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The Brutal Truth

A Treatise on the Truth of Reality

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Deductive claims follow the Definitions and Axioms. Empirical claims are only as strong as the cited findings. Speculative chapters in Parts V and VIII are labeled as such and do not overturn the ontology.

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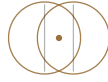
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Philosophical inspiration: Baruch Spinoza. Contemporary prose and applications are by the author, not quotations from Spinoza unless expressly identified.

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PART I

Of Reality

How to Read This Treatise

Abstract

This book applies the geometric method of Spinoza's *Ethics* to the question ordinary life refuses to ask: what is the case, and what follows for a finite mode that has to live inside it. Its central claim is ontological rather than psychological. Reality is one substance, infinite in attributes, expressed as finite modes, operating by necessity. A human being is one such mode. The feeling of being a separate chooser, standing outside the causal order and issuing commands into it, is an inadequate idea: consciousness of effects joined to ignorance of causes. Once that vocabulary is fixed, the one hundred and fourteen chapters that follow are not a catalogue of cynicisms. They are corollaries. Each names a comforting picture of the world, shows the cause that picture conceals, and states what a person can do once the concealment is removed. Twelve Definitions and twelve Axioms are set down first, drawn from verified propositions of the *Ethics*. Documentary and empirical claims are separated from deductive ones and marked as such, because no demonstration can establish a lesion study and no experiment can establish that a category error has been made.

Keywords: Spinoza, substance, mode, conatus, adequate idea, necessity, freedom, bondage, Deus sive Natura.

Prolegomenon

This is the complete text of ten Parts. The Definitions and Axioms of Part I govern everything after them. Chapters that report measurements, histories, or laboratory findings are not proofs of the Definitions. They are illustrations, constraints, or failures of illustrations. Where a finding is weaker than the sentence it used to support, the chapter says so. Where a chapter enters territory Spinoza did not settle, the chapter is marked as speculative and is not permitted to overturn a demonstration.

The scope of the whole work. It treats truth as an adequate idea of a cause, and reality as the one substance of which every cause is a mode. It covers the practical advantages that follow from seeing this, the social punishments that follow from saying it, the floor beneath human self-description, the questions that remain open, the reorganization that makes the floor livable, the operations that actually increase power, and the strategies that remain guesses.

What it does not cover. It does not offer a new religion, a cosmic parent, or a technique for becoming uncaused. It does not teach you how to feel better about death by denying it. It does not claim that every brutal sentence in the older editions was a settled fact. Several were polemic. Several were overfitted to a study. This edition keeps the severity and withdraws the false precision.

The method. Three kinds of claim appear in this work and they are never confounded. Deductive claims are established from the Definitions and Axioms, in the manner of the *Ethics*, and are valid or invalid. Empirical claims are established by measurement, replication, and the history of a field, and are reported with their limits. Speculative claims are marked as such: they may be interesting, they may even be useful as bets, and they do not become ontology by being repeated. The common error, in both directions, is to refute a demonstration with a mood or a measurement with a metaphor.

The reader. No prior knowledge of Spinoza is assumed, and no mathematics is used. The reader is assumed to be capable of following a proof, to be willing to hold comfort in suspension until a cause is named, and to prefer an account of what is to an account of what would be nicer. The reader who wants consolation will find some, late, and will find that it is not consolation in the ordinary sense. It is the removal of a second suffering: the protest that reality ought to have been otherwise.

A note on the text. Citations of the form E1P14 refer to Part I, Proposition 14 of Spinoza's *Ethics*; E2D4 refers to a Definition in Part II; E3P6 to Part III, Proposition 6. Every such reference was checked against the text before it was used. *Depends on* lines under chapter titles name the Definitions, Axioms, and Ethics propositions that the chapter applies. They are not decorations.

What "truth" means here

Truth, in this book, is not sincerity, not consensus, and not the feeling of conviction. Spinoza's formula is exact: a true idea is an adequate idea, and an adequate idea is one that, insofar as it is considered in itself, has all the properties of a true idea (E2D4). Knowledge of an effect depends on and involves knowledge of its cause (E1A4). An idea is adequate when the cause can be clearly and distinctly perceived in it. An idea is inadequate when the mind has the effect and lacks the cause, and then invents a story to cover the gap.

