

SPINOZA: THE RATIONALLY INCLINED MYSTIC

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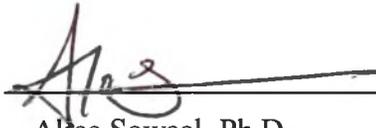
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August 2018

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Spinoza: The Rationally Inclined Mystic by Navvab Tadjvar, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.



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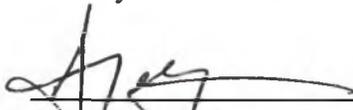
## SPINOZA: THE RATIONALLY INCLINED MYSTIC

Navvab Tadjvar  
San Francisco, California  
2018

In part II of the *Ethics*, Spinoza delineates three types of knowledge central to his epistemology. In order of ascending superiority Spinoza's reveals these to include knowledge from opinion or imagination, rational knowledge, and intuitive knowledge. Spinoza's treatment of the types of knowledge is sparse which has led to interpretive disagreements amongst scholarship. Most scholars agree that all three types of knowledge differ with respect to their method of cognition often referred to as "form", however there is considerable disagreement as to whether rational and intuitive knowledge also differ with respect to epistemic content. While some scholars argue that the content of rational knowledge is identical to that of intuitive knowledge, others argue there is a new domain of substantial information accessible to intuitive knowledge. Steven Nadler suggests that such a gap in content between reason and intuition would certainly make Spinoza something of a mystic. No such gap in content exists on Nadler's account however, maintaining that Spinoza is "a rationalist through and through". Nadler's argument places the disparity between reason and intuition on a distinction between modes of cognition, rather than content, which he contends disqualifies Spinoza as a mystic. Instead, Nadler characterizes Spinoza as a rationalist on the grounds that reasoning has access to the complete domain of substantial epistemic content. In this paper I argue that Nadler places the crux of mysticism too narrowly in content and he neglects the more important features of the mystics epistemology, especially those that are related to ontology. I hold

that when we consider Spinoza's epistemology and ontology, as delineated in the *Ethics*, it becomes clear that Spinoza meets the muster for qualification as a mystic, even though his project is unique nonetheless by means of the rational method he employs to achieve the mystical experience. While Nadler's argument leaves no room for the possibility that Spinoza could qualify as both a rationalist and a mystic, I argue Spinoza is just the rationally inclined mystic.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
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**Introduction:**

The relationship between mysticism and rationalism is rarely given much consideration in scholarship as a result of an epistemic distinction which seems to divide the projects. While the typical mystic argues that the experience constituting mysticism's central core is outside the domain of human reasoning, the rationalist designates reasoning as principle to the rationalist's highest aspirations. By means of his engagement with rationalist Baruch Spinoza, Steven Nadler demonstrates his account of this distinction.

Nadler's consideration of the issue regards part II of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza delineates three types of knowledge central to his epistemology. In order of ascending superiority Spinoza's reveals these to include knowledge from opinion or imagination, rational knowledge, and intuitive knowledge. Spinoza's treatment of the types of knowledge is sparse which has led to interpretive disagreements amongst scholarship. Most scholars agree that all three types of knowledge differ with respect to their method of cognition often referred to as "form", however there is considerable disagreement as to whether rational and intuitive knowledge also differ with respect to epistemic content. While some scholars argue that the content of rational knowledge is identical to that of intuitive knowledge, others argue there is a new domain of substantial information accessible to intuitive knowledge. Steven Nadler suggests that such a gap in content between reason and intuition would certainly make Spinoza something of a mystic. No such gap in content exists on Nadler's account however, maintaining that Spinoza is "a

rationalist through and through”. Nadler’s argument places the disparity between reason and intuition on a distinction between modes of cognition, rather than content, which he contends disqualifies Spinoza as a mystic. Instead, Nadler characterizes Spinoza as a rationalist on the grounds that reasoning has access to the complete domain of substantial epistemic content.

In this paper I argue that Nadler places the crux of mysticism too narrowly in content and he neglects the more important features of the mystics epistemology, especially those that are related to ontology. I hold that when we consider Spinoza’s epistemology and ontology, as delineated in the *Ethics*, it becomes clear that Spinoza meets the muster for qualification as a mystic, even though his project is unique nonetheless by means of the rational method he employs to achieve the mystical experience. While Nadler’s argument leaves no room for the possibility that Spinoza could qualify as both a rationalist and a mystic, I argue Spinoza is just the rationally inclined mystic.

Following a brief examination of rationalism and mysticism generally, I review in more detail the specific ontological commitments held by Spinoza and the mystics. I proceed to examine the area of dispute in epistemology as it relates to these ontological commitments. In doing so, I argue that what is paramount for classification of the mystic is not the accessibility of new substantial content as Nadler presumes, but rather the intuitive apprehension of an Absolute Infinite Unity which Spinoza exalts as the pinnacle of his ethical project. Such an exposition has important implications for both for the

association of rationalism with mysticism, and for Spinoza's method as a viable alternative for certain advanced meditative practices that cultivate the mystical experience.

## **Section 1: Rationalism and Mysticism**

The next section will provide a general account of rationalism along one line of scholarly interpretation that aligns rationalism with mysticism. This survey will set the grounds for a more detailed consideration of Spinoza's particular rationalist project as it relates to mysticism.

