



**Common notion and essence of things: the intense  
relationship between knowledge of the last two kinds**

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## **Abstract**

There is an intense relationship between knowledge of the second and third kind in Spinoza's classification of knowledge. Both of them are adequate, but only the second is the origin of the adequacy. Knowledge of the second kind consists of common notions, but common notions only constitute the essence of human body and what simpler than it. On the other hand, knowledge of the third kind is knowledge of essence of things. Therefore, the relationship between them and how knowledge of the second kind moves to the third become a problem. In this dissertation, I shall firstly evaluate two opposite interpretation and their flaws. And I will re-examine the definition of knowledge of the last two kinds, especially what are common notions and essence of things: the different degrees of common notions, and their difference with universal notions, what are singular things, how these things are defined, and finally what does essence mean. After these reevaluation, I will give my interpretation about how Spinoza, by changing the way definitions are formed, bridge the gap between knowledge of the last two kinds

**Keywords:** Common Notion, Essence, Knowledge, Motion, Power

## Note on the Text

All the texts cited, referred and mentioned in this dissertation are from Curley's *The collected works of Spinoza*. When I cite texts from Spinoza's works except *Ethics*, the volume and page numbers cited refer to Carl Gebhardt edition (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925, 4 vols), which is the standard edition of Spinoza's works. *Short Treatise* and *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* are abbreviated as *ST* and *TdIE*.

Roman numerals refer to parts of *Ethics*, and Arabic numerals refer to different axioms, definitions, propositions and so forth. The following abbreviations are used:

A=axiom

P=proposition

D=definition

C=corollary

S=scholium

L=lemma

Pref=preface

Def Aff=the definitions of the affects at the end of Part III

## Introduction

The theory of knowledge is of great importance to Spinoza's philosophy. Both his epistemology and ethics depend on how he define adequate and inadequate knowledge. Consisting of sense-perception, images, and signs, knowledge of the first kind, also called as opinion or imagination, is the origin of the inadequacy, through which human know nothing certain about the Nature or God (EIIIP40S2). If human do not have adequate knowledge, they will never get the happiness and blessedness (EIIIP49S). Thus, as two different kinds of adequate knowledge, knowledge of the second and third kind play a significant role in Spinoza's philosophy. Through the former, for the first time, human find a certain method to acquire adequate ideas; and by these adequate ideas, they even can form the knowledge of God (EIIIP47), proceeding from which the essence of things is achievable (knowledge of the third kind). Adequate knowledge is the only remedy for human to overcome passions (EVP4S); and the more knowledge of singular things human have, the more power of mind over affects. Thus, knowledge of the third kind, i.e. intuitive knowledge, is the key to happiness. However, how can human make the leap from inadequate knowledge to the adequacy?

The classification of knowledge is also presented in Spinoza's earlier works, both in *ST* and *TdIE*. In *TdIE*, where Spinoza calls knowledge "the perception", the knowledge of the second kind is inadequate; and in *ST*, he calls it "a true belief". Before *Ethics*, Spinoza does not assert that the knowledge of the second kind is the origin of adequacy. It is either a inadequate perception, or a true belief which knows things only through a conviction in the intellect (*ST*, I/55). Then, how Spinoza changes his mind and argues that knowledge of the second kind is adequate? A comparison of texts between descriptions of knowledge of the second kind will reveal the key to understand the uniqueness of it in *Ethics*. In *TdIE* and *ST*, Spinoza describes it as:

*The Perception that we have when the essence of a thing is inferred from another thing, but not adequately. This happens, either when we infer the cause from some effect, or when something is inferred from some universal, which some property always accompanies (TdIE, 19).*

*We call the second belief, because the things we grasp only through reason, we do not see, but know only through a conviction in the intellect that it must be so and not otherwise (ST, I/55).*

In *Ethics*, it is “from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things”. Compared with his earlier works, common notion, as a new concept, appears in *Ethics* which makes the knowledge of the second kind the origin of adequacy (properties are mentioned in *TdIE*) and starting point to the knowledge of the third kind. Through common notions, knowledge of the second kind is not restricted only to rational belief (*ST*, I/55), but it finally is adequate. It seems that intuitive knowledge arises from knowledge of the second kind, because of common notions. Nevertheless, there is a gap between these two kinds of knowledge: why through things common to all, essence of singular things can be known? The relationship between common notions and the essence of things is unknown and how knowledge of the second kind moves to the third is still a problem. Thus, I shall firstly give a brief discussion about how this topic is treated by scholars, why interpretations by now are still unsatisfactory, and why both of interpretations still not bridge the gap between the last two kinds of knowledge; because of the unclearness of the existed interpretations, I shall next re-examine the definition of last two kinds of knowledge to achieve a better understanding of them. Common notions and essence of things are key phrases of them. For the former, I will try to explicate what are common notions: their different degrees in terms of how general they are, the specialty of them as the sole origin of adequacy, the limits of common notions, and the difference between common notions and universal notions. As for the latter, I shall try to explain: what is singular things by explicating how Spinoza defines a singular thing, the inevitable consequences followed from his unique way of definition, and what is essence of things. After these re-examinations, I will explain how Spinoza destroys the limits of common notions, how knowledge of the second kind moves to the third, and how he uses his way of definition to find a chance for human to achieve adequate knowledge of things more complicated than them.

