I. Introduction

“It is as if the notion "criminal" were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten. A Hume discovering this situation might conclude that there was a special sentiment, expressed by "criminal," which alone gave the word its sense. So Hume discovered the situation in which the notion "obligation" survived, and the notion "ought" was invested with that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a "moral" sense, but in which the belief in divine law had long since been abandoned: for it was substantially given up among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.” G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”

Theses: 1. Spinoza’s commands of reason have a source in natural regularities. 2. The view is attractive as a way of understanding ‘ought’ claims.

II. Spinoza’s Ideas of Reason are Steady

A. Steadiness and Imagination. Steadiness (my term) is the persistence of an idea in consciousness or occurrent thought, a continual “regarding as present.”

2p17: If the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of some external body, the mind will regard that same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the body is affected by a mode that precludes the existence, or presence, of that body.

B. Steadiness and Reason. All ideas of reason are steady.

2p40s2: “[we perceive things] from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (2p38c, 2p39, 2p39c, and 2p40); and I will call this “reason” and “the second kind of knowledge.”

2p13...Lemma 2: “All bodies agree in certain things. Dem.: For all bodies agree in this: they involve the concept of one and the same attribute (2d1). Therefore in this also: they can move more slowly and more quickly and, simply [absolute], that they can move or rest.”

2p38: [emphasis added] Those things that are common to all and that are equally in the part and in the whole cannot be conceived except adequately. Dem.: Let A be a thing that is common to all bodies and is equally in the part and in the whole of each body. I say that A cannot be conceived except adequately. For its idea (2p7c) will necessarily be adequate in God, both to the extent that he has the idea of the human body and also to the extent that he has ideas of its affections, which (2p16, 2p25, 2p27) involve in part (ex parte involvunt) the nature both of the human body and also that of the external bodies. That is (2p12, 2p13), the idea will necessarily be adequate in God to the extent that he constitutes the human mind or to the extent that he has the ideas that are in the human mind. The mind therefore (2p11C) necessarily perceives A adequately both to the extent that it perceives itself and also to the extent that it perceives its own or any external body, nor can A be perceived in any other way. Cor.: From this it follows that there are certain ideas or notions common to all men. For (212) all bodies agree is certain things, which (2p38) must be perceived adequately, or clearly and distinctly, by all.
2p39: Of this—whatever is common and proper to the human body and some external bodies by which it is ordinarily affected and is also equally in the part and in the whole—the idea in the human mind will be adequate.

Dem.: Let A be that which is common and proper to the human body and some external bodies, which is equally in the human body and in those external bodies and which, finally, is equally in the part and in the whole of each external body. There will be an adequate idea of A in God (2p7c), both to the extent that he has the idea of the human body and also to the extent that he has ideas of those external bodies. Suppose now that the human body is affected by a body through this which it has in common with it, that is, through A. The idea of this affection will involve property A (2p16) and so (2p7c) the idea of this affection, to the extent that it involves property A will be adequate in God to the extent that he is affected by the idea of the human body, that is (2p13), to the extent that he constitutes the nature of the human mind. Therefore (2p11c) this idea is also adequate in the human mind.

Cor.: From this it follows that a mind whose body has more in common with other bodies is more able to perceive more things adequately.”

III. Spinoza’s “Commands of Reason” (rationis dictamina) are Ideas of Reason

A. 3p3 associates action with ideas.

3p3: The actions of the mind arise solely from adequate ideas; the passions however depend solely on inadequate ideas. Dem: The first thing the constitutes the essence of the mind is nothing other than the idea of an actually existing body (2p11, 2p13), which (2p15) is composed of many other ideas of which some are adequate (2p38c), others inadequate (2p29s). Whatever therefore follows from the nature of the mind and of which the mind is its proximate cause, through which it must be understood, must necessarily follow either from an adequate or from an inadequate idea. But insofar as the mind (by p1) has inadequate ideas, to this extent it is necessarily acted on. Therefore, the actions of the mind follow from adequate ideas alone, and the mind is acted on only because it has inadequate ideas.

B. 4p35 builds upon 3p3 in giving an account of reason and human society.

4p35: To the extent that men live from the guidance of reason, and only to that extent, do they always necessarily agree in nature. Dem. To the extent that men struggle with affects that are passions, they can be different in nature (4p33) and contrary to one another (4p34). However, men are said to act to the extent that they live from the guidance of reason (3p3).

C. 4p66 builds upon the unchanging nature of common properties.

2p44c2: It is of the nature of reason to perceive things from a certain standpoint of eternity.

