

## MAPPING SPINOZA'S ETHICS

di John Bagby\*

When I first started reading Spinoza seriously I was captivated by the geometrical order. Not just for its promise of consistency and precision, but especially for its dynamic powers of growth and development. Thinking geometrically is a constructive excogitation that builds, progresses, and engenders thoughts in a way which is analogous to life itself. At that time I was enamored by concepts in thermodynamics, like dissipative structures, auto-poiesis, and the cooperative intelligence of ecosystems. I envisioned the network of dependencies of Spinoza's self-citations as a web of life hanging together dynamically. Yes, this system needs to be logically consistent, but its *adequacy* comes from its power to generate thinking. It is by gathering the definitions and axioms in a mind which actively *conceives* them, and *a fortiori*, in a life whose blessedness is actually increased by this activity, that the truth of his *Ethics* emerges. The consistency of the arguments is analogous to the relation of parts in the body. The vascular system is an intricate and delicate system of dependencies which must always come together perfectly if life is to persevere. Life is not merely the coherence of parts, it is an organization that sustains and augments powers that, by forming a unity, increase the ability to act. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. Life is not the totality of relations but the integral which organizes them.

Spinoza took up the task of considering human actions and appetites as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies. This does not mean that the geometrical style renders its objects static or abstract. Instead it attaches thought directly to production, to the causes which link multiplicity together. It is never enough that the elements simply come together. They must harmonize in a higher order and organize to produce a greater power of acting. The

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geometrical order is a visible sign of this fundamental amplifying improvement of thought: truth is generated by a harmony of organization. Spinoza's use of the geometrical method is a joyous affirmation of the power of thinking. By dedication and persistent effort at improvement, one gains exponential returns on investments.

A basic insight of Spinoza's ethics is that two people working together equals 3 alone. It's not always an exact proportion, but the underlying axiom is that forces which harmonize, increase their power beyond the mere addition of two quantities: cooperation is greater than the sum of its parts.

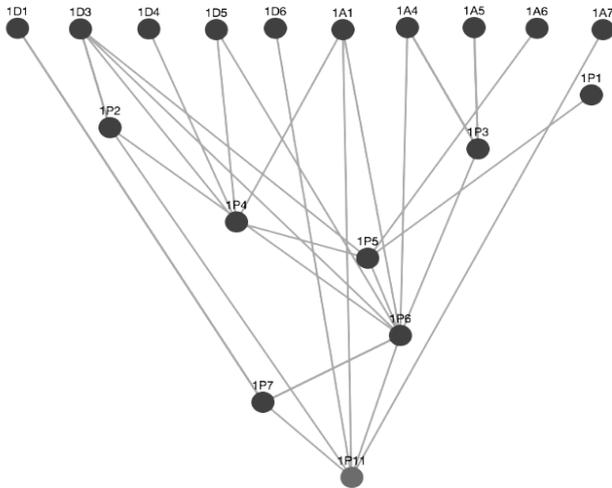
This principle is evident in geometry. Take Spinoza's beloved example of the idea of a triangle. Knowledge of a triangle involves points and lines, but if we take points and lines on their own, we learn nothing about triangles. The formula of triangle is not a sum = lines + points. Neither is it the juxtaposition of lines and points. The triangle is greater than the sum of its parts. The formula of a triangle is that three angles equal two right angles. This is not something which we grasp in the image, a general type, or through categorization by resemblance, but is an ability to engender or conceive. The idea of a triangle emerges from the process of demonstrating its essence and properties. We cut up the triangle and measure its angles to find that they equal two right angles, or employ parallel lines. We repeat the operation on equilateral and various right triangles. We do not need to verify it on every possible triangle to *know* that it is the underlying principle of them all. Reason leads to an intuition greater than the sum of its ingredients.

The idea of a triangle afforded Spinoza another insight about the nature of thought. Thinking involves an affirmation which is an act of will. The affirmation of a triangle pertains to the essence of the idea of a triangle (2p49). This recognition of the intimate relation between will and idea applies, for Spinoza, to all singular volitions, and therefore to the activity of thinking *per se*. Thus we can move again from the parts to a greater whole, from a singular idea to the generation of adequate thinking itself.

Ultimately, humans are not really individuals, but parts of a greater whole. We are parts of a community and of nature itself. We are little better off than worms in the blood of some great unfathomable animal. Our greatest potential does not consist of amassing

power as an individual, but in cooperation with others. Working together, we are elements whose integration is greater than the sum of the parts in isolation. For Spinoza, it is our knowledge of causes—generative ideas—that must guide our political life. “The desire of well-doing, which is engendered by a life according to reason, I call morality.” (4p37s). If the *Ethics* is capable of aiding in one’s cultivation of reason and even in the improvement of society, what greater gift could we be given—as creatures who’s striving for improvement must proceed in an orderly manor—than detailed instructions by which to navigate the sublime peaks of life’s truths?

It was the intricacy of the geometric order which I most desired to see arrayed in its overwhelming complexity—admittedly my initial motivations were for spectacle and wonder. Later this enthusiasm grew into a clearer concept of a useful tool for scholarship. The project began when Jean-Luc Solère, in a seminar at Boston College, asked if anyone had considered digitally mapping Spinoza’s citations. After sharing my vision with him, we applied for an exploratory grant, which we received in 2015, to construct a map on a public platform (still available at [metamaps.cc/maps/1516](http://metamaps.cc/maps/1516)). After completing this project, and with proof of concept, we applied for an ATIG grant, from Boston College, to create the stand alone website, [ethica.bc.edu](http://ethica.bc.edu), which we completed in 2018 with the help of programmers Calvin Morooney and Ben Shippee. This included many advancements, such as the hyperlinked Latin dictionary via Perseus Project and the “tree view” (shown below). One can now journey through the inimitably intricate veins of Spinoza’s colossal achievement of philosophical ingenuity.



To get started, try navigating our full maps under the graph visualization tab. The full maps can be reorganized in several configurations, adjusted on the left hand sign of the page (Layout and Filter By Part). Hover the mouse cursor over elements to have the connection points illuminated. Use the scroll wheel to adjust the zoom. Next, try double clicking on an element to get the full text pop up box with links to the related elements. We have employed the terms “parent” and “child” to refer to either the prior elements which are cited or the subsequent elements which will utilize it later, respectively. Next, at the top of the full text box, click view tree. In this view you can more about in a more linear way. Click on elements to have their relatives displayed in a cascading “family tree.” You can reconfigure the elements by dragging them around. (this currently works best in Safari). After getting your fill of the visuals, explore the “List of Elements” tab, which provides an easily navigable version of the Ethics with the Latin text. Clicking on an element will bring up a text pop up. Double click on any Latin word and a new window will open with the dictionary and syntax information provided by The Perseus Project. The “Search query” at the top right and side of the page allows you to search the entire text of the ethics for any terms you wish to track.