Spinoza's Formal Essence

Spinoza stipulates in E2def2, his definition of the essence of a thing, that the essence of each particular can neither exist nor, even, be conceived, except alongside its particular. Yet a mere eight propositions later, in what Yitzhak Melamed refers to as “one of the most fascinating and enigmatic texts of the Ethics,” Spinoza states that God maintains an idea of the essence of nonactual particulars “in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things are contained in God’s attributes” (E2p8). While there are known interpretive controversies with each of these claims (many of which will be explored here) it would seem at least at first glance that God holds an idea about the essences of nonactual particulars—which is to say that these essences are conceived apart from their particular—and that the objects of these ideas—formal essences—are things within God’s attributes whether their particulars exist or not. If E2def2 does indeed tie the existence and even conception of a particular to the actual existence of the particular then it seems the formal essence, which is to say the essence as conceived at all times by God, must be distinct in some way from the essence within a particular.

Or we may be simply misreading E2def2 and/or E2p8. E2def2 for instance purports to define what “belongs to” the essence of a thing, suggesting to some commentators that Spinoza is not defining the essence of a particular but, rather, the relation between an essence and its constituent parts. E2p8 is also sometimes read as a statement about an idea in God’s mind that God entertains whether an object of the idea exists or not. I start by defending the claim that E2def2 and E2p8 pose a serious difficulty to any consistent interpretation of Spinoza’s position on essences. Specifically, that E2def2 does define the essence of a thing as existing and being conceived only alongside its actual particular, and that E2p8 requires that there be some essence that exists and is comprehended by God whether its particular exists or not.

I raise this problem principally to motivate my contention that Spinoza’s formal essence has two distinct modes of existing, and a corresponding difference in its content. From E2p8 we learn that the essences of particulars exist and are comprehended by God eternally, whether their particular exists or not. The corollary suggests that when a particular with this essence comes into existence, the essence assumes a different, durational, mode of existence. And as Spinoza explains his “unique view” in the scholium that follows, the essence that exists eternally and apart from its particular is only a kind-essence which, when expressed through some particular, takes on a different mode of existence and content—namely, its being unique to and as such able neither to be or be conceived except alongside its particular. I defend these interpretive claims here, while also arguing against alternative conceptions in the deep and important literature on this interpretive issue.

The Consistency Problem:

Let’s begin by looking carefully at E2def2, which reads as follows: “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
Spinoza appears to be stating that the essence of a thing is such that we cannot posit, take away, or conceive it without positing, taking away, or conceiving the thing and, vice versa, that we cannot posit, take away, or conceive the thing without doing so for its essence. If the essence of a thing can neither be posited (ponitur), taken away (tollitur), nor even conceived (concipi) without its particular, and vice versa, then it follows that an essence and its particular cannot exist or be conceived apart—that wherever and whenever we have one we must have the other. This idea is reinforced in E3p7, where Spinoza defines the “actual essence” of each particular as “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being …” If essences exist only alongside their particulars, then they cannot exist apart from them and certainly not as kinds. According to E2def2, then, essences of particulars can only exist alongside particulars.

There is an alternative reading wherein the “ad essentiam alicuius rei … pertinere” locution in E2def2 indicates that Spinoza is not defining the relation between an essence and its particular but, rather, the relation between what belongs to an essence—meaning, its component or constituent parts—and the essence itself. On this reading, E2def2 should be read as stating that we cannot posit, take away, or conceive whatever belongs to an essence without doing so for the essence as a whole and, vice versa, that we cannot posit, take away, or conceive an essence without doing so for whatever pertains or belongs to it. The point of

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1. *Ad essentiam alicuius rei id pertinere dico, quo data res necessario ponitur et quo sublato res necessario tollitur; vel id, sine quo res et vice versa quod sine re nec esse nec concipi potest.*

2. In the ST Spinoza notes that the nature of a thing consists in whatever the thing can neither be nor be conceived without, and adds “but this is not sufficient; it must be in such a way that the proposition is convertible, viz. that what is said also can neither be nor be understood without the thing. See also ST I.52.14-19, where the soul, akin to the idea of the motion and rest within a body, changes with the body’s proportion of motion and rest. That is, if we align the essence of a thing with its soul, and align the soul with the idea of its proportion of motion and rest [both of which are largely secure] then according to this passage, as the proportion of motion and rest changes from infancy to childhood to adulthood, so too does the soul. Hubner suggests that E2d2 is defining the relation between an essence as an idea and the object (‘res’) of that essence, so that E2d2 can help us to understand the relation between a kind and some instance just as well as the relation of a particular essence to its actual particular. If so then E2d2 cannot be used to rule our general essences (as if often is used), and may in fact serve as a clarificatory point about their use! Specifically, this would amount to an assertion that any kind-essence may neither be nor be conceived without some instance and, vice versa, that a particular of some kind can neither be nor be conceived without its kind. This is as best I can tell a plausible reading of E2d2, but note that Spinoza nowhere uses it as such and, furthermore, frequently rejects the idea that particulars instantiate kind-essences (see ST and E2p …). Still, I think Hubner is right to note that this definition cannot be used as evidence against kind-essences, as it often is.