### **An essential same or a complete different knowledge**

There are two question in this stage, the relationship between knowledge of the last two kinds, and how men proceed from the second to the third. Especially how common

notions could function as a bridge to the essence of things, given that singular things are the first step in knowing things (Melamed, 2013, p.47), and simple ideas are the first principle of Spinoza's deductive system (Parkinson, 1953, p.37). Spinoza's system will not be sound until these two questions are solved.

Spinoza's classification of knowledge is rather vague. Nadler thinks the definition of the knowledge of the last two kinds are "frustratingly sparse" and Spinoza "does little to spell out in detail what exactly each of these two kinds of knowledge involves"; thus, the relationship between them is not very clear (Nadler, 2006, p.178). Represented by Nadler and Parkinson, this interpretation argues that knowledge of the second and third kind are basically the same and have few differences, though they are different in terms of using rules (Parkinson, p.190). Nadler contends that they are only different in their forms but not the content or information they contained. Knowledge of the second kind is logical inference; intuitive knowledge is more like an instant perception of the causality regarding singular things (Nadler, p.181). Both kinds of knowledge involve the knowledge of singular things. The former offers an explanatory framework, or properties of things in general of singular things; the latter shows how particular things "instantiate such properties" (Nadler, p.178). The fact that there is no qualitative difference between them means that only through knowledge of the second kind the intuitive knowledge can be grasped, for one cannot know anything about particular things without recognising what specific particular things they are.

Another interpretation argues that these two kinds of knowledge are qualitatively different. Nadler gives what he thinks a doubtful interpretation that there is a gap between these two kinds of knowledge, the latter can be achieved only by a kind of "leap" (p.183). Jaspers also notices a "shift" from one class of knowledge to another, and knowledge of the second kind is endless and empty without the third (1962, p.28). As a result, whether knowledge of the third kind really arises from the second, and how this process works becomes dubious (Wilson, 1996, p.133).

For the first interpretation, there is evidence in Spinoza's texts: "the desire to know things by the third kind of knowledge cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge, but can arise from the second" (VP28). However, Spinoza never explains how it works. Scholars simply make the similar claim but do not fully explain the process between them. It is also not self-sufficient to say both of them are inferential or deductive knowledge, so the third can arise

from the second. The premise of this argument is the equation of the second kind of knowledge with the third, but this premise is unexamined.

Spinoza defines the knowledge of the second kind as the knowledge consists of common notions, and adequate ideas of the properties of things, which also arise from common notions (EIIIP40S2). Thus, the basic components of it are common notions. Common notions as he described in IIP37, IIP38 and IIP39, are ideas of things common to all, or things common to and peculiar to human bodies and certain external bodies. Through ideas of things common to all to ideas common to human body and certain external thing, there are different degrees of common notions: through the most general common notion to the least general (Deleuze, 1988, p.115; Parkinson, p.165). Nevertheless, the first discrepancy between these two kinds of knowledge appears in IIP37, “What is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing”. Although there are all different degrees of common notions, at least the most general common notions do not “constitute the essence of any singular things”. If the intuitive knowledge is knowledge of essence of things, knowledge of the second kind, or at least part of it is qualitative different.

The other interpretation is not without flaws. Intuitive knowledge is adequate, but the adequacy of knowledge arise and only arise from common notions (IIP38, IIP39). If there is unsolvable gap between them, or human can only achieve the third kind of knowledge by a “leap”, it will be dubious that anyone could ever have the intuitive knowledge. To understand the relation between common notions and essence of things, an in-depth examination of definitions of them is necessary.

### **Knowledge of the second kind re-examined: common notions and universal notions**

By definition, knowledge of the second kind is “from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things” (IIP40S2). Then, what are common notions, and adequate ideas of the properties of things need to be explicated separately.

There are things common to all, and common notions are ideas of things common to all, or common to, and peculiar to human body and certain external bodies. The notion of extension is an example of the former kind, because all bodies have extension which means

extension is common to all; an example of the latter kind is hard to give, because Spinoza himself never gives one<sup>1</sup>. The same speed of a bike and a car could be an example, but it may need to be checked cautiously. The system of common notions is constructed by IIP38 and IIP39. From the most general common notions to the least general common notions, there are different degrees of them (Deleuze, p,115). It is hard to say how many degrees of them are there, but there is one thing certain that no matter to which degree these common notions belong, they can only be conceived adequately (IIP38, IIP38C, IIP39). Spinoza, in IIP29C, illustrates that human can only have inadequate or mutilated knowledge of itself, its body and external bodies, if they perceive things from the common order of nature. Then, why common notions are so special that only them can be conceived adequately? Why common notions are uncommon to the common order of nature? A brief discussion of knowledge of the first kind, or common order of nature, will help to achieve a better understanding.

