

SPINOZA

The Letters

Translated by

SAMUEL SHIRLEY

Introduction and Notes by

Steven Barbone, Lee Rice, and Jacob Adler

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rightly conceive Thought, we ought to comprehend it under ideas, because with the removal of all ideas we would destroy Thought. So the example not being sufficiently clear to us, the matter still remains somewhat obscure, and we stand in need of further explanation.

Finally, at the beginning of the third Scholium to Proposition 8,⁴⁹ we read: "Hence it is clear that, although two attributes may be conceived as really distinct (that is, the one without the aid of the other), it does not follow that they constitute two entities or two different substances. The reason is that it is of the nature of substance that all its attributes – each one individually – are conceived through themselves, since they have been in it simultaneously." In this way you seem, Sir, to suppose that the nature of substance is so constituted that it can have several attributes, which you have not yet proved, unless you are referring to the fifth definition⁵⁰ of absolutely infinite substance or God. Otherwise, if I were to say that each substance has only one attribute, I could rightly conclude that where there are two different attributes there are two different substances. We would ask you for a clearer explanation of this.

Next, I am most grateful for your writings which were conveyed to me by P. Balling⁵¹ and gave me great pleasure, particularly the Scholium to Proposition 19.⁵² If I can here serve you, too, in any way which is within my power, I am yours to command. You need only let me know. I have begun a course of anatomy, and am about half way through. When it is completed, I shall begin chemistry, and thus following your advice I shall go through the whole medical course. I must stop now, and await your reply. Accept my greetings, who am,

Your very devoted,
S.J.D'Vries.

1663. Given at the Hague, 24 February
To Mr. Benedict Spinoza, at Rijnsburg.

⁴⁹ Probably EIP10Schol in the finished version of the *Ethics*.

⁵⁰ See E1Def6.

⁵¹ See the third section of our introduction.

⁵² We are not able to determine about which proposition in the final version of the *Ethics* de Vries writes.

LETTER 9 To the learned young man Simon de Vries, from B.d.S.

[Printed in the O.P. The original is extant. The O.P. text is an abridged version of the original, and the last paragraph appears only in the Dutch edition of the O.P. The letter is undated. A conjectural date is February 1663.]

My worthy friend,

I have received your letter, long looked for, for which, and for your cordial feelings towards me, accept my warmest thanks. Your long absence has been no less regretted by me than by you, but at any rate I am glad that my late-night studies⁵³ are of use to you and our friends, for in this way I talk with you while we are apart. There is no reason for you to envy Casearius.⁵⁴ Indeed, there is no one who is more of a trouble to me, and no one with whom I have had to be more on my guard. So I should like you and all our acquaintances not to communicate my opinions to him until he will have reached a more mature age. As yet he is too boyish, unstable, and eager for novelty rather than for truth. Still, I am hopeful that he will correct these youthful faults in a few years time. Indeed, as far as I can judge from his character, I am reasonably sure of this; and so his nature wins my affection.

As to the questions raised in your group (which is sensibly organised), I see that your difficulties result from your failure to distinguish between the kinds of definition. There is the definition that serves to explicate a thing whose essence alone is in question and the subject of doubt, and there is the definition which is put forward simply for examination. The former, since it has a determinate object, must be a true definition, while this need not be so in the latter case. For example, if someone were to ask me for a description of Solomon's temple, I ought to give him a true description, unless I propose to talk nonsense with him. But if I have in my own mind formed the design of a temple that I

⁵³ Because Spinoza earned his living grinding and making lenses, night time was the only free time he had in which to pursue philosophy.

