

THE BANISHMENT OF ACCIDENTS FROM SPINOZA'S PARADISE

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Part I: Paradise. 3. Part II: Before Creation. 4. Part III: Banishment. 5. Part IV: The Sin. 6. Conclusion.

Aus dem Paradies, das Cantor uns geschaffen, soll uns
niemand vertreiben können.¹

1. INTRODUCTION²

ACCIDENTS [*accidens/toevallen*] were recognized residents of the ontological polity of western philosophy at least since Aristotle.³ While hardly ever enjoying an equal ontological status with their metaphysical superiors – substances – the presence of accidents in medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophy was all but ubiquitous. Then something happened: rather enigmatically, accidents lost much of their legitimacy in the early modern period.⁴ So much so that by the end of this period, many considered accidents

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¹ “No one shall expel us from the paradise that Cantor has created for us.” D. HILBERT, *Über das Unendliche*, «Mathematische Annalen», 95/1 (1926), p. 170.

² I am indebted to the participants at the December 2020 session of the JHU Spinoza & Early Modern Philosophy virtual workshop for their comments and critiques of an earlier draft of this paper. I would like to thank Zach Gartenberg, Emanuele Costa and the anonymous referee for *Acta Philosophica* for their penetrating comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

³ See Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a25 and *Topics*, 102b4-26.

⁴ I have briefly discussed the issue of Spinoza's change of heart toward accidents in Y. Y. MELAMED, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013, pp. 28-30 and p. 48 (Italian transl., *La metafisica di Spinoza. Sostanza e pensiero*, E. COSTA (ed.), Mimesis, Milano 2020, pp. 63-65 and p. 91). My primary aim in the current paper is to develop and extend this brief account. For Pierre Bayle's discussion of the rejection of accidents as part of a broader rejection of scholasticism by the new philosophers, see P. BAYLE, *Spinoza*, in Id., *Dictionnaire historique et critique par Mr. Pierre Bayle*, Compagnie des Libraires, Amsterdam 1734, vol. 5, p. 224 (English transl., *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, Routledge/Thoemmes Press, London 1997, vol. 5, p. 221). For two excellent studies of the nature of modes in Spinoza, see J. CARRIERO, *On the Relationship between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 33 (1995), pp. 245-273, and C. JARRETT, *The Concept of Substance and Mode in Spinoza*, «Philosophia», 7 (1977), pp. 83-105.

as the bastard children of an unholy union between theological obscurantism and our flimsy imagination. This sudden fall from grace is most salient – probably more than in any other contemporary author – in the work of Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677). The young Spinoza seemed to espouse accidents – as changeable qualities, somehow akin to modes [*modi*] – as significant components of the genuine furniture of reality. But, roughly from 1663 on, Spinoza systematically avoided employing the concept of accident in his ontology (and political theory).

In this paper, we will try to trace the dramatic story of the fall of accidents from Spinoza's paradise. In the first part of the paper, we will observe the accidents roaming freely – well, almost freely – in their pre-1663 paradise of Spinoza's early works. The second part will be dedicated to some highlights in the early history of accidents “before creation”, i.e., before their incarnation in Spinoza's early ontological paradise. The third part will study the banishment, or systematic elimination, of accidents from Spinoza's ontology after 1663. The fourth and final part will attempt to determine the sin which brought about the accidents' punishment.⁵ Thus, we confront a seemingly classic narrative. Without further ado, let us turn directly to our first act.

2. PART I: PARADISE

The *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well Being* [*Korte Verhandelning van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*] is an early work of Spinoza. Filippo Mignini dates the work to the middle of 1660.⁶ The two manuscripts of this work – discovered in the mid-nineteenth century – also contain two “appendices.”⁷ Recently I have argued that far from being appendixes to the KV, these two short

⁵ Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza's works are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols., edited and translated by E. Curley, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985/2016. I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., edited by C. Gebhardt, Carl Winter Verlag, Heidelberg 1925) for the Latin and Dutch text of Spinoza. I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: TIE – *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*], DPP – *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* [*Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II*], CM – *Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], KV – *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandelning van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*], TTP – *Theological-Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], Ep. – *Letters*. Passages in the *Ethics* (abbrev. E) will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-choli-um), and app(-endix); ‘d’ stands for ‘definition’ when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book, and to ‘demonstration’ in all other cases. Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1.