Images of things are “the affection of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us” (IIP17S). Human bodies do not perceive directly external bodies, because they rather perceive images of bodies, i.e. ideas of affections; thus, human bodies can only directly know traces left by external bodies on human bodies; they do not really reach out to the external bodies but only a series of reactions made by human bodies. In a way, when human bodies perceive ideas of affection made by external bodies, they do not perceive external bodies but human bodies themselves. This process only involves the nature of external bodies, but never explicates the nature of it (IIP18S). And by IIP25D, “insofar as the external body is an individual which is not related to the human body, the idea, *sive* knowledge, of it is in God insofar as God is considered to be affected with the idea of another thing which is prior in nature to the external body itself”, so “the ideas of an affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of the external body”. The knowledge of external bodies depends on the knowledge of things which cause them (IA4), namely those prior to the external things in nature; human bodies are affected by external bodies, and they are not the cause, or prior to the external bodies. Thus, human can never achieve the adequate knowledge of external bodies. Spinoza concludes in IIP29S, “so long as it (human mind) is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with thing, to regard this or that, and not so

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<sup>1</sup> After the thorough examination of how Spinoza makes definition of singular things, it is easy to understand why it is difficult to give an example of the less general common notions.

long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions”, it has no adequate but a confused or mutilated knowledge of external bodies. However, if human mind is determined internally, then the adequate knowledge is achievable. Common notions are the way which mind can be determined internally. Therefore, “internally” will be the key to understand why common notions are so special through which human can have adequate knowledge.

Taking the least general common notions as an example, suppose that there is one thing called A<sup>2</sup> common to, and peculiar to, human bodies and certain external bodies and it is equal in the part and in the whole, which means A is not only an external thing but also an internal thing. It is external, since it belongs to the external body; it is internal, because it also belongs to the human body. A is inside of human body, so human body could be the cause of it, and human body is prior to A in nature. Although human still perceive its own body rather than external things, A contained in human body is common as A contained in the external things, which means that human can know A through knowing their bodies and the cause of A is human bodies. Then, A must be conceive adequately, because human mind is determined internally. As a consequence, human have adequate knowledge of A. And human can have adequate knowledge of the external thing which has A, though only part of external things is known, i.e. A.

Now that common notions proved to be the source of adequate knowledge, the next question is does the common notion explicates the essence of things? Or are common notions the source of essence of things? Consisting of common notions, does the knowledge of the second kind contain the essence of things? The problem is complicated, considering there are different degrees of common notions.

For the most general common notions, because things common to all do not constitute the essence of singular things. Even if human have adequate knowledge of them, they will not have adequate knowledge of essence of things. If, say A which is common to all, constitutes the essence of a singular thing, then according to IID2, there will be necessarily

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<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to give an example here. Spinoza himself also uses abstract “A” as an example when he argues his theory of common notions. It seems a little odd, because Spinoza always gives a concrete example to prove his argument. For instance, he uses Paul and Peter in IP17CS and other places. However, he omits this example in supporting his theory of common notions, because he completely changes the meaning of singular things. It may be the reason why he uses mathematics as an example to prove his classification of knowledge.

this singular thing constituted by A. However, if the singular thing exists and A constitutes its essence, then A cannot be the thing common to all, because it is the essence of singular things. Besides, the fact that A is something common to all means that all the things share A; and it is impossible that all things share one singular thing. Therefore, adequate knowledge of the most general common notions does not contain the essence of things.

On the other hand, is the least general common notion able to constitute the essence of things, because they are not common to all, but only to two singular things? By the fact that human can have adequate knowledge of them, human may have adequate knowledge of human body and certain external bodies and so forth. And therefore, human can know the essence of things and intuitive knowledge does arise from knowledge of the second kind.

However, this is not the case. There are two things human can know adequately by the least general common notions. Firstly, human can know the property of external things, because this property is common to human and these things. Assuming that by the least general common notions, human can know the essence of something about human (property), but do not constitute the essence of human bodies. Because they are what common to human and external things, they should be neither completely human, nor external things. Properties belong to certain things but do not constitute their essence. Spinoza makes a contrast between property and essence in different texts (*TdIE*, II/35; Def Aff VI), indicating that only if the essence of things is known at first, properties of things can be understood; and human can know “neither what the being to which those *propria* belong is, nor what attribute is” (*ST*, I/45) through properties<sup>3</sup>. Properties do not constitute the essence of things. Thus, through properties or the least general common notions, the essence of things is unachievable.

