



# Spinoza and the Possibility of Adequate Ideas

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Adequate ideas are the fundamental element of Spinoza's epistemological program. However, a recurrent worry among scholars is that Spinoza's account of adequate ideas is inconsistent with any finite being ever having one. As I frame it, the problem is that for Spinoza an idea is adequate in a mind only if all its causal antecedents lie within the mind as well. However, it seems there can be no finite mind for which this is true; finite minds come to be and exist within a deterministic causal nexus, and the causal antecedents of every idea in a mind will ultimately stretch far beyond it. I call this the External Cause Objection. I argue that Spinoza appreciated and explicitly answered this concern. According to this reply, adequate ideas do not have causes external to the mind because they do not fall into the category of what Spinoza calls "singular things." In addition to showing that this coheres with his more specific claims about adequate ideas and his firm belief that finite minds are parts of nature, I argue that the resolution to this problem sheds light on Spinoza's understanding of what I call absolute agency.

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Adequate ideas are the fundamental element of Spinoza's epistemological program. However, a recurrent worry among scholars is that Spinoza's account of adequate ideas is inconsistent with any finite being ever having one.<sup>1</sup> As I frame it, the problem is that for Spinoza an idea is adequate in a mind only if all its causal antecedents lie within the mind as well. However, it seems there can be no finite mind for which this is true; finite minds come to be and exist within a deterministic causal nexus, and the causal antecedents of every idea in a mind will ultimately stretch far beyond it. I call this the *External Cause Objection*. Importantly, this is not an isolated problem; the ethical and therapeutic projects of Books 3–5 of the *Ethics* are built upon adequate ideas. It is only through adequate ideas that we are active, virtuous, and live by the guidance of reason, for example. Thus, a challenge to the coherence of Spinoza's account of adequate ideas is a challenge to the coherence of his system more broadly. In this paper, I argue that Spinoza appreciated and explicitly answered this concern. According to this reply, adequate ideas do not have causes external to the mind because they do not fall into the category of what Spinoza calls 'singular things.' I show how this coheres with Spinoza's view that finite minds are parts of nature, and argue that it yields novel insights into Spinoza's account of action.

Before laying out the plan, a couple of caveats are in order about the scope of this inquiry. Adequate ideas figure into a number of interpretive debates in Spinoza scholarship, and I want to highlight two in particular at the outset. First, in Book 2 of the *Ethics* and elsewhere Spinoza distinguishes two kinds of knowledge that involve adequate ideas: reason and intuition. According to Spinoza, intuition is more powerful than reason (E5P36c), gives rise to the intellectual love of God (E5P33), and constitutes the mind's greatest virtue (E5P25).<sup>2</sup> It is important, then, to understand how reason and intuition differ, and there are a number of competing accounts of this difference.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the question of whether we can have adequate ideas in the first place is prior to questions about the differences between reason and intuition. Moreover, as I see it, Spinoza's answer to *External Cause Objection* is consistent with a number of ways of understanding this difference. For these reasons, I will set aside interpretive questions about the relation between reason and intuition in this paper. Second, I will be focusing on the nature of adequate ideas and what it is for a mind to have one, and will largely set aside related questions about the conditions for conscious awareness of an adequate idea. The *External Cause Objection* is a puzzle about the causal origins of adequate ideas, a puzzle whose immediate solution does not rely on any specific account of the conditions for conscious awareness. Moreover, Spinoza's account of selective consciousness, or whether he even has one, are contested questions among scholars.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that Spinoza has a developed account of consciousness, it may well relate to his notion of adequacy. However, making such a case would presuppose a thorough understanding of adequacy, and I'll limit my efforts here to clarifying this latter notion.

Towards this end, I start in Section 2 with a statement of the problem. While this problem has been formulated in a variety of ways, I present the *External Cause Objection* as a trilemma. Framing the argument in this new way not only highlights the core issues, but also allows us to see that Spinoza appreciated this objection and explicitly formulated a reply. In Section 3, I (i) show that Spinoza resolves the trilemma by denying that adequate ideas have external causal antecedents, and (ii) argue that this tells us something important about the nature of adequate ideas for Spinoza, namely that they are not singular things. Nevertheless, this is a surprising way of resolving the trilemma, and seems to simply push the problem back. After all, to claim that adequate ideas

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Rice (1999: 159–62), Delahunty (1985: 219), Bidney (1940: 38), Della Rocca (1996: 183 n. 29; 2003: 205), Huenemann (2008), Kisner (2011: 35–45; 2019), Marshall (2008; 2013), Garver (2018).

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Spinoza's work are Curley's. I have used the following abbreviations to refer to Spinoza's writings: Ep. = correspondence; TIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; TTP = *Theological Political Treatise*; PT = *Political Treatise*. When referring to the *Ethics*, I note the part of *Ethics* followed by a = axiom, c = corollary, d = demonstration, P = proposition, D = definition, or s = scholium. References are given by volume and page from Gebhardt's Latin *Opera* (G) and Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (C).

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of some of these accounts see Nadler (2006: 180–84), see also Soyarslan (2013).

<sup>4</sup> On the various approaches to accounting for consciousness in Spinoza's work see LeBuffe (2010) and Marrama (2017).

are somehow causally isolated from the world seems to do something profoundly un-Spinozistic: namely, to create a ‘dominion within a dominion’ (E3Pref). I take up this concern in Section 4, and show how Spinoza’s resolution to the *External Cause Objection* is consistent with his firm belief that finite minds are parts of nature. Finally, in Section 5 I look at Spinoza’s first step in the movement from adequate ideas towards the wider ethical and therapeutic goals in the *Ethics*: action. I argue that the account of adequate ideas that follows from his resolution of the *External Cause Objection* sheds light in particular on Spinoza’s understanding of what I call absolute agency.

## 2. THE EXTERNAL CAUSE OBJECTION

### 2.1. STATING THE PROBLEM

According to Spinoza, God is an infinite being expressed through the attributes of thought and extension. Everything other than God is a mode of God (E1P15). For example, my body is a finite mode of God’s attribute of extension, and my mind is a finite mode of God’s attribute of thought. More specifically, my mind is the idea of my body—it is the representation of my body in the attribute of thought (E2P13). My mind and body are not unusual in these regards for Spinoza. For every mode of extension, there is a corresponding idea in the attribute of thought that is the representation of that body. According to Spinoza, this correspondence extends not just to the modes themselves, but also to the causal relations that obtain between them (E2P7s). Given this parallelism between the attributes of thought and extension, it follows that just as a human body is constituted by smaller bodies, so too the human mind is constituted by the ideas of these smaller bodies (E2P15), and similarly, for every change that occurs in the body, there is a corresponding change in the mind (E2P12).

