

# “The Habit of Virtue”: Spinoza on Reason and Memory

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**Abstract:** In this paper I explain how, for Spinoza, humans can acquire the “habit of virtue” from “fatal necessity” (Ep.58). Spinoza claims that no decision can be made without memory of the thing that one wants to do. However, his rejection of free will also implies that nobody can freely select what to remember. It seems that, as it is not in the power of an individual to freely choose what to remember and do, it is not possible to establish a disposition towards virtuous behavior. To solve this puzzle, I focus on the way in which memory interacts with reason, in Spinoza’s system. I argue that this interaction allows the unfolding in time of reasoning processes. Reasoning can, in turn, be conceived as a kind of habit, which generates and sustains virtuous behavior. First, I clarify what the notion “habit of virtue” signifies for Spinoza. Then, I briefly review his account of memory. Next, I elucidate his conception of reason and its building blocks, “common notions.” On these grounds, I show how reason can be understood as an activity by which mnemonic associations are reconfigured. Finally, I point out how reason relies on memory to preserve itself in time, determining virtuous habits.

**Keywords:** Memory, reason, virtue, habits, common notions, affects, actions and passions, Spinoza, Tschirnhaus

## 1. Introduction

With this paper I aim to provide an analysis of the way in which memory interacts with reason, in Spinoza's system. I argue that this interaction gives rise to what we may call "discursive reasoning," that is, the unfolding in time of reasoning processes. Further, discursive reasoning can be understood as a habit, which is identical, in Spinoza's account, with virtuous behavior.<sup>1</sup>

The impetus for this investigation is provided by a question that the German mathematician Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus poses in a letter addressed to Spinoza, around the end of 1674. In his letter, Tschirnhaus expresses perplexity about Spinoza's necessitarianism and his rejection of free will. He asks:

If we were compelled by external things, who could acquire the habit of virtue [*habitus virtutis*]? [...] [I]n how many ways does it not happen that if we are determined to something by external things, we resist this with a firm and constant heart? (Ep.57, C.II 425-426/G.IV 264)

Spinoza's answer is rather elusive:

I don't know who has told him [Tschirnhaus] that it can't happen from a fatal necessity [*ex fatali necessitate*], but only from a free decision of the mind, that we should have a firm and constant disposition. (Ep.58, C.II 430/G.IV 267)

This reply suggests that an individual can acquire the "habit of virtue," a "firm and constant disposition" to act virtuously, from a "fatal necessity." Yet, Spinoza does not explain how, on his view, this can actually happen. In this paper, I will try to address Tschirnhaus's question, providing a series of arguments compatible with Spinoza's overall philosophical framework. As mentioned above, my aim is to demonstrate that the acquisition of the habit of virtue, in Spinoza's terms, depends on precise accounts of reason and memory.

<sup>1</sup> For Spinoza's works, I use the following abbreviations: E=*Ethics* (followed by part number; ad=definition of an affect; App=Appendix; c=corollary; d=definition/demonstration, when it appears after a proposition number; exp=explanation; p=proposition; post=postulate; Pref=Preface; s=scholium); Ep=Letter (followed by letter number); TIE=*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (followed by section number, according to the division followed by Curley); TTP=*Theological-Political Treatise* (followed by chapter and section numbers, according to the division into sections followed by Curley). English quotations are from Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Works*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley, 2 vols, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985-2016, hereafter abbreviated as C (followed by volume number). I retain Curley's use of the italics to indicate when "or" translates the Latin *sive* or *seu*. Generally, *sive* and *seu* denote an equivalence, rather than an alternative. References to Latin versions of Spinoza's works are to Baruch Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. by Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925, hereafter abbreviated as G (followed by volume number).

I will show how, for Spinoza, the effects of both reason and memory are necessarily determined. Our power to reason depends on the laws of our nature alone and, in this sense, its effects can be understood as originating from a kind of “free necessity [*libera necessitate*]” (Ep.58, C.II 427/G.IV 265), not compelled by external factors. It expresses itself as the power of ordering and connecting images according to the “order of the intellect” (E5p10, C.I 601/G.II 287): an order of causal connections between things based on their ever-present common properties. The images themselves, which we perceive in our mind and which our reason orders according to the order of the intellect, are instead provided by memory. Yet, the way in which we come to perceive, retain, and recollect images in our mind is not in our power: it is determined, rather, by the way in which external causes necessarily arouse in us particular networks of memories rather than others. Hence, the acquisition of a “habit of virtue”—which I identify with the permanence and flourishing in the mind of trains of ideas ordered according to the order of the intellect—insofar as it also relies on memory, remains also dependent on elements of “fatal necessity.”

To support this thesis, I will begin, in section 2, by clarifying what the notion of “habit of virtue” signifies for Spinoza. In section 3, I will describe Spinoza’s account of memory: this entails the presence in the human mind of networks of interconnected ideas, which reflect the manner in which the human body is affected by external objects. In section 4, I will introduce Spinoza’s distinction between two ways in which ideas can be associated together: the “common order of nature” (E2p29c, C.I 170/G.II 114), which depends on how memory is shaped by the external causes, and the “order of the intellect,” which depends on reason. In section 5, I will show how reason—that is, the activity by which the mind grasps some common properties of things and joins images through them—can be understood as a kind of reconfiguration of mnemonic associations. In section 6, I will then explain how reason, which Spinoza identifies with human virtue itself, relies on memory and organizes it in order to preserve itself in time, thus giving rise to discursive reasoning and becoming a habit. In section 7, which concludes the paper, I will summarize how reason and memory must therefore coexist, to determine the acquisition of one’s virtuous habits.

