of the bodies” (EII.PD.L4) and an individual or one body is composed when a number of bodies “communicate their motions to each other on a certain fixed manner” (EII.PD.D). Spinoza is not particularly clear about what such form consists in when it comes to mental things such as minds, except establishing in EIIP21 that the form of the mind is the idea of the mind, i.e., an idea of an idea. But parallelism, which stipulates that the order and connection of ideas is the same as that of the things they represent, induces us to think that the mental equivalent of bodily ‘*ratio*’ must be some sort of fixed and determinate relation between ideas. But we need not get further entangled here in that particular discussion. All we should note is that the form of the mind constitutes that through which it is necessarily identical to itself and that Spinoza speaks of such necessary self-identity in terms of ‘eternity’ in EIIP44C2. It appears, then, as if Spinoza is telling us that eternity itself does not consist in the fact that something remains the same through time, but in the fact that, at whatever moment or period we choose to consider some thing, it will at that moment or in that period necessarily be what it is in

virtue of its form, in such a way that the eternity of things must be read, not horizontally as identity in time, but vertically as necessary self-identity of form at any given moment, as what the thing *necessarily is now*.²² In this way, the eternity of a thing is nothing but the necessity of the form through which it is conceived as an eternal truth. Its conception is, in a sense, rigorously tautological like when, in EID8, Spinoza defines ‘eternity’ by reference to the definition of an eternal thing: at any given moment, or necessarily now, all things are eternally conceived adequately as what they are in virtue of their form. This form is the internal ‘mechanical’ construction of the mind as a mode, i.e., a characteristic configuration of mental causes constituted within the attribute of thought, which is nothing but the *formal reality* of the mind as a mode. To return to the expression in EVP20S with which we began, this ‘formal reality’ is also what the eternity of the mind amounts to when considered *without* relation to the body. It is also the eternity of the mind that, above, I have qualified as ‘absolute.’ I think this is about as far as I will get. We must now turn to the final question I wanted to address, and try to understand what the eternity of the mind might, then, amount to when it is considered *with* relation to the body, i.e., when we consider the mind from the perspective of its representative content, or *objective reality*.

7. The Scalar Aspect of Eternity

In this final section, I want in particular to point out that the scalar eternity of the mind does not, as Garber tentatively suggested, refer to another ‘kind’ of eternity than the absolute one. I think it refers to exactly the same eternity of the mind as the absolute one, albeit from another perspective. More precisely, I suggest that, whereas the absolute notion of eternity of the mind refers to the formal reality of the mind as a mode of the attribute of thought, i.e., the mind as an eternal formal essence contained in the attribute of thought, the scalar notion of eternity must be understood beginning from the objective reality of the human mind insofar as it is a part of the divine intellect, i.e., the mind as an eternal truth about the body.

In order to gain some clarity about this point, we must first return briefly to the notion of ‘formal essence’ that we found in EIIP8S and that Spinoza uses to designate the objects contained in the divine attributes corresponding to the ideas of non-existent things comprehended in the divine intellect. How should

²² Current necessity, or ‘necessity now,’ is a temporally indexed modal category that Spinoza reserves for modes, as opposed to the necessity proper to substance which requires no such qualification. Hence, modes are necessarily now either existing or non-existing. But *what* they necessarily are now is the same, regardless of whether they currently exist. Spinoza’s use of the modality ‘necessity now’ is complicated and requires a more elaborate analysis than I can provide in this context. See in particular EIP11D2 and PPD I, Lemma 2.

we understand this notion of formal essence? The Platonizing readings that constitute my main opponents in this paper here suggest that we should oppose the formal essences of EIIP8 to the actual essences that Spinoza speaks of elsewhere in his work, in EIIP7, when developing his conception of the *conatus*, or perseverance in existence that he identifies as the ‘actual essence’ of those things. This approach leads to grasping formal essences as a kind of potentialities or even possibilities somehow contained in the divine attributes, waiting to be actualized, thus being brought into real, or actual existence. For example, Garrett writes in a recent article that “the formal essence of a thing constitutes in some way the ‘possibility’ or ‘actualizability’ of that thing.”²³