Turning our focus to the mind, Spinoza observes that we are capable of ignorance, error, and confusion on the one hand, and knowledge, understanding, and reason on the other. Spinoza accounts for the former in terms of inadequate ideas and the latter in terms of adequate ideas, and it is through our adequate ideas, Spinoza argues, we become active and self-directed beings. So what is the problem? The problem lies, in part, in the metaphysics of adequacy: the account of adequate ideas that Spinoza gives seems inconsistent with his wider systematic commitments. While there are a number of ways to formulate the *External Cause Objection*, I will do so in terms of an inconsistent triad.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza seems committed to each of the following:

*Adequacy*: If idea *x* is adequate in finite mind *M*, then none of *x*’s causal antecedents are external to *M*.

*Possibility*: Human minds (can) have adequate ideas.

*Externality*: Every idea in a finite mind *M* has causal antecedents that are external to *M*.

In the rest of this section, I briefly lay out the case for Spinoza’s commitment to each of the above. The most complex of these commitments is *Adequacy*, so I’ll start there.

### 2.2. SPINOZA’S COMMITMENT TO ADEQUACY

Spinoza’s account of adequate ideas first appears in a substantive way at E2P11c. In this corollary Spinoza begins by observing that the human mind is merely a part of God’s infinite intellect. It follows, according to Spinoza, that any idea in a human mind (or any finite mind for that matter) is also in God. Thus God and I share ideas. However, while many of my ideas are inadequate, all

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<sup>5</sup> Marshall (2008; 2013) gives the most developed consideration of this problem in the literature. Following Della Rocca (1996), Marshall characterizes the problem in terms of an infinite chain of causes: adequacy seems to require that a mind have ideas of an infinite chain of antecedent causes, but no finite mind can have such a chain. In reply, Marshall argues that we can have adequate ideas of common notions, God’s attributes, and particular essences since these ideas do not have an infinite number of causal antecedents. While I largely agree with Marshall’s main conclusions on this score, I think an alternative framing has interpretive benefits. Not only does it highlight the important fact that causal antecedents must be internal to the mind (regardless whether the chain is finite), it also puts us in a position to appreciate Spinoza’s explicit answer to the problem, and helps to further flesh out Spinoza’s account of adequate ideas, in particular, as non-singular things (as I will argue).

of God's are adequate.<sup>6</sup> It follows that adequacy is not an intrinsic feature of an idea, since God and I have numerically the same ideas. Rather, for Spinoza, adequacy is a mind-relative property of ideas. No idea is adequate or inadequate *simpliciter*; ideas are adequate or inadequate only in a particular mind.<sup>7</sup>

What makes an idea adequate or inadequate in a mind? In Book 2 Spinoza gives two related criteria. I will call the first criterion the *Completeness Requirement*. Spinoza frames this criterion in terms of adequacy in God's mind. All ideas are adequate in God's mind, but in one of two ways. On the one hand, it might be that idea *x* is adequate in God's mind insofar as finite mind *M* alone is a part of the infinite intellect, in which case *x* is also adequate in *M*. On the other hand, it might be that *x* is adequate in God's mind only insofar as some other idea in conjunction with *M* is part of God's intellect, in which case *x* is inadequate in *M*. The problem with *x*, in this latter case, is that *M* is missing something required for adequacy; as Spinoza puts it, *M* understands *x* 'only partially' (G II 95; C I 456). Thus, the (in)adequacy of *x* in *M* concerns whether *x* can be completely understood through *M*, or whether something beyond *M* is required in addition. Indeed, Spinoza takes completeness of understanding in a mind to be necessary and sufficient for adequacy.<sup>8</sup>

What is a mind missing when it has an inadequate idea? Since a mind is wholly composed by ideas (E2P15d) it follows that the mind is missing some other idea that bears a special relationship to it, namely an idea that would allow it to be completely understood. This brings us to the second criterion, the *Causal Requirement*. According to this criterion, an idea *x* in *M* is adequate just in case *M* has adequate ideas of *x*'s causes. The reason, for Spinoza, that we cannot completely understand an idea unless we have adequate ideas of its causes is that the character and identity of an idea is wholly due to its causes. As Spinoza writes at the outset of the *Ethics*: 'the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves the knowledge of its causes' (E1a4). If you do not have adequate ideas of its causes, you will not be able to accurately analyze an idea, trace the origins of its characteristics, or appreciate its place in Nature.<sup>9</sup> In short, inadequate ideas are, as Spinoza puts it in E2P28d, 'like conclusions without premises' (G II 113; C I 470). Importantly, this requirement automatically extends to knowledge of *all* an idea's causal antecedents: *x* is adequate in my mind only if I have an adequate idea of *x*'s cause, say *y*, but *y* will be adequate in my mind only if I have an adequate idea of its cause, say *z* ... etc.

These two criteria of adequacy place notable limits on the adequate ideas that finite beings may have. In particular, it follows from Spinoza's criteria that no idea with causal antecedents extending outside *M* will be adequate in *M*. After all, given the *Causal Requirement* we cannot have an adequate idea of *x* if we do not have adequate ideas of all *x*'s causes, but if a cause is outside *M*, then God's mind does not include the cause insofar as *M* is a part of the infinite intellect. Given *Completeness*, it follows that the cause is not adequate in *M*, and therefore *x* will not be adequate in *M* either. Thus (and this brings us back around to the inconsistent triad), Spinoza is committed to *Adequacy*: if idea *x* is adequate in finite mind *M*, then none of *x*'s causal antecedents are external to *M*.

Before turning to the other elements of the *External Cause Objection*, it is important to note an alternative to attributing *Adequacy* to Spinoza. Perhaps most prominently, Jonathan Bennett (1984: 178) suggests that Spinoza is speaking ambiguously in his comments on adequacy, and

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6 This is most explicit at E2P36d. Spinoza takes himself to have established this conclusion much earlier though. He writes: 'all ideas are in God (by E1P15); and, insofar as they are related to God are true (by E2P32), and (by 2P7c) adequate' (G II 118; C I 474).