⁶ See F. MIGNINI, *Introduction au Court Traité*, in SPINOZA, *Oeuvres 1: Premiers écrits*, PUF, Paris 2009, pp. 159-180.

⁷ The title “appendix” was given by the mid-nineteenth century editors.

texts are in fact early drafts of another work.⁸ The first “appendix,” I contended, is the earliest draft of the *Ethics* we currently have. It is written *more geometrico*, yet surprisingly it contains *no definitions*. Instead, we have seven axioms followed by four propositions, and each proposition is accompanied by a detailed demonstration (as in the published version of the *Ethics*). The content of these axioms and propositions fits elegantly with the first three pages of the published version of the *Ethics*.

For the purposes of the current study, we can focus on the first axiom of this intriguing text:

Substance is, by its nature, prior to all its accidents (modifications) [*De zelfstandigheid staat wegens syn natuur voor alle syne toevallen (modificationes)*].⁹

‘Toevallen’ is the standard Dutch word for accidents. Since the scribe of this manuscript added a clarifying note in brackets ‘(modificationes)’, Ed Curley translated ‘toevallen’ as modes. This is a reasonable decision since it is clear that the text takes ‘accident’ and ‘mode’ as interchangeable. Still, insofar as our interest here is (at least partly) the precise relation between accidents and modes, as perceived by the early Spinoza, I prefer to translate ‘toevallen’ literally as ‘accidents’, so that the translation does not efface the text’s identification of accidents and modes.

Axiom 1 of “appendix” one to the KV has a clear parallel in the published version of the *Ethics*: “A substance is prior by its nature to its affections [*Substantia prior est natura suis affectionibus*]” (E1p1). At this point we may already suspect that, at least for a while, ‘accidents’ and ‘modes’ were equivalent terms for Spinoza. This suspicion is confirmed once we examine a draft of the *Ethics* quoted by Spinoza in an early (October 1661) letter to Henry Oldenburg.

Please attend to the definitions I gave of Substance and Accident.¹⁰ For by *Substance* I understand what is conceived through itself and in itself, i.e., that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing; *but by Modification, or Accident* [*per modificationem autem, sive per Accidens*], what is in another and is conceived through what it is in. From this it is clear that:

[A1] *Substance is by nature prior to its Accidents*, for without it, they can neither be nor be conceived.

⁸ Y. Y. MELAMED, *The Earliest Draft of Spinoza’s Ethics*, in C. RAMOND, J. STETTER (eds.), *Spinoza in 21st-Century French and American Philosophy: Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, Moral and Political Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, London 2019, pp. 93–112.

⁹ KV-App1-A1 | 1/114/4.

¹⁰ A month earlier, in September 1661, Spinoza attached an excerpt from a draft of the *Ethics* to an earlier letter he sent to Oldenburg (Ep. 2). This geometrical enclosure has been lost, though we can partially reconstruct its content from Spinoza’s discussion of this text in Ep. 4. As the first sentence of the quote above shows, the definitions of Substance and Accident were part of the geometrical enclosure.

[A2] *Except for Substances and Accidents, nothing exists in reality*, or outside the intellect, for whatever there is, is conceived either through itself or through another, and its concept either does or does not involve the concept of another thing (Ep. 4 | IV / 13 / 30-14 / 35).¹¹

The definitions of substance and accident/modification in this draft are virtually the same as E1d3 and E1d5 in the published version of the *Ethics*, with the notable exception that the final version of the *Ethics* has ‘mode’ in E1d5, rather than ‘Modification or Accident.’ The two other italicized passages in this excerpt correspond respectively to E1p1¹² and E1p4d¹³ in the ultimate version. Here too, the final *Ethics* has “affections of substance” instead of “accidents” in the draft quoted in Ep. 4.

The Ep. 4 draft treats accidents and modifications as equivalent concepts, though it seems to disclose some *slight* preference for the terminology of accidents: they are mentioned more frequently, and at the beginning of the quote above Spinoza refers to “Substance and Accident” (rather than substance and modification) as the *definienda*. But this is a slight nuance which may or may not be of any significance.

The equivalence of accident and mode also appears in Spinoza’s first published book, the 1663 *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy* [*Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae*], in which Spinoza presents the first two parts of *Descartes’ Principles* (1644) in a geometrical manner. The topic of the next passage is the difference in reality/perfection between substance, on the one hand, and modes/accidents, on the other.

