

Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present

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“It remains now to investigate the doubtful idea—i.e., to ask what are the things that can lead us into doubt, and at the same time, how doubt is removed. I am speaking of true doubt in the mind, and not of what we commonly see happen, when someone says in words that he doubts, although his mind does not doubt. For it is not the business of the Method to emend that. That belongs rather to the investigation of stubbornness, and its emendation.”

(Spinoza, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect §77)

1. Introduction

The skeptic is one of Spinoza’s favorite targets of abuse. Whatever truth Spinoza might manage to discover, he complains, “some skeptic would still doubt it.” “There is no speaking of the sciences” with skeptics; instead, “they must be regarded as automata, completely lacking a mind” (TIE 41).¹ But Spinoza contrasts such mindless obscurantists, “who ha[ve] no other end than doubting,” with Descartes, who wielded skepticism instead “to free his mind from all prejudices, so that in the end he might discover firm and unshakable foundations of the sciences” (TIE 41). And Spinoza begins his geometrical reconstruction of Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy with an approving exposition of that “great man’s” methodological skepticism and its response, arguing that we can attain certainty only once we have a clear and distinct idea of the essence of God.

But this agreement turns out to be superficial, because Spinoza and Descartes have deeply different stories about how the idea of God grounds certainty. I outline this story in Section 2, focusing on Spinoza’s early work, where I argue that he responds to the Cartesian

skeptic by denying the very distinction between true ideas and ideas that are clearly and distinctly perceived. However, Spinoza's characterization of truth in the Ethics as agreement of an idea with its object complicates matters, leaving it unclear whether Spinoza has responded in a way that would satisfy a Cartesian skeptic. In Section 3, I discuss Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge, or cognition. I argue that Spinoza's answer to skepticism vindicates only one special kind of knowledge and that he ultimately denies that empirical, mathematical, moral, and revelatory knowledge of nature are possible. In Section 4, I conclude by showing that, according to Spinoza, Descartes salvages knowledge from the Cartesian skeptic only by reducing all natural knowledge to revelation.

2. Certainty

In the Prolegomenon to his Principles of Cartesian Philosophy, Spinoza provides an account of Descartes's deployment of and response to methodological skepticism. Superficially, it is a faithful account: we can have some certain beliefs if, and only if, we cultivate a clear and distinct idea of God. But the demon is in the details.

Spinoza starts by asking: while meditating with Descartes, why can we be certain of our own existence despite the possibility that God is a deceiver, but we cannot be certain, for example, that the angles of a triangle add to 180 degrees? In the former case, he answers:

wherever we turned our attention—whether we were considering our own nature, or feigning some cunning deceiver as the author of our nature, or summoning up, outside us, any other reason for doubting whatever—we came upon no reason for doubting that did not by itself convince us of our existence. (C 237)

When entertaining the proposition that each of us exists (call this proposition “cogito”), no other idea furnishes us with a reason to doubt it, including the idea that God is a deceiver. Not so when we entertain the proposition that the three angles of a triangle sum to two right angles (call this “triangle”). Instead, while we are “compelled to infer” triangle when we attend to the nature of a triangle,

we cannot infer the same thing from [the supposition] that perhaps we are deceived by the author of our nature... So here we are not compelled, wherever we direct our attention, to infer that the three angles of a Triangle are equal to two right angles. On the contrary, we discover a ground for doubting, viz. because we have no idea of God which so affects us that it is impossible for us to think that God is a deceiver. (C 237)

We can render mathematical truths like triangle certain by cultivating a clear and distinct idea of God:

When we have formed such an idea, that reason for doubting Mathematical truths will be removed. Wherever we then direct our attention in order to doubt some one of them, we shall come upon nothing from which we must not instead infer that it is most certain—as happened concerning our existence. (C 237)

These passages suggest that, according to Spinoza, S’s belief that p is certain if and only if all three of the following are true:

- (a) p is a “mathematical truth.” A “mathematical truth” in the PPC seems to be a truth that we are “compelled to infer” from a clear and distinct idea, and not necessarily one that concerns mathematics (C 238).
- (b) S cannot discover a “ground for doubting” p . According to Spinoza, a “ground for doubting” p is an idea from which a doubt that p can be inferred—so ultimately we will want to know: what is a doubt that p , for Spinoza?
- (c) S can infer p (or, S can “infer that p is most certain” (C 237)) from every other idea that S can attend to.