### **1.1 Rationalism and Mysticism: Ontology and Epistemology**

In "*The Rationalist Impulse*", Alan Nelson examines rationalism with respect to ontology, epistemology, and method. Nelson notes that "rationalism bears on ontology" because it requires an understanding of the natures of both the subjects and objects of knowledge. The typical objects of knowledge are identified by Nelson as, non-sensory, general, unchanging or eternal, undivided, and indivisible, the most prominent of which is the idea of an infinite being. The intellect, the mind, or the rational part of the soul has the privileged role of receiving this knowledge because it is integral to the recovery of innate ideas, such as extension and thought, which rationalists believe ground the appearances or phenomena of everyday life. Using the intellect, the rationalist extrapolates these innate ideas from typical sensational phenomena which leads to the apprehension of an infinite being as the phenomenon's absolute grounding. A general

examination of mysticism reveals important similarities to the rationalist project in the sense that the mystic also exalts the apprehension of an infinite being which the mystic argues constitutes the ultimate grounding of reality.

The ontology and epistemology of the mystic are as intimately related as for the rationalist. While the characteristics associated with the mystical experience differ to a certain extent depending on scholarly interpretations, the central core of the mystical experience is generally agreed among scholars to involve the apprehension of an Infinite Unity as the ultimate grounding of reality. The Unity is sometimes interpreted as God, the One, Universal Being, Universal Consciousness or simply as an undifferentiated Unity. During the moment of mystical apprehension the mystic no longer conceives of himself or other objects as divided from each other, but rather regards all things only as One, a unified whole. Further, the experience appears to the mystic as objective, and the mystic has an experienced sense of certainty that this Unity is in some way basic to the universe and has greater reality than the divided world as understood through sense experience. With respect to method, the mystical experience is often cultivated by mystics through particular ascetic rituals, meditative practices, or even spontaneously. These practices are typically given primacy over reason as methods for cultivating the mystical experience. Furthermore, the typical mystic emphasizes the limitations of reasoning and maintains that the mystical experience is above reasoning in some capacity. This distinction is at the core of the controversy surrounding the association of rationalism with mysticism, though I argue it is resolved by Spinoza. The following section will provide a more detailed

account of the ontology of Spinoza and the mystic which will provide context for the scholarly dispute in epistemology.

## **Section 2: Ontology**

### **2.1 Mystic:**

This section will examine how the mystic exalts an ontological unity that (1) is infinite and all encompassing and (2) has objective reference.

A multitude of scholars have endeavored to identify the core characteristics associated with mysticism which appear, at least upon initial review, to include important distinctions on comparison. W.T Stace notes that the central point of mysticism around which all other core characteristics revolve is the apprehension of a unity taken to be basic to the universe. According to Stace, “the Unity is the central experience and central concept of all mysticism.” This Unity is called the One or the Good by Plotinus, the Godhead by Eckhart, Brahman or the Universal Self in ancient Hindu mysticism, and sometimes the Void in Buddhism. The experience of such a unity has specific implications for the subject of the mystical experience. Evelyn Underhill defines ‘mysticism’ as the art of *union* with Reality, and identifies the mystic as a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment. William Earle corroborates Underhill’s definition understanding mysticism to involve the identity of the soul and God, or the experience of the identity of oneself with Absolute Reality. These conceptions of mysticism emphasize an important feature of the ontological unity as it relates to the subjects experience, namely that all multiplicity is

eliminated including the distinction between subject and object. This is described by Plotinus when he mentions

“No doubt we should not speak of "seeing," but, instead of [speaking of] "seen" and "seer," speak boldly of a simple unity. For in this seeing we neither see, nor distinguish, nor are there, two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor belonging to himself; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into It, one with It; it is only in separation that duality exists”.

The position is corroborated by Sufi Mahmud Shabistari stating,

“In God there is no duality. In that Presence “I” and “we” and “you” do not exist. “I” and “you” and “we” and “he” become one...since in the unity there is no distinction, the Quest and the Way and the Seeker become one.”

At the moment of mystical experience the mystic at once both identifies an Absolute Unity, and experiences what seems to the mystic as a sharing of identity or union with this Unity. The Christian mystic interprets the experience as a union with God, the Hindu mystic as an experience of the individual self identical with Brahman or Universal Self, the Buddhist in some cases at the moment of satori (Zen term for enlightenment) feels the self “melt away into something which is of a quite different order”. This is likely what is meant when Meister Eckhart says “I am God”, or when Al-Hallaj calls himself “The Truth”, or what Tennyson means when he says his “individuality dissolved into boundless being.” The ontology of the mystic involves a Unity devoid of any multiplicity and all empirical distinctions. The mystic then experiences this Unity by means of the dissolution of himself as individuated and feels a union or shared identity with the Unity.

Another important aspect of the mystic's ontology which scholars agree upon, is the infinite nature of this Unity. The Mandukya speaks of Brahman as possessing qualities that pertain to the infinite and Plotinus makes particular mention of the Infinite Unity on a multitude of occasions, one of which will be of importance when we discuss the epistemological superiority of intuition over discursive reason.

Stace notes one particular mention of this infinity in the Chandagoya Upanishads where it is written,

“Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understands nothing else, that is the infinite. Where one sees something else, hears something else, understands something else, that is the finite.”

In accordance with this notion it could be argued, as Stace does, that the appropriate interpretation of infinity is “that outside of which and other than which, there is nothing”. It should be granted that other scholarly interpretations of the mystics conception of infinity have been noted. At this juncture it should suffice to indicate that the Unity is understood by the mystic to be infinite in some sense of the term without distinguishing the precise nature of this infinity. We will notice that Spinoza has a particular notion of infinity that serves as an explanatory framework for the mystics description. All other arguments withstanding, such a notion would qualify Spinoza as a mystic with respect to at least one scholarly interpretation of the mystics conception of infinity.