## **2. Human virtue: actions *vs* passions of the mind**

To better grasp Spinoza’s reply to Tschirnhaus, we can start by clarifying what he understands by “habit of virtue.”<sup>2</sup> This expression (*virtutis habitus*) is

<sup>2</sup>The notion of “habit” was widely discussed throughout the Middle Ages. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century, specific debates on virtue, understood as a kind of “habit” and “second nature,” were prompted by the appearance of Grosseteste’s full translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*

rarely used in his works, although it appears a few times in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. On one of these occasions, Spinoza identifies “acquiring the habit of virtue” with “gaining control over the passions” (TTP.III 12, C.II 113/G. III 46). He adds that the means to acquire the habit of virtue depends “chiefly on our power alone, *or* on the laws of human nature alone.” For this reason, he concludes that “these gifts [...] have always been common to the whole human race” (TTP.III 12, C.II 114/G.III 46-47).<sup>3</sup> Still, this power, common to all humans, is not conceived by Spinoza as determined by any freedom of the will. By contrast, it is conceived as subject to the same “universal laws of nature, according to which all things happen and are determined” (TTP.III 8, C.II 112/G.III 46).<sup>4</sup>

In a similar way, in the *Ethics* Spinoza defines “virtue” as the power by which we cause effects that can be understood through the laws of human nature alone:

By virtue and power I understand the same thing, i.e., virtue insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, *or* nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone. (E4d8, C.I 547/G.II 210)

In Spinoza’s terms, to be able to bring about things which can be understood through one’s own nature alone means, for an individual, to be the “adequate cause” of those things (E3d1). When an individual is the adequate cause of some effects, that individual is properly said to “act” (E3d2). Expressions of our virtue are, therefore, those of our affections that Spinoza identifies with “actions,” as opposed to “passions” (E3d3). Proper “actions,” that is, are affections that can be entirely understood as effects determined only by our nature and its specific laws: they originate in and depend only on ourselves, rather than on the influence of external causes acting upon us. Passions, by

(for previous debates, see Cary J. Nederman, “Nature, Ethics, and the Doctrine of ‘Habitus’: Aristotelian Moral Psychology in the Twelfth Century,” *Traditio* 45 [1990], pp. 87-110). Regarding Spinoza’s general terminology for “habits,” see Syliane Malinowski-Charles, “Habitude, connaissance et vertu chez Spinoza,” *Dialogue* 43:1 (2004), pp. 101-102. She highlights how the Aristotelian conception of a virtuous habit as a “second nature” differs from that of Spinoza, who identifies virtue with one’s very own nature.

<sup>3</sup> Spinoza mentions “habit of virtue” another three times: TTP.V 4 (C.II 139/G.III 69), TTP.XV 44 (C.II 281-282/G.III 188), and TTP.XVI 6-7 (C.II 283/G.III 190).

<sup>4</sup> For Spinoza, the “laws of nature” are “nothing but the eternal decrees of God, which always involve eternal truth and necessity” (TTP.III 8, C.II 112/G.III 46). He contends that “no one does anything except according to the predetermined order of nature, i.e., according to God’s eternal guidance and decree” (TTP.III 10, C.II 113/G.III 46). Hence, whatever in a human follows from the only power of their nature, can be also called “God’s internal aid” (TTP.III 9, C.II 113/G.III 46).

contrast, are affections of the mind and the body that occur in us as a result of external causes acting upon us.

In sum, Spinoza does not deny that there can be some effects in us that do not depend on external causes, and he does not contend that the acquisition of a virtuous habit is entirely determined by external factors that lie beyond our power, contrary to what Tschirnhaus's objection seems to imply. Quite the opposite, expressions of our virtue are, by definition, those actions that depend only on our nature and can be understood through it alone. Yet, as these actions follow from, and must comply with, the necessary laws of our nature, they are determined in a necessary manner as all the other effects which are compelled in us by external causes. As Spinoza also writes to Tschirnhaus, the fact that something "exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature" is the only way in which he conceives of freedom: it is, in his words, "free necessity" (Ep.58, C.II 427/G.IV 265).<sup>5</sup> What Spinoza means to deny, in his reply to Tschirnhaus, is that what determines an individual to act virtuously—or to produce certain effects that can be understood through the laws of their nature alone—must depend on a free decision of the mind, or on the freedom of their will.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza invokes the role of memory to claim that there would be no decision in the mind—that is, there would be no disposition of an individual to do or will anything<sup>7</sup>—if there was no memory

<sup>5</sup> Conversely, "a thing is [...] compelled if it is determined by something else to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way" (Ep.58, C.II 427/G.IV 265). See also Spinoza's definitions of free and necessitated behavior in E1d7. Much scholarly work has been devoted to disentangling Spinoza's account of freedom and its relationship with necessitarianism (for a monograph on this topic, see Matthew J. Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; for two recent articles, see Martin Lenz, "Whose Freedom? The Idea of Appropriation in Spinoza's Compatibilism," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 71:3 [2017], pp. 343-357; Moira Gatens, "Spinoza's Notion of Freedom," in Yitzhak Y. Melamed (ed.), *A Companion to Spinoza*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021, pp. 394-401).

<sup>6</sup> See also E2p48. An analysis of Spinoza's rejection of free will in the *Ethics*, can be found in Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "The Causes of Our Belief in Free Will: Spinoza on Necessary, 'Innate,' yet False Cognition," in Yitzhak Y. Melamed (ed.), *Spinoza's "Ethics": A Critical Guide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 123-127.

<sup>7</sup> In Ep.58, the definition of "habit of virtue" as a "firm and constant disposition" translates the Latin *firmatus et constans animus* (C.II 430/G.IV 267). Similarly, as regards the term *habitus*, Malinowski-Charles notes that in Spinoza it "designates, in a very specific way, a permanent disposition to do something" ("Habitude, connaissance et vertu," p. 101, my translation). Although *dispositio* is sometimes seen as a technical term in Spinoza, the way "disposition" is used by both Curley and Malinowski-Charles in this context is hardly misleading. For Spinoza, one's decision (*decretum*) necessarily agree with one's disposition (*dispositio*): the difference is that while the latter notion generally refers to the way in which someone's body is physically determined to do something, the former denotes the cognitive element—the fact that the mind has the idea of the bodily determination (see also Oberto

of the thing that we want to do, or of the action that we want to perform. Consistent with his rejection of free will, Spinoza adds that it is not in the free power of the mind to either recollect a thing or forget it. Hence, it is not by an act of free will that we decide what to do or not to do.