The ordinary mind lives in that gap. It is conscious of wanting, choosing, loving, blaming, and hoping. It is ignorant of the chain that produced the want. It therefore treats the want as an origin. That treatment is the source of almost every comforting illusion this book will name. The illusion is not a lie told by a villain. It is the natural product of a finite intellect that perceives itself more clearly than it perceives the world that produced it (E2P19, E2P23, E2P29).

It follows that "brutal" does not mean cruel. It means: stated without the covering story. A truth can be brutal and still be ordinary. Gravity is brutal in this sense. So is death. So is the fact that praise and blame, applied to an uncaused will, describe nothing in nature.

What "reality" means here

Reality, in this book, is not "whatever my tribe currently affirms," and it is not a veil behind which a more interesting universe is hiding. By reality I understand substance: that which is in itself and is conceived through itself (E1D3). There is only one such thing (E1P14). Spinoza calls it God or Nature. The "or" is the entire theology of this book. It is not a being among beings. It is the being of beings. It does not stand outside the causal order and intervene. It is the causal order.

Whatever exists, exists as a mode of that one substance (E1P15, E1P25C). A mode is a finite expression, determined to exist and to act by another finite expression, and so on without end (E1P28). You are a mode. This sentence is a mode. The market, the nervous system, the star, the law, the marriage, the tumor, and the proof are modes. There is no second world in which a different you could have chosen otherwise. There are only the causes that were available, and the effects that followed.

Two attributes of substance are known to us: thought and extension (E2A5). They are not two things interacting. They are one thing expressed in two ways (E2P7). This is why the book will refuse every story in which a mind bosses a body, or a body secretes a mind as a waste product, or a soul rents a brain for a lifetime and then vacates. The order of ideas is the order of things. A change in one is a change in the other, because there are not two.

From this, three refusals follow immediately.

First: there are no final causes. Nature does not act for an end (E1 Appendix). The universe is not trying to teach you, reward you, or complete a story in which you are the protagonist. Teleology is the imagination

reading its own appetite back onto substance.

Second: nothing is contingent (E1P29). The feeling that an event "need not have happened" is a comparison between what occurred and an image of what did not. The image was never a second reality. It was a fiction produced by incomplete knowledge of the causes.

Third: a finite mode cannot be the absolute origin of its own actions (E1D7, E1P28). Freedom, if the word is to be kept, cannot mean exemption from the causal order. It can only mean this: that a larger share of what happens in us is understood through our own nature, and a smaller share is suffered as an obscure passion (E3D1, E3D2, E5P3).

That is the truth of reality this book will not bargain away. The one hundred and fourteen chapters are what it costs to stop bargaining.

Definitions

Definition I. Substance. As Spinoza: by substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed (E1D3).

Note. This is the first and last metaphysical claim in the book. Everything else is a mode of it. The word is not a poetic name for "the universe as a collection." A collection is conceived through its members. Substance is not.

Definition II. Attribute. As Spinoza: by attribute I understand that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence (E1D4). Thought and extension are the two attributes known to us (E2A5).

Note. An attribute is not a property glued onto a hidden thing. It is a way the one thing is conceived as essential. The book will therefore treat a change of body and a change of idea as one change, reported twice.

Definition III. Mode. As Spinoza: by mode I understand the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived (E1D5). A human being is a finite mode, determined to exist and to operate by another finite mode, and so on to infinity (E1P28).

Note. "You" names a complex mode, not a substance. The grammar of ordinary language treats the name as if it named a little substance inside the big one. That grammar is the first inadequate idea.

Definition IV. God or Nature. As Spinoza: by God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence (E1D6). This book uses *God or Nature* for that substance and nothing else.

Note. The definition excludes will, purpose, personality, petition, and reward. If those are required for the word "God" to be usable, the word should be dropped. The referent remains. It does not become smaller when the name is changed.