7 For a full examination of this view see Della Rocca (1996: 44–67).

8 In E2P11c Spinoza only explicitly indicates that if *x* is adequate in God's mind insofar as he constitutes the nature of *M* and something else, then *x* is inadequate in *M*. However, Spinoza takes himself to have proven a much broader thesis in E2P11c. At E2P34, Spinoza appeals to E2P11c to justify the claim that 'when we say that there is in us an adequate and perfect idea, we are saying nothing but that (by E2P11c) there is an adequate and perfect idea in God insofar as he constitutes the essence of our Mind ...' (G II 116; C I 472; my italics). Thus, Spinoza takes himself to have shown that *x* is adequate in *M* just in case *x* is adequate in God's mind insofar as *M* alone is a part of the infinite intellect (and is therefore completely understood through *M*). See Spinoza's uses of E2P11c at, e.g., E2P24d, E2P39d, E2P4d, and E3P1d. Cf. Wilson (1996: 99), Della Rocca (1996: 54–55), and Marshall (2008: 57–58). Marshall refers to this criterion as the 'containment thesis.'

9 See Wilson (1991). See also Della Rocca (1996: chap. 3).

that what he really means is that none of an idea's *proximate* causes are external to the mind.<sup>10</sup> However, this would allow for an adequate idea to be caused by an inadequate one, something Spinoza explicitly denies. To illustrate, suppose this suggestion is correct and that *x* is adequate in *M* only because all of its proximate causes are internal to *M*. Let *y* be one of those proximate causes. Of course, *y* has a set of proximate causes as well that includes *z*, and so on. In a finite mind, this series will eventually lead outside of it. So let us say that *z* is external to *M*. This means that *y* will be inadequate in *M* (since it has a proximate cause that is external), and consequently *x* would have an inadequate idea among its causes. However, as we've seen, for Spinoza we understand ideas through or by means of grasping their causes, and consequently we cannot have the complete understanding that constitutes an adequate idea if we only have a partial understanding of one or more of its causes. Indeed, using 'clear and distinct' as a synonym for 'adequate' Spinoza explicitly makes this point, saying: 'whatever we clearly and distinctly understand must become known to us either through itself or through some other thing that is clearly and distinctly understood through itself' (TTP 6. 21: G III 85; C II 157).<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3. SPINOZA'S COMMITMENT TO POSSIBILITY AND EXTERNALITY

There are straightforward reasons for attributing both *Possibility* and *Externality* to Spinoza. With regard to *Possibility*, Spinoza explicitly notes that we have adequate ideas throughout the *Ethics*. Thus, he observes at E3P58d that 'the Mind conceives some adequate ideas' (G II 187; C I 529) and at E3P9d that 'the Mind is constituted by adequate and inadequate ideas' (G II 147; C I 499). Moreover, he concludes that all men have certain adequate ideas (E2P38c), and further that the human mind has an adequate idea of God's eternal and infinite essence (E2P47).<sup>12</sup>

*Externality*, the principle that every idea in a finite mind *M* has causal antecedents that are external to *M*, is almost as straightforward. Spinoza tells us in E2P9 that 'the idea of a singular thing which actually exists has God for a cause not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists ... and so on, to infinity' (G II 91–92; C I 453). In this proposition Spinoza affirms that finite modes of thought ('ideas of singular things') are always a consequence of some other finite mode of thought, *ad infinitum*.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it seems that all ideas in a finite mind are themselves finite modes of thought, for Spinoza. As we've seen, the human mind just is the idea of its body (E2P13). Moreover, the human body is a composite finite mode of extension, constituted by other finite modes, which are themselves composites. Given the parallelism between the attributes of thought and extension, the corresponding human mind's parts will be ideas of these finite modes of extension, and indeed on these grounds Spinoza concludes at E2P15d that 'the idea of the human Body is composed of these ideas of the parts composing the Body.' Thus, if all our ideas are finite modes of thought, and all finite modes of thought have finite modes of thought as causal antecedents, *ad infinitum*, it follows that all our ideas have an infinite set of finite causal antecedents. However, because we are finite, this chain

<sup>10</sup> See also Donagan (1996: 373). Motivated by Spinoza's cryptic claims in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that Jesus communicated with God 'mind to mind' and that Jesus 'understood things truly and adequately,' Donagan explores the proposal that external causes might create effects within the mind in different ways. He suggests that, for Spinoza, an idea might be adequate in *M* as long as its external causal antecedents do not cause the adequate idea by means of the imagination. Nevertheless, we should set this proposal aside for two reasons. First, Spinoza is explicit that external objects can cause ideas in us *only* by affecting the human body, that is, only by means of the imagination (E2P26d). Second, this proposal is inconsistent with the *Completeness Requirement*. After all, if an idea in *M* has an external cause, then *M*'s idea will not be adequate in God's mind only insofar as *M*'s mind is part of the infinite intellect, regardless of whether its external antecedents caused the idea by means of the imagination or not.

<sup>11</sup> See also 5P28d. Steinberg (2009: 149 fn. 15) raises some additional concerns about Bennett's proposal. For the equivalence of 'adequate' and 'clear and distinct' see, e.g., E2P38c: 'all bodies agree in certain things, which must be perceived adequately, or (*sive*) clearly and distinctly, by all' (G II 119; C I 474).

<sup>12</sup> For a challenge to *Possibility* see Kisner (2011). Kisner argues that the best way to resolve the problem at hand is to read Spinoza as committed only to a degreed notion of adequacy. While he admits this is not the most natural reading of texts like those cited above, he thinks doing so is preferable to denying either *Adequacy* or *Externality*. I engage Kisner's arguments in Section 4.

<sup>13</sup> Spinoza uses the terms 'singular thing' and 'finite mode' interchangeably. See the definition of singular thing at E2D7.

of causal antecedents will eventually extend beyond the confines of our mind, and so every idea in our mind will have causal antecedents external to it, that is, *Externality*.<sup>14</sup>

Given the commitments noted above, Spinoza is faced with an inconsistent triad, and the interpretive challenge is to (i) establish that Spinoza is not committed to at least one of the three principles generating the inconsistency, and (ii) explain where the reasons adduced above for the ersatz commitment go wrong. I will argue that *Externality* is false for Spinoza, without thereby denying the metaphysical background that makes *Externality* seem plausible in the first place; moreover, in doing so I take myself to be following Spinoza's explicit lead as I'll show in the next section.