[W]e can do nothing from a decision of the mind unless we recollect it. E.g., we cannot speak a word unless we recollect it. And it is not in the free power of the mind to either recollect a thing or forget it. (E3p2s, C.I 497/G.II 144)

It follows that no decision or disposition to act in a virtuous way can arise in the mind of an individual if memory is not preset to recollect ideas that are capable of arousing, somehow, virtuous decisions and actions in the individual. Therefore, to understand how memory can determine one's decisions, and eventually enable the acquisition of the habit of virtue, it will be useful to look at Spinoza's description of human memory.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Spinoza's account of associative memory: images, affects, and decisions

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza identifies the source of memory with a function of the human body that is responsible for the formation, retention, association and reproduction of some corporeal affections.<sup>9</sup> He roughly divides the parts composing the human body into fluid, soft, and hard (E2post2, C.I 462/G.II 102), and contends that, following a contact with an external body, the fluid parts of the human body can push against the soft parts, thereby leaving "traces of the external body" impressed on them (E2post5, C.I 462/G.II 102-103). When the body is so affected, the mind has, in parallel, ideas of such corporeal

Marrama, "Consciousness, ideas of ideas and animation in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25:3 [2017], pp. 510-513). Spinoza argues that decisions of the mind and dispositions of the body mirror one another, happen simultaneously, and coincide with an individual's overall appetite, i.e., their *conatus* (E3p2s, C.I 497/G.II 143; E3ad32exp, C.I 539/G.II 199). More on this is explained below, in section 3. For a study on the concept of "disposition" in Spinoza, see Jacques-Louis Lantoine, *L'intelligence de la pratique: Le concept de disposition chez Spinoza*, Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Malinowski-Charles focuses on the role played by memory, in Spinoza's account, in shaping the repetitive nature of habitual behavior ("Habitude, connaissance et vertu," pp. 106-107). My aim here is instead to explain how memory accounts for the presence or absence of ideas and affects in someone's mind—determining thereby an individual's appetite and decisions.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed description of Spinoza's account of memory, on which this section draws, see Oberto Marrama, *Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind: Consciousness, Memory, and Reason*, PhD dissertation, University of Groningen/UQTR, 2019, pp. 127-141.

modifications.<sup>10</sup> These affections of the body, which are like “impressions” of external objects in us, are in fact the “images” which are perceived and remembered by the mind (E3post2, C.I 493/G.II 139-140). According to Spinoza, their ideas “represent external bodies as present to us” (E2p17s, C.I 465/G.II 106, translation modified).

As long as the soft parts of the human body retain these traces, or impressions, the fluid parts can interact with them again according to the same pattern of movement. This allows bodily affections to be replicated as they originally happened.<sup>11</sup> According to Spinoza, the retention and repetition of the same interactions between fluid and soft parts of the body can explain how the mind is capable of retaining and recollecting ideas of past impressions, in different and separate moments. This is because the reiteration of these affections in the human body must, in parallel, be mirrored by corresponding ideas in the human mind. He contends, on this basis, that “[a]lthough the external bodies by which the human body has once been affected neither exist nor are present, the mind will still be able to regard them as if they were present” (E2p17c, C.I 464/G.II 105).

Based on this model,<sup>12</sup> Spinoza specifically understands “memory” as the result of associations between ideas—associations which must reflect, in the mind, a corresponding order and connection of corporeal affections (E2p18s, C.I 465/G.II 106-107).<sup>13</sup> He argues that “[i]f the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also” (E2p18, C.I 465/G.II 106). Spinoza seems to imply that the human body can be affected in such a manner that several images

<sup>10</sup> This is a consequence of Spinoza’s so-called “mind-body parallelism,” according to which “[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E2p7, C.I 451/G.II 89). Another formulation of this principle is found in E3p2s: “the order of actions and passions of our body is, by nature, at one with the order of actions and passions of the mind” (C.I 494/G.II 141). For a seminal study on this topic, see Michael Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. For an analysis that questions the aptness of the notion “parallelism” as regards Spinoza’s theory, see Chantal Jaquet, *L’unité du corps et de l’esprit: Affects, actions et passions chez Spinoza*, Paris: PUF, 2004, pp. 9-16.

<sup>11</sup> This reiteration of bodily affections can also occur in the absence of the external objects that caused the first impressions—thanks, Spinoza writes, to the “spontaneous motion” of the fluid parts along the soft parts already shaped by past contacts (E2p17d2, C.I 464/G.II 105).

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza is cautious about the verisimilitude of his physiological explanation of memory: “[t]his can happen from other causes also,” he points out, “but it is sufficient for me here to have shown one through which I can explain as if I had shown it through its true cause” (E2p17s, C.I 464/G.II 105).

<sup>13</sup> See also Harry Parkinson, “Language and Knowledge in Spinoza,” *Inquiry* 12:1-4 (1969), p. 16.

of external bodies are impressed together on its soft parts. If these traces are physically connected to each other in the body, the interaction of one of them with the fluid parts of the body will involve the whole network of interconnected impressions.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when the human body is affected in ways which cause the fluid parts to interact with a pre-existing impression, the mind will imagine that impression along with all those that are naturally enchained with it. This, Spinoza contends, allows the mind to have multiple ideas of corporeal modifications on the occasion of a single affection (E2p18d). In this sense, the notion of “memory” put forth by Spinoza includes the whole spectrum of sensations and ideas of images that, bound together, are presented at one time to an individual’s mind, following a single external stimulus.

The same associative mechanism, in Spinoza’s account, also explains how affects of sadness and joy—which Spinoza identifies with affections respectively related to a decrease or an increase in one’s power of acting (E3d3; E3p11s; E3ad2-3)—are joined to each other and to the images which are presented to one’s mind.<sup>15</sup> Based on his account of memory, Spinoza maintains that “[i]f the mind has once been affected by two affects at once, then afterwards, when it is affected by one of them, it will also be affected by the other” (E3p14, C.I 502/G.II 151). This observation leads him to conclude that “[a]ny thing can be the accidental cause of joy, sadness, or desire” (E3p15, C.I 503/G.II 151).