Definition V. Cause. From a given definite cause an effect necessarily follows; and, conversely, if there is no definite cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow (E1A3). Knowledge of an effect depends on and involves knowledge of its cause (E1A4).

Note. Cause, here, is not a billiard-ball picture borrowed from later physics. It is intelligibility: that through which a thing is conceived. A story that names an effect and withholds its cause is not a causal story. It is an image.

Definition VI. Adequate idea. As Spinoza: by adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties or intrinsic denominations of a true idea (E2D4). Truth is the adequate idea of a cause.

Note. Adequacy is not sincerity and not confidence. A man may be passionately sure of an inadequate idea. The test is whether the effect can be understood through the cause named.

Definition VII. Inadequate idea. By *inadequate idea* I understand a partial, confused, or imaginary grasp of a cause, in which the mind has the effect and lacks the order that produced it (E2P28, E2P35). Falsity is the privation of knowledge that such ideas involve.

Note. Inadequate ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate ones (E2P36). Confusion is not a sin and not an accident. It is what a finite mode produces when it is more affected than it is understanding.

Definition VIII. Conatus. Everything, insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being; this endeavor is the actual essence of the thing (E3P6, E3P7). In a human being this endeavor, as it is conscious, is called desire (E3P9S).

Note. Desire is not a defect in an otherwise rational creature. It is the creature. Reason does not generate motion. It clarifies the object of a motion already underway.

Definition IX. Affect. By *affect* I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the ideas of these affections (E3D3). Joy is the passage to greater power; sadness the passage to lesser (E3P11S).

Note. The book will not treat feelings as reports about the world. They are reports about a change in power, referred to an object that may or may not have caused them.

Definition X. Bondage. By *bondage* I understand the human lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects: the condition of the man who is not his own master, but is governed by fortune, in whose power he so is that although he sees the better for himself, he is still compelled to follow the worse (E4 Preface).

Note. Bondage is not chains and not society. It is governance by inadequate ideas. A prisoner who understands the lock is less in bondage, in this sense, than a free citizen who does not understand his own appetite.

Definition XI. Freedom. As Spinoza: that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone (E1D7). For a finite mode this is a limit, not a possession. What can be increased is the proportion of one's actions of which one is the adequate cause (E3D1, E3D2).

Note. Freedom so defined is compatible with being caused, because a thing's nature is itself a cause. What it excludes is the fantasy of having been able, in the same causal world, to have done otherwise.

Definition XII. Power. By *power* I understand a mode's capacity to act, that is, to be the adequate cause of effects that follow from its nature (E3P7, E4P18S). An increase of power is joy; a decrease is sadness. The useful is whatever aids this increase (E4D1, E4P38).

Note. Power is not domination and not status. A man may dominate a room and be almost entirely a patient of his vanity. Another may increase his power in solitude by replacing a confused idea with a clear one.

Axioms

Axiom I. From a given definite cause an effect necessarily follows; if there is no definite cause, no effect can follow (E1A3).

Axiom II. Knowledge of an effect depends on and involves knowledge of its cause (E1A4).

Axiom III. Except for substance, nothing can be or be conceived without God; whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God (E1P15). There is only one substance (E1P14).

Axiom IV. Nothing in the universe is contingent. All things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and operate in a certain way (E1P29). Nature has no end set before it (E1 Appendix).

Axiom V. The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (E2P7).

Axiom VI. Men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined (E1 Appendix; E2P35S; Letter 58).

Axiom VII. The ideas of the affections of the body, referred to the mind alone, are not clear and distinct but confused (E2P28). Inadequate and confused ideas follow by the same necessity as adequate ones (E2P36).

Axiom VIII. Everything, insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being (E3P6). We do not desire a thing because we judge it good; we judge it good because we desire it (E3P9S).

Axiom IX. An affect can be restrained or taken away only by an opposed and stronger affect (E4P7).

Axiom X. Knowledge of good and evil is nothing but the affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it (E4P8).

Note. Moral vocabulary is therefore a report of power-change in the guise of a description of the world. The report can be useful. It is not a second ontology.

Axiom XI. An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it (E5P3). There is no affection of the body of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept (E5P4).