By *perfection* I understand only reality, or being. E.g., I perceive that *more reality is contained in substance than in modes, or accidents*. Hence, I understand clearly that it *contains a more necessary and perfect existence than accidents do*.¹⁴

In this passage too, accidents and modes appear as interchangeable concepts of equal standing. This would be the swan song of the accidents, as they are just about to be ostracized.

Before we conclude our very brief survey of accidents’ time in the sun, let us address one more passage from a text that is currently considered Spinoza’s earliest work – the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*] – apparently composed in the late 1650s.¹⁵ The passage appears in the context of Spinoza’s discussion of the different kinds of cognition, the second of which (in the TIE) is ‘random experience’. The question at stake in this extract is how we can learn the essences of things.

¹¹ Italics added.

¹² “*Substantia prior est natura suis affectionibus*”.

¹³ “[E]xtra intellectum nihil datur praeter substantias earumque affectiones.”

¹⁴ DPP-1p7sLem1Note2 | 1/165/6-8. Italics added.

¹⁵ See Curley’s editorial notes in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, cit., vol. 1, p. 3.

[From perception we have from random experience, undetermined by the intellect] no one will ever perceive anything in natural things except accidents. But *these are never understood clearly unless their essences are known first*. So that also is to be excluded.¹⁶

In this passage Spinoza asserts that accidents cannot be known unless we first know “their essences” and therefore, on pain of circularity, we cannot learn the essences through the accidents. What does Spinoza mean here by “their essences”? I suspect, though I’m not confident, that the view Spinoza expresses here is one in which accidents are supposed to be *inseparable* from their substance. We will discuss the crucial issue of the separability of accidents in the next part.

3. PART II: BEFORE CREATION

In his canonical *Isagogue*, Porphyry defines accident in the following manner:

What comes into being and passes away apart from the destruction of the substratum is an accident. Two types are distinguished: the separable and the inseparable. Sleeping is a separable accident, while being black occurs inseparably in the crow and in the Ethiopian. It is possible, however, to conceive of a white crow and of an Ethiopian who has lost his color apart from the destruction of the substratum.¹⁷

Two points should be stressed about Porphyry’s definition. First, when he claims that some accidents – such as *sleeping* – are separable from their substratum, he does not mean to suggest that *accidents* can exist free-floating without a substratum, but rather that the *substratum* can be without the separable accidents. The separability at stake is completely *asymmetric*. Second, we should note Porphyry’s assertion that in the case of *inseparable* accidents – such as the blackness of the crow – ontological and conceptual possibilities come apart. A crow cannot be not-black – for blackness is here an inseparable accident – but the crow can be *conceived* as not being black.

Porphyry’s presentation of the five Aristotelian *predicabilia* and the distinction between separable and inseparable accidents were adopted by numerous Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin medieval texts. Thus, in his youthful logical treatise,¹⁸ מלות דהגיון [*Makalah Fi-sinaat Al-Mantik*], Maimonides writes:

There are two kinds of accidents: *one inheres permanently and inseparably in its subject* [מקרה קיים בנושא בלתי נפרד ממנו], like the blackness of pitch and the whiteness of snow

¹⁶ TIE § 27. Italics added.

¹⁷ PORPHYRY THE PHOENICIAN, *Isagogue*, translated by E. W. Warren, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto 1975, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ On this treatise and the recent suggestion that it was not composed by Maimonides, see H. A. DAVIDSON, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Work*, Oxford University Press, New York 2005, pp. 314-322.

and the heat of fire; and the other is a *separable accident* like the standing or the sitting of a person, or the heat of iron or stone.¹⁹

Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic* also presents the Aristotelian distinction between accident [מקרה] and *proprium* [סגולה] in the following manner.

That which *always* exists in all the individuals of a species but does not constitute the essence of that species, we call *proprium*. That which exists in *most or some* individuals of a species and does not constitute its essence, we call *accident*. These are the five universals as enumerated by the ancients.²⁰

When we consider the last two passages together, the distinction between *permanent (or inseparable) accident* and *proprium* becomes somewhat unclear: why should we consider the whiteness of snow a permanent (or inseparable) accident rather than a *proprium*? We will return to this question shortly.