### 3. DENYING EXTERNALITY

#### 3.1. SPINOZA'S LETTER TO BOUWMEESTER AND RELATED TEXTS

In thinking about the *External Cause Objection* it is important to begin with the largely unappreciated fact that, at least in general terms, Spinoza was aware of the concern and formulated a reply to it.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he explicitly takes up this issue in a 1666 exchange with Johan Bouwmeester. Bouwmeester was a friend and long-time member of the Amsterdam Circle. As a trusted confidant, Bouwmeester had access to early drafts of the *Ethics*, and Spinoza talked with Bouwmeester about the possibility of translating the *Ethics* up through Book 3.<sup>16</sup> What I've called the *External Cause Objection* comes up in a conversation between the two about method in philosophy. Only Spinoza's side of this exchange remains, but as Spinoza represents the conversation Bouwmeester had asked whether there is a method for philosophy or 'whether our minds, like our bodies, are also subject to chance events and our thoughts are governed more by fortune than by skill' (Ep. 37: G IV 188a; C II 32). This question presupposes that, for Spinoza, our bodies are subject to chance or fortune, and this is exactly right. All bodies are part of a deterministic causal nexus for Spinoza, and our bodies are subject to chance or fortune inasmuch as we are subject to the effects of these external forces, forces that are largely unknown to us and outside our control. Bouwmeester's question, then, is whether the mind is similarly subject to unknown external forces, and this is the connection to the *External Cause Objection*. Spinoza replies to Bouwmeester's query as follows:

[T]he intellect is not subject, as the body is, to accidents. This is evident simply from this: that one clear and distinct perception, or many together, can be absolutely the cause of another clear and distinct perception. Indeed, all the clear and distinct perceptions we form can arise only from other clear and distinct perceptions in us, and cannot have any other cause outside us. From this it follows that the clear and distinct perceptions we form depend only on our nature, and its definite, fixed laws, that is, on our absolute power, not on fortune (that is, on causes which, although they too act according to definite and fixed laws, are nevertheless unknown to us and foreign to our nature and power). As for the rest of our perceptions, I confess that they depend on fortune in the highest degree. (G IV 188a–189a; C II 32–33)

On its face this is a surprising answer. We could reasonably expect Spinoza to reply with something along the lines of E2P7: 'the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (G II 89; C I 451), and to explain to Bouwmeester that as parts of a deterministic causal nexus human minds are, like bodies, inescapably subject to the influence of external forces. This is not, however, how Spinoza replies; indeed, he suggests the opposite—that something about the mind is unlike the body and is immune from the influence of external forces.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Spinoza's claim in the *TIE* that: 'it would be impossible for human weakness to grasp the series of singular, changeable things, not only because there are innumerable many of them, but also because of the infinite circumstances in one and the same thing, any of which can be the cause of its existence or nonexistence' (G II 36; C I 41).

<sup>15</sup> Though for an exception see A. Garrett (2003: chap. 3).

<sup>16</sup> See Nadler (1999). In particular, Nadler notes that drafts of what would become Book 2 of the *Ethics* were circulating among the Amsterdam Circle by the mid 1660s (1999: 225).

Taking a closer look at Spinoza's reply, it is important to point out that Spinoza changes the terms of the question. Spinoza represents Bouwmeester's question as whether the mind is like the body in being at the mercy of chance, but Spinoza's answer is in terms of the *intellect*. In the *Ethics* Spinoza identifies the intellect with the part of the mind that understands things clearly and distinctly or adequately (see, e.g., E5P40c), and this squares with his use here. Spinoza is introducing a distinction between mind and intellect that allows him to say that while some elements of the mind are subject to fortune, namely 'the rest of our perceptions,' the intellect is not. More specifically, the clear and distinct ideas that constitute the intellect can arise only from other clear and distinct ideas; that is, as Spinoza puts it, 'they cannot have any other cause outside us.' On the contrary, these ideas arise from our nature alone.

This passage raises some important questions, but I want to begin by pointing out that whatever else we might say about this answer, it is a clear reply to the *External Cause Objection*. Spinoza is taking for granted that we have clear and distinct ideas, and thereby tacitly endorsing *Possibility*. Moreover, he affirms *Adequacy* as well: clear and distinct or adequate ideas cannot have external causes (causes 'outside us'). Lastly, he denies *Externality* by claiming that we have ideas that depend only on our nature, not on external causes, namely the clear and distinct ones. Thus, Spinoza's reply to the *External Cause Objection* in this letter is that although part of the mind is at the mercy of chance, part of our mind is not insofar as we have ideas without external causal antecedents.

While Spinoza is nowhere else as explicit in taking up and replying to the *External Cause Objection*, there is textual evidence that he rejects *Externality* elsewhere in his work. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, for example, Spinoza characterizes the inborn power of the intellect as 'what is not caused in us by external causes' (G II 14; C I 17). We also see him directly speak to this issue briefly in the scholium to E2P29. In this scholium (and in the immediately preceding corollary) Spinoza is summarizing his prior conclusions about confused ideas. He writes:

I say expressly that the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused [NS; and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, i.e. so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally. ... For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly ... (G II 114; C I 471).

To perceive things from the common order of nature through external causes is to have only confused ideas. In contrast, and as in his reply to Bouwmeester, Spinoza claims that our clear and distinct (or adequate) ideas are not subject to 'fortuitous encounters' with external forces, but have their origins in something internal to the mind. Thus, again Spinoza suggests that there are ideas that are, unlike bodies, not subject to fortune. The wider case against *Externality* involves showing how adequate ideas, so understood, fit into, and shed light upon, Spinoza's broader project in the *Ethics*.<sup>17</sup> I make this case in Sections 4 and 5, but before doing so I briefly turn to an important consequence of denying *Externality*.

### 3.2. ADEQUATE IDEAS ARE NOT SINGULAR THINGS

To deny *Externality* is to tell us something important about the nature of adequate ideas. Recall that in Section 2.3 we laid out an argument for attributing *Externality* to Spinoza. In brief: if (i) all our ideas are finite modes of thought, and (ii) all finite modes of thought have finite causal antecedents that stretch back *ad infinitum*, it follows that all our ideas have finite causal antecedents that stretch back *ad infinitum*, and therefore beyond the confines of our finite minds, that is, *Externality*. Premise (ii) is above reproach; Spinoza is explicit in E2P9, and elsewhere that finite modes of thought—indeed, all singular things—are the effects of infinite causal chains. Given that *Externality* is false for Spinoza, and our adequate ideas do not have external causal antecedents, it follows that (i) is false: adequate ideas are not finite modes of thought. Indeed,

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<sup>17</sup> For a distinct set of arguments that Spinoza's answer to Bouwmeester represents his mature view on this issue see A. Garrett (2003: 77–78).

when we go back and look at the grounds for (i) in E2P13 and 15 we see that Spinoza is claiming only that the mind is, like the body, a composite entity built from finite modes; he does not claim that every idea in a finite mind is a finite mode.