To sum up, Spinoza conceives memory as the mechanism by which, at any given time, a whole network of interconnected ideas is presented to the mind of the individual, following a single affection produced by external causes. The same mechanism also brings about a corresponding connection of affects, which necessarily determine the actual disposition of an individual to act, or react to the sources of joy and sadness that they imagine

<sup>14</sup> Laurent Bove argues that it is the striving (*conatus*, in Spinoza’s terms; E3p7, C.I 499/G.II 146) of the human body to persevere in its being that prompts it to create connections between corporeal traces (*La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*, Paris: Vrin, 1996, pp. 20-25). He therefore identifies what he calls *Habitude* (in French, capitalized) with human *conatus*, contending that *Habitude* constitutes the foundation of memory. He distinguishes this “aptitude, or spontaneous power” (my translation) of the human body from the repetition of the affections themselves, which he calls *habitudes* (in French, non-capitalized). In addition to introducing elements of finalism which are foreign to Spinoza’s philosophizing (see E1App), this reading seems to me to clash with his descriptions of memory and imagination as purely passive mechanisms. In my analysis, I retain the term “habit,” with reference to one’s virtue, to address what Spinoza defines, in Ep.58, as “a firm and constant disposition” to oppose the power of passions (see also footnote 7 above).

<sup>15</sup> Concerning this point, see also Lisa Shapiro, “Spinoza on the Association of Affects and the Workings of the Human Mind,” in Melamed (ed.), *Spinoza’s “Ethics”*, pp. 215-219.



as present—determining, therefore, their current appetite, decisions and actions.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, according to Spinoza, “the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies” (E3p2s, C.I 497/G.II 143). The human appetite, in turn, coincides in human beings with “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being” (E3p7, C.I 499/G.II 146), and it is regarded by Spinoza as “the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation” (E3p9s, C.I 500/G.II 147). It is, therefore, on account of our appetite and our very essence that “[w]e strive to promote the existence of whatever we imagine that leads to joy, and to remove or destroy whatever we imagine is contrary to it, *or* that leads to sadness” (E3p28, C.I 509/G.II 161, translation modified). Hence, insofar as the way in which memory is configured, along with the way in which it is aroused by external causes, determine at each moment the images and the associated affects of sadness and joy that affect an individual’s mind, memory also necessarily determines that individual’s relevant appetite and decisions.

#### **4. Connections of ideas: the “common order of nature” and the “order of the intellect”**

According to Spinoza, the order and connection in which ideas are initially associated in one’s memory reflect the way in which an individual “is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that” (E2p29s, C.I 471/G.II 114). For, we have seen, images and their memory associations originate from affections caused in the human body by external bodies.

[M]emory is [...] nothing other than a certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body—a connection that is in the mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body. (E2p18s, C.I 465/G.II 106-107)

Spinoza calls the sequence in which external causes affect our body, determining the associations of ideas that characterize our imagination and memory, the “common order of nature” (E2p29c, C.I 471/G.II 114).<sup>17</sup> However, he distinguishes the order and connection of the ideas that is provided in this

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed investigation of the nature and role of affects in Spinoza’s theory of action, see Donald Rutherford, “Deciding What to Do: The Relation of Affect and Reason in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” in Noa Naaman-Zauderer (ed.), *Freedom, Action, and Motivation in Spinoza’s “Ethics”*, New York/London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 133-151.

<sup>17</sup> See also E2p30d, E4p4c, E4p57s, and E4App7.

way by one's corporeal memory from the connection of ideas which follows the "order of the intellect,"<sup>18</sup> and which, he maintains, is equal in all humans.

I say [...] that this connection happens according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body in order to distinguish it from the connection of ideas which happens according to the order of the intellect, by which the mind perceives things through their first causes, and which is the same in all men. (E2p18s, C.I 466/G.II 107)

In the Fifth Part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza contends that the mind, so long as it is not diverted by affects contrary to its own nature, has "the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect" (E5p10, C.I 601/G.II 287). Spinoza grounds this claim on his mind-body parallelism thesis. "In just the same way as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the mind," he argues, "so the affections of the body, or images of things are ordered and connected in the body" (E5p1, C.I 597/G.II 281). It follows that, if the mind, by its own power, can rearrange a given order of ideas of impressions, then the relevant impressions in the body must, in parallel, assume a new corresponding configuration.<sup>19</sup> Further, by reordering the ideas of the affections of the body, the mind can also rearrange the affects of joy and sadness that those affections bring about.

Thus, Spinoza argues that by this power of reordering one's ideas, an individual can acquire the capacity to defend themselves from the influence of passions and evil affects. Indeed, he contends that one of "the remedies for the affects" consists in "the order by which the mind can order its affects and connect them to one another" (E5p20s, C.I 605/G.II 293). He writes:

By this power of rightly ordering and connecting the affections of the body, we can bring it about that we are not easily affected with evil affects. For a greater

<sup>18</sup> Spinoza does not define "intellect" (*intellectus*) and his use of this notion in the *Ethics* (as well as his other works) is at times inconsistent. As far as a human mind is concerned, by "intellect" Spinoza usually refers to its capacity to understand and form adequate ideas independently of the imagination (see, for example, E1p15s, C.I 424/G.II 59). This seems to be the kind of use put forward when he mentions the "order of the intellect" as distinct from the order of the affections determined by "fortuitous encounters with things" (and which dominates the Fifth Part of the *Ethics*; see E5p39s, C.I 614/G.II 305). For a seeming identification of "intellect" with "reason," see E4App4. On other occasions, however, Spinoza uses "intellect" as a synonym for the whole capacity to perceive or "faculty of conceiving," which also includes imagination and inadequate knowledge (see E2p49s, C.I 487/G.II 133).

<sup>19</sup> For discussions on how this rearrangement of bodily affections can happen without implying any interaction between mind and body, see Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: L'expérience et l'éternité*, Paris: PUF, 1994, p. 318, and Marrama, *Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*, pp. 141-148.

force is required for restraining affects ordered and connected according to the order of the intellect than for restraining those which are uncertain and random. (E5p10s, C.I 601/G.II 287)

Spinoza demonstrates this thesis by referring to another proposition (E5p7), in which he identifies the affects that are ordered according to the intellect as affects “arising from or aroused by reason.”