The terminology of 'mode [אופן]' appears in medieval Hebrew philosophical works, though far less frequently than 'accident.' An interesting instance of the mode terminology appears in Gersonides' commentary on Genesis 2:2:

[God] desires the rational order of the world, which is God, may be blessed, in some mode [שהוא חושק בזה הסיידור המושכל אשר לעולם, אשר הוא השם ית' באופן-מה].²¹

Gersonides' assertion that the rational order of nature is a mode of God may well appear as an anticipation of Spinoza, but we cannot discuss this issue here.²²

By the seventeenth century, the precise relation between modes and accidents was rather unclear. In the Third Meditation, Descartes treats accidents and modes as equivalent:²³

¹⁹ MAIMONIDES, *Treatise on Logic*, translated by I. Efros, American Academy for Jewish Research, New York 1938, Ch. 10, p. 52. Italics added. The Hebrew text is from the early medieval translation by Moshe Ibn-Tibbon which has been used in almost all manuscripts and editions of this work.

²⁰ MAIMONIDES, *Treatise on Logic*, cit., Ch. 10, p. 51. Italics added.

²¹ GERSONIDES, *Perush al ha-Torah* [Commentary on the Pentateuch], Daniel Bomberg, Venice 1547, p. 13b. I am indebted to Zev Harvey for pointing out this passage to me some years ago.

²² See W. Z. HARVEY, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*, J. C. Gieben, Amsterdam 1998, p. 104, n. 17.

²³ For reference to Descartes' text, I relied on Adam and Tannery's edition (R. DESCARTES, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, [AT] 12 vols., edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery, J. Vrin, Paris 1964-76), cited by volume and page number. Thus 'AT VII 23' stands for page 23 of volume 7 of this edition. For the English translation, I used the CSM edition (R. DESCARTES, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (vol. 3), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985), cited by volume and page number, thus: 'CSM II 231' stands for page 231 of the second volume.

Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective' reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents [*Modos, sive accidentia*].²⁴

In the Objections and Replies appended to Descartes' *Meditations*, the issue of accidents is discussed in some detail following upon Arnauld's mentioning to Descartes that it is hard to square Descartes' new metaphysics with Church doctrine on the issue of transubstantiation:

We believe on faith that the substance of the bread is taken away from the bread of the Eucharist and only the accidents remain. These are extension, shape, colour, smell, taste and other qualities perceived by the senses. But the author thinks there are no sensible qualities, but merely various motions in the bodies that surround us which enable us to perceive the various impressions which we subsequently call 'colour,' 'taste' and 'smell.' Hence only shape, extension and mobility remain. Yet the author denies that these powers are intelligible apart from some substance for them to inhere in, and hence he holds that they cannot exist without such a substance.²⁵

Arnauld's point is quite simple. Per Church doctrine, at the moment of the consecration, the bread and wine turn into new substances – the body and blood of Christ – while remaining with the very same accidents of taste, colour, and smell. Thus, these accidents – sometimes called 'real accidents' – are not completely dependent on their substance: they depart their substance of inherence at the moment of the consecration (and they do not inhere in the new substance).²⁶ In the *Meditations*, Descartes had been using 'accidents' and 'modes' as equivalent terms. However, modes are just states of the substance, and they cannot be or be conceived without their substance. Thus, if Descartes is strictly committed to a metaphysics of modes (or of mode-equivalent accidents which are inseparable from their substance), the very concept of transubstantiation would seem to be unintelligible.

In his response, Descartes points out that he "could easily get around the objection if I say that I have never denied the existence of real accidents."²⁷ Yet his ultimate reply is much more interesting. Descartes confirms that on

²⁴ AT VII 40 | CSM II 28. Cf. the French text of AT VII 78. On the other hand, a text which was appended by the CSM editors to the early (1628) *Regulae* lists accidents and modes as distinct kinds of qualities: "We must note that the word 'part' has to be taken in a very wide sense, as signifying everything that goes to make up a thing - *its modes*, its extremities, *its accidents*, its properties, and in general all its attributes" (CSM I 78). Italics added. I somewhat doubt this extract from the 1664 *Port Royal Logic* (see CSM I 77) precisely represents the wording of the 1628 *Regulae*.

²⁵ Fourth Set of Objections (AT VII 217 | CSM II 153).

²⁶ For a helpful discussion of the theology of the Eucharist, see G. KLIMA, *Substance, Accident, and Modes*, in H. LAGERLUND (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht 2011, pp. 1219-1227.