Besides, if they constitute the essence of human body and external things, human must be equal to the external things, because they have a common essence. And if this is the case, then it is not a common notion, for human bodies are the same as external things, and there is only one thing.

Human can also know its essence as a property of certain external things. Supposing B is something more complicated than human, and has essence of human as its property. Because what common to B and human is essence of human, then the essence of human is achievable. Since human bodies are only a property of B, then the essence of B and its

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<sup>3</sup> *Proprium* and *proprietas* are used interchangeably by Spinoza (Curely, p. 652)

remaining properties have nothing in common with human, and human cannot form any adequate knowledge of them. Therefore, through the least general common notions, not all essence of things are achievable.

Some may argue that through common notions, certain essence is achievable. Although properties do not constitute the essence of things, but through the least general common notions, human at least know the essence of properties, and such properties may constitute the essence of other things. Common notions do not constitute the essence of things more complicated than human, but they constitute the essence of a part of human bodies, or human bodies themselves. Human can only know property of things. If they want to know the essence of things, either these things are parts of human, simpler than human, or they have the same essence as human. Therefore, human as a medium can be used to know things simpler than human. However, the simplest thing can never be known, because it is not composed by anything and no thing is common to it. And, Spinoza explicitly says that human should seek knowledge from particular things, because “the more particular an idea is, the more distinct, and therefore the clearer it is” (*TdIE*, II/36).

Analyses by far show the limits of knowledge of the second kind, or common notions. Human cannot know things more complicated than their bodies; and the simplest thing is also unachievable.

The re-evaluation of knowledge of the second kind analyses both common notion and adequate ideas of properties of things, from which questions could be raised. Human can only have adequate knowledge of its parts and its bodies; it is also hardly possible that they could know things more complex than human body, like God. The question that what common notions are has been answered; next, what common notions are not will be discussed. This is important in fully understanding common notions. Scholars, who support the first interpretation, argue that knowledge of the second kind offers an explanatory framework of singular things, or properties of things in general, and intuitive knowledge shows how those general characteristics particularises in detail in singular things. They are different not in terms of contents but in forms.

The premise of this interpretation is the existence of things in general, and general contents are common notions. However, this interpretation will not stand, until its premises are examined.

Firstly, whether these general contents are common notions? General contents of things, or ideas of general things, may be called general notions. “General notion” is vague, since Spinoza never uses this concept, but common notion and universal notion. Some scholars believe common notions are universal notions and both of them are general notions.

According to Smith, “These common notions of reason merely express the general characteristics of each thing or class of thing rather than their individual essences.” He believes common notions are universal or general ideas. He argues that “the second kind of knowledge pertains to certain universal or general ideas ‘common to all men’” (p.89). With this equation between common notions and universal notions, undoubtedly, things in general exist and human can have adequate knowledge of them, since the knowledge of common notions are adequate. It is true that Spinoza sometimes uses universal notions or universal knowledge (VP36S) to denote the adequate knowledge of things, but he only uses the expression “universal knowledge” once. As for universal notions, when he enumerates his classification of knowledge in IIP40S2, saying that “it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions”, he includes all three kinds of knowledge in universal notions, both adequate and inadequate one. However, these two separated texts cannot be the evidence that Spinoza uses “common notions” and “universal notions” interchangeably. Spinoza discussed these terms in his earlier works, which may help us achieve a better understanding: In *TdIE* and *ST* he says:

*For when things are conceived abstractly (as all universals are), they always have a wider extension in our intellect than their particulars can really have in nature. And then, since there are many things in nature whose difference is so slight that it almost escapes the intellect, it can easily happen, if they are conceived abstractly, that they are confused (TdIE, II/29).*

*But we have rightly regarded this as indicating their ignorance; for all and only the particulars have a cause, not the universals, because they are nothing (ST, I/43).*

*But as we have already said, things must agree with their particular Ideas, whose being must be a perfect essence, and not with universal ones, because then they would not exist (ST, I/49).*