Affects that arise from, or are aroused by, reason are, if we take account of time, more powerful than those that are related to singular things which we regard as absent. (E5p7, C.I 600/G.II 285)

Here it is to be noted that the affects that arise from reason are defined as more powerful, compared to other affects, only insofar as they can exert an effect through time—that is, insofar as they are capable of persisting in one’s memory. To justify this, Spinoza affirms that ideas connected according to the order of the intellect allow for more, and more stable, associations between one another. Images (and relevant affects) connected according to the order of the intellect, therefore, end up being more easily retained and recollected—given favorable circumstances.

In order to elucidate the arguments that Spinoza uses to support these claims, the following section will be devoted to analyzing his account of reason and its building blocks: adequate ideas of properties of things that he identifies with “common notions.”<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Common notions, the “foundations of our reasoning”

For Spinoza, the human capacity to reason, also named the “second kind of knowledge,” depends on “the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things” (E2p40s2, C.I 478/G.II 122).<sup>21</sup> Broadly spea-

<sup>20</sup> The concept of “common notion” was widely used by philosophers before and after Spinoza. For a study that traces its origin to Euclid’s *Elements* and Stoic philosophers, see Johannes Schneider, “Notiones Communes,” in Joachim Ritter et al. (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel: Schwabe, 1984, vol. 6, pp. 938-940. For a study on its use in early modern philosophy, see Andreas Blank and Dana Jalobeanu (eds.), “Common Notions in Early Modern Thought,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 8:1 (2019).

<sup>21</sup> For Spinoza, the first kind of knowledge consists in that provided by the human capacity of having ideas of images and memory of things according to the order and connection of bodily affections determined by external causes (E2p40s2), which we analyzed above and which Spinoza considers “the only cause of falsity” (E2p41, C.I 478/G.II 122). He also distinguishes a third kind of knowledge, called “intuitive” (E2p40s2, C.I 478/G.II 122). For two recent analyses of the latter, see Sanem Soyarslan, “The distinction between reason and intuitive knowledge in

king, Spinoza's "common notions" seem to provide the human mind with the necessary bases of demonstrative reasoning: knowledge of common features that are instantiated in individual things and reflected in the content of their ideas, and which can act as predicates in syllogisms.<sup>22</sup> The demonstration that Spinoza provides to explain the existence of these "adequate ideas" in the human mind relies on the existence of common properties of bodies (E2p38d and E2p39d).<sup>23</sup> Common notions are, indeed, defined as ideas of properties that are common to all things—hence, also "common to all men" (E2p38c, C.I 474/G.II 119)—or of properties that are common to certain specific things and our body (E2p39).<sup>24</sup> All ideas that can be inferred from common notions must be also adequate (E2p40)—that is, in Spinoza's words, "clear and distinct" (E2p36, C.I 473/G.II 117)—and true (E2d4). For these reasons, Spinoza defines "common notions" as the "foundations of our reasoning" (E2p40s1, C.I 475-476/G.II 120).<sup>25</sup>

These ideas, Spinoza argues, allow associations with and between the ideas of all images of things that share such properties. Hence, the more a common notion is associated with relevant images, the more likely it is that it will be aroused in the mind, in the presence of the right stimuli coming from the external world (E5p11; E5p13)—for that common notion will be recalled each time in which the idea of a connected image is recollected by memory, following an affection of the body.<sup>26</sup> Spinoza writes:

Spinoza's *Ethics*," *European Journal of Philosophy* 24:1 (2013), pp. 27-54; Kristin Primus, "Part V of Spinoza's *Ethics*: Intuitive knowledge, contentment of mind, and intellectual love of God," *Philosophy Compass* 17:6 (2022), e12838.

<sup>22</sup> On this, see also Frédéric Manzini, *Spinoza: une lecture d'Aristote*, Paris: PUF, 2009, pp. 161-163; Alexandre Matheron, "Modes et genres de connaissance (*Traité de la réforme de l'entendement*, paragraphes 18 à 29)," in Alexandre Matheron (ed.), *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l'âge classique*, Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011, p. 476 and pp. 485-486.

<sup>23</sup> "Adequate ideas," in Spinoza's account, are ideas that are capable of fully and truly representing their objects (see E2d4 and E2p11c). Some scholars have questioned whether the requirements that Spinoza sets out for an idea to be regarded as "adequate" are consistent with the possibility that any finite mind (including human minds) might have adequate ideas at all. See, for example, Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem*, p. 183, n. 29; Eugene Marshall, *The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza's Science of the Mind*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 20-57; Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 110-147; Thaddeus Robinson, "Spinoza and the Possibility of Adequate Ideas," *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 4:8 (2022), pp. 1-15.

<sup>24</sup> Conversely, Spinoza affirms that objects of ideas of reason cannot be essences of singular things (E2p37).

<sup>25</sup> For further discussions on this topic, see also Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza II: L'Âme (Éthique, II)*, Paris: Aubier-Montagne, 1974, pp. 326-328 and pp. 365-370; Michael LeBuffe, *Spinoza on Reason*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 86-92.

<sup>26</sup> See also Malinowski-Charles, "Habitue, connaissance et vertu," p. 113.