Spinoza claims that these criteria are satisfied for mathematical truths like triangle if and only if we have a clear and distinct (“C&D”) idea of God’s essence, and in particular of God’s veracity (C 237). What is his justification for this? Let’s focus on (b) and first consider how Descartes guarantees it through God’s veracity. Once I have the C&D idea of God’s essence, I can conclude that God exists and that God lacks the will to deceive. That means that God has actually created me, and has created me with faculties that would not ineluctably cause me to believe what I shouldn’t.

This argument is in no way open to Spinoza, and he does not make it. Spinoza denies that we have faculties at all (E Iip42), and he denies that God has a will whose quality can be evaluated (E Ip37). So he cannot rely on God’s veracity being actualized in God’s well-intentioned creation of our faculties to get us from the C&D idea of God’s essence to the claim that we cannot generate any doubts about triangle. Indeed, in the PPC, Spinoza takes pains to stress that I can be certain of triangle before I know that my author is not a deceiver—indeed,

before I know that God exists. All that is required for my ideas of mathematical truths to be certain is that I have a C&D idea of God's essence.

Descartes's claim that once I have this idea, I can become sure that I will never generate a doubt of any C&D idea, p , required first showing that I should believe that p , since a non-deceiving God created me. That is what guarantees not just that I cannot currently generate any reasons to doubt that p from my unclear and indistinct ideas but that it is impossible for me ever to generate a reason to doubt that p , if p is C&D. It is the epistemic status that, for Descartes, guarantees that certain ideas are doubt-proof—their being doubt-proof does not confer epistemic status.

Given that Spinoza does not rely on God's guarantee and the epistemic status it provides to achieve (b), there are two questions to answer:

(A) How does Spinoza think that we can proceed from the C&D idea of God's essence to Spinozistic certainty? After developing the C&D idea of God's essence, it seems like I can still come to doubt triangle on some other grounds—say, some fuzzy recollection that there are non-Euclidean geometries. According to the Prolegomenon, having any ideas that are not clear and distinct should place me in perpetual peril of doubt, since there is no telling what doubts I can infer from them—not to mention that I have ideas—even, it seems, clear and distinct ones—from which I cannot infer triangle.

(B) Even if Spinoza can establish Spinozistic certainty of triangle, has he established that he should believe it, or that it is true?

Spinoza appears to provide an answer to (A) in the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (TIE), where he explains that the C&D idea of God's essence ensures that our ideas are indubitable if they are deduced in the proper order from God's essence, which is "the origin of all things":

...if someone proceeds rightly, by investigating [first] those things which ought to be investigated first, with no interruption in the connection of things ... he will never have anything but the most certain ideas. (TIE 80, see also TIE 44)

Since "true knowledge proceeds from cause to effect" (TIE 85), if I begin with a C&D idea of God's essence, carefully deduce what follows from it in the proper order, and populate my mind only with the resultant ideas, I will never generate a ground for doubting that I know any of those ideas. This is clearly impossible for a finite mind, which will always have unclear and indistinct ideas (see, e.g., E IIIp1d, E IVp4, TIE 44). But Spinoza seems to think that we can approximate it and that we can in some sense "insulate" this God-derived chain or network of clear and distinct ideas from the rest of our minds and, to that extent, make those ideas immune to doubt. In this picture, God's essence guarantees that I have certain ideas in virtue of God's being the cause and origin of all things, and not in virtue of God's being the cause of my cognitive and epistemic faculties.

On the TIE account, then, it looks like knowledge of God's essence guarantees the Spinozistic certainty of our ideas of mathematical truths only if those ideas are deduced in the right way from the clear and distinct idea of God's essence. This explains the third, seemingly unattainable, criterion that a certain idea must be deducible from every idea in the mind. Spinoza

seems to assume the further point that, if every one of a person's ideas were certain, each certain idea would be deductively connected with every other. I have not found a place where Spinoza asserts anything that strictly entails this, so I can only offer: it sounds exactly like something Spinoza would say.