From these texts, we could know that all abstract ideas are confused, and universal ideas are abstract ideas; universal notions are “nothing”, or “do not exist”. They are beings of reason, which do not exist in real world, but only in human mind (*ST*, I/33). Being of reason also means being of imagination, which is invented, like numbers, to help human to reach a better understanding of external things (Parkinson, p.150). Besides, he makes a clear distinction between universal notions and common notions. In IIP40S1, he says that he will omit the thorough discussion about notions which are ill-founded, of hardly any use, but he will not omit the necessary discussion about them. Thus, Spinoza decides to discuss briefly about transcendentals terms and universal notions. Notions like being, thing and something are transcendental terms. These notions arise from the body which is affected by an excessive number of images simultaneously; and because the mind can only form a certain number of images at a time, if there are too many images beyond the capacity of the body simultaneously, the mind cannot discern even slight differences between these images. Thus, “the mind also will imagine all the bodies confusedly, without any distinction and comprehend then as if under one attribute, viz. under the attribute of being, thing, etc”, and “these terms signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree.” Universal notions, on the other hand, are caused by similar reasons: “Those notions they call Universal, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc., have arisen from similar causes”, which means these universal notions are confused too, because they arise from imagination, and abstract from excessive numbers of images. These notions are inadequate, because “these notions are not formed by all in the same way”. Different people may have different standard for the framework of genus, such as “man, horse and dog”. As a result, these notions are not common to all men. Different bodies, which form such notions, may be affected in different degree even at the same time, or even the same body may be affected in different degree at different time. Such notions are inadequate, because they do not have “all the intrinsic denominations of a true idea”(IID4); and they are definitely not common notions. In conclusion, general contents are universal notions, but universal notions are not common notions. Universal notions represents the general contents of singular things, but these general contents are images formed by human bodies. These universal notions are confused notions, and general contents are not the origin of adequate knowledge.

The existence of general things or their essence is another question to be answered. Some may think knowledge of the second kind offers a framework for the recognition of things. If men want to recognise particular things by their general framework, they need to firstly know what are those general things, or have ideas of them. For instance, human need a general knowledge of hammers in general to recognise a particular hammer. But before that, they need to know what the hammer in general is, i.e. the idea of hammer in general. After they know it, a tool with a metal head and a wooden handle used to hammer nails and so forth, they will recognise a particular hammer. However, by IIP7, “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”, if there is an idea of hammer in general, then the hammer in general must exist. If the hammer in general exists, then it will not be a thing in general, because things in general means that they are general but not singular or particular<sup>4</sup>. As a result, if there is no thing in general, there will not be ideas of them.

The variant of this interpretation believes that through common notions one can know the essence of things in general (Smith, p.89). For example, one can know what is the essence of hammer, i.e. “hammerness”, but not the essence of a particular hammer. By this process, one will know the essence of things in general first, and then he will proceed from it to the essence of particular things. This interpretation is incorrect too. By IID2, “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing”, there is mutual relationship between essence of things and things to which the essence belongs. If there is the essence, then things to which the essence belongs must exist; and if there are things to which the essence belongs, then the essence must be. This mutual relationship makes sure the mutual existence between essence and things. Thus, there is neither essence of things in general, nor general things themselves, not mentioned ideas of things in general; by the definition of things in general, they cannot be real and they are only being of reason.

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<sup>4</sup> Spinoza uses singular and particular things interchangeably, see Glossary in *The Collected Works of Spinoza Volume I*, edited by Curley, p.649.

Now, common notions are the source of adequacy. They are special, because they are determined internally in human bodies. As a consequence, human are the cause of things to be known and human are able to form adequate knowledge. Common notions are not universal notions, so they are not ideas of genus, or things in general. Common notions have boundaries. The knowledge composed by common notions, knowledge of the second kind, is limited knowledge, including at most knowledge of human bodies. The limits of common notions will raise another problem: when Spinoza explicates common notions, what is the meaning of words like “human” or “things”, on the condition that all of them are confused or mutilated ideas? If these terms are inadequate, the whole *Ethics* will be at risk, since Spinoza uses them to build his philosophy. Essence of things may become confused, because of the application of mutilated terms; and intuitive knowledge may be inadequate. If only essence of human, or parts of human is achievable, and neither the simplest things nor things bigger than human is achievable, how human know the essence of “each thing”(IIP6), or even of God (IIP47S)?

Some may object that the knowledge of human is sufficient, for knowledge of things, such as knowledge of sun, math or even Nature is conceived through human bodies. If human know their bodies well, they will know everything in universe conceived through their bodies. However, this is definitely not what Spinoza would agree. In the quotation from *ST* above, knowledge of things should not only exist in human intellect, it should also be in the real world, it must be the knowledge of actual things, rather than images reflected in mind.

The discussion about what common notions are shows their limits; through them human could acquire at most knowledge of themselves. What common notions are not, on the other hand, raises new question regarding how intuitive knowledge could be adequate. This means the problem regarding how knowledge of the third kind derived from the second is still unsolved.

### **Intuitive knowledge re-examined: things, its definition and essence**

The re-examination does not solve the problem about how knowledge of the second kind moves to the third, it even raises a new one. Intuitive knowledge may no longer be adequate; How Spinoza defines “essence of things” becomes crucial. If intuitive knowledge

is inadequate, there will be no relation between knowledge of the last two kinds. Therefore, it is time to examine intuitive knowledge.