Things we understand clearly and distinctly are either common properties of things or deduced from them, and consequently are aroused in us more often. And so it can more easily happen that we consider other things together with them rather than with [things we do not understand clearly and distinctly]. (E5p12d, C.I 603/G.II 289)

Spinoza also maintains that the common properties that are the objects of ideas of reason are conceived as immutable and always present (E5p7d, C.I 600/G.II 285)—or “under a certain species of eternity” (E2p44c2, C.I 481/G.II 126). Therefore, they are always perceived in the same manner, in association with any idea of an image that shares these properties—regardless of whether the object of that image is conceived of as being present or absent, existing or non-existing, belonging to a past or a future time.<sup>27</sup>

The stability in one’s mind of the ideas of reason implies that also any affect aroused by them “will always remain the same,” for as long as they persist in one memory and all times in which they are aroused in one’s mind. Spinoza writes:

[A]n affect that arises from reason is necessarily related to the common properties of things, which we always regard as present (for there can be nothing that excludes their present existence) and which we always imagine in the same way. So such an affect will always remain the same, and hence, the affects that are contrary to it, and that are not encouraged by external causes, will have to accommodate themselves to it more and more, until they are no longer contrary to it. To that extent, an affect arising from reason is more powerful. (E5p7d, C.I 600/G.II 285-286)

We can thus understand reason, as outlined by Spinoza, as being an activity performed by the human mind, by which sensory data randomly received from the environment—ideas of images, presented to the mind by our imagination and memory—are rearranged and associated to one another according to the order of the intellect: an order of logical connections and mutual causations, based on shared properties, which is independent of the temporal order according to which the images are originally gathered.<sup>28</sup> This power of the mind, by

<sup>27</sup>To give an example, some common properties apply equally to my late grandfather and my living daughter (say, all features shared by human beings in general); thus, ideas of these properties will affect my mind in the same way and with the same power, independently of whether I will think of them in association with the memory of my late grandfather or the idea that I have of my daughter presently running in front of me.

<sup>28</sup>As regards the body’s parallel activity, reason can be understood as a natural and necessary rearrangement of affections of the body—reflected in the mind—that hinges on common properties of bodily affections and the interactions that these affections, based on such properties, entertain with each other. Robert Abraham insightfully defines Spinoza’s common notions as “knowledge of the dynamic relationships within the body,” which acquaint us with “the principal

which it understands and connects things through their common properties—or, using Spinoza's words, “the power of forming clear and distinct ideas, and of deducing some from others” (E5p10d, C.I 601/G.II 287)—is nothing other than the necessary activity in which the mind expresses its proper nature.<sup>29</sup> It is in fact the activity of the mind “as it is determined internally,” that is, when it acts according to the laws of its nature alone, not compelled by “fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that” (E2p29s, C.I 471/G.II 114).<sup>30</sup> Hence (as we have seen in section 2), it is identical with its virtue. As Spinoza writes in E4p23d:

[I]nsofar as [a man] is determined to do something from the fact that he understands, he acts, i.e., does something which is perceived through his essence alone, *or* which follows adequately from his virtue. (E4p23d; C.I 558/G.II 226)

The human capacity to reason, in Spinoza's account, is therefore an expression of human virtue. Furthermore, as we have just seen, reason can arouse in humans affects that can through time overcome, by their capacity to stick in one's mind, the power of competing affects and passions.

In the next section, I will move on to analyze how reason can, on these grounds, become a habit: that is, by which means reason can flourish in one's mind and become its main activity. As we will see, this implies, on the one hand, establishing the sufficient conditions that can prompt a decision to act virtuously and keep reasoning, when our will to reason is challenged by competing appetites. On the other hand, it also requires that ideas ordered according to the order of the intellect can persist in one's mind or be easily available for recollection, in order for reason to be able to develop and build on pre-existing knowledge. Thereby, the permanence in one's mind of affects aroused by reason can effectively overcome the fluctuating power of passions, determined by the many fortuitous interactions that we necessarily have with the external world.

virtue of things having something in common, namely their compelling causal relationship” (“Spinoza's Concept of Common Notions: A Functional Interpretation,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 31:1-2 [1977], pp. 32-35).

<sup>29</sup> “For the mind,” Spinoza also writes, “has no other power than that of thinking and forming adequate ideas” (E5p4s; C.I 599/G.II 284). See also E3p3d. It follows that adequate (i.e., clear and distinct) ideas are effects that entirely depend on the power of the mind, and that the mind is the adequate cause of the adequate ideas it has (E3p1d).

<sup>30</sup> “For so often as it is disposed internally” Spinoza continues, “then it regards things clearly and distinctly” (E2p29s, C.I 471/G.II 114).

## 6. The “habit of virtue” as discursive reasoning

In this account, the fact that the human body is capable of a great many affections or modifications at once (E2p14d), represents both a means and an obstacle to acquiring the habit of virtue.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, as we have seen, having a body capable of “being acted on in many ways at once” (E2p13s, C.I 458/G.II 97) entails, in the case of human bodies, the presence of particularly sophisticated imaginative and mnemonic powers, which enable the retention, association and recall of many interconnected affections at once. This allows a human mind to have at its disposal, at any time, a high number of ideas of bodily affections and perceptions, variously composed and associated with each other, of which reason can “understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions” (E2p29s, C.I 471/G.II 114) and which can be ordered according to the “order of the intellect.”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the same capacity of our body to be affected by external bodies in many ways, brings it about that our perceptive field and our appetite are continuously exposed to great variations. Spinoza contends that it is in fact impossible, for any human being, not to be subject to the effects of the external world in ways which are beyond their power and control. As he writes:

It is impossible that a man should not be a part of nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause. (E4p4; C.I 548/G. II 212)

As a consequence thereof, “it follows that man is necessarily always subject to passions” (E4p4c, C.I 549/G.II 213). For as long as an individual is alive,

<sup>31</sup> Spinoza grounds this capability of the human body on two postulates. According to E2post3, “[t]he individuals composing the human body, and consequently, the human body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways” (C.I 462/G.II 102). According to E2post6, “[t]he human body can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways” (C.I 462/G.II 103).

<sup>32</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggested (referring to E4p38 and E5p39) that the capacity of the human body to be affected in many different ways is by itself a remedy against the passions, independently of the activity of the intellect. As I am demonstrating, without the intervention of reason, the imaginative powers of the human mind—which reflect the capacity of the human body to undergo various and diverse modifications—can only be a disruptive source of confusion and distraction, as they passively feed the mind with multiple perceptions in a seemingly chaotic and erratic manner; conversely, an enhanced imagination becomes useful (it is, in fact, indispensable) as long as it provides material for the intellect (i.e., reason) to identify common properties of things and thereby establish new, steady mnemonic connections between perceptions. References to E4p26 and E4p27 in the demonstration of E4p38 (on which rests also the demonstration of E5p39) corroborate my reading.

their imagination and memory will constantly and necessarily be affected in several ways which do not depend on their power, and which are unknown and unpredictable for them. As we have seen, the ways in which our body is affected by external causes, totally unknown to us, determine multiple images to be aroused in our mind, causing each time different networks of interconnected ideas to be recalled by memory. By bringing about associated affects of joy and sadness, they determine in turn our actual appetites and decisions.<sup>33</sup>

Immersed in this unstable scenario, what human beings necessarily strive for, when they reason, is not only to understand everything that they are capable of at any given time, but also to keep understanding the things that they understand, throughout the variations to which their imagination is inevitably exposed.