⁵⁴ See note to 'Casarius', Ep8.

want to build, and from its description I conclude that I will have to purchase such-and-such a site and so many thousands of stones and other materials, will any sane person tell me that I have reached a wrong conclusion because my definition may be incorrect? Or will anyone demand that I prove my definition? Such a person would simply be telling me that I had not conceived that which in fact I had conceived, or he would be requiring me to prove that I had conceived that which I had conceived, which is utter nonsense. Therefore a definition either explicates a thing as it exists outside the intellect – and then it should be a true definition, differing from a proposition or axiom only in that the former is concerned only with the essences of things or the essences of the affections of things, whereas the latter has a wider scope, extending also to eternal truths – or it explicates a thing as it is conceived by us, or can be conceived. And in that case it also differs from an axiom and proposition in requiring merely that it be conceived, not conceived as true, as in the case of an axiom. So then a bad definition is one which is not conceived.

To make this clearer, I shall take Borelli's example of a man who says that two straight lines enclosing an area are to be called figurals. If he means by a straight line what everybody else means by a curved line, his definition is quite sound (for the figure intended by the definition would be



or some such figure), provided that he does not at a later stage mean a square or any other such figure. But if by a straight line he means what we all mean, the thing is plainly inconceivable, and so there is no definition. All these considerations are confused by Borelli, whose view you are too much inclined to embrace.

Here is another example, the one which you adduce towards the end of your letter. If I say that each substance has only one attribute, this is mere assertion unsupported by proof. But if I say that by substance I mean that which consists of only one attribute, this is a sound definition, provided that entities consisting of more than one attribute are thereafter given a name other than substance.

In saying that I do not prove that a substance (or an entity) can have more than one attribute, it may be that you have not given sufficient attention to the proofs. I advanced two proofs, the first of which is as follows: It is clear beyond all doubt that every entity is conceived by us under some attribute, and the more reality or being an

entity has, the more attributes are to be attributed to it. Hence an absolutely infinite entity must be defined. . . and so on. A second proof – and this proof I take to be decisive – states that the more attributes I attribute to any entity, the more existence I am bound to attribute to it; that is, the more I conceive it as truly existent. The exact contrary would be the case if I had imagined a chimera or something of the sort.

As to your saying that you do not conceive thought otherwise than under ideas because thought vanishes with the removal of ideas, I believe that you experience this because when you, as a thinking thing, do as you say, you are banishing all your thoughts and conceptions. So it is not surprising that when you have banished all your thoughts, there is nothing left for you to think. But as to the point at issue, I think I have demonstrated with sufficient clarity and certainty that the intellect, even though infinite, belongs to *Natura naturata*, not to *Natura naturans*.⁵⁵

Furthermore, I fail to see what this has to do with understanding the Third Definition,⁵⁶ or why this definition causes you difficulty. The definition as I gave it to you runs, if I am not mistaken, "By substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that whose conception does not involve the conception of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that attribute is so called in respect to the intellect, which attributes to substance a certain specific kind of nature." This definition, I repeat, explains clearly what I mean by substance or attribute. However, you want me to explain by example – though it is not at all necessary – how one and the same thing can be signified by two names. Not to appear ungenerous, I will give you two examples. First, by 'Israel' I mean the third patriarch: by 'Jacob' I mean that same person, the latter name being given to him because he seized his brother's heel.⁵⁷ Secondly, by a 'plane surface'⁵⁸ I

55. For the distinction, see E1P29Schol. Spinoza is here revising and reviving a medieval distinction. For information on the (debated) significance of the distinction within Spinoza's own philosophy, see James Collins, *Spinoza on Nature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 26-49; H. Siebeck, "Ueber die Entstehung der Termini *natura naturans* und *natura naturata*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 3 (1890), 370-378; and Harry M. Tiebout, "Deus, sive Natura," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16 (1955-56), 512-521. The phrases occur more frequently in KV than in Spinoza's later writings.

56. E1DeF3-4.

57. See Genesis 25:26 for an account of Jacob's name and 35:10 for an account of the change of this name to Israel.

58. Aristotle reports Democritus' account that a smooth surface or plane is one which reflects back all rays of light, and thus it has a white appearance. By contrast, a rough surface would reflect only a few rays, and so it would seem black.