4p62: Insofar as the mind conceives things from the command of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea is of a future or a past or of a present thing. Dem: Whatever the mind conceives in following reason, it conceives under the same standpoint of eternity or necessity (2p44c2) and if affected with the same certainty (2p43, 2p43s). So, whether the idea is of a future or past or present thing, the mind conceives the thing with the same necessity and is affected with the same certainty. And whether the idea is of a future or past or present thing it will notwithstanding in the same way be true (2p41), that is, it will notwithstanding have all of the same properties of an adequate idea. Therefore, insofar as the mind conceives things from the command of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea is of a future or a past or of a present thing.
4p66: From the guidance of reason, we seek a greater future good before a lesser present one and a lesser present evil before a greater future one. **Dem.** If the mind could have adequate knowledge of a future thing, it would be affected toward the future thing with the same affect as it would toward a present thing (4p62). So, insofar as we attend to reason itself, as in this proposition we have supposed ourselves to do, the thing is the same whether the greater good or evil is supposed to be future or present. So therefore (4p65), we want a greater future good before a lesser present one, etc.

**IV. 5p7: The Commands of Reason Are Powerful because They Are Steady**

4p17s: With this I believe that I have shown why men are moved more by opinion than by true reason, and why the true knowledge of good and evil agitates the spirit and often gives way to lusts of all kinds.

5p7: Affects that arise from or are intensified by reason are, if we take account of time, more powerful than those that are related to singular things that we consider to be absent. **Dem.** We consider a thing to be absent not because of the affect by means of which we imagine it, but because of this, that our body is affected by another affect, that precludes the thing’s existence (2p17). Therefore an affect which is related (revertur) to a thing that we consider to be absent is not of such a nature that it surpasses the rest of a man’s actions and power (see 4p6); but, to the contrary, its nature is such that it can be checked in some way by those affections that preclude the existence of its external cause (4p9). An affect, however, that arises from reason, is related necessarily to the common properties of things (see the definition of reason in 2p40s2), which we also consider to be present (for there can be nothing that precludes their present existence) and which we always imagine in the same way (2p38). Therefore, such an affect will always remain the same, and consequently (5a1), affects that are opposed to it and that are not reinforced (foventur) by their external causes, must adapt themselves more and more to it, until they are no longer opposed. To that extent, an affect that arises from reason is more powerful.

The Sage’s Prescription from 5p4s: We should work especially hard in order to know each affect clearly and distinctly, insofar as it can be done, so that thereby the mind may be determined from an affect to thinking those things that it perceives clearly and distinctly and in which it may be completely content; and also so that the affect may be separated from the thought of an external cause and joined to true thoughts.

The Sage’s Prescriptions from 5p10s: We have asserted as a maxim of life (see 4p46 and 4p46s) that hate should be conquered by love, or nobility, not however by reciprocal hatred. So that we may always have this rule of reason ready when it is needed, however, we should think and meditate often about common human wrongs and how and in what way they may best be driven away by nobility... ...We should think about tenacity in the same way in order to set aside fear; that is, we should recount in detail and frequently imagine the common dangers of life, and how, by presence of mind and by strength of character they may best be avoided and overcome.

5p10s, “[Whoever applies the Sage’s prescriptions] will in a brief time be able to direct most of his actions according to the command of reason.”

**V. Spinoza’s ‘Ought’ and Motivation**

Spinoza associates the power of ‘ought’ claims to motivate with regular confirmation of relevant truths in experience. This yields something like the right account of the connection between morality and motivation. It also is a clear, highly original, and promising account.
Some Commands of Reason:

4p18s: Reason demands self love, seeking one’s own advantage, seeking what is really useful to oneself, seeking what will really lead man to a greater perfection, striving as far as one can to preserve one’s own being.... ...Men governed by reason want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men.

4p24: Acting from virtue is nothing but acting, living and preserving being under the guidance of reason from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage.

4p26: From reason, we strive for nothing but understanding.

4p35: To the extent that men live from the guidance of reason, and only to that extent, do they always necessarily agree in nature. 4p35c: Nothing is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason.

4p46: He who lives by the guidance of reason strives to the extent that he can to return another’s hate, anger and contempt toward him with love or generosity.

4p50: Pity in a man who lives by the guidance of reason is evil in itself, and useless. 4p50c: A man who lives by the guidance of reason strives as far as he can not to be touched by pity.

4p51: Favor is not repugnant to reason; on the contrary it can agree with it and arise from it.

4p53: Humility is not a virtue. Humility does not arise from reason.

4p54: Repentance is not a virtue. It does not arise from reason. 4p54s: Because men rarely live from the commands of reason, these two affects, humility and repentance, and also hope and fear, bring more advantage than harm.

4p58: Honor is not contrary to reason, but can arise from it.

4p62: Insofar as a mind conceives things from the command of reason, it is affected equally whether the idea is of a future, a past, or a present thing.

4p63: He who is led by fear and does good in order to avoid evil is not led by reason.

4p65: From the guidance of reason we follow the greater of two goods and the lesser of two evils.

4p66: From the guidance of reason, we seek that greater future good before the lesser present one and the lesser present evil before the greater future one.