What we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding; nor does the mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything else useful to itself except what leads to understanding. (E4p26; C.I 559/G.II 227)

It must be our very own reason, therefore, that by the necessity of its own laws, creates the conditions for persevering in its acting. Here, the human capability of retaining and retrieving ideas of images that are already ordered and connected according to the order of the intellect reveals itself essential for our reason to flourish and become discursive: to become, that is, an uninterrupted train of adequate ideas that preserves and further increases itself in time. Moreover, since reasoning—as we have seen—coincides with our virtue, memory is what allows our virtue to become a “habit.” In other words, memory is what enables ideas and affects “arising from, or aroused by, reason” to become the common motive that determines our decisions and guides our thoughts and actions, despite the power of the ever-changing passions to which we are always exposed and by which we are constantly affected.

For this to be possible, however, reason must organize one’s images and affects in order to always prompt a “decision” to act virtuously, that is, to keep reasoning and, by reasoning, to mitigate or destroy the power of passions. Thus, we can understand human reason as performing three functions:

<sup>33</sup> This is also the reason why, Spinoza reminds Tschirnhaus, all humans “believe themselves to be free,” despite their lack of control on the external causes that determine their memory and decisions: because “men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” and, in case of competing desires, “because they want certain things only slightly, so that their appetite for these things can easily be restrained by the memory of another thing they recall more frequently” (Ep.58, C.II 428/G.IV 266). See also E1App (C.I 440/G.II 78), E2p35s (C.I 473/G.II 117), E3p2s (C.I 496-497/G.II 143), and E4Pref (C.I 545/G.II 207). Concerning this topic, see Melamed, “The Causes of Our Belief in Free Will.”



1. it looks for an order of intelligible causal connections between items of memory, based on ever-present common properties (i.e., the “order of the intellect”), each time that memory provides the mind with a given network of ideas of images and relevant affects (E2p29s);
2. it orders and connects affections and affects according to the order of the intellect (E5p10; E5p20);
3. it provides memory with images and affects rearranged according to this new configuration, for future recollection and use (E5p1; E5p10s).

Properly fulfilling the last point is particularly important, as far as the acquisition of the “habit of virtue” is concerned. As we have seen in section 2, Spinoza holds that “it is not in the free power of the mind to either recollect a thing or forget it” (E3p2s; C.I 497/G.II 144). Indeed, reason is just the activity by which the mind understands and organizes the content provided by one’s memory. This activity, however, is not a kind of memory itself: it does not retain or remember any image by itself, and it is not capable of triggering any kind of mnemonic recollection in one’s mind.<sup>34</sup> Memory—and, along with memory, the possibility to retain and recollect images that are ordered according to the order of the intellect—is always dependent on the affections that affect the human body from the outside. However, as we have just seen, the ways in which our memory can be variously aroused and affected, at any time, with images and affects produced in us by stimuli coming from the external world, are unknown to us. And together with the things we remember, also our appetite becomes subject to unpredictable changes. These limitations dictate the three means by which the activity of reason furthers itself through memory, which Spinoza expounds in the long scholium to E5p10.

First, as a premise, the results that we attain by reasoning—knowledge of common notions, adequate ideas of properties of things, immutable laws of nature—must be kept present to one’s consciousness or soon be made available for recollection, in order for reason to be able to build on them later or use them at all. It is of the essence of reason, therefore, that we “commit [...] to memory” ideas ordered according to the order of the intellect, which express a “right manner of living, or sure maxims of life [*recta vivendi ratio, seu certa vitae dogmata*]” (E5p10s, C.I 601/G.II 287, translation modified).

Second, and consequently, ideas ordered according to the order of the intellect must be arranged in ways that can increase the occasions of recollection that one’s experience and fortune might bring about, in order for us to be able to maintain through time trains of adequate ideas and easily recall those that have been temporarily abandoned. That is, reason will strive to associate adequate ideas to as many images as possible, so that perceiving or remembering any

<sup>34</sup> Concerning this point, see also TIE.82 and TIE.83 note.

of them will cause the whole chain of interconnected adequate ideas to be recalled or retained. Hence, Spinoza goes on to argue that conclusions of right inferences, maxims and precepts that we commit to memory, are to be applied “constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life”:

In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready. (E5p10s, C.I 601/G.II 287)

Note that Spinoza here does not mean to exclusively refer to implementing our “sure maxims” in real circumstances. He is also suggesting that, by using our imaginative resources, we strive to figure all possible scenarios in which the conclusions that we reached by reasoning could turn out to be useful or applicable, in order for us to “always have them ready.”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, ideas must be associated in such a way as to always (as far as possible) determine us to decide to pursue reasoning and act accordingly, when faced with distracting affections or powerful competing passions that might divert our appetite and actions. Hence, reason will strive to associate adequate ideas to pleasant images, so that their recollection will arouse in us affects of joy, capable of orientating our appetite towards those actions that agree with the “precepts of the reason” (E4p18s, C.I 555/G.II 222), and of outweighing potential passions that may instead divert or suppress our determination to act according to those precepts.<sup>36</sup> Hence, in E5p10s, Spinoza writes:

[I]n ordering our thoughts and images, we must always attend to those things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy. (E5p10s, C.I 602/G.II 288)

<sup>35</sup> Regarding this, see the example that Spinoza provides in E5p10s, concerning the maxim that “hate is to be conquered by love, or nobility” (C.I 601-602/G.II 287-288).