In fact, I think that this third criterion is sufficient for certainty, according to Spinoza, if we add that we also have the C&D idea of God (which Spinoza, at E Iip47, claims we do). There are a few reasons to think this. It makes sense of the claim in the TIE that "if there should be only one idea in the soul ... whether it is true or false, there will be neither doubt nor certainty, but only a sensation of a certain sort" (TIE 77). Certainty is not simply absence of doubt but essentially concerns the relationship of an idea with other ideas in the mind. Furthermore, Spinoza himself defines doubt in terms of certainty. At TIE 78 Spinoza writes that "doubt will arise though another idea which is not so clear and distinct that we can infer from it something certain about the thing concerning which there is doubt." Finally, Spinoza writes that "by certainty we understand something positive, not the privation of doubt" (E Iip49). This gives us an alternative characterization of doubt: I doubt that p if I have any idea from which I fail to "infer from it something certain" about p . Although Spinoza tries to retain Cartesian language in the PPC by suggesting that the possibility of God's deception furnishes a reason to doubt triangle, it is clear that he is really concerned there with whether or not we can "infer that [triangle] is most certain" (C 237).

This is an absurdly high standard, but certainty, for Spinoza, is a matter of degree. The more C&D ideas we have deduced from God's essence, from which we can deduce the idea in question, and the fewer unclear and indistinct ideas we have that we cannot connect up with it,

the more certain the idea. The perfectly certain idea, which can be deduced from every idea in the mind, is to be found only in God's intellect.

Now the Cartesian skeptic can still ask whether our C&D ideas are true, or whether we are justified in believing them, starting with the C&D idea of God. Or as Spinoza gripes, "...perhaps ... some Skeptic would still doubt both the first truth itself and everything we shall deduce according to the standard of the first truth" (TIE 47). Spinoza responds that this person "speaks contrary to his own consciousness" and his mind is "completely blinded" (TIE 48). Doubt must always have another idea as a reason or a cause (TIE 78). To have an idea is just to (pro tanto) believe or affirm that idea, because ideas essentially involve affirmation (E IIp49), although other ideas in the mind may undermine that affirmation. If there are no ideas in the mind other than the C&D idea of God and those deduced from it, the skeptic has nothing that could generate a doubt, and is just "saying in words" that he doubts.

But this is still only a psychological diagnosis of the skeptic. Very well: being certain in the Spinozistic sense entails that someone is unable to doubt her ideas. But can it ensure that she is justified in believing them, or that they are true?

Recall that, on the account of certainty that we have provided for Spinoza, that an idea is certain entails, among other things, that it is C&D. Spinoza stresses in the PPC that we can form a C&D idea of God's essence before we know whether our author is a deceiver—a point that Descartes also clearly accepts. What does it mean to perceive something clearly and distinctly? In the case of Cartesian immutable natures, it entails that the properties that I C&Dly perceive to belong to that essence really do belong to that essence. As Descartes puts it: "the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it" (CSM II 91).² In the same

place, Descartes claims that it is this sort of understanding that he has of the truths of mathematics.

But then what, exactly, are we doubting when we doubt whether triangle is true? It cannot be that triangle in fact follows from the essence of a triangle—the truth of this is just exhausted by the fact that the truth of triangle can be clearly and distinctly perceived to belong to the essence of a triangle. It is not clear that Descartes can give any sense to the claim that he doubts the truth of triangle, once he grants that he C&Dly perceives the essence of a triangle and C&Dly perceives that triangle belongs to it. Descartes tries to drive a wedge between the assertion that triangle belongs to the nature of a triangle and the assertion that triangle can be truly affirmed of a triangle in the Second Replies (CSM 106) where he distinguishes between the following claims:

1. “That which we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can be truly asserted to belong to its nature,” which claim Descartes deems “tautological,” and
2. “That which we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can truly be affirmed of that thing,” which he seems to think is more substantive.

But Descartes’s own Definition IX in the Second Replies (CSM II 74) comes close to an admission that (1) and (2) are equivalent: “When we say that something is contained in the nature of the concept of a thing, this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing [my emphasis].”³ Descartes can try to rely on a distinction between asserting something of a thing and affirming something of a thing, but I do not see what sort of distinction he has in mind.

Spinoza clearly believes that Descartes cannot maintain this distinction. All that the truth of triangle consists in is that it follows from the essence of a triangle. Spinoza applies this concept of truth even to essences that do not seem to be simple or immutable natures in the Cartesian sense:

...if some architect conceives a building in an orderly fashion, then although such a building never existed, and even never will exist, still the thought of it is true, and the thought is the same, whether the building exists or not. (TIE 69)

This is Spinoza's point when he insists in the PPC that I can form a C&D idea of God's essence and deduce ideas from it, even before I know that I am not authored by a deceiver: truth does not depend on a well-intentioned creator matching up my ideas with the world. In these passages, an idea is true if it does in fact follow from a given possible essence. Sometimes it sounds like this may be a finite essence: in the case of the architect's blueprint, Spinoza seems to suggest that "the architect's building has a spiral staircase" is true if and only if it is in fact a feature of that blueprint. Other times, as in Spinoza's discussion of certainty above, it sounds like this could be true only if the architect's blueprint itself was deduced in the right way from God's essence—the cause and origin of nature.