Axiom XII. A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death (E4P67).

Note. This axiom is placed last because it is a consequence the reader will not credit until the others have done their work. It is not a slogan for avoiding the subject. It is the test of whether the subject has been understood.

The order of the books

Part I has just been given. It is the only part that must be read first.

Part II, Of Power, collects twenty ideas that increase a mode's capacity to act once inadequate pictures of choice, mind, desire, and work are withdrawn. They are advantages only relative to those who still spend force on the pictures.

Part III, Of Bondage, collects the ideas that cost dinner invitations: the ones that name coordination as morality, convenience as friendship, and interest as ideology. They are not permission to become cruel. Cruelty is usually an inadequate idea with a good seat.

Part IV, Of the Floor, is the bedrock: consciousness as a mode of extension and thought, death as the end of a finite mode, the absence of final causes, the construction of meaning, the nonexistence of an uncaused will. This is the part that produces vertigo if Part I was skipped.

Part V, Of What Cannot Yet Be Demonstrated, keeps the questions that honest inquiry does not close: the remaining gap in a theory of experience, the status of time, the silence of the sky. It is not a license to reinstall a cosmic parent in the gap. The gap is a gap.

Part VI, Of Freedom, is the reorganization. Understanding necessity does not abolish pain. It abolishes the second pain of insisting that the first pain was a mistake in the order of Nature. The dissolution of the self as a little substance is not nihilism. It is accuracy.

Part VII, Of Operation, is what is left when motivational mythology is removed: talent, luck, ownership, bargaining power, consistency, quitting. These chapters are empirical where they claim to be empirical. They apply Definition XII. They are not proofs of the Definitions. They are what a mode with conatus actually does once it stops lying to itself about merit.

Part VIII, Of the Frontier, is labeled speculation. A speculative chapter may be used as a bet. It may not be used as a metaphysics.

The conclusion does not add a fifteenth kind of comfort. It restates E4P67 and sends the reader back to the only work there is: the replacement of inadequate ideas by adequate ones.

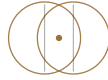
A note on severity

A book that calls itself *The Brutal Truth* will be accused of enjoying the bruise. Some sentences in earlier editions did. This edition does not. Severity is a property of the object, not a style of the author. If a claim is false, its harshness does not save it. If a claim is true, softness does not improve it.

You may find that some of the one hundred and fourteen are wrong. You should hope that some of them are wrong. The appropriate response to any individual claim is examination. Does the demonstration hold? Does the evidence, where evidence is claimed, survive its own limits? Would replacing this idea with a clearer one increase or decrease the power to act?

The goal is not to believe the book. The goal is to stop believing the covering stories. What remains, if the work is done, is not a darker world. It is the same world, with fewer inventions in it.

We begin from the idea that has been destroying philosophical careers for centuries, and that Spinoza stated without apology: a man who thinks he is an uncaused cause has not yet begun to understand himself.



PART II

Of Power

CHAPTER 1

I. Free Will Does Not Exist

Depends on: Definition XI, Axiom VI. Ethics E1 Appendix, E2P35S, Letter 58.

Demonstration. A thing is free only if it exists from the necessity of its own nature and is determined to act by itself alone (Definition XI). A finite mode is determined to exist and to act by another finite mode, and so on without end (E1P28). Therefore a human being is not an uncaused cause of his actions. The feeling of having been able to do otherwise is consciousness of the action joined to ignorance of its causes (Axiom VI). ■

The Claim

You have never made a free choice. The feeling that you could have done otherwise is ignorance of the causes operating upon you. Freedom is not the absence of causation. Freedom is the understanding of it.

The Comforting Illusion

The standard view holds that you are an autonomous agent. You weigh options, exercise willpower, and choose. When you succeed, it reflects character. When you fail, it reflects weakness. The entire apparatus of praise, blame, guilt, pride, and moral responsibility rests on this foundation.

It is false.