We see independent support for this conclusion at E2P40d. Spinoza's argument here parallels his reply to Bouwmeester insofar as he claims that ideas that follow from adequate ideas are themselves adequate. He makes the case for E2P40 as follows:

When we say that an idea in the human Mind follows from ideas that are adequate in it, we are saying nothing but that (by P11C) in the Divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause, not insofar as he is infinite, nor insofar as he is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things, but insofar as he constitutes only the essence of the human Mind. (G II 120; C I 475)

In this proof, Spinoza appeals to what I've called the *Completeness Requirement* on adequacy first expressed in E2P11c, and the conclusion here follows straightforwardly given this requirement. What is important about this passage for my purposes is how Spinoza characterizes adequate ideas in this proof. For the sake of simplicity, let us start with two ideas in mind  $M$ ,  $I_1$  and  $I_2$ . We will say that  $I_2$  follows from  $I_1$ , and  $I_1$  is adequate in  $M$ . As he so often does in Book 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza frames his discussion of  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  insofar as they are ideas in God's mind rather than as ideas in a finite mind. Thus, as Spinoza characterizes the relation here, to say that  $I_2$  follows from  $I_1$  in  $M$  is to say that 'in the Divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause ...'. Now if Spinoza takes  $I_1$  to be a finite mode or singular thing, then he should characterize this idea in the same way he characterizes the causes of finite modes at E2P9d (and elsewhere) by saying that God is the cause of  $I_2$  'not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is affected by another idea of a singular thing ... and so on, to infinity.' However, in this passage Spinoza explicitly denies that God is the cause of  $I_2$  in this way, saying: 'God is the cause, not insofar as he is infinite, nor insofar as he is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things. ...'. Thus, in this passage Spinoza tells us that  $I_1$ , though an idea adequate in  $M$ , is not a finite mode or singular thing.

Like his rejection of *Externality*, this consequence raises a number of further questions about what adequate ideas are, and how adequate ideas, so understood, fit into Spinoza's wider system. However, before taking these questions up in the next section, I want to summarize and bring some threads together. I have argued that Spinoza was aware of the *External Cause Objection* and resolves the trilemma by denying *Externality*. While many ideas in a finite mind are subject to the whims of fortune, some are not—namely the adequate ideas that together constitute the intellect. These ideas are immune to the influence of causes external to the mind in which they are adequate. Further, I've argued that denying *Externality* tells us something of metaphysical significance about adequate ideas, namely that they are not finite modes of thought, and more broadly are not singular things. Thus, finite minds are not constituted solely by finite modes of thought. Indeed, this is the mistake that leads us to *Externality* and ultimately to the *External Cause Objection*. Rather, finite minds are constituted by both inadequate ideas that are finite singular modes of thought and adequate ideas that are not.

## 4. THE COHERENCE OF DENYING EXTERNALITY

### 4.1. DOES THIS CREATE A DOMINION WITHIN A DOMINION?

Spinoza develops his account of the human mind explicitly in contrast to those who conceive of it as something that 'disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature' and has 'absolute power' over its effects. The mind, for Spinoza, is not a separate realm outside nature, but is part of it, and consequently is subject to 'the same necessity and force of nature' as everything else (E3Pref). However, to deny *Externality*, and thereby claim that human minds have ideas without external causal antecedents seems to set up precisely the sort of 'dominion within a dominion' that Spinoza so forcefully opposes.<sup>18</sup> Not only does it entail that our adequate ideas are outside the influence

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<sup>18</sup> See also *Political Treatise* 2.6.

of the finite order, it also raises questions about the origins of our adequate ideas. After all, if they don't come from outside our minds, where do they come from? In this section, I take up these challenges and show that denying *Externality* is consistent with Spinoza's rejection of the mind as a dominion within a dominion. Along the way I will show that this coheres with Spinoza's claims about common notions, our adequate ideas of God's infinite and eternal essence, and adequate ideas of the essences of particular things.

#### 4.2. THE CAUSAL INDEPENDENCE OF ADEQUATE IDEAS

For Spinoza, we live in a world in which our very existence is determined by the common order of nature; yet, if *Externality* is false we somehow have ideas that are independent of this order. How can this be? The answer to this question, in brief, is that Spinoza fully countenances characteristics or features of reality that are not due to any finite cause, and adequate ideas are, and are representations of, precisely those characteristics. To make this case, I want to start by following up with the conclusion drawn in 3.3 that adequate ideas are not singular things. If adequate ideas are not singular things, then given the parallelism between the attributes they do not represent singular things. But then what do they represent, that is, what are adequate ideas of or about? According to Spinoza's ontology, there are only God's eternal and infinite attributes and their modifications. There are two kinds of modification to the attributes, finite and infinite. In contrast to finite modes which are limited in duration and extent, infinite modes are unlimited and omnipresent throughout their attribute (E1P21).<sup>19</sup> Given that adequate ideas do not represent finite or singular things, then they must represent either infinite modes or the attributes themselves.

Indeed, as we'll see when we look at Spinoza's more specific comments, we find that they represent both. At this point, however, it is important to observe that this consequence in large part explains why ideas of these features are independent of the finite causal order. For Spinoza, God's attributes are metaphysically prior to any mode that exists in them, and their infinite modifications follow either immediately from the absolute nature of the attribute itself, or mediately through (and only through) another infinite mode or modes (E1P23d). Thus, the attributes and the infinite modes that follow from them are independent from the finite causal order, and so are the ideas that correspond to and represent them.