It might look like, while this gets us an (ideally) perfectly coherent network of ideas, we have not established that anything outside of these ideas, including God, actually exists.⁴ But Spinoza thinks that existence claims, like claims about essences, also follow from God's essence (E Ip25) and are independent of truths about essences (e.g., E IIp8s). It is not clear how truths about which things exist and in what order follow from God's essence, by Spinoza's lights, and

Spinoza apparently thinks that we shouldn't even bother trying to deduce the series of finite existences from God's essence, since we are in no position to know it (e.g., Ep. 32). But at least in principle it can be so deduced.⁵

However, Spinoza also articulates a different conception of truth than this one, on which *p* is true, not if it can be clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from a given essence, but if it corresponds to its object. In the Ethics, it is axiomatic that "a true idea must agree with its object" (E Ia6), which axiom serves as the very definition of truth at Short Treatise II 15. How could this agreement be guaranteed by certainty, on the account of certainty we attributed to Spinoza?

In the Ethics, Spinoza replaces talk of clarity and distinctness with talk of adequacy, using them interchangeably in some places (E Iip36, 38). Like clarity and distinctness, it is an "intrinsic denomination"; an adequate idea

insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object [objectum], has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea ... I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, viz. the agreement of the idea with its object. (E IId4)

It seemed like Spinoza had managed to rid himself of his dreaded skeptic by denying him the required distinction between truth and what is clearly and distinctly perceived of an essence. But now Spinoza has asked for it. How do you know that what has the intrinsic denominations of adequacy has the extrinsic denominations of agreement with an object?

Spinoza asks this question at E Iip43: "how can a man know that he has an idea that agrees with its object?" "He who has a true idea," Spinoza answers, "at the same time knows that

he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing.” The proof claims that if the human mind has an adequate idea of X, then there also is an adequate idea of the idea of X in that mind, concluding:

And so he who has an adequate idea, or (by P34) who knows a thing truly, must at the same time have an adequate idea, or true knowledge, of his own knowledge. I.e. (as is manifest through itself), he must at the same time be certain, q.e.d.

Spinoza’s proof that true ideas carry certainty moves from a mind’s having an adequate idea of X to its “knowing a thing truly,” which is justified by E IIp34: “Every idea that in us is absolute, or adequate and perfect, is true.”⁶ However, the proof’s reliance on IIp32, which in turn appeals to IIp7c, suggests that the sense of “agreement” that is being established between an idea and its object is not, prima facie, the kind of agreement with which the skeptic is concerned. It is instead the agreement of a mode of thought with its parallel mode, and while adequate ideas do agree with their objects in this sense, so do all ideas. But this is not what we want to know: to use Spinoza’s example, when we ask whether Peter’s idea of Paul is true, we want to know whether it agrees with what it represents—Paul—and not whether it agrees with its parallel object in God, which is some state of Peter’s body.

This correspondence account of truth seems to be in tension with the account of truth in at least parts of the TIE; in addition to the passages above, in the TIE 69–71, Spinoza claims that “the form of the true thought must be placed in the same thought itself without relation to other things.” Spinoza means something different by “truth” here than he does in the Ethics, where he separates the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of an idea from one another. Spinoza goes on to

articulate his epistemology almost exclusively in terms of adequacy and not truth. There are a number of excellent works that treat Spinoza's account of truth and adequacy in greater depth.⁷ But as long as he maintains a distinction between truth and adequacy, Spinoza's response to the skeptic in Iip34 will strike her as a dodge and not a response, since it does not relate the intrinsic properties of the idea, like adequacy, to agreement with its object.

