

*Certainty / 79*

## KEY PASSAGES

E1def1; E1p7; E1p8 (especially E1p8s2); E1p11.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Miner, R. C. (2002). The dependence of Descartes' ontological proof upon the doctrine of *causa sui*. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 58, 873–86.
- Garrett, D. (1979). Spinoza's 'ontological' argument. *Philosophical Review*, 88, 198–223.
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## RELATED TERMS

Causal Axiom; Cause; Conception; Descartes; Essence; Existence; Follow; God; Inherence; Involvement; Principle of Sufficient Reason; Substance

## 31.

# CERTAINTY

SPINOZA'S THEORY OF truth has been an important topic of interest in the secondary literature, especially in comparison with Descartes's conception of the clarity and distinctness of ideas. Certainty (*certitudo*) is a word commonly used by Spinoza throughout his works. Although it is never formally defined, Spinoza arguably makes specific epistemological and theological uses of it in addition to the usual meaning of certainty as that which is opposed to doubt. We can identify three essential characteristics of certainty in Spinoza's thought: identity with the objective essence, being a feature of any true idea, and being self-evident.

In Spinoza's theory of knowledge, the key claim is that any true idea involves certainty. It can be found as early as the TIE, where Spinoza sets out his theory of certainty as "knowing that I know" and uses certainty as methodological tool for advancing in the search for knowledge (TIE[35–38]). There, Spinoza further equates certainty or reflexive knowledge (i.e., knowing that I know) with the "objective essence" of my mind when I conceive a true idea: "From this it is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself" (TIE[35]). By "objective essence," Spinoza is referring to the thing insofar as it is the object of an act of intellection, that is, insofar as it is an idea, and by formal essence, he is referring to the thing in itself, distinct from its reality in an intellect. For example, if I have a true idea (say, of Peter; cf. TIE[34]), I thereby also know that I know him, and this certainty is identical with the idea (objective essence) of Peter present in God's intellect, and corresponding to the formal essence "Peter." However, if I simply *imagine* Peter rather than *know* him adequately, such a certainty will not be given to me, because I will not be grasping his actual objective essence. In other terms, for Spinoza, we experience certainty because of the identity between our idea and God's.

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This theory is reiterated by Spinoza in a similar way in the *Ethics*. God's intellect contains an infinite chain of ideas related to any being (as idea of the being, then idea of this idea, and idea of the idea of idea, etc.). When I know the thing in question, Spinoza seems to be saying that I am having a similar chain of ideas of ideas in my mind, which, he says, constitutes my feeling of certainty:

There is also in God an idea, or knowledge, of the human mind, which follows in God in the same way and is related to God in the same way as the idea, or knowledge, of the human body. (E2p20)

This idea of the mind is united to the mind in the same way as the mind is united to the body. (E2p21)

For the idea of the mind, i.e., the idea of the idea, is nothing but the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object. For as soon as someone knows something, he thereby knows that he knows it, and at the same time knows that he knows that he knows, and so on, to infinity. (E2p21s)

The self-evidence of any true idea is an important aspect of Spinoza's conception of certainty. For its validity, certainty does not require any additional proof than its own light as it is felt through experience: "from this, again, it is clear that, for the certainty of truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea" (TIE[35]). Don Garrett (2018) stresses here that Spinoza's criterion of truth is an intrinsic denomination of an idea, making this a dividing line between him and Descartes. For Descartes, clarity and distinctness still needs an external validation, notably, God's benevolence, in order to hold as a criterion of truth, whereas for Spinoza, it is sufficient to have a true idea in order to know that it is true. Nevertheless, it is not meant to be an easy task, because, as Garrett (2018) and Carriero (2020) both emphasize, an effort of attention is needed to heed the truth. Furthermore, Carriero rightly insists on the experiential dimension of grasping truth when I know something. Spinoza's formulations indeed point to certainty as an inner experience at the same time as he expresses the intrinsic character of this criterion of truth:

He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing. (E2p43)

In [2]p21s I have explained what an idea of idea is. But it should be noted that the preceding proposition is sufficiently manifest through itself. For no one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty . . . What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false. (E2p43s)

If certainty is involved in any true idea I may have, it is arguably precisely because in this case, my intellect 'merges' with God's idea of the same thing. I am then grasping the thing's objective essence itself. The infinite chain of ideas of ideas makes it the case that I automatically "know that I know."

This element of Spinoza's theory is similar in the TIE and the *Ethics*. The only evolution from one work to the other, insofar as the theory of certainty is concerned, is arguably not about what certainty is, but about its sufficiency as a philosophical method aiming at wisdom. In the TIE, Spinoza believed that we could build a whole body of knowledge on any single true idea, by taking the inherent certainty contained in that true idea as a criterion for distinguishing the true

from the false in all other ideas. This is the primary method which Spinoza proposes in the TIE (primary because there are other methods, including deduction, which he does not develop there, but which he recognizes as “the most perfect method” in TIE[39]). Spinoza’s proposal is that in our day-to-day advancement in knowledge, we *compare* each idea which we have with a true idea which we are certain of. If the idea is self-evident, then it can be accepted as true: each true idea reveals to us the infinity of power which we have through our intellect. If it does not include the “I know that I know” feature, on the other hand, it must be rejected as doubtful.