Spinoza defines intuitive knowledge as follows:

*And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things (IIP40S2).*

Intuitive knowledge focuses on the essence of things. If intuitive knowledge is adequate, “things” need to be adequate, not “confused in the highest degree”; and therefore, how “things” are defined must be examined. Examining how Spinoza defines singular things is key to understand why “essence of things” is adequate knowledge. In IP25C, Spinoza defines “that particular things are nothing but affections of God’s attributes, or modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way”. It is basically the same as the definition of singular things in IID7. Singular things are finite modes of God and durational existence. However, Spinoza adds details to this definition about how one singular thing can be distinguished from things:

*And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing (IID7).*

It is easy to understand. If A1 cause B, A2 also cause B, A3 and A4 to the infinity, then all of A can be seen as one singular thing, for all of them are the cause of B; apart from this, things with different nature can also be seen as one singular thing. Take the human body as an example: human body is composed by different organs, each of which has a particular function and cannot be seen as the same organ; however, if all these organs function to produce one and the same effect, i.e. all of them are cause of one effect, then they can be seen as one singular thing. In this case, human can be seen as one singular thing, though it is composed by things with different essence. Spinoza explicates details on how to distinguish one singular thing from others, or why a singular thing can be considered as one singular thing rather than two or more. He demonstrates four different standards to recognise one singular thing in his lemmas. Firstly, if a body or individual composed by a number of bodies, when some of them are taken away or removed and another bodies with the same nature or essence take the place of those removed, then the individual remain the same singular thing

as before (IIL4), considering a man replaced his arm; on the second, if the part of a composed individual is changed, no matter to which degrees it changed, as long as the ratio of motion and rest between the part changed and the parts remained of the same individual keeps the same, the individual can be seen as the same singular thing (IIL5). Considering a man with a metal leg, the nature of this leg is changed, but the ratio between this metal leg and whole human action is remain relatively the same; next, if the motion of parts composing an individual is altered to another direction, as long as these parts continue its motions and “communicate them in the same ratio as before”, the nature of this individual will remain the same (IIL6); finally, no matter what happens to it as a whole, or among its parts, so long as all its parts communicates with each other and keep the same ratio as before, the composed individual will retain its essence (IIL7). From these lemmas, rules of recognising one singular thing can be epitomised that no matter what happened to the parts of one individual or an individual as a whole, as long as the ratio or communication of the motion between its parts remains the same, the individual retains its essence, and remains as one singular thing. The key of these lemmas is the ratio or communication of motion between parts. Spinoza roughly gives three kinds of individuals; nevertheless, this is not a rigid calcification, since composed individuals have infinite kinds, and the most complicated one is Nature itself which is composed by things with different essence. In Spinozistic philosophy, the world is composed by different individuals. Therefore, the only way of recognising an individual is through its ratio of motion. As long as the ratio is the same, the individual is the same; if the ration is changed, no matter to which direction, or how its proportion changed, the individual will change. This explains IID7; “a number of individuals concur in one action and are the same cause of one effect” means that if a number of individuals, which move to a same direction or rest simultaneously, the communication of its parts remain the same, they can be seen as one singular thing. From Spinoza’s analysis of bodies, it is clear how he defines one singular thing, by the ratio of motions of parts of a composed body.

Some may argue that the standard of recognising one singular thing is derived from Spinoza’s physics and they are all about bodies, but the essence of things contained things more than bodies; these rules won’t apply to ideas. However, Spinoza thinks that the knowledge of bodies is sufficient for knowing ideas, because human bodies are the nature of human mind. As for thing, if one wants to know the essence of an idea, one needs to know

the nature of its object at first (II13S). Thus, the rules derived from Spinoza's physics can be used as the rules on recognising things beyond the bodies, i.e. ideas. Apart from this, his parallelism makes sure that if parts of bodies keep the same ratio as before, the particular thing remains the same, and the idea must be the same (IIP7).

It is obvious that Spinoza changes the way philosophers used to make a definition for singular things, and the consequence followed explains why intuitive knowledge could be adequate. The traditional definition is formed by genus and difference as Spinoza mentioned (*ST*, I/46), but Spinoza defines a singular thing by its particular motion. A definition must be true and adequate, and "the right way of discovery is to form thoughts from some given definition" (*TdIE*, II/34). Spinoza is unsatisfied with the traditional definition and he thinks a perfect definition "will have to explain the inmost essence of the thing, and to take care not to use certain *propria* in its place" (*TdIE*, II/35). He uses a geometrical example, saying that if a circle is defined as the figure "in which the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal" (*TdIE*, II/35). This definition only reveals the properties but not the essence of a circle, because it does not explain how circle moves; thus, by definition, the things to be defined cannot be known adequately. A good definition needs to include the proximate causes of the thing defined, and can deduce all the properties of this thing. As Curley said, the definition "describes a process by which a thing of that kind might be produced, as stating condition which would lead to the existence of a thing of that kind" (Curley, 1988, p.111). The definition of one thing is a process or motion, from which all the properties or effects follow. And a definition which contains the fixed motion of the thing defined is perfect definition, and reveals its inmost essence. Because its inmost essence is contained in the definition, the definition is adequate and true.