3. Knowledge

Skepticism is usually formulated as a question about the possibility of knowledge, but we have not really talked about knowledge so far. Actually, Spinoza uses the word cognitio, which is the word translated by “knowledge,” in contexts that involve very different types of cognitive contents and in contexts that do not involve truth or even adequacy. There seem to be no special constraints on what counts as cognitio besides having an idea (in Iip20, for example, Spinoza refers several times to “an idea, or knowledge [sive cognitio]”). Spinoza does not have a concept that plays the role of Descartes's knowledge or of our knowledge—something that requires, say, belief, truth, evidence, or certainty. Not only does cognitio signify a variety of kinds of perceptions or conceptions with varying degrees of adequacy, but no more is required for cognitio than having an idea. The only reason anyone would doubt this, Spinoza continues in Iip43s, is if they conceived of an idea “as something mute, like a picture on a tablet,” so that it would be possible to be in possession of a true idea without believing it. As we have seen, Spinoza denies that this is possible.

Rather than a single distinction between what counts as knowledge and what fails to qualify, Spinoza proposes a hierarchy of kinds of cognitio. Our highest epistemic goal is to know the essences of particular things in nature, or to “reproduce the formal character of nature, both

as to the whole and as to the parts” (TIE 91). There is only one kind of cognition that serves this goal: the kind that deduces the essence of a thing from the essence of its cause, and ultimately from the “source and origin of nature,” or God. It is about this kind of knowledge that it is fair to call Spinoza anti-skeptical. But Spinoza admits that he knows very little in this way (TIE 20). While every person does have adequate knowledge of God’s essence (E IIp47), it is difficult to see how we can get from that to knowledge either of the laws of nature or of the essences of particular things.

Most cognitio is though experientia vaga, or “experience that is not determined by the intellect” (TIE 20), which includes all the ideas acquired through the senses, or what Spinoza calls imagination. But this cognition cannot give us adequate knowledge of nature “as it is in itself” (TIE 9) and never involves certainty (TIE 26). There is a kind of cognition in between these two, that according to the Ethics gives us adequate knowledge of the properties of things in general but not of the essences of particular things. However, the most natural reconstruction of Spinoza’s account of their adequacy seems to entail that they are a kind of accidentally adequate imaginative knowledge. We think that we are perceiving the properties of external bodies, while we are actually perceiving a combination of properties of our own bodies and the ones that are affecting us. Usually this would make those ideas inadequate, but since those properties happen to be the same in certain cases, we perceive them adequately. This would seem to be precisely the kind of case where skeptical worries would arise—sometimes those ideas are adequate, and sometimes they are not, but how can we be sure which one is which? In fact, in the earlier TIE, Spinoza writes that only intuition “comprehends the adequate essence of the thing and is without danger of error” (TIE 29). So, at least early Spinoza would have denied that we know these common properties with certainty.

Given Spinoza's accounts of truth, certainty, and belief, it is difficult to evaluate Spinoza as a skeptic or an anti-skeptic in those terms. But if we redefine skepticism in Spinozistic terms, we find that Spinoza counts as skeptical about a variety of kinds of possible knowledge: those are the areas of inquiry in which we are not able, for Spinoza, to form adequate ideas. The reason is not that we cannot have certainty in these realms, or that our ideas of their subject-matters are fallible. Rather, in all of these cases, Spinoza argues that there are systematic reasons why the ideas that are formed are inadequate. In this way, Spinoza denies that we can possibly have knowledge of nature of the following kinds: revealed, moral, applied mathematical, and empirical.

If we understand scientific knowledge as empirical or mathematical knowledge of nature, then Spinoza seems to be a skeptic about scientific knowledge, belying the widely-accepted story, as expressed by Popkin, that "if Spinoza was an irreligious sceptic, he was most un- or anti-sceptical in the areas of scientific and philosophical knowledge" (Popkin 2003: 246). Any cognition from sense experience counts as the first—inadequate—kind of knowledge, even the most carefully controlled experiments. In his exchange with Oldenburg about Robert Boyle's experiments with niter, Spinoza argues that whatever properties of matter an experiment might make manifest to the senses, we can never know the deeper causes at play (Ep. 13). "The way in which things are really ordered and interconnected," Spinoza admits, "is quite unknown to us" (TTP II 58). While experiments can usefully catalog the sensible properties of physical objects, such a catalog is of Nature "as it is related to the human senses" and not "as it is in itself" (Ep. 6).

What about mathematical physics? Spinoza does not doubt the adequacy of mathematical claims, and he identifies mathematics as a model on which all inquiry should be based (E I app).