Although the independence of adequate ideas from the finite order follows from the argument to this point, it is important to check it against Spinoza's more specific claims about adequate ideas as well. In Book 2 of the *Ethics* Spinoza explicitly distinguishes three kinds of adequate idea: (i) the 'common notions' introduced at E2P37–38, (ii) adequate idea(s) of God's attributes introduced at E2P45–47, and (iii) adequate ideas of the essences of particular things introduced at E2P40s2.<sup>20</sup> Now, if the argument above is correct, then this should be consistent with, if not reflected in, Spinoza's claims about these kinds of knowledge more specifically. I will talk about our adequate idea(s) of God's essence in Section 4.3, and so in the remainder of this section I will briefly make the case that Spinoza's specific comments about the common notions and ideas of particular essences square with the conclusion that they are not finite. I'll start with the common notions.

Although Spinoza does not make it explicit, there are good independent reasons for thinking that common notions are infinite modes (as many scholars have noted).<sup>21</sup> First, in his discussion of common notions at E2P38c, Spinoza points us back to the so-called 'physical digression' that follows E2P13. There Spinoza characterizes a state of motion as something that is common to all

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the argument for E1P21 see D. Garrett (1991). For a discussion of the infinite modes more broadly see Nadler (2006: 87–98), and of the immediate infinite mode of extension in particular see Robinson (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Strictly speaking, in E2P40s2 Spinoza refers only to the 'essence of things.' However, in his subsequent reference to E2P40s2 in E5P36s (but see also E5P24–25), he clarifies that he is talking about 'the very essence of any singular thing.'

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Curley (1969: 57–58), Nadler (2006: 175), Marshall (2008: 63). For skepticism of this, though, see Schliesser (2011).

bodies.<sup>22</sup> This matches the example of an infinite mode in the attribute of extension Spinoza gives in reply Tschirnhaus's request for examples of the infinite modes, and indicates that for Spinoza we have an adequate idea of this infinite mode.<sup>23</sup> Second, and more broadly, Spinoza's description of common notions is suggestive. According to Spinoza, common notions are adequate ideas of things that are common to all and equally in the part and in the whole (E2P38c). These ideas, which Spinoza characterizes as 'universal knowledge' (E5P36c), constitute the foundation of the second kind of knowledge, reason (E2P40s2), and are conceived under a certain species of eternity (E2P44c2). Spinoza's description of the common notions, then, seems to not only be inconsistent with being a finite mode, but also to match the account of infinite modes as something omnipresent in an attribute.

In addition, there are good independent reasons for thinking that adequate ideas of the essences of individuals represent infinite modes as well, though this is somewhat more contentious among scholars.<sup>24</sup> In brief: after introducing these ideas in Book 2, Spinoza says nothing more about them until the latter half of Book 5, and they figure into his arguments concerning the eternity of the mind. Starting at E5P21, Spinoza zeros in on one adequate idea in particular, namely 'the idea that expresses the essence of this or that human Body' (E5P22), and in E5P23 he contrasts this 'eternal idea' with a durational idea that represents the body as it exists within the finite order.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in his arguments, Spinoza points us back to E1P25c and E2P8c, both of which emphasize the distinction between a thing's essence and its existence. In E2P8c, in particular, Spinoza contrasts the durational existence of a finite mode and the essence of a non-durational mode that is only 'comprehended in God's attributes.' According to these descriptions, then, the essences of particular things exist in the attributes, and so must be modes, but are also eternal and so cannot be finite. This leaves only the infinite modes.<sup>26</sup> Thus, there are textual considerations quite independent from the argument I've given for thinking that the common notions and ideas of the essences of particular things represent infinite modes, and so independent reasons for thinking that these ideas are independent from the finite causal order.

### 4.3. THE ORIGINS AND ORDER OF INNATE IDEAS

Even if we can make sense of the causal independence of adequate ideas, we might still wonder how we have these ideas in the first place. To put a sharper point on this question, we might wonder whether the possession of adequate ideas, so understood, is consistent with Spinoza's rejection of the mind as an uncaused cause. Here is the concern: for *x* to be adequate in a mind is for that mind to have adequate ideas of all *x*'s causal antecedents. As finite beings, this series of causal antecedents cannot be infinite in our minds, since such a series inevitably leads outside it. However, it seems as if it cannot be finite either, since in this case there will be an adequate idea that originates the series. As the originator, it cannot be caused by some other adequate idea in *M*, but neither can it be caused by an inadequate idea (since inadequate ideas can't cause adequate ones). Thus, the originating idea would seem to be an uncaused cause that 'disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature' (E3Pref), something expressly ruled out by Spinoza (E1P17c2).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In E2P13I2 Spinoza writes, 'all bodies agree ... in that they can move now more slowly, now more quickly, and absolutely, that now the move, now they are at rest' (G II 98; C I 459).

<sup>23</sup> Ep. 64. See also *Short Treatise* 1.9 and 1.3. For more on motion as an infinite mode see Robinson (2014).

<sup>24</sup> E.g., D. Garrett (2009; 2010), Martin (2008; 2017). For criticism of this claim, however, see Laerke (2017).

<sup>25</sup> In E5P21–23 Spinoza discusses 'the idea of the essence of this or that human body, under a species of eternity' without explicitly identifying it as an adequate idea. This comes, however, in E5P24–25 where Spinoza connects this idea to our system of adequate ideas, by reminding us that adequate ideas of the essences of singular things proceeds from adequate ideas of the attributes of God (E2P40s2; but also in E2P47d).

<sup>26</sup> A further question concerns the nature of infinite modes of this kind. For example, what omnipresent features constitute the essence of a particular finite body? I will not propose a specific answer here, and will note only that the argument here is consistent with what is probably the most developed answer to this question in the literature. D. Garrett (2009: 290) proposes that the essence of a particular body is permanent and pervasive throughout an attribute insofar as it 'consists in the attribute's general capacity to accommodate—through the general laws of its nature as an attribute—the actual existence of a singular thing of the given specific structure whenever and wherever the series of actual finite causes should actually determine it to occur.'

<sup>27</sup> This objection has been formulated most directly by Matthew Kisner (2011: 30–31; 2019: 46).