A final area of consideration regarding the mystic's ontology is that the Unity is experienced by the mystic as having objective reference not being mere inner or subjective state. The accuracy of the mystics position in this regard is another area of

debate in scholarship. The typical mystic does not present arguments to support the conclusion of objectivity, likely because the mystic apprehends this reality via immediate experience/intuition rather than discursive reasoning, a position I will examine in more detail in the section on method and epistemology. As a point of phenomenology, it is reasonable to conclude that, at the very least, the mystical ontological Unity is a psychological phenomena experienced by the mystic as having greater reality than the reality of the individuated world as understood through sense experience.

In this section it has been examined that central to the mystical experience is an ontology that involves an Infinite Unity that has objective reference. Also central to this ontology is a subject of the mystical experience that is in some sense part of this Unity and can experience itself as such. Having briefly examined the ontology constituting the central core of mysticism I will move on to examine Spinoza's ontology which we will notice presents a framework that is harmonious with the mystics position.

## **2.2 Spinoza:**

This next section will examine how Spinoza also argues for an ontological unity that is (1) infinite and all encompassing and (2) has objective reference.

Spinoza's ontology is mostly detailed in Part 1 of the *Ethics*. The first fifteen propositions of Part 1 function partially to demonstrate that there is only one substance in the universe which is indivisible, infinite, and necessary. It has been examined that the mystic ontology involves an Infinite Unity that is conceived of by the mystic as having objective reference. It is the purpose of this next section to demonstrate how Spinoza's

ontology illustrates a highly refined framework in support of the mystic ontology. The three categories characteristic of Spinoza's ontology include 'substance', 'attributes' and 'modes'. A review of these notions will help establish the correspondence.

Spinoza defines 'substance' (*substantia*) as, "That which is in itself and is conceived through itself; the conception of which does not need the conception of any other thing from which it must be formed" (EID3). This definition has both an ontological and epistemological component because, as noted earlier, for the rationalist, the two are intimately related. With respect to the ontological point, when Spinoza says "in itself" he means that substance is completely ontologically independent, that is, relies on nothing else for its existence. Such a thing is different from finite objects which depend on this substance for their existence and are therefore not completely ontologically independent the way substance is. The epistemic point corresponds to the ontological requirement in that substance can be fully conceived without reference to any other thing. Spinoza understands substance to be the underlying substrate of all things, therefore its conception isn't reliant on any other things to adequately understand it. Spinoza will ultimately refer to this substance as God, or Nature (*Dues, seu Natura*).

Another important feature of Spinoza's ontology involves his account of attributes. He mentions, "By attributes I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence" (EID4). The main attributes of concern to humans are thought and extension which are the most fundamental expressions of substance. Nadler notes that "Thought is a determinate nature of which particular thoughts or ideas

are determinate expressions. Extension is a determinable nature of which particular shapes or figures are determinate expressions". The substance and its attribute, though, are not "really distinct" from one another but only "conceptually" so. They refer to different features of the thing, "Substance refers to its ontological status, its "thing-hood," while attribute refers to the fact that it has a distinctive character or nature".

The final important category characteristic of Spinoza's ontology is what he calls mode. He states "By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived" (EID5). The specific shape of a human body would be a mode of that body and a manifestation of the attribute extension. The particular ideas of a human mind would be modes of that mind and manifestations of thought. A mode then, is the particular ways a thing exists but as a manifestation of the attributes underlying its nature. As such, when one conceives of an individual human body one also necessarily conceives of the attribute of extension underlying its nature. When one has an individual idea, such an idea necessarily contains the conception of thought itself. As noted earlier, attributes are the expressions of substance which is self-subsistent. Modes then are dependent on substance for their existence and their conception, or in other words are both ontologically and epistemically dependent on substance.

Spinoza only speaks of one substance, of which all other things are either attributes or modifications, but one may wonder whether there could be multiple substances on Spinoza's model. As noted, the mystical experience involves the

apprehension of an Infinite Unity, therefore a multitude of substance's would be an ineffective correlate for the Unity of the mystics ontology. Spinoza is clear however that there is only one substance and his proof for this involves the proof that substance is both necessarily existing and infinite, both of which are the other essential characteristics of the mystics ontological Unity. Next I will explore how Spinoza's conception of substance involves its necessarily existence which supports the mystics conception of the Unity's objective reference.

As explored, for Spinoza there is nothing in nature but substance, attributes, and modes and that modifications are both ontologically and epistemically dependent on substance. Adding to this conception of ontological and epistemic dependence, Spinoza implements causal determinism and causal reasoning as evidence that substance must be uncaused and must necessarily exist. Spinoza's causal determinism can be identified by IA3 where he claims "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow". His causal reasoning is demonstrated by his stating, "The knowledge of an effect depends on the knowledge of its cause" (EIA4). Utilizing these axioms Spinoza can claim that "One substance cannot be produced by another substance," and therefore "a substance cannot be produced by anything else" (EIP6). This line of reasoning follows because if a substance were caused by another substance then it would be logically dependent on the conception of another cause which would betray ID3 which defines substance as that which is conceived through itself. Therefore the cause of the existence of substance must

be in its own nature, which leads Spinoza to claim “it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist” (EIP7). By means of this reasoning Spinoza has confirmed the necessary existence of substance which supports the objective reference of the Unity for the mystic. In order to draw the full correlation between Spinoza and the mystics ontology however it must still be shown that there is only one substance that is infinite by nature. Spinoza understands the infinite nature of substance to follow logically from its necessary existence.