But he straightforwardly denies that applied mathematics provides us with knowledge of nature. Treating bodies in terms of their geometrical properties, Spinoza claims, involves abstraction, and abstractions do not describe “real and physical beings” (Ep. 12). Abstraction by its nature leads to confusion, since it elides particular differences, and all that exist are particulars (TIE 75–76, 93, 99). While Descartes makes a similar critique of abstraction, unlike Spinoza, he claims that our perception of bodies in terms of their geometrical properties involves a “clear and distinct intellectual operation” (First Set of Replies, CSM II 84). Spinoza makes his critique of applied mathematics explicit in his “letter on the infinite” (Ep. 12) and in E Ip15s, where he argues that “Measure, Time, and Number” are “only aids of the Imagination.” What is organized by measure, time, and number, however, are dimensionality, duration, and classes, so these latter, the passages suggest, are themselves generated by the imagination and thus do not represent nature as it is in itself.

So much for the limits of natural knowledge in its sphere. Spinoza also denies that we can have natural knowledge of moral and religious truths. In the Ethics, Spinoza writes that good and evil, praise and blame, and sin and merit, understood as absolute, are “nothing but modes of imagining” that “do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination” (E I app). It is possible to make sense, for Spinoza, of something’s being beneficial for another thing if it contributes to an increase in its power, but what contributes to the power of one finite thing detracts from the power of another. In fact, Spinoza identifies the reification of these beings of imagination as itself a cause of skepticism in the Appendix to the Ethics Part I, since what “seems good to one” turns out to be bad for another.

Spinoza proposes defining revelation as “the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man” (TTP 1). However, “all that we clearly and distinctly understand is dictated to us by

the idea and nature of God,” according to Spinoza, so if by “revelation” we mean certain knowledge that comes from God, then all knowledge, including all natural knowledge, counts as revelation. “[F]or the knowledge that we acquire by the natural light of reason depends solely on knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees” (TTP 1).

Prophecy and scripture, however, are divine in a different way. The prophet interprets revelation for those who cannot achieve certain natural knowledge of nature and must rely on faith instead to guide their lives toward beatitude. The goal of prophecy, then, is obedience and not genuine knowledge. This is achieved through the prophets, who are not individuals with more powerful rational insight, but with “more lively imaginative faculties.” An examination of scripture, Spinoza says, reveals that “everything that God revealed to the prophets was revealed either by words, or by appearances, or by a combination of both” (TTP 1). We saw above that imagination does not yield adequate knowledge, but Spinoza confirms in the TTP that “imagination by itself, unlike every clear and distinct idea, does not of its own nature carry certainty with it” (TTP 2). For this reason, those who rely on prophecy must demand a sign in order to be certain of what is revealed in prophecy. Miracles, also, provide us with no understanding of nature or of God: the power of God and the power of nature are identical, so an event that cannot be explained through natural causes cannot be explained at all, and so cannot provide us with any kind of knowledge (TTP 6).

Insofar as there is any true knowledge in scripture, according to Spinoza, it must also be natural knowledge. Those teachings of scripture that are not have “nothing to do with philosophy” (Preface, TTP), and they do not represent “the sort of knowledge that derives from the natural light of reason.” The goal of scripture is to convey, with moral certainty, the “simple conception of the divine mind” that teaches obedience to God, justice, and charity. Such

cognition is “completely distinct from natural knowledge in its purpose, its basis, and its method,” such that “these two have nothing in common.”

4. Conclusion

As we saw in the last section, prophecy does not carry certainty with it, but, unlike natural knowledge, it requires a sign. Prophecy and natural knowledge share in common that they, like any knowledge, are “dictated to us, as it were, by God’s nature” (TTP 1). But all of our clear and distinct ideas, for Spinoza, are “dictated to us by the idea and nature of God—not indeed in words, but in a far superior way and one that agrees excellently with the nature of mind, as everyone who has tasted intellectual certainty has doubtless experienced in his own case” (TTP 1). That revelation requires a sign rather than carrying certainty with it makes it inferior to natural knowledge, according to Spinoza (TTP 3). Similarly, in the TIE, Spinoza stresses that the “true method does not consist in seeking the signs of truth after the acquisition of the idea ... the truth needs no sign” (TIE 61).

Let us return to Spinoza’s account of Descartes’s response to the skeptical scenario. Spinoza, like Descartes, sees some kind of knowledge of God as part of the guarantee of knowledge that the demand for certainty represents. But according to Spinoza, this is knowledge of God’s essence, not of God’s existence and veracity. We saw that Spinoza appreciated Descartes’s foundational project when it was understood as an attempt to examine all of our ideas in order to clarify them, so that they either lost their power or furnished evidence for rather than against the doubted belief. But Spinoza rejected the idea that we must know our origin in order to know that our beliefs are not caused in a way that leads us into error.