The Method must speak about Reasoning, or about the intellection; i.e., Method is not the reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things, much less the understanding of the causes of things; it is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of the perceptions; by investigating its nature, so that from that we may come to know our power of understanding and so restrain the mind that it understands, according to that standard, everything that is to be understood; and finally by teaching and constructing certain rules as aids, so that the mind does not weary itself in useless things. (TIE[37])

This method, which “is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea” (TIE[38]), could be called Spinoza’s inductive method, because we are going from one experience to another and comparing them. Its heart is the experience of certainty, which reveals the power of intellectual understanding to us.

In the *Ethics*, however, knowledge proceeds from so-called “common notions” (E2p37–40), which are universally true, and from the adequate idea of God which is involved in every mind (E2p45–47). We could say that Spinoza applies there the deductive method which was announced in TIE[39]. Gilles Deleuze, in Chapter 18 of *Expressionism in Philosophy*, famously suggests that Spinoza stopped writing the TIE and started afresh in the *Ethics* when he discovered the common notions, because he chose to use them as a new basis for his method (a similar view is held by Garrett 2018). But even on this reading, according to which certainty is no longer the sole basis of Spinoza’s method in the *Ethics*, it nevertheless remains an important aspect of it, since this experience is the proof that my intellect is a part of God’s infinite intellect, a theory on which the whole process of salvation is grounded.

Marcos Gleizer, who wrote a book-length study on truth and certainty (2017), proposed that the experience of certainty is what unites the two aspects of true ideas, namely correspondence, their extrinsic property, and adequacy, their intrinsic property. In Spinoza, doubt is only possible in the mind as long as the necessity or the impossibility of the thing is not properly understood. But the certainty involved in any true idea in virtue of its adequacy is precisely an awareness of the thing’s necessity to exist. As far as method is concerned, Gleizer hypothesized that there are degrees of certainty according to the explanative power of the idea considered. Modes do not exist with the same necessity as attributes, for instance. So, Spinoza needed to start from the true definition of God in the *Ethics* because this adequate idea was the only one able to exclude any metaphysical doubt and to ground all knowledge. For Gleizer (as well as for Garrett 2018), it is thus through the theory of the *verum index sui* involved in certainty, and through the highest certainty of the idea of God, that Spinoza avoided the well-known problem of the ‘Cartesian circle’ denounced by Arnauld. So, in the end, certainty remains the ultimate tool of Spinoza’s method.

Finally, Spinoza has another notion of certainty, namely moral certainty, that has theological significance. In the TTP, having “moral certainty” is equated to believing with one’s heart and

being obedient to God's decrees as expressed in the Bible: "Prophecy, or revelation, is the *certain* knowledge of some matter which God has revealed to men" (TTP[1]). In addition, he explicitly says that this is sufficient for being saved. At the same time, in Chapter 2 of the TTP, Spinoza contrasts this "moral certainty," which he attributes to prophecy, with "mathematical certainty," which belongs to true philosophy. The standard interpretation of this distinction is that the salvation provided by theology is, for Spinoza, inferior to that provided by philosophy (see notably Matheron 1971). This reading is based on the fact that moral certainty is grounded in the imagination, and philosophical or mathematical certainty in reason, and that imagination does not involve intellectual certainty as reason does for Spinoza.

However, in Chapter 15 of the TTP, Spinoza both confirms the total impossibility of establishing the rational certainty of matters of faith, and says that such a mathematical certainty *is not required when moral certainty is sufficient*: "Those who try to show the authority of Scripture by mathematical demonstrations are completely misguided. For the authority of the Bible depends on the authority of the Prophets. So it can't be demonstrated by any stronger arguments than those the Prophets used" (TTP 15.29). As Spinoza recaps, the Prophets derive their whole certainty from the following three considerations (already presented in TTP chap. 2): "a distinct and vivid imagination, a sign, and finally (and principally), a heart inclined toward the right and the good" (TTP 15.30). Moral certainty is thus clearly related to imagination for the Prophets, but when the above three conditions obtain, anyone may judge that the prophetic teachings are worth believing, and then attribute moral certainty to them.

It remains a matter of interpretation to make sense of these apparently contradictory claims. But both in philosophy and in theology, certainty is important for Spinoza. In either case, it is only through *certain* knowledge that salvation can be reached.

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#### KEY PASSAGES

E2p21s; E2p43s. TIE[34–38]. TTP chaps. 2 and 15.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

- Carriero, J. (2020). Descartes (and Spinoza) on intellectual experience and skepticism. *Roczniki Filozoficzne / Annals of Philosophy*, 68(2), 21–42.
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#### RELATED TERMS

[Adequacy](#); [Descartes](#); [Falsity and Error](#); [Idea](#); [Ideas of Ideas](#); [Mind–Body Identity](#); [Prophecy](#); [Salvation](#); [Skepticism](#); [Truth](#)

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