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3. Hubner (2015, 64-5) argues for a broader reading of E2def2 as possibly including kinds as well. Humanity, for instance, is such that, being given, a human is given, and being taken away, a human is taken away, in which case E2def2 can help us to understand the relation between a kind and some instance just as well as the relation of a particular essence to its actual particular. If so then E2def2 cannot be used to rule our general essences (as if often is used), and may in fact serve as a clarificatory point about their use! Specifically, this would amount to an assertion that any kind-essence may neither be nor be conceived without some instance and, vice versa, that a particular of some kind can neither be nor be conceived without its kind. This is as best I can tell a plausible reading of E2d2, but note that Spinoza nowhere uses it as such and, furthermore, frequently rejects the idea that particulars instantiate kind-essences (see ST and E2p …). Still, I think Hubner is right to note that this definition cannot be used as evidence against kind-essences, as it often is.

4. *Pertinere* may be read as indicating the reach or extent, as well as what belongs to, a thing (see Lewis and Short), in which case E2def2 may be defining what belongs to an essence or the reach or extent of one. I will later suggest that the more telling locution from E2def2 is the specification of the essence *alicuius rei,* that Spinoza is defining the essence of (meaning something like “within”) a particular.
the definition, on this reading, is to emphasize that essences are like simples, meaning that though we might imagine different parts of an essence, the essence and its parts can neither be nor be conceived apart from one another.

There are several problems with this interpretation. First, it would require that Spinoza uses “res” in the definiens and in the definiendum in two very different senses, with no mention of the change. In the first instance, res in “to the essence of any thing (res)” clearly refers to the thing the essence is the essence of. Yet in the second, given the constituents of an essence the thing (res) is now to be understood as “essence”; given the constituents of an essence, the thing—now essence—is given. It would be odd for Spinoza to change the meaning of “res,” without note, in the same sentence.

Second, the latter clause of the definition would require that anything that belongs to one essence can neither be nor be conceived without that essence, meaning that any constituent of one essence cannot be the constituent of another. But Spinoza relies in his conception of causation on the idea that two particulars can interact only if they have something in common (E1ax4&5), and later more specifically argues that causal interactions follow only from the natures of the particulars involved (E2p13adda1” & E2p16dem). I am oversimplifying an important issue in Spinoza, but basically, the natures of particulars are what determine how they interact with one another, which they can do only if they have something in common, namely, whatever rules or laws dictate how they interact with one another. This would not be possible if any feature of one essence could not be shared with another.

Third, there are a host of passages where Spinoza insists that the essence of each particular is unique to that particular, which E2def2 would stand as a kind of grounding, but nowhere, to my understanding, does Spinoza rely on a co-dependence between whatever might belong to an essence and the essence itself. In the Short Treatise where Spinoza is repudiating universals he notes that only particulars are real, so only particulars have a cause, and “if particular things have to agree with another nature, they will not be able to agree with their own” (I.43). Spinoza adds shortly thereafter that “Peter must agree with the Idea of Peter, as is necessary, and not with the Idea of Man” (I.43). This recurs in the Ethics where, for instance, Spinoza states that the essences of particulars do not involve existence (E1p24) and that God causes both the essence and existence of particulars (E1p25). The language is not quite as explicit in the Short Treatise, but Spinoza seems clearly to intend that the essence that cannot produce its particular’s existence and that must be cause by God is unique to that particular. So it is important that the essence or nature of a particular be unique to that particular, which Spinoza appears to stipulate in E2def2.

5 Several commentators have argued that essences are informed by the laws of nature, meaning that causal interactions involve natures because natures are aligned or perhaps synonymous with laws. See Carraud, Viljnen, Hubner, Martin. We also learn in E2p45 that the idea of every singular thing includes as a kind of imprint of its origin an idea of God’s essence, which holds as much for the essence of a particular as it does the particular it defines.
Finally, in each reference back to E2def2 it is abundantly clear that Spinoza means for E2def2 to define the relation between an essence and its particular. The first reference is E2p10cs where Spinoza writes “I have said that what necessarily constitutes the essence of a thing is that which, if it is given, the thing is posited, and if it is taken away, the thing is taken away…” This is a verbatim repeat of E2def2 except that Spinoza states the definiens here as what “constitutes” (constitutere) the essence of a thing; the essence of a thing is such that it can neither be nor be conceived without the thing. Again, in E2p37dem, if something is common to all things yet we suppose that this thing also constitutes the essence of some thing B, “then by E2def2 it can neither be nor be conceived without B.” So in both E2p10cs and E2p37dem, which to my knowledge are the only explicit references back to E2def2, is it abundantly clear that E2def2 is defining the relation between an essence and its particular.

With E2def2 in mind, it is striking that in E2p8, a mere eight propositions later, Spinoza asserts that “The ideas of singular things … that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things … are contained in God” (E2p8). This claim seems, on its face at least, to contradict E2def2 in two respects: God conceives of the essence of singular things when they do not exist and God conceives this essence because or in the same way as the essence itself is included or contained within God. In stark contrast with E2def2, then, essences both exist and are conceived apart from the actual existence of their particulars. Reconciling these claims constitutes a serious challenge for any coherent account of essences in Spinoza.

**Objective and Formal Essences:**

We cannot understand the ontological commitment(s) in E2p8 without first taking a closer at a few of its central concepts and Spinoza’s proffered support. Spinoza appears to align God’s idea of an essence with the “formal essence” in God’s attributes, and notes in the corollary that God’s comprehension of the idea of a particular is synonymous with its “objective being.” This pairing of “formal” and “objective” goes back, of course, to Descartes, who characterizes the “formal reality” of a thing as the reality a thing has on account of its being actual, or actually existing, and “objective reality,” reserved only for ideas, as the reality an idea has with respect to its representational content, meaning the reality of the object as depicted within the idea of it. Spinoza adopts and signals agreement with the Cartesian doctrine when he writes, in