This reading of the notion of formal essence is, to my mind, mistaken.²⁴ Spinoza fiercely combats the idea that notions of possibility or potentiality, no matter how they are presented or formulated, have any ontological import whatsoever (see EIP29, EIP31S, EIP33S). If those terms have any meaning, it is only epistemologically, as specific ways of ignoring the determining causes of something (EIVD3-4). For Spinoza, things exist or they do not, for determinate reasons or causes (EIP11D2). There is no in between, i.e., no such thing as a non-actual existence distinct from an actual one. It makes no sense to speak of formal essences that are non-actual and yet still exist in some unspecified non-actual sense. Moreover, from the immediate context of Spinoza’s use of the term ‘formal essence’ in EIIP8S, it is quite clear that the relevant dichotomy is not between formal and actual essence, which are terms Spinoza never juxtaposes, but between formal essence and objective being. Hence, in EIIP8C, i.e., immediately after introducing formal essences, Spinoza further explains that “so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God’s infinite idea exists.” Clearly, following the standard Cartesian distinction between the formal and objective reality of things, Spinoza thus speaks of the ‘formal essence’ in order to distinguish the way a thing or mode is formally contained in some attribute from the way in which that same thing is represented objectively in the divine intellect. In short, Spinoza speaks of ‘formal essence’ in order to distinguish the essence itself from the idea of the essence, i.e., its ‘objective being.’

Following this configuration of terms, we should, then, identify the following three notions: First, there is the formal essence of the body, which is a

²³ See Garrett, “Spinoza’s Theory of *Scientia Intuitiva*,” p. 104. See also Garrett, “Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal,” p. 284-302.

²⁴ See Lærke, “Aspects of Spinoza’s Theory of Essence. Formal Essence, Non-existence and Two Types of Actuality,” [forthcoming].

mode of the attribute of extension. Next, there is the formal essence of the mind, which is a mode of the attribute of thought. Finally, there is the objective being of the body, or idea, which is an idea comprehended in the divine intellect. This idea is, as we know, nothing but the mind itself (EIIP11C; EIIP13). Hence, the mind has two distinct aspects. On the one hand, formally, the mind *is* something, i.e., a mode contained in the attribute of thought; on the other hand, objectively, the mind is *of* something, i.e., namely the idea of the body comprehended in the divine intellect.

The formal essence of the mind is absolutely eternal, just like the formal essence of the corresponding body in the attribute of extension is absolutely eternal. This eternity of the mind and the body is to be understood, as argued above, in terms of the necessary self-identity of their forms. However, to the extent that the human mind is a part of the divine intellect and contains an objective reality, it is also a representation of the body. When considered from this angle, the human mind is not a form given within the attribute of thought, but an idea of the human body given in the intellect of God. That idea, insofar as it is considered as a part of the intellect of God, is an eternal truth because it is an idea of an eternal thing. And there is nothing scalar about it to the extent that it pertains to God. God's idea of any human body is an eternal truth that is just as absolutely eternal as is the form of the body of which it is the idea. Moreover, it is an idea or eternal truth that is sempiternally comprehended in the divine intellect, no matter whether the corresponding body exists or not. However, if we consider the human mind in itself, apart from the infinite divine intellect of which it is a part, i.e., consider it as a finite intellect, things present themselves differently. In this case, the mind can represent its own object, the body, in two distinct ways. How? Spinoza writes in EVP29S:

We conceive [*à nobis ... concipiuntur*] things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or [*vel*] insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under the aspect of eternity [*sub species aeternitatis*], and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God.

As we have seen above, while discussing the difference between the sempiternity and the eternity of the mind, all things have these two distinct aspects, existential and essential: all those things whose essence does not include existence, i.e., all modes (EIP24), have an existential aspect that is read horizontally in duration and time: either they actually exist or they actually do not exist, where 'actually' should be understood in the sense of 'currently.' Any conceivable mode either currently exists or does not exist. These same modes, however, also have an essential aspect that is read vertically, that is to say, according to the necessity of the form. Spinoza maintains that this aspect is

also actual.²⁵ The actuality of the form, however, is not ‘actuality’ in the sense of ‘currently.’ It is rather ‘actuality’ as opposed to ‘potentiality’ or ‘possibility.’ The actuality of form is the necessity of that form, as opposed to the scholastic conception of form as some potentiality or possibility, or some finality aimed at. In sum, ‘actuality of *existence*’ equals ‘current existence,’ or ‘existing now’; the ‘actuality of *essence*,’ on the contrary, equals the ‘necessity of form,’ or the fact that things necessarily are what they currently are. Conceiving things in this latter, essential sense is also, as we have already seen in relation to EIIP44C2, what things are ‘under the aspect of eternity.’