²⁷ AT VII 248 | CSM II 173.

his metaphysics of substance and modes, transubstantiation is indeed unintelligible. However, he denies that unintelligibility entails impossibility: "I firmly insist and believe that many things can be brought about by God which we are incapable of understanding."²⁸ In other words, transubstantiation is a *miracle* which the all-powerful God can, and does, perform every Eucharist celebration. We need not bend our metaphysics to make it consistent with the truth of miracles.

Before we return to our discussion of accidents in Spinoza, let us look at one more contemporary text. Franco Burgersdijck's *Institutionum Logicarum Libri Duo* (1626) was one of the most influential logic textbooks of the seventeenth century. The fifth chapter of the first book of the *Institutionum Logicarum* opens with the following theorem and explanation:

An accident is a being [ens] inhering in a substance. Inhering in a substance is being in a substance, as in a subject... [as Aristotle's states in the *Categories*] that which is in something, not as a part, and which cannot be without that in which it is in.... Hence it follows that: (1) Accidents cannot exist without a subject, (2) [Accidents] cannot migrate from subject to [another] subject, (3) [Accidents] cannot inhere in another accident.²⁹

Burgersdijck's accidents cannot exist without their subject, nor can they switch from one subject to another. Thus, they are *ontologically* dependent on their subject. But can they be *conceived* without their subject?

Burgersdijck answers the last question in his discussion of the distinction between inseparable accidents and *propria* (both being qualities which do not constitute the essence of a thing and are always present in the thing):

All accidents can be separated in thought [*cogitatione*] from their subject, without implying a contradiction. And hence they are accidents, and not *propria* which cannot be thought separately without a contradiction. He who thinks a crow is not black, though he thinks the false, does not yet think that a crow is not a crow, nor does he think that from which it follows that a crow is not a crow. But he who conceives fire that is not hot, conceives that from which it follows that fire is not fire.³⁰

Hotness either belongs to the essence of fire or follows necessarily from the essence of fire (in which case it would be a *proprium* of fire). Blackness does not belong to the essence of crow, nor does it follow necessarily from the essence of crow. For that reason, blackness, though ontologically inseparable from the crow, is not a *proprium* of the crow but only an inseparable accident.³¹

²⁸ AT VII 249 | CSM II 173.

²⁹ F. BURGERSDIJCK, *Institutionum Logicarum Libri Duo*, Daniel Roger, Cambridge 1647, p. 18. The translation is mine.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, Book I, Ch. 13, p. 51.

³¹ Notice that on this view, the inseparability of inseparable accidents seems to be a brute fact.

In this sense *propria*, which can neither be nor be conceived without (the essence of) their subject, appear extremely similar to the modes of the late Spinoza.

4. PART III: BANISHMENT

Like many of his contemporaries, Spinoza mocked the notion of real accidents, i.e., accidents which have existence in their own right.³² In the 1663 *Cogitata Metaphysica*, he refers to real accidents as “clearly absurd [*plane inepta*],”³³ immediately after asserting that “there is nothing in Nature but substances and their Modes.”³⁴

But the fate of accidents *simpliciter* was not much better than that of the real accidents, and in Spinoza's works after 1663 they virtually disappear. Definitions and axioms which used the terminology of accidents in the early drafts of *Ethics* would be reformulated, and ‘mode’ will systematically replace any occurrence of ‘accident.’ In the final version of *Ethics*, the terminology of accidents appears only as part of an idiom, or a coined phrase, such as, ‘*per accidens*’ or ‘*ex accidenti*,’³⁵ which make no commitment to an ontology of accidents.³⁶

Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* (1670) and the unfinished *Political Treatise* do not employ the terminology of accidents. In the incomplete *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar* Spinoza uses the terminology of modes but not that of accidents.

Intriguingly, when Leibniz reports on his visit to Spinoza's house in the Hague and the conversations the two had between the 18th and 21st of November 1676, the equivalence of modes and accidents resurfaces:

I saw [Spinoza] while passing through Holland, and I spoke with him several times and for a long time. He has a strange metaphysics, replete with paradoxes. Among other things, he believes that the world and God are but one and the same thing and substance, that God is the substance of all things, and that creatures are nothing but modes or accidents [*des Modes ou accidens*].³⁷

³² For the pressures which led Duns Scotus (and other late scholastics) to develop and defend the notion of real accidents, see R. PASNAU, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 181-199.