Now, we have two adequate ideas by far, common notions and definitions. Common notions are ideas of things common to at least two different bodies; definitions, on the other hand, reveal the inmost essence of one particular thing. These two terms seem unrelated. However, if we compare the traditional definition with Spinozistic definition, there will be a connection.

The traditional way of definition Spinoza opposed "must be by genus and difference" (*ST*, I/46), but "if we can only know a thing perfectly through a definition consisting of genus and difference, then we can never know perfectly the highest genus,

which has no genus above it. Now if the highest genus, which is the cause of the knowledge of all other things, is not known, the other things which are explained by that genus are much less known or understood” (*ST*, I/46). The traditional definition is by genus and difference, rather than the inmost essence of things. It will not produce adequate knowledge, for genus like man, dog, and hammer are universal notions. Genus is abstraction which is confused (Deleuze, p.46). If a definition is adequate, it won’t show a kind of things, or thing in general, but a particular one. For instance, the definition of human won’t include all human being as a kind, but a particular human, because there are no true human being as a kind, but only an imagination helping human to understand reality. The essence of human being, or human nature is a particular motion. What conform with this motion, or keep the same ration of motion between its parts as human, can be called human. Although by a slightly different reason (make sure IIP4 be true), Curley also thinks definition are not definitions of genus, but a particular thing (p.112). The actual world is composed by all different individuals and there are not kinds of things in the world. Obviously, there will be objections that Spinoza’s doctrine of genus is against common sense; and if there is no kind of thing, when Spinoza makes his argument about human, does he not use the genus? If he uses human bodies as a genus, his philosophy is based on non-existed things; but if he uses human bodies as a particular thing or body, how it could be universal and persuade everyone?

Indeed, this theory sounds against the common sense, for human perceive the world with genus and difference. If there is no genus, the world will be chaotic and without order. For Spinoza, an ordered world is a world for common people; and if human perceive things from common order of nature, they will never reach the adequate knowledge, but a confused and mutilated one (IIP29S). Back to the example of human, is there a kind of thing called human? And how Spinoza uses words like “human” or “human body”? Actually, Spinoza does not believe there is human nature or essence of human; and as a consequence, there is no kind of human. When Spinoza discusses the gladness between horse and human in IIP57S, he argues that the gladness between them is different, because they have a different essence; and he continues that the gladness between a drunk and a philosopher is no small difference, which implies that the essence of a drunk and a philosopher is different. By the common order of nature, we accustomed to say that both a drunk and a philosopher are human, which means they have the same essence. The difference between them are their

properties; however, Spinoza denies that they have the same essence. If they do not have the same essence, they are not one singular thing; indeed both of them are human, but this time human are just the being of reason, not real. The drunk and the philosopher are essential different and there are not human being. Although Spinoza rejects the concept of human, he still uses it to build his philosophy, but he does not use it without reason. He discusses terms like “good”, “evil”, “perfect” and “imperfect” in the preface of part IV, saying that though these terms are not real, he will retain them in order to *form an idea of man, as a model of human nature*. Thus, Spinoza sets a model of man for his reader, and the word “man” in his book is not some random man but the model he set for human being.

Now, we know there is no genus and world is composed by all different kinds of individuals. One individual can only be discerned from another individuals by its essence, its motion rather its properties. Their motion is the standard to recognise any individuals. Thus, these motions of individuals are their definition. And as a consequence, the real world, a world without imaginations, is a both more complicated and simpler world. It is more complicated, because there is no genus and the world is not ordered as it was; it is also simpler, for all kinds of things are included in one kind, individuals with different motions. For example, there are two men, Peter and Paul<sup>5</sup>. If Peter has a different, or opposite motion compared with Paul. They are two different individuals, or two different things; they cannot be included in the same kind, human. Any terms, like man, trying to include them in one category will be false, because their essence is different, even opposite. Another example, the difference between a philosopher and a drunk, is given by Spinoza.<sup>6</sup>

Now that the meaning of “things” is clear, the only term which needs to be examined is “essence”. When Spinoza uses the word “essence”, what is it he really indicates? At the Part I, he mentions that the essence of God is his power (IP34). He continues in IIP7 that “*conatus* by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing” (IIP7). It seems that the essence of God and things is the power or striving. And in the demonstration of the same proposition, he uses “power” and “*conatus*” interchangeably. In IVD8 Spinoza uses “essence”, “virtue”, and “nature” interchangeably.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter and Paul are used by Spinoza several times.

<sup>6</sup> It is this reason that examples are so hard to give in demonstrating the adequate knowledge, for there is no genus. Spinoza uses math as an example, but it is rather misleading, because numbers are being of reason. They do not exist in the real world. (Wilson, p.132)

*Conatus* is the actual essence of things; and *conatus* is a kind of motion<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the nature or essence of things is its power or motion.