In reply, it is important to remember that adequate ideas have a causal order. As we've seen, adequate ideas represent either infinite modes or the attributes themselves. Further, infinite modes all ultimately follow from the absolute nature of their attribute (E1P21d), and consequently so do ideas of them. That is, just as the infinite modes of extension all eventually trace back to the absolute nature of extension itself, so too will our ideas of these modes trace back to our idea of the absolute nature of extension. Importantly, however, this is no ordinary idea. This is an idea of God's eternal and infinite essence. Spinoza argues in E2P45–47 that the idea of God's eternal and infinite essence is adequate and perfect in all modes, and hence adequate in human minds. Furthermore, since this idea is adequate in our minds, it follows that we have adequate ideas of all its causes, and indeed we do: the essence of God involves existence, and so is self-caused (E1P11, E1P24d). Adequate ideas are thus ultimately rooted in the knowledge of God's essence which all things possess in virtue of existing in God. Thus, the fact that our adequate ideas all ultimately trace back to a single origin does not imply that minds are uncaused causes which have the power to disturb the order of nature, but shows how adequate ideas depend on the idea of God's eternal and infinite essence. Indeed, in the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza is explicit on this point, saying: 'all our knowledge, i.e. our supreme good, not only depends on the knowledge of God, but consists entirely in it' (G III 60, C II 128).

A final point to make about the origins of adequate ideas is that adequate ideas are innate on the proposed account. As we have seen, adequate ideas do not have causes external to the mind; rather, they are part of human minds by nature as Spinoza observes at numerous points in the *Ethics* (e.g., E2P11c, E2P40d).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, we can understand why these ideas are innate. Our minds and bodies are modes of the attributes of Thought and Extension, respectively. Given Spinoza's arguments at E2P45–47, we all have adequate ideas of these attributes. Since the infinite modes of these attributes follow, ultimately, from their absolute natures, we all therefore have adequate ideas of these infinite modes as well.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, this is nothing distinctive of human minds. The argument above applies to all modes. As a result, far from creating a dominion within a dominion, denying *Externality* puts all minds on equal metaphysical ground. As representations of finite modes of extension, all minds have an adequate idea of this attribute along with all its infinite modes. As such, these ideas are innate, and are causally independent from the finite order of ideas.

## 5. THE POSSIBILITY OF ABSOLUTE AGENCY

According to Spinoza, we have the power to combat the corrosive influences of the passions to the extent that we are led by, or live in accordance with, reason. To live in this way is to act, or be active (E4P35d), and this is grounded in our adequate ideas since 'the actions of the Mind arise from adequate ideas alone' (E3P3). Unlike those who are enslaved by the passions and subject to the whims of fortune, the person guided by reason is self-determined and moved to act through understanding. Thus, Spinoza's account of adequate ideas lies at the root of his wider ethical and therapeutic projects. In this section, I look at Spinoza's first step towards these wider ends—the move from adequacy to activity, and argue that his reply to the *External Cause Objection* helps clarify some key elements of Spinoza's account of action in the *Ethics*.<sup>30</sup> Let us start with a brief look at what it means for a mode to act, for Spinoza.

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<sup>28</sup> Spinoza does not explicitly identify adequate ideas as innate. However, in the TIE Spinoza characterizes the intellect as the mind's inborn power, noting in a footnote that by 'inborn power' he means 'what is not caused in us by external causes' (G II 14; C I 17). He also characterizes the properties of the intellect as our innate tools (G II 38; C 43). See also Nadler (2006: 175–76) and Marshall (2008; 2013: chap. 2). Marshall makes a similar case that adequate ideas are innate for Spinoza, and argues that Spinoza's conception of innate ideas parallels Leibniz's. For a different approach to common notions and skepticism that they are innate see Sangiacomo (2019: chap. 2).

<sup>29</sup> Most of these ideas will lie below the threshold of conscious awareness. As an example of the difference between having an adequate idea and being aware of it we can look to E2P47s. Spinoza has just claimed in E2P47 that we all have adequate ideas of God's eternal and infinite essence, but in this scholium he goes on to note that nonetheless men do not have so clear a knowledge of God as they do of other ideas. Laying out the conditions for conscious awareness will be part of a much broader effort to specify Spinoza's account of consciousness. See note 4.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the development of Spinoza's account of activity from the *Short Treatise* to the *Ethics* see Sangiacomo and Nachtomy (2018).

Spinoza's account of action begins at E3D1–2. He defines action in terms of being an adequate cause, and defines an adequate cause of some effect as its complete cause, wherein the effect is understood completely through the cause. Similarly, he defines an inadequate cause as the partial cause of some effect wherein the effect cannot be understood completely through the cause alone.<sup>31</sup> In E3P1 and E3P3 Spinoza connects this account of action directly to his account of adequate ideas, arguing on the basis of E3D1–2 that the actions of a mind arise from, and only from, ideas that are adequate in it. Thus, a mind acts just in case its adequate ideas are the complete cause of some effect. This is a strict standard for action, but it is not the only standard that Spinoza draws on in the *Ethics*. In fact, Spinoza moves very quickly from the strict standard of E3D1–2 to a degreed standard according to which a mode acts to the degree or extent to which it is self-determined, and is passive to the extent that it is determined by external forces. Already in E3D3, for example, he observes that a body's power of acting can be increased or diminished. In what follows, I will call the strict standard of E3D1–2, *absolute agency*, and the degreed standard, *partial agency*.<sup>32</sup>

Spinoza's account of partial agency fits easily into the related discussions of perfection, virtue, and the guidance of reason that come later in the *Ethics*, since Spinoza discusses these notions in degreed terms as well (see, e.g., E3Def. Aff. 3ex, E4P20, E4P35). The place of absolute agency, however, is less clear and is a matter of dispute among scholars. On the one hand, a number of commentators have suggested that absolute agency, for Spinoza, is an unreachable ideal true only of the actions of God. They argue that as parts of nature we are always subject to the influence of external forces, and so are always only a partial cause of what we do. Since we can never be the sole cause of any effect, we can never be absolute agents.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, others have argued that this is a mistake, and that the influence of external forces leaves room for absolute agency. Steven Nadler (2015), in particular, has recently made this case as part of a wider defense of Spinoza's account of the free man.<sup>34</sup> In brief, he begins by agreeing that as parts of nature we are constantly subject to the influence of external forces. As we navigate our environment we are locked in a persistent battle of influence, and what a mind ultimately does in any particular case is the result of a contest of forces between its adequate ideas, on the one hand, and the environment, on the other. Most of the time, the power of an adequate idea is suppressed, muted, or redirected as a result of the contest with external forces, and the subsequent effect is only partially a consequence of the influence of the adequate idea. Sometimes, however, the influence of an adequate idea wins out, and the effect is determined solely by an adequate idea or set of adequate ideas. In these specific cases, according to Nadler, the mind is the sufficient cause of its actions through its adequate ideas (2015: 114). Thus, being a part of nature does not exclude (what I've called) absolute activity, and Nadler goes on to argue that the free man is an ideal person who always acts in this way.