³³ CM II 1 | 1/249/32. Cf. CM II 12 | 1/281/17. In Ep. 13 (July 1663), Spinoza accused Robert Boyle – himself a critic of real accidents – of tacitly assuming real accidents due to Boyle's willingness to entertain the notion of vacuum in which quantity (an accident) is present without any substance (IV/65/31). ³⁴ CM II 1 | 1/249/29.

³⁵ See, for example, E1p16c2, E3p15, E3p16d, E3p17s, E3p36s, E3p50, E3DA9, and E3DA24.

³⁶ The readers are invited to check on their own the passages listed in the previous note.

³⁷ G. W. LEIBNIZ, *Die Philosophische Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. J. C. Gerhardt, Olms, Hildesheim 1965 [1875-1890], vol. 1, p. 118.

Presumably, Leibniz was either translating Spinoza's concepts into his own manner of thinking,³⁸ or he might have been under the influence of the DPP and CM which, I assume, he read in preparation for the meetings.³⁹ One way or another, in Spinoza's own writing from around 1676, the terminology of accidents had been long gone.⁴⁰ Why?

5. PART IV: THE SIN

The *Zeitgeist* of the late seventeenth century, and its growing rejection of scholastic metaphysics, provide part of the explanation. Here is Pierre Bayle's description of these developments:

Descartes, Gassendi, and, in general, all those who have abandoned Scholastic philosophy, have denied that an accident is separable from its subject in such a way that it could subsist after its separation and began employing the less common term 'mode' instead of 'accident' to make clear that the qualities at stake are inseparable from their substance.⁴¹

Thus, Spinoza's rejection of the terminology of accidents was clearly part of a broader trend. Fortunately, Spinoza's himself supplies an explanation for the dismissal of the terminology of accidents at the beginning of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* (1663), the text in which Spinoza engages most substantively with the scholastics.⁴² The passage below appears in the context of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* discussion of the division of being [*Entis divisio*]. Being, claims Spinoza, is divided into "being which exists necessarily by virtue of its own nature" (presumably, God), and "being whose essence involves only possible existence" (i.e., created things).⁴³ The latter category is further divided into (created) substances and modes,

whose definitions are given in the *Principles of Philosophy* I, 51, 52, and 56. So it is not necessary to repeat them here. I only wish it to be noted, concerning this division, that *we say expressly that being is divided into Substance and Mode, and not into Substance and Accident. For an Accident is nothing but a mode of thinking [modus cogitandi], inasmuch as*

³⁸ In spite of some significant reservations – "an accident that is not a mode seems difficult to explain" (G. W. LEIBNIZ, *Philosophical Essays*, eds. R. Ariew and D. Garber, Hackett, Indianapolis 1989, p. 198) – Leibniz felt more comfortable with the terminology of accidents and employed it occasionally throughout his career.

³⁹ Spinoza never allowed Leibniz to read the manuscript of the *Ethics*.

⁴⁰ As I have suggested above, Spinoza seems to dismiss with the 'accident' terminology around 1663.

⁴¹ P. BAYLE, *Dictionary*, vol. 5, pp. 331-332 (*Dictionnaire*, vol. 5, p. 224).

⁴² For an excellent discussion and overview, see E. COSTA, *Spinoza and Scholastic Philosophy*, in Y. Y. MELAMED (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Spinoza*, Blackwell, Hoboken 2021, pp. 47-55.

⁴³ CM I 1 | 1/236/25-7.

it denotes what is only a respect [*quod solummodo respectum denotat*]. E.g., when I say that the triangle is moved, the motion is not a mode of the triangle, but of the body which is moved. Hence the motion is called an accident with respect to the triangle. But with respect to the body, it is called a real being, or mode [*ens reale, sive modus*]. For the motion cannot be conceived without the body, though it can without the triangle.⁴⁴

The passage seems to be crucial for our investigation as it explicitly attempts to explain why the traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic division of being into Substance and Accident is inapt and must be replaced by a division of being into Substance and Mode. But to understand this untrivial passage, we must first answer at least two questions: (i) What does Spinoza understand by *modi cogitandi* (in this period) and what is the significance of the claim that accidents are *modi cogitandi*? and (ii) Why does Spinoza think that motion can be conceived without the triangle, but not without the body? We have already encountered the claim that inseparable accidents can be conceived without their substrate,⁴⁵ but why assume that when a triangular body is moving the motion is a mode of body and only an accident of the triangle?