The Causal Mechanism

Every decision you have ever made arose from prior causes: genetic predispositions you did not select, neural architecture shaped by environments you did not control, habits installed by reinforcement schedules you never consciously authorized, affects triggered by stimuli you did not notice, and ideas inherited from a culture you were born into. The brain initiates action before the conscious mind registers a decision. Benjamin Libet demonstrated this in 1983: a readiness potential in the motor cortex preceded the conscious experience of deciding by roughly 350 milliseconds. Subsequent studies by John-Dylan Haynes and colleagues extended the window to seconds, using fMRI to predict decisions before subjects reported making them. These experiments concern constrained laboratory tasks. Their interpretation does not by itself settle whether all meaningful choices are decided before awareness.

Spinoza offered a philosophical argument against uncaused human choice; modern neuroscience does not by itself confirm his entire argument. In the *Ethics*, he argues that men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of their causes. A stone thrown through the air, if it were conscious, would believe it chose its trajectory. We are the stone, equipped with a press secretary that explains our flight path.

The Evidence

The Libet experiments (1983) showed a consistent temporal gap between neural initiation and conscious awareness of decision. Soon et al. (2008, *Nature Neuroscience*) demonstrated that patterns of brain activity in pre-frontal and parietal cortex predicted choices up to seven seconds before subjects reported deciding. Wegner's "The Illusion of Conscious Will" (2002) catalogued the conditions under which people confabulate agency for ac-

tions they did not cause. More recently, Robert Sapolsky's "Determined" (2023) summarized the case from endocrinology, neuroscience, genetics, and developmental biology: every behavior has a biological antecedent, and every biological antecedent has a prior cause, in an unbroken chain reaching back before birth.

The rejoinder that "compatibilism preserves free will" merely redefines free will until it loses all connection to what people actually mean by the term. If "free will" means "acting according to one's desires without external coercion," then a dog chasing a squirrel has free will. The compatibilist move preserves the word by gutting the concept.

Case Study

Consider two smokers. The first believes in free will. Each morning, he resolves to quit. Each afternoon, he lights a cigarette. He attributes the failure to weak character and tries again tomorrow with the same strategy: willpower. He has been failing this way for fifteen years.

The second understands determinism. She asks: what causes produce smoking, and what causes would produce cessation? She removes cigarettes from her house. She stops drinking coffee, which triggers the craving. She replaces the afternoon break with a walk. She uses nicotine patches to decouple the chemical dependency from the behavioral habit. She does not wake up each morning asking herself to "choose" differently. She changes the causal structure and lets the new causes produce the new outcome.

The first smoker still smokes. The second quit ten years ago and never looked back. The difference was not character. It was causal engineering.

The Objection

"If there is no free will, then nothing I do matters. I am just a puppet."

This objection confuses determinism with fatalism. Fatalism claims that outcomes are fixed regardless of your actions. Determinism claims that your actions, like everything else, have causes, and those actions produce effects. Your deliberation, your effort, your decision to read this chapter: all are real causes in the causal chain. They produce real outcomes. The fact that they themselves have causes does not make them less real or less efficacious. The puppet objection imagines an external puppeteer. The reality is that you are part of the causal fabric, not a victim of it. Your actions matter precisely because they are causes.

The Operational Implication

Stop asking how to make yourself want something. Start asking what arrangement of environment, habit, and bodily state would make the desired outcome causally inevitable. Replace moral struggle with causal engineering. When you fail, do not ask "What is wrong with me?" Ask "What cause produced this outcome, and what cause would produce a different one?" The first question produces guilt and paralysis. The second produces analysis and action.

The person who believes in free will tries to choose differently and fails because the causes remain unchanged. The person who understands determinism changes the causes and succeeds because new causes produce new outcomes. This is not philosophy. It is the difference between the smoker who still smokes and the one who quit.

Evidence and interpretation

Readiness-potential findings do not settle the metaphysical debate. Schurger, Sitt, and Dehaene (2012) modeled spontaneous fluctuations and threshold crossing as an alternative account of the averaged pre-movement buildup: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1210467109>. The deterministic po-

sition defended here is philosophical; it should not be presented as the unique experimentally proven interpretation. Spinoza's conscious-stone illustration is in Letter 58 to Schuller.