If substance is both necessarily existent and self-caused by its nature, then it must be eternal by its nature as well. Spinoza notes, “By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing” (EID8). Since it pertains to the nature of substance to exist, it cannot be conceived of as having a beginning or end and therefore must exist outside duration. This eternality pertains to both attributes and substance, but to a higher degree to substance which consists in all the attributes. Substance pertains to the category of things that are “absolutely infinite”.

In clarification of this position we can examine when Spinoza notes,

“Nothing in nature is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality, or being it has, the more it has attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. And consequently there is nothing clearer than that a being absolutely infinite must be defined...as a being that consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence.” (EIP10S)

For Spinoza, “if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence” (EID6). All reality then is contained within absolute infinity which includes all possible attributes. Spinoza’s notion of an absolutely infinite substance involves the consideration that substance must include infinite attributes. There are of course two attributes known to us, thought and extension, which are infinite in their own kind in that they persist outside duration, however they do not interact or limit each other, they are instead separate but parallel expressions of substance. Therefore absolute infinity pertains to substance which each of these separate but parallel attributes and all other possible attributes are expressions of.

At this point it has been examined how Spinoza establishes that there is an infinite substance which necessarily exists but yet remains to be shown why only one substance exists of which all else is an attribute or modification. Spinoza’s ontology take an interesting semantic turn in P15 where he calls this infinite and necessarily existing substance “God” (EIP15). For much of the *Ethics* then on, Spinoza will refer to substance as such. Spinoza argues “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived”. His argument for the oneness of God follows from IP5 and IP2 which state respectively that “in nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” and that “there must necessarily exist a substance with infinite attributes”. If there were any other substance it would have to be expressed by means of some attribute but God has every possible attribute therefore this other substance would be expressed by another attribute already expressed by God which defies IP5. For this reason Spinoza concludes

there can be no other substance but God (EIP14). By means of these propositions Spinoza renders a refined framework in support of the mystics notion of an Absolute Infinite Unity. While one could object to the soundness of Spinoza's argument, as Leibnitz does, it should suffice for the correlation that we are attempting to draw between his project and mysticism that on Spinoza's account there is only one substance that is both, infinite, and necessarily existing.

Spinoza's ontology demonstrates how all things are in some sense manifestations of God, either expressed as attributes or modifications. Spinoza clearly affirms his position on the matter by means of his demonstration of EIP15 where he mentions, "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God". The mystic argues, as does Spinoza, that an individual human being is not only part of this Unity, but can *apprehend* itself as part of this Unity. That is, an epistemological, as well as an ontological, point can be made. It has been examined earlier that this position is paramount to the mystical experience and now by means of our examination of Spinoza's ontology we notice that we are, and can conceive of ourselves, as part of God or Nature. How in particular this is possible for Spinoza, I will examine in the next section on epistemology and method. Furthermore, while epistemic and ontological priority is given to an Absolute Infinite Unity on both the mystic and Spinoza's accounts, the most seemingly obvious area of distinction lays in another aspect of their respective epistemologies, the role of reason in cultivating the apprehension of this Unity.

Ultimately it will be shown that, on closer examination this distinction does less to separate the projects as much as it does to harmonize them in an interesting way.

### **Section 3: Method and Epistemology**

While it has been examined that Spinoza's framework supports the ontology of the mystic in the sense that everything is somehow a manifestation of God, it has not yet been explored whether an individual can experience himself as part of God the way the mystic experiences himself as part of the Unity. While Spinoza argues that God is the underlying substrate of all reality and can be apprehended as such, the mystic speaks of specifically participating in the infinite nature of the Unity. This next section will examine the specific nature of the mystic and Spinoza's epistemological stance as related to discursive reasoning. Through this exegesis we will notice that Spinoza both, exalts the individual's capacity to participate in the infinite nature of God, and grants epistemic priority to a mode of apprehension he considers superior to reasoning which he calls *Scientia Intuitiva* (intuition). These considerations signify that the mystical experience is precisely what Spinoza is concerned with in the *Ethics*.

#### **3.1 Three Types of Knowledge:**

Spinoza writes about the three forms of knowledge:

“It is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions: from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses... I have been accustomed to call knowledge from random experience; from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of properties of things. This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge. In addition...there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive

knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essence of things.” (Spinoza, EIIP40S2)

In part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza delineates three types of knowledge central to his epistemology which he calls, “Opinion or imagination,” “Reason,” and “Intuitive knowledge.” Knowledge from opinion or imagination involves, “knowledge which has been represented to us through the senses” or from signs. Spinoza calls this first type of knowledge confused, maintaining that it is not an appropriate source of knowledge (EIIP40). Spinoza’s position on this matter corresponds to the earlier discussion on ontology and epistemology. Knowledge of finite things as they exist in duration have epistemic and ontological inferiority to the knowledge of things as manifestations of attributes and God, and it is relative to this more pertinent conceptual framework that the first type of knowledge is confused. While this position follows easily from what we have examined earlier in Part 1 of Spinoza’s project, the distinction between Spinoza’s notion of rational and intuitive knowledge is much less apparent.