In the discussion above, we find that by common notions human cannot get the adequate knowledge about simplest bodies and can know at most knowledge of himself; anything beyond human bodies will not be known, because they have nothing in common with human bodies and no common notions for human to use. If we take Spinozistic definitions into consideration, another interpretation may appear. The gap is how the knowledge of the second kind moves to the third, on the condition that it is a knowledge at most about human bodies; intuitive knowledge, on the other hand, is essence of things, not only essence of man. The origin of adequacy is the common notion, and it has limits. However, only when genus and difference are used in forming traditional definitions, this problem occurs. No genus exists in the Spinozistic philosophy, so the relationship between human bodies and external things is changed and the boundaries of common notions vanish. The essence of any bodies is its motion, so what makes the human a human is its particular motion, say it is “human motion”. Anything moves with the same ratio, or moves according to this “human motion”, can be called human. As long as two thing moves in the same ratio, “human motion”, they will be called human. For example, Paul is a man who is ready to form adequate knowledge. The thing to be known is a individual of a higher kind, say society or anything more complicated than Paul. By the traditional definitions, Paul can know adequately no more than the part common to him in this particular thing. However, if Paul changes his motion, or *conatus*, to the same motion of society, he will know the essence of this society, because they have the same essence. Thus, adequate knowledge of this more complicated thing is possible. In this case, there is no rigid category called human bodies. Indeed, human can only know knowledge at most to things common to its own bodies, but there is no rigid boundaries of human bodies. With the increasing of its power, the changing of its motion and the alternation of its essence, the capacity to be affected by external things, to know external things is changed. With this alternation, there are more things common to human bodies, and the more things human bodies common to, the more adequate knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Another philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who made a huge influence on Spinoza, used the concept *conatus* or endeavour as a motion.

acquired by human, though the human body in question is no longer the genus of all men, but a particular one.

With the analyses of key concept of intuitive knowledge, essence of things or their motions show its relation with common notions. Together with common notions, there is finally a way to solve the gap between knowledge of the last two kinds. The way definition are formed is changed, the definition of human is change. If what are human is changed, what common to human is changed. By altering its motion, human can be common to all different kinds of things, and ideas of human could be used as common notions to acquire adequate knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

We can finally make comments on those two interpretations. Both of them are partly true and partly false: the first is true, because knowledge of the second kind does involve the essence of things, but this knowledge only contains very limited knowledge, such as properties of human bodies, and never extends beyond the human bodies; it is wrong, because there is no general contents of things, not mentioned that there is knowledge of general content of things. All the general contents, which represented by universal notions, are confused. The second interpretation is correct, because of its insight about the distinction between knowledge of the second kind and third kind. However, it fails to grasp the real relationship between them. The real difference between these two knowledge is not that the one can know common notion, but the other can know the essence of things. The real difference is that the former can only have limited knowledge about human bodies, nothing more, but the latter, on the bases of power or motion, can know the essence far more than the former. Through the formal essence of certain attribute of God, through the power, human at least has a chance to know every things whose essence is power.

With the intense relationship between common notions and essence things, it seems difficult to say that human have any chance to know the adequate knowledge beyond what is common to human; the knowledge of complicated things, and the knowledge of the individual composed in the highest degree is unachievable, because there are many things in them which do not common to human bodies; and the simplest bodies are also not available to human mind, because as simplest bodies, they have nothing in common with others things.

But after the re-examination of Spinoza's usage of human, singular things, essence and definition, there is no absolute limits of human bodies. By the increases and decreases of its power, human bodies can common to more, or less complicated things; therefore, they can know more adequate knowledge, even of simplest bodies. The real difference between knowledge of the second and the third kind, or between common notions and essence of things is how "things" are defined. If there are only first two kinds of knowledge, then only essence of limited things are known. But through knowledge of the third kind, especially through the formal essence of certain attributes of God, in this case, through power, adequate knowledge of essence of everything could be possible. Through the essence of things, namely power, human can even reach to the essence of God, and have the knowledge of God. Spinoza breaks the traditional classification of things. There is no genus, and definitions should aim at the inmost essence of things, i.e. their motion or power. The world no longer to be a hierarchical world, and there is no "great chains of being". The whole world is one, and this one is what he called Nature (IIL3C), the most complex individual composed by different kinds of individuals, each of which has no difference in genus but in their motion or power. As the bases of his ethics, these two kinds of knowledge proffers the answer about the essence of human. And by this answer, namely the essence of human is *conatus* or power, Spinoza could distinguish two different affections, action and passion, by which human know the bondage of them and how they pursue freedom. The relationship between common notions and essence of things is complicated and against common sense, but only with the understanding of them can the true significance of Spinoza's theory of knowledge be revealed. It is not easy to understand, some even think there is no good solution to this riddle (Wilson, p.132-p.133). However, as Spinoza said, "but all the things excellence are as difficult as they are rare" (VP42S).

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