To answer the first question, we need turn to the beginning of the same chapter (Ch. 1 of part 1) in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*. Spinoza commences the chapter (and the *Cogitata Metaphysica* as a whole) by defining Being [*Entis*] as that which we clearly know to “exist necessarily, or at least to be able to exist.”⁴⁶ Following this definition, he argues that Chimaeras, Fictitious Beings [*ens fictum*], and Beings of Reason [*entia rationis*] are *not* beings. Regarding *entia rationis*, he notes:

A Being of reason is nothing but a mode of thinking, which helps us to more easily retain, explain, and imagine the things we have understood. Note that by a mode of thinking we understand, as we have already explained in IP15S,⁴⁷ all affections of thought, such as intellect, joy, imagination, etc.⁴⁸

In the last excerpt, Spinoza suggests that beings of reason are a subgroup within the modes of the attribute thought. He then continues and elaborates:

By what modes of thinking we retain [*retineamus*] things

That there are certain modes of thinking which help us to retain things more firmly and easily, and when we wish, to recall them to mind or keep them present

⁴⁴ CM I 1 | 1/236/32-237/5. Italics added.

⁴⁵ See the excerpt from Burgersdijck at the end of Part II above.

⁴⁶ CM I 1 | 1/233/21.

⁴⁷ In IP15S of the DPP, Spinoza presents the Cartesian theory about the cause of error and the intellect's relation to the will. In this context, he divides modes of thought into “modes of perceiving (like, sensing, imagining, and purely understanding), and modes of willing (like, desiring, shunning, affirming, denying and doubting)”, CM I 1 | 1/233/30-35 - a division familiar to readers of Descartes' Third and Fourth Meditations.

⁴⁸ CM I 1 | 1/233/30-35.

to the mind, is sufficiently established for those who use that well-known rule of Memory, by which to retain something very new and imprint it on the memory, we recall something else familiar to us, which agrees with it, either in name or in reality. *Similarly, the Philosophers have reduced all natural things to certain classes [class-sem], to which they recur when anything new presents itself to them. These they call genus, species, etc.*⁴⁹

“The Philosophers” referred to in the passage might be the followers of “the Philosopher,” i.e., Aristotle. But what is the unfinished list of classes at the very end of the passage? I suspect that these are the five traditional predicabilia – genus, species, differentia, property, and *accident* – and that Spinoza expects readers to easily recognize them as such. If indeed accidents are (implicitly) contained in this list, we might have a beginning of an answer to our first question. Accidents and the other four predicabilia constitute a subgroup of Beings of Reason, i.e., they are the Beings of Reason that help us *retain* and *recall* things. On their part, Beings of Reason are a subgroup of *modi cogitandi* (modes of thought). Thus, accidents are *modi cogitandi*. The picture we get is of a three-level taxonomy: a subgroup of modes of thought are Beings of Reason, and a subgroup of Beings of Reason are the five predicabilia (accidents included).⁵⁰ Beings of reason that help us to retain and recall things – i.e., the five predicabilia – are universals.⁵¹

At this point we are ready to address our second question: why is the movement of a triangular body a mode of that body, but only an accident of the triangle? Here we can point out what is most likely the source of Spinoza’s example which is taken from Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*, I 59.⁵² The title of the section is: “*How universals arise. The five common universals: genus, species, differentia, property, accident.*” Addressing the last of these common universals – i.e., accidents – Descartes writes:

⁴⁹ CM I 1 | 1/234/1-10.

⁵⁰ Another subgroup of beings of reason are time, number and measure. These do not help us retain things, but rather “serve to explain a thing by determining it through comparison to another” (CM I, 1 | 1/234/12-16).

⁵¹ In CM I, 1 Spinoza does not explicitly call retaining beings of reason ‘universals’. However, if we compare the CM discussion of the question whether the proper definition of man is featherless biped or rational animal (CM I, 1 | 1/235/20-22), and Spinoza’s discussion of the same question in E2p40s1 (II/121/27-32) – where universals are explicitly designated as the subject of the discussion – the identification of retaining beings of reason with universals becomes clear. Cf. DESCARTES’ *Principles*, I 58, where universals are explicitly presented as *modi cogitandi*.

⁵² Notice that the CM passage where Spinoza presents the moving triangle example begins with an explicit reference to Descartes’ definition of substance and mode, in “*Principles* I 51, 52, 56,” which appear less than a page before the moving triangle example in Descartes (*Principles* I 59).