Rational and intuitive knowledge both involve an understanding of the causal and determined order of things through the necessity of the divine nature, which Spinoza calls “adequate ideas” (EIP29). A true idea of God includes the conception of God’s self-causing and necessary existence while a true idea of a finite mode includes a full conception of the causes that determine it, such as the finite mode’s ontological dependence on the attributes and God. Though both rational and intuitive knowledge involve these adequate ideas, Spinoza’s definition of the two types of knowledge

indicates some difference with respect to what the adequate ideas specifically involve. Reason involves the mind's apprehension of common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things, while intuitive knowledge involves adequate knowledge of the essences of things (II40S2). By reason involving 'common notions and properties of things' Spinoza means that rational knowledge involves adequate ideas of what is common to all things in virtue of the sort of things they are. Using rational knowledge one recovers these common notions by "regarding a number of objects at once" in terms of their "agreements, disagreements and oppositions" (EIIP21). Taking extension as an example, all bodies are modes of the attribute extension meaning an individual cannot fully understand a body without understanding it as extended or in other words, an adequate idea of any body *involves* the adequate idea of extension. When a human body encounters another body, the idea of the humans body encounters the idea of the other body as well and reason functions to recover the common notion of extension that is imminent to both. A property that would follow from extension necessarily includes the concept of motion and rest and therefore such a conception is also involved in rational knowledge. So by reason involving, 'common notions and properties of things' Spinoza means that reason involves the attributes of extension and thought, along with other general principles that follow from the attributes necessarily.

While rational knowledge definitely involves the adequate ideas of common notions and general properties, one subject of debate in scholarship regards whether or not rational knowledge also involves adequate ideas of particular things. Furthermore, If

rational knowledge does involve adequate ideas of particular things, what differentiates those adequate ideas from the adequate ideas reserved for intuitive knowledge that involves “the essences of things”? Such questions have led some of the Spinoza scholarship to suggest that there is a new domain of substantial information that is reserved for intuitive knowledge. Steven Nadler argues that such a gap in content between reason and intuition would certainly make Spinoza something of a mystic. Nadler argues that Spinoza is a “rationalist through and through” as opposed to a mystic on the grounds that there is no gap in substantial information between rational and intuitive knowledge. Nadler contends that the two types of knowledge are instead distinct only by means of their modes of cognition referred to as “form”. I will examine this distinction between form and content further and demonstrate that, regardless of the outcome of the dispute, Spinoza still meets the muster for qualification as a mystic because the domain of new information gained by the mystical experience is not where the crux of mystical categorization lies. I argue that what is important for qualification as a mystic is reverence for an experience that involves the intuitive apprehension of the Absolute Infinite Unity, which Spinoza exalts as the pinnacle of his ethical project. Spinoza’s epistemology, hence still qualifies as a framework for the mystics epistemology despite Nadler’s position.

### **3.2 Analysis of Content and Form dispute**

An exegesis of the scholarly debate around the epistemic disparity between reason and intuition will clarify two points that are important for the association of Spinoza with

mysticism. First we will notice how Nadler's interpretation of Spinoza in this debate demonstrates a framework for how the mystic experience's himself "melt away" at the moment of the mystical experience. Second, this discussion will help clarify how the limitation of reasoning is conceived of similarly by both Spinoza and the mystic.

The area of contention surrounding the disparity between reason and intuition involves two areas of dispute. On one hand scholars hold interpretive disagreements as to what extent these types of knowledge extend to "singular things". Further adding to the the confusion are questions as to what Spinoza specifically means by the "essences" of things reserved for intuitive knowledge. Looking back to the quote in EIIP40S2 where Spinoza delineates the three forms of knowledge, with respect to what Spinoza mentions about "singular things", some scholars interpret the *Ethics* definition of rational knowledge as referring only to the mind's apprehension of common notions and general properties of things, but not to any knowledge of particular things that instantiate such properties. Others argue that rational knowledge extends to particulars in so far as it subsumes them in a broad manner under the common notions and thus includes the general recognition that all individual things are modes that depend on substance, and are governed by the general principles of their respective attributes. On this account, knowing a particular rationally is to know *that* it is necessitated by infinite and finite causes but not to know *how*. On these two interpretations, Nadler notes that Spinoza either believes the content of rational and intuitive knowledge are identical, in which case we only have access to common notions and a vague recognition of the necessity of

everything in nature, or Spinoza believes there is a new domain of substantial information that is accessible with intuitive knowledge, making him a mystic. Nadler argues that neither of these are the case providing an alternative account.

Nadler argues that rational knowledge involves adequate ideas that extend to singular things beyond just common notions or the general fact that particular things are determined by laws of nature. On Nadler's account, both rational and intuitive knowledge involve adequate knowledge of particulars and thus lead to an idea of a thing that situates it in its proper causal context. Both ways of knowing consider a particular thing independent of its durational and changing relationships to other particular things and place it explicitly in relation to an attribute and to the eternal principles that govern all the modes of that attribute, such that one sees not only *that* the thing is necessitated but also *how*. Nadler supports this interpretation by referencing Spinoza's mention that, "it is of the nature of reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent" (IIP44). Unlike knowledge from random experience which connects things together haphazardly giving rise to belief in contingency, rational knowledge involves particulars as they truly are because it regards them through common notions and general properties, thus introducing necessity. Nadler argues that, because reason involves knowledge of these common notions and general properties *sub specie aeternitatis*- "Under the form of eternity," the content of rational knowledge also involves adequate ideas of particular things that are subsumed under these common notions and general properties. In such a case, rational knowledge would access the full scope of content possible involving particular things.

