

## The Middle Standpoint in Spinoza's *Ethics*

Spinoza writes, “[A]lthough we are already certain that the mind is eternal...we shall consider it as if it were now beginning to be, and were now beginning to understand things *sub specie aeternitatis*...” It has not yet been noticed what he is alluding to: a neoplatonist interpretation of Euclid, according to which, when we follow Euclid’s instructions for drawing figures on a page, we are “taking eternal things as if they were coming to be” (Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements*). In this essay I explore the import of this remarkable and hitherto unnoticed allusion to neoplatonism. I begin by arguing that the allusion indicates two things about the *Ethics*.

First, it helps us understand the epistemic role that Spinoza accords to passions, sensory perceptions, and other inadequate ideas. These function as constructions do in the neoplatonist version of Euclid: they help imperfect beings know perfect, eternal things.

Second, it helps us appreciate that the *Ethics* contains three standpoints. Sometimes Spinoza adopts the standpoint of the imagination, describing how things appear from its point of view. Sometimes he adopts the standpoint of eternity, describing how things appear from the intellect’s point of view. In certain places, he adopts a *middle standpoint*: the standpoint of someone shifting from the standpoint of imagination to the standpoint of eternity.

This notion of perspective that shifts — from temporality to eternity — is not new. It can be found in medieval commentaries on how to read scripture. As these commentaries describe, the reader first uncovers the literal meaning, one that takes a story to describe events that unfold over time. As the reader progresses, deeper levels of meaning rise into view, and he or she may come to see the story as an allegory of eternal truths. When we take Spinoza’s middle perspective, we are ‘reading’ our mental states in a similar fashion: progressing from interpreting them literally — as depicting a tangle of messy, temporal things — to interpreting them as revealing an order of neat, eternal essences.

With this in mind, we can find a new solution to a well-known puzzle. The puzzle is this: Spinoza claims that we can replace inadequate ideas, passions, and other passive mental states with active mental states such as joy, love, and adequate ideas. But, famously, to carry this out, it *prima facie* appears that we would need to change the past of our mental states, which is, of course, impossible. The new solution is to interpret Spinoza as holding that passive mental states exist only from the imagination’s standpoint. When we take the middle perspective, they fade away. When he says we can eliminate the passions, he is speaking from this shifting perspective.