Finally, if we suppose that some right-angled triangles are in motion while others are not, this will be a universal accident [*accidens universale*] of such triangles. Hence, five universals are commonly listed: genus, species, differentia, property, and accident (*Italics added*).

The movement of the triangle⁵³ is merely a universal accident of the triangle – claims Descartes – because not all triangles are in motion: movement (*qua* universal) is instantiated in some, but not all, triangles. In other words: triangles can be and conceived without motion. Descartes, however, does not tell us here whether *motion* can be and be conceived without the triangle.⁵⁴ Spinoza's discussion of the moving triangle in CM I, 1 seems to be a complement of Descartes' analysis of the case.⁵⁵ For Spinoza, the crucial issue is whether motion presupposes the triangle (or another shape), and his answer is negative. "Motion cannot be conceived without the body but can be conceived without the triangle."⁵⁶ Motion is a state of bodies, not of shapes.⁵⁷ For that reason, motion is a mode of the body but an accident of the triangle.

Throughout its long history the notion of accidents has involved several significant ambiguities, two of which are critical for Spinoza's discussion. (1) Are accidents separable from their subject or not? (2) Are all accidents universals, or are perhaps some accidents particulars (or 'tropes' in the language of recent metaphysics)?⁵⁸ My suspicion is that Spinoza deserts the terminology of accidents in order to rid himself from these two ambiguities. Universal accidents, *qua* universals, are merely *modi cogitandi*, not true qualities which obtain outside the intellect. The notion of particular accident is also of no use to Spinoza, because the concept of mode is far less vague (modes cannot be and

⁵³ I disregard Descartes' characterization of the triangle as right-angled because this characterization is employed by Descartes to exemplify the features of the other predicabilia. In the case of accidents, this characterization seems idle.

⁵⁴ In *Principles* I 61, in the context of his discussion of the modal distinction, Descartes presents a similar example, and asserts that both motion and shape may be conceived without the other.

⁵⁵ For Descartes' view of motion as mode of bodies, see D. GARBER, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, pp. 172-175.

⁵⁶ CM I, 1 | 1/237/5. Cf. Descartes, *Principles* I 61.

⁵⁷ Keep in mind that in CM I, 1 | 1/237/5 Spinoza refers to the moving triangle as an *example*, arguably an example of a moving *shape*. Were this passage merely trying to make the (trivial) point that motion does not presuppose a specific shape (but might still presuppose some shape, rather than necessarily presuppose a body), Spinoza's formulation in passage would be quite misleading.

⁵⁸ On the role of 'tropes' in Aristotle, see S. M. COHEN, *Accidental Beings in Aristotle's Ontology*, in G. ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, F. D. MILLER (eds.), *Reason and Analysis in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht-Heidelberg-New York-London 2008, pp. 231-242.

be conceived without their substance). Modes are also not shareable⁵⁹ and thus clearly not universals. Therefore, it seems that apart from problems and ambiguities accidents had nothing to contribute to Spinoza's system (which cannot be covered by the function of modes). Despite their long history and impressive philosophical pedigree, the accidents must go.

6. CONCLUSION

Even in their best days, accidents were usually the plebeians of the ontological polity dominated by substances. But as Spinoza sharpened his conception of substance, accidents became simply redundant in his ontology. Could Spinoza keep using universal accidents as mere fictions, or rather, beings of reason? He could. Yet, unlike many fictionalists in modern philosophy of mathematics, Spinoza's study of superstition made him keenly aware of the temptation of fiction and the danger of ascribing reality to a wishful paradise. For this reason, it was necessary to delimit a clear boundary between real beings and beings of reason, and once this division was marked, it became clear that accidents have no place among the furniture of reality.

ABSTRACT · The paper traces the dramatic story of the fall of accidents from Spinoza's paradise. In the first part of the paper, we will observe the accidents roaming freely – well, almost freely – in their pre-1663 paradise of Spinoza's early works. The second part explains some highlights in the early history of accidents “before creation,” i.e., before their incarnation in Spinoza's early ontological paradise. The third part will study the banishment, or systematic elimination, of accidents from Spinoza's ontology after 1663. The fourth and final part will attempt to determine the sin which brought about the accidents' punishment.

KEYWORDS · Spinoza, Aristotle, Descartes, Porphyry, Substance, Accidents.

⁵⁹ Were substances to share a mode, they would not be fully independent of each other.