Nadler mentions that, ultimately one is able to achieve an adequate knowledge of the essences of particular things, an understanding of them under the form of eternity and in relation to their infinite and eternal causes rather than in the context of their temporal determinations. But as mentioned at the beginning of this section, Spinoza states that the foundations of reason do not explain the essence of any singular thing (P44C2). Rather, it is intuitive knowledge that involves adequate ideas of the essence of things. What Spinoza means by “essence” in this context is another subject of controversy amongst scholars which has led to further interpretations that intuitive knowledge involves new content.

On Nadler’s position, the epistemic disparity between rational and intuitive knowledge is to be framed not in terms of content but in terms of their respective “forms”. By, “form” Nadler means that rational and intuitive knowledge differ only in terms of their methods of cognition. Whereas rational knowledge is discursive and involves inferring the effect from its cause, much as a conclusion is logically derived from premises, intuitive knowledge involves an immediate perception of the connection between cause and effect, resulting in a singular conception of the “essence of a thing”. Intuitive knowledge apprehends the “essence of a thing” because it involves an immediate perception and singular conception of the particular things determinate nature. On this interpretation, intuition represents a kind of epistemic compression of information. It involves a direct apprehension of the causal and logical relationship between its terms, such that the information is united into something grasped in a single

act of the mind.. On Nadler's account, rational knowledge concerns the same content as intuition albeit through inference, and it is therefore the cognitive processes that differentiate the two types of knowledge rather than the content acquired.

Regardless of where one falls with respect to the content/form controversy, this examination of the epistemological distinction between the two forms of knowledge provides some clarity as to how Spinoza's model provides an account of an individual's capacity to experience himself as part of the Absolute Infinite Unity which we noticed is essential for the mystics epistemology. When an individual uses reasoning or intuition he regards himself under the form of eternity, meaning independent of his durational and changing relationships to other particular things. The individual places himself explicitly in relation to God such that he sees how he follows from God's infinite nature. Spinoza's framework explains why the mystic feels the self "melt away" and feels instead a participation in the infinite nature of the Unity. The individual no longer conceives of his identity in relationship to the contingent qualities that distinguish it from other finite things but conceives of how he is an expression of a unified substance. This consideration demonstrates again how Spinoza's project provides a conceptual framework that supports the experience of mystics. In this case the framework provides context for how the mystic experiences himself as part of the Absolute Infinite Unity.

We have examined how Spinoza's ontology presents a framework that supports the mystic ontology with respect to God as indivisible, infinite, and necessarily existing. By means of this engagement with Spinoza we also noticed how his ontology confirms

that all finite things, including humans, are modifications of God. Such an ontology provides a conceptual framework necessary for a justification of the aspect of the mystical experience that involves no longer conceiving of oneself as individuated but instead as part of an Absolute Infinite Unity. Now, by means of the engagement with Nadler, it has been established that Spinoza's epistemology illustrates a framework for this experience. Spinoza understands both rational and intuitive knowledge to characterize modes of cognition that place the individual's conception of himself in reference to God instead of in reference to his durational and changing relationship to other particular things. Such knowledge involves a shift in awareness from an understanding of one's identity as a particular object separate from other objects in duration toward an understanding of oneself as part of the Absolute Infinite Unity. Insofar as the mystical experience involves the ontology of an Infinite Unity, that is experienced by means of the dissolution of the finite self, and is conceived of as having objective reference, we should be able to conclude that Spinoza is concerned with the mystical experience.

One could raise the objection that being concerned with the mystical experience is not itself enough to designate Spinoza's categorization as a mystic however, as there may be an epistemic distinction that prevents this designation. Contingent upon Spinoza's emphasis on the role of reasoning in the cultivation of the mystical experience, Spinoza's project may remain distinct from the mystic project in a significant way. Nadler argues that Spinoza is not a mystic on the grounds that both reasoning and intuition access the

same domain of content. On Nadler's account it is the accessibility of new content by means of intuition that is important for classification as a mystic. While Nadler is correct that often the mystic appears to argue that a domain of substantial content is apprehended during the mystical experience that is outside the domain of reason, I argue that such a position does not separate Spinoza from the mystic. On my position such a distinction is purely the result of unique methods employed by different mystics to generate the mystical experience. For the categorization of a mystic, what is more important than the domain of content apprehended during the mystical experience as achieved through reasoning or by means of another method, is reverence mode of cognition involved in the mystical experience that is above and beyond reasoning. Both the mystic and Spinoza agree that the pinnacle of apprehension involves intuition and is beyond reasoning in this capacity. Such a consideration ultimately aligns Spinoza and the mystics projects. This position will be examined further in the next section

### **3.3 The Inferiority of Reason:**

It has been explored that Spinoza and the mystic both exalt an ontology and epistemology that place the individual as part of an Absolute Infinite Unity which is apprehended during the mystical experience. The area of contention that makes mysticism difficult to rectify with rationalism is not so much concerning this particular relationship between ontology and epistemology however. The claim often made by mystics that the apprehension of the mystical experience is beyond reasoning in some capacity seems to reveal a significant area of friction between the two projects.