Now, what we further learn in EVP29S is that not only do things *have* these aspects but that those aspects correspond to two ways of *conceiving* them, i.e., *duobis modis à nobis concipiuntur*. Hence, we are no longer just considering what duration and eternity *are*, formally, in the attributes, but how duration and eternity are *conceived*, objectively, in the intellect. And the question is how this distinction plays out when the thing under consideration is ourselves, that is to say, when we apply this distinction to the way in which the mind conceives its own object, the body. I will not spell out here the way the epistemology works in detail but the point Spinoza is getting at is, of course, that, when our mind grasps its object, i.e., the body, according to the so-called ‘first kind of cognition,’ grounded in imagination, we conceive ourselves under the aspect of duration, as durational. This is because the imagination is cognition based on the imaginations of things that represent bodies to our mind as present, that is to say, as currently or actually existing (see EIIP17S and EIIP40S1). When, however, we conceive ourselves adequately by the second or third kind of cognition, i.e., reason or intuition (EIIP40S1), we rather conceive ourselves under the aspect of eternity, as eternal (cf. Letter 12). For, as Spinoza already established in EIIP44C2, “it is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain aspect of eternity.” For this reason, Spinoza writes in EVP29D, when the mind conceives itself adequately, it “pertains to the nature of the mind to conceive the body’s essence under a species of eternity.”

It is, however, sometimes the case that we grasp ourselves in one way, and sometimes the case that we grasp ourselves in the other. Sometimes we are in the grip of the passions, when we fear and hope, hate and love, according to the way in which our encounters with other things affect our abilities to conserve our existence in duration. Here, our cognition of ourselves remains governed

²⁵ One might not be entirely unjustified in criticizing Spinoza for some deductive clumsiness on this point when, towards the end of his work, he in this way introduces a distinction within ‘actuality,’ a notion he has used dozens of times in previous parts without ever indicating in which sense. It might have been better had he coined two distinct terms for each of those meanings from the outset! This flaw does, however, not in itself affect the exactitude of the demonstration, although it does lend (and has lent) to misunderstanding.

by the imagination, by our experience of our present selves or the recollection of our former selves. It is under this aspect that we conceive, imaginatively, that kind of perpetuation of the self along with all its experiences and recollections the indefinite prolongation of which religion and the ‘common opinion of men’ traditionally associates with the immortality of the soul (EVP34S). Sometimes, on the contrary, we manage to contemplate ourselves as what we necessarily are now, that is to say, the essential actuality of ourselves that is nothing but the eternity or necessity of our forms. When we do that, we do nothing but understand ourselves exactly as God understands us, or rather, quite literally, our understanding of ourselves just *is* God’s understanding of us, insofar as our intellect is a part of the divine intellect (EVP40S). And the relative proportion between these two ways of conceiving ourselves, imaginary and intellectual, determines whether it is the greater or the smaller part of mind that is eternal, according to the scalar notion of the eternity of the mind (EVP40C). But, as it should be clear, this scalar conception of the eternity of the mind pertains only to the mind’s *objective reality*, the way in which it is constituted as a representation of the body, i.e., as a representation of its existence or of its essence.

Hence, the distinction between the formal and the objective can help get a better grip on the difference between the absolute and scalar eternity of the mind. It can be summarized it as follows: from the point of view of its formal reality, or what it is in itself without relation to the body, the human mind is absolutely eternal in virtue of the necessity of *its own* formal essence. However, from the point of view of the objective being it contains, with respect to what it comprehends or represents, the human mind is only eternal to the extent that it expresses the eternal truth about its own object, that is to say, the formal essence of the *body*, or the essential actuality of its form. To the extent, however, that it expresses the durational aspect of the body, i.e., the actuality of its existence, it does not express an eternal truth. Thus, as Spinoza himself sums up the difference in EVP29: “Whatever the mind understands under the aspect of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the body’s present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the body’s essence under the aspect of eternity.”

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