There is more that might be said about these competing positions, but at this point I want to return to Spinoza's account of adequate ideas, and apply the lessons learned from his reply to the *External Cause Objection* to the question of absolute agency. The first lesson we can draw is that it is a mistake to argue that absolute agency is an unreachable ideal on the grounds that finite modes are subject to persistent external influences. As we've seen, adequate ideas do not have external causes, and since absolute agency issues from adequate ideas alone, the mere fact that we are parts of nature and subject to external influences does not thereby exclude it. The

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<sup>31</sup> Two notes: first, although Spinoza does not explicitly refer to it in E3D1 or E3D2, this is natural application of his view that effects are understood through their causes (E1a4). Second, see also Spinoza's use of E3D1–2 in the demonstration for E4P2.

<sup>32</sup> See also, e.g., E3P11 and 12. Della Rocca (2003) calls these Strong and Weak senses; Kisner (2019) calls them Adequacy-activity and Striving-activity.

<sup>33</sup> This point is made sometimes directly in terms of agency, see, e.g., Delahunty (1985: 219–20), Wartofsky (1973), Sangiocomo and Nachtomy (2018: 102–3), Kisner (2019: 46). Other times, this point is made as part of discussions of Spinoza's account of freedom, see, e.g., Bennett (1984: 324–25). For a consideration of whether absolute agency is in tension with God's role as the immanent cause of all things see Zylstra (2020).

<sup>34</sup> The 'free man' first appears in E4P66s and is an ideal person who always lives according to the guidance of reason. Nadler (2015: 105–7) traces Spinoza's account of freedom back through his notion of the guidance of reason to the absolute activity of E3D1–2.

second lesson is that absolute agency is not to be found in the output of a contest of forces, since adequate ideas are not singular things. Even if the influence of external forces were to somehow wane, thereby allowing the power of a mind's adequate ideas to play a larger role in the behavior of an individual mind, that behavior still occurs at a particular time. However, a non-singular thing cannot be the sole cause of a temporally limited effect. As temporally limited, the effect will be a singular thing, and all singular things have singular causes (E1P28).<sup>35</sup> Thus, an adequate idea may cause a change in the attribute of thought only in concert with something finite.<sup>36</sup> However, to bring about a change in concert with other modes is to be only a partial cause, and consequently not to act absolutely. A finite mind only exercises partial agency to greater and lesser degrees as it navigates its environment.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, then, Spinoza's account of adequate ideas shows that both these interpretations of absolute agency are off base.

So where does this leave us—how does absolute agency fit into Spinoza's broader system? Spinoza's account of adequate ideas might seem to suggest absolute agency is indeed an unreachable ideal, not because we are parts of nature subject to external influence, but because adequate ideas are non-singular. Indeed, it is true that the fact that adequate ideas are non-singular implies that we cannot be absolute agents in our interactions with other finite modes. Crucially, however, this does not imply that absolute agency is impossible for finite beings. In fact, Spinoza's account of adequate ideas shows quite the contrary, namely that all finite modes not only can, but do act in this sense—though not in their interactions with other finite modes. According to Spinoza, a mind acts absolutely insofar as ideas adequate within it are the adequate or complete cause of some effect. But as we've seen, every mind has ideas like this. The argument is straightforward: for Spinoza, all minds have adequate ideas; moreover, according to Spinoza's account of adequacy, for an *x* to be adequate in *M* is for *M* to have adequate ideas of all *x*'s causes; if *M* has adequate ideas of all *x*'s causes, then there are ideas within *M* that are the adequate or complete cause of *x*, and so *M* acts absolutely, given Spinoza's definition of absolute agency. In short, all minds with adequate ideas are also absolute agents, and the absolute activity of a mind is manifest in the unchanging causal relations that hold between its adequate ideas.

A final lesson concerns the relationship between partial and absolute agency. Both previous accounts imply that we can be partial agents without being absolute agents. However, Spinoza's account of adequate ideas shows that absolute agency is a necessary condition for partial agency. For a finite mind to be a partial agent is for its adequate ideas to contribute to what the mind does. However, as we've just seen, any mind that has adequate ideas is an absolute agent. Consequently, it is impossible for a mind to be a partial agent without also being an absolute agent. Given this, it is not surprising, perhaps, that Spinoza begins Book 3 of the *Ethics* with absolute agency but then quickly turns to partial agency. After all, although absolute agency grounds partial agency, the challenge in our daily battles with the passions is to strive for greater degrees of only partial agency.

## 6. CONCLUSION

At the end of Section 2 I observed that the *External Cause Objection* sets out a challenge to not only show that Spinoza can consistently deny at least one of the constituents of the inconsistent triad, but also to explain the error of attributing the inconsistent triad to Spinoza in the first place. I've argued that Spinoza was aware of this objection, and explicitly formulated a reply: namely,

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Spinoza's claim in the TIE that 'From universal axioms alone the intellect cannot descend to singulars, since axioms extend to infinite, and do not determine the intellect to the contemplation of one singular thing rather than another' (G II 34; C I 39).

<sup>36</sup> For a different route to this same conclusion see Grey (2014: 455–58). Grey focuses on the intellect as the eternal part of the mind, and argues that, for Spinoza, an effect is eternal if and only if its direct, efficient cause is eternal.

<sup>37</sup> Consequently, in my view the free man—as a person who navigates the world—is an ideal or model of partial agency only (though I will not develop that argument here). For an alternative reply to Nadler's proposal see Soyarslan (2019). Soyarslan is willing to grant to Nadler that we can act in this sense, but argues that since we are necessarily in bondage for Spinoza, we cannot always be the sufficient cause of our actions, and the free man is not an attainable ideal.

that adequate ideas do not have causes external to the mind in which they are adequate. This shows, moreover, that adequate ideas are not singular things, and coheres with Spinoza's broader commitment to the human mind's position as a part of nature, like all other minds. Finally, Spinoza's resolution to the *External Cause Objection* shows how we are absolute agents: just as all minds have adequate ideas, so too all minds are absolute agents. At the end of the day, Spinoza's belief that adequate ideas can minimize the corruptive influence of the passions and lead us to a state of blessedness is one that deserves critical scrutiny. However, I've argued that the metaphysical foundations of this claim are safe: adequate ideas and absolute agency are not only possible for finite minds, but common to all of them.<sup>38</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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