For Spinoza, reason plays a necessary role in the cultivation of intuitive knowledge. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza defines intuitive knowledge as “the perception we have when a thing is perceived through its essence alone, or through knowledge of its proximate cause” ( G II.10/C I.13). Nadler notes that rational knowledge then is a necessary condition for intuitive knowledge because it provides the material that the mind eventually perceives through intuition. Using Spinoza’s method, one utilizes reasoning to recover latent ideas involving what is common amongst objects of sense perception which Spinoza calls “common notions”. To illustrate again with an example, by means of reasoning one would compare two objects and infer that they both share the attribute of extension and also infer that they are both expressions of God. This would be as opposed to regarding them in reference to their particular durational properties that distinguish them. Eventually, having done this work, the subject could arrive to a point of no longer needing reasoning to infer these connections but rather apprehending them intuitively. While reason plays this important role in Spinoza’s method, the mystic on the other hand often emphasizes the limitations of reasoning, alleging that the mystical experience is outside the domain of reason in some capacity. Plotinus illustrates this mentioning,

You ask how can we know the Infinite? I answer, not by reason. It is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The infinite therefore cannot be ranked among its objects.

The limitation of reasoning is also emphasized by Ruysbroeck who writes about those who have had the mystical experience stating,

“Such enlightened men are, with a free spirit, lifted above reason into a bare and imageless vision, wherein lives the eternal indrawing summons of the Divine Unity”.

In scholarship, the limitation of reasoning is often associated with mystic claims that the mystical experience is ineffable, and attempts by mystics to explain the experience has often resulted in paradoxical descriptions leading scholars of mysticism to include paradoxicality to the list of mysticisms core characteristics. While Spinoza’s treatment of intuitive knowledge in part V has been interpreted as paradoxical on some readings, I argue another interpretation is evident to explain the limitation of reasoning. On my interpretation, the limitation of reasoning advanced by mystics is exemplified by Spinoza’s position that intuition is a superior mode of cognition to reasoning.

Reverence for intuition over reason is not uncommon for mystics. During his explanation of the transport one experiences through living the Sufi life, Al-Ghazali describes an apprehension beyond the intellect stating,

“Wherefore, just as the understanding is a stage of human life in which an eye opens to discern various intellectual object uncomprehended by sensation; just so in the prophetic the sight is illumined by a light which uncovers hidden things and objects which the intellect fails to reach...How should you know their true nature, since one knows only what one can comprehend? But the transport which one attains by the method of the Sufis is like an *immediate perception*, as if one touched the objects with one’s hand”.

Al-Ghazali draws two points of comparison in this quote, between conceptual thought and sensation, and between conceptual thought and immediate perception. We can juxtapose Al-Ghazali’s description of this transport with the three forms of

knowledge central to Spinoza's epistemology to better understand the limitation of reasoning. On both accounts, rational knowledge involves the recovery of content that is unattainable through mere sense perception. As examined, the proper area of dispute for Spinoza involves disagreements as to what intuition specifically involves over and beyond reasoning. Recall that on Nadler's argument, the superiority of intuitive knowledge over rational knowledge is characterized by an immediate perception into the content rational knowledge has recovered. While Al-Ghazali claims there is a content distinction between what the intellect can uncover and what is available to sense perception, he also appears to assert that there is content gained through immediate perception that the intellect fails to reach. It is such quotes from mystics that likely lead Nadler to deny an association of Spinoza with mysticism. While reasoning has the privileged role in Spinoza's project of recovering common notions and elevating one's knowledge beyond the understanding of things as individuated towards the apprehension of God, the mystic seems to simply leap towards the apprehension of the Unity by means of their own unique practices without the requisite work of reasoning. There are even some reports of spontaneous mystical experiences like that of St. Ignatius Loyola understood to have had the mystical experience while contemplating running water. It is my argument though, that while the mystical experience *could* involve the apprehension of new content for those less rationally inclined, the accessibility of this new content is not *necessary* in order to qualify as a mystic. What is more important for this designation, as related to the inferiority of reasoning, is that there is a mode of apprehension beyond

reasoning, which Al-Ghazali explains as an “immediate perception”. To further illustrate this distinction, in reference to the quote mentioned by Al-Ghazali James notes, “It is commonplace of metaphysics that God’s knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive”. I argue that both Spinoza and the mystic exalt a mode of apprehension beyond reasoning, which we can call intuition, that specifically involves an “immediate insight” into the Absolute Infinite Unity and it is in this sense that reason is limited. The distinction of content only relates to the idiosyncratic methods of attaining the intuitive apprehension of this Unity. While a Sufi mystic like Al-Ghazali utilizes particular ascetic rituals to cultivate the mystical experience, a rationalist of Spinoza’s variety would be the mystic that uses reasoning to generate the experience. That is, the new content gained by mystics at the moment of the mystical experience is a result of their particular methods for generating the experience. For those mystics that do not utilize the method of Spinoza to achieve the mystical experience it is plausible that new content is gained with intuition. For Spinoza however, there is no new content on Nadler’s account; but I argue this is only the result of Spinoza’s particular brand of mysticism that utilizes reasoning to cultivate the mystical experience. In light of these considerations, the content argument used by Nadler to demonstrate Spinoza’s rationalism and argue against his mysticism loses its significance. Spinoza qualifies as a rationalist in virtue of his method and a mystic in virtue of his ontology and epistemology. In other words Spinoza is the rationally inclined mystic.

As a final note on this subject, it should not be discounted that some mystics may regard reasoning as an ineffective method for cultivating the mystical experience. Such an interpretation is certainly plausible considering the diverse traditions which seemingly utilize a variety of different methods that function in the place of reasoning to aid their apprehension of the Absolute Infinite Unity. The ascetic rituals of Sufi practitioners or the meditative rituals of Dzogchen practitioners are two among these practices of which a multitude of different methods are reported. A truly interesting project would involve an exposition of the methods of mystics from different traditions. If the mystic claims regarding the limitation of reasoning are partially a reference to our inability to use reasoning as a method to achieve the mystical experience, we should right this off as a reflection of the mystics bias to their own method. It has been examined that Spinoza is concerned with the mystical experience, and if we are to be charitable to his project we would have to concede that his project stands in opposition to such a claim against the capabilities of reasoning as a method. Furthermore, If the mystics were placed into separate categories by means of their idiosyncratic methods the designation would lose all relevance. To separate Spinoza's rationalism from his mysticism as a result of distinctions in method is to distract from the essence of the projects. What makes the mystic a mystic isn't a disregard for human reasoning as a method towards the apprehension of the Absolute Infinite Unity. The designation of mystic is instead given based on a reverence for intuition as a mode of apprehension beyond reasoning that gives more immediate insight into the Absolute Infinite Unity than is capable by reasoning. It

has been established then that Spinoza's method is one additional path among the variety of those already available for one to achieve the mystical experience. Having qualified Spinoza as a mystic, I will next examine some other important areas of consideration regarding the relationship between Spinoza and mysticism.

#### **Section 4: Ethics and correlation to scientific research:**

##### **4.1 Ethics**

There are other similarities between Spinoza and mysticism which I will now consider briefly but no doubt deserve more attention than I will here provide. Stace notes that there is clear unanimity of evidence from a variety of traditions including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism, that associate with the mystical experience with blessedness, joy, peace, or happiness. Furthermore, the mystical experience is associated with man's greatest perfection, and results in action toward the benefit of others.

It has been examined that Spinoza's notion of intuitive knowledge is the mystical experience. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza associates intuitive knowledge with Beatitudo (blessedness), Felicitas (happiness), Salus (salvation), the greatest satisfaction of the mind (acquiescentia mentis), and the greatest human perfection. Like the mystic then, Spinoza associates the mystical experience with individual perfection and flourishing. The ethical project of the mystic is not only purely egoistic however, as it involves the aiding of others flourishing as well. Such a position also finds correlaries in Spinoza's ethical project. Spinoza notes that insofar as people are rational, they not only flourish

personally but aid in the flourishing of others as well (E4P35). This is partially due to the role of common notions in his epistemic project. When we engage with objects of a similar nature we are best in a place to use reasoning to recover those things which underlie our similar natures. Therefore interaction with other humans, with the aid of reasoning, results in an understanding of what is good for oneself but also for humans generally. Spinoza ultimately argues that when people live according to the guidance of reason, they are good for one another (E4P35).

*Of course it should be considered that interpretations of perfection, blessedness, happiness, and joy likely vary to some extent depending on the mystic. To consider the nature of every mystics conception of these terms is outside the scope of this paper however. Insofar as the mystics ethical ideal involves the greatest human perfection, the greatest joy, manifests in a servitude towards others, and aligns with intuitive apprehension of an Absolute Infinite Unity, Spinoza continues to meet the muster for such a qualification. As a final area of consideration it will be examined briefly how recent scientific research on meditative traditions that involve the mystical experience reveal important pragmatic considerations that have implications for Spinoza's project.*

#### **4.2 Scientific research:**

Recent scientific research has been closing in on the benefits of meditative practices that are known paths toward the mystical experience. As of 2017 there have been 1125 articles in scientific literature on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) has strongest evidence of benefits, with

more than 600 published studies. MBSR is shown to change how people relate to their pain, and has proven highly effective in reducing how much pain elderly people feel and how disabled they become as a result. A review by Johns Hopkins University concluded that mindfulness could lessen anxiety and depression as well as pain about the same amount as medication but with no side effects. Furthermore, highly experienced meditators show signs of lower stress than non-meditators and new identification of gamma oscillations at resting states of Olympic level meditators has excited scientists about the potential implications for well-being.

It would be haphazard to argue that all meditative practices concern the mystical experience. Nonetheless, some meditative practices that have shown to yield benefits, such as mindfulness, involve the mystical experience in their most sophisticated forms. If Spinoza's project is concerned with the mystical experience, as I have argued it is, his rational method should serve as an alternative method to those meditative practices which also concern the mystical experience and have shown to yield benefits through scientific research.

### **Conclusion:**

It has been examined that Spinoza and the mystic both advance an epistemology and ontology that involves the intuitive apprehension of an Absolute Infinite Unity. Furthermore, it has been shown that Nadler's argument against Spinoza's designation as a mystic hinges on a distinction that demonstrates only Spinoza's idiosyncratic method for achieving the mystical experience rather than disqualifying him as a mystic. The only

distinction that remains between Spinoza and the mystic is the rational method Spinoza uses to cultivate the mystical experience. To separate Spinoza's rationalism from mysticism as a result of distinctions in method however is to distract from the essence of the projects. Principle to qualification as a mystic isn't *how* we come to the intuitive apprehension of the Absolute Infinite Unity but *that* we do. Insofar as this is the case, I conclude that Spinoza can and should qualify as a mystic of the rationally inclined variety. An interesting point of progression would be an examination as to whether the designation of mystic is reserved for Spinoza or if other rationalists qualify as well. Further, and most importantly, if Spinoza's method is one that can in fact cultivate the mystical experience, then it could be considered a viable alternative for the meditative practices that also cultivate the experience and have shown to yield improvements in the quality of life of their practitioners.

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