<sup>36</sup> Spinoza contends that “[a]mong all the affects that are related to the mind insofar as it acts, there are none that are not related to joy or desire” (E3p59, C.I 529/G.II 188). When the mind is the adequate cause of its own affections (as in the case of adequate ideas for a reasoning mind), these are, by definition, actions of the mind (E3d3), and they relate to a permanence or an increase in one’s power of acting. Hence, they can only arouse in us affects of joy and, consequently, a desire to persevere in the same kind of acting (E3p28). It follows that, for Spinoza, the activity of reason is always, considered in itself, a source of joy that feeds on itself, as it were (see also Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 200-207). Nevertheless, he is also adamant in contending that this joy can be easily overwhelmed by concomitant passions (E4p15), since “the power of external causes [...] compared with ours [...] indefinitely surpass[es] our power” (E4p15d, C.I 554/G.II 220). Therefore, it is reasonable to reinforce our determination to act according to the precepts of reason by joining additional sources of joy to our motives, as long as they are not excessive. In other words, we give ourselves treats (also in terms of reasonable expectations of future joy), to instigate our will to keep using our reason.

At the end of the scholium of E5p10, after having provided a series of examples aimed at concretely showing the reader how these results can be achieved, Spinoza concludes:

[H]e who will observe these [rules] carefully—for they are not difficult—and practice them, will soon be able to direct most of his actions according to the command of reason. (E5p10s, C.I 603/G.II 289)

The list of “rules” and examples that Spinoza provides in E5p10s as remedies against the power of passions may seem, at first sight, to express a series of moral precepts having normative character. In fact, since these activities are all deduced from the “the power [...] by which [the mind] strives to understand things” (E5p10d, C.I 601/G.II 287) and to persevere in this,<sup>37</sup> they simply describe the main endeavor of our reason—the way in which it always works.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, this is what we all, as rational beings, constantly do in our everyday life, as much as we can: showered at each moment with an enormous amount of diverse inputs which originate outside of us, we strive to organize our memory and an external world that, through our memory and imagination, we imagine “as present to us” (E2p17s, C.I 465/G.II 106), in order to keep track of our thoughts and actions.

## 7. Conclusion

Acquiring the habit of virtue, for Spinoza, is a complex process, entirely determined by the way in which natural powers, common to all human beings, necessarily interact with each other and with the different circumstances and situations brought about by the surrounding environment. On the mental level, it requires the interplay of two functions of the mind—two “kinds of knowledge,” in Spinoza’s terms—each of which acts according to its own necessary laws.

<sup>37</sup> See E3p9 and, in particular, E4p26, mentioned above and central to the demonstration of E5p10.

<sup>38</sup> Note that the word “rules,” with reference to Spinoza’s list of precepts in E5p10s, is an addition made by Curley in his translation. It is present neither in Spinoza’s *Opera Posthuma* (which generically refers to *haec*, “these”; p. 245), nor in his *Nagelate Schriften* (the Dutch word used there is *dingen*, “things”; p. 278). It follows that one’s ability and willingness to “observe [...] and practice” the activities enumerated by Spinoza depends entirely on the effects that are determined in us by varying environmental circumstances and by how the mutable powers of external forces help or hinder the natural power of one’s mind, rather than on some supposed strength of one’s free will.

On the one hand, there is memory, which passively receives stimuli from the external world and constantly feeds the mind with networks of ideas variously associated with one another. On the other hand, there is the striving of the mind to reason—that is, to understand things and order them according to their causal connections (the “order of the intellect”). By providing the mind with many ideas of which reason can “understand [...] agreements, differences, and oppositions,” and by allowing the conclusions of right inferences to be retained, recalled, and implemented through mnemonic devices, memory acts as the necessary background that enables reason to unfold and flourish in time, thereby becoming discursive reasoning. These, eventually, are the natural means by which any human can acquire the “habit of virtue,” a “firm and constant disposition” to act according to the dictates of reason and overcome the fluctuating power of passions and sad affects.

However, as we have seen, what the mind effectively remembers at any given time is always determined by the inputs that, coming from the external environment, trigger in one’s body a specific pre-existing network of images and affects. Since the capacity to have this or that set of ideas present to oneself is entirely determined by our memory, also understood as a product of external causes affecting the human corporeal imagination, the process by which we can become virtuous always remains exposed to the risk of failure. For the power by which we strive to keep reasoning can always be overwhelmed by the force with which random encounters constantly affect and variously dispose the human body, causing a continuous mutation of our perceptual landscape, including images and memories, affects and desires, and consequent decisions. For this reason, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza concludes that “only a very few (compared with the whole human race) acquire a habit of virtue from the guidance of reason alone” (TTP.XV 45, C.II 282/G.III 188). Indeed, as Spinoza remarks in his reply to Tschirnhaus, an element of “fatal necessity” does not necessarily prevent the acquisition of the habit of virtue: in fact, it makes it possible.

Briefly put, we need to get lucky, at least a bit, and be put into the right conditions and circumstances—conditions that, by triggering the appropriate memories, remind us of our best intentions and correct inferences—in order to acquire a virtuous habit.<sup>39</sup> But it is human reason, which is equal in all

<sup>39</sup> As opposed to “God’s internal aid,” which concerns the power that humans have due to their nature alone (see footnote 4), in the TTP all conditions provided by the external environment that further encourage and promote our power of being active, reasoning, and acquiring the “habit of virtue” are called “God’s external aid” (TTP.III 9, C.II 113/G.III 46). External factors that can determine the way in which affects are joined and aroused in one’s mind, thereby promoting or hindering one’s steadiness, also include those supplied by human society and culture, such as one’s religion and education (see E3ad27exp).

humans, that strives, by its own power and as much as it can, to create and provoke such proper conditions.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Alexandra Chadwick for her invaluable help, Syliane Malinowski-Charles and Martin Lenz for useful advice, Thomas Colbourne, Torin Doppelt, Rodolfo Garau, Sarah Kizuk, Róbert Mátyási, and two anonymous reviewers for suggestions that helped develop this paper. Much research leading to this paper was supported by the *Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture*, whereas initial editing was supported by the *Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation*. The work was finalized within the frame of the MSCA PF project 101064483 MC-EuCon “Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673) in the history of European ideas of consciousness.” Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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