Now, this is not to say that Spinoza is not concerned with the causal origin of our ideas. Like for Descartes, in order for ideas to be true, they must be caused in the right way. God's essence grounds our knowledge because knowledge of an effect, for Spinoza, is grounded in knowledge of its cause (E Iax4). Since God's essence is the cause of everything in nature, "all our conceptions involve God's nature and are conceived through God's nature, thus we can accept finally, that everything that we adequately conceive is true" (TIE 63). Moreover, according to Spinoza, our true ideas involve or express that cause: "nothing can be conceived without God" and "everything in Nature involves and expresses the conception of God in proportion to its essence and perfection; and therefore we acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural phenomena" (TTP 6). This suggests that just by attending to a true idea, the knowledge of its cause, God, is evident, and this is a mark of its truth.

For Descartes, to treat the origin of our faculties as dependent on the will of God independently of their place in nature is, according to Spinoza, to treat them as miracles and to treat the idea of God as a sign. God's goodness acts as a guarantee of the agreement of the idea with its object, but without making any clearer the nature of truth. This is illustrated by the fact that for Descartes to prove that our clear and distinct ideas are true because God guarantees their veracity does not at all require that we characterize or understand the nature of truth. All that is important for that proof is that God would not allow that our clear and distinct ideas were false, whatever truth or falsity might be. According to Spinoza, this turns all natural knowledge into revelation—an inferior kind of knowledge. Spinoza takes his response to make the nature of truth plain, and to relate it necessarily to God's essence.

Spinoza adopts the Cartesian skeptical method, if by that we understand that he appreciates that we must have knowledge of God to have knowledge of anything. But we also require knowledge of God to understand the nature of truth. Being able to be derived from God's essence just is their truth, for Spinoza. He is an anti-skeptic insofar as we can do that. But since we know very little in this way, he is a skeptic about many types of knowledge claims.

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¹ I use the following abbreviations for Spinoza's works: E = Ethics, where p = proposition, d = demonstration, def = definitions, c = corollary, a = axiom, app = appendix, l = lemma; KV = Short

Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being; TIE = Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect; TTP = Theologico-Political Treatise; CM = Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts; Ep. = Epistle. For quotations from the Principles of Cartesian Philosophy (PPC), I provide the page number from Curley (1985): e.g., “C 237”. All quotations are from Curley (1985). I am very grateful to Baron Reed for his insightful comments on this paper and for enlightening conversation.

² He mentions the fact that he has shown God’s veracity, but seems to go on to suggest that their certainty predates this—equivocating, I believe between psychological and normative certainty.

³ And see also the Seventh Replies (CSM II 310): “No matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, without being true.”

⁴ Della Rocca (2007) argues that Spinoza resists skepticism by identifying the truth of an idea, its intelligibility, and the existence of what it represents. I think that the account of truth and certainty I have described so far dovetails nicely with his and is inspired by many of the same considerations. However, as I go on to suggest, I do not think this can be the full story, since Spinoza seems elsewhere to suggest that there is a distinction between the intelligibility of a thing’s essence and its existence.

⁵ Note that all this can be done without appealing to any experience of the cogito or anything else that actually exists. But Spinoza does allow that we have an immediate knowledge of at least one finite existence—each of us has immediate knowledge of the existence of her own mind and body (E Iip2 and 4). As Perler (forthcoming) argues, this precludes skepticism about the existence of the physical world, and also the external physical world, because we “feel [our] body to be affected in many ways” (E Iip4). Perler convincingly argues that we can develop these ideas that we get in this way about the things that actually affect us, connecting them up to some extent with the C&D ideas that we deduce from the essence of God. Given that these ideas are infinitely confused, while they give us knowledge that things exist, it is hard to know how to connect this knowledge of particular existences up with the knowledge from essences that we get by deducing ideas from the clear and distinct idea of God’s essence. I see E Iip4 as Spinoza’s explanation of how we have anything approaching knowledge of finite existences in our

local environment, given that there is no chance that we could deduce them from God's essence, rather than as a response to the skeptic.

⁶ Not to mention that Spinoza seems to be offering a new account of certainty here—one that requires having an idea of an idea.

⁷ See, for example, Curley (1975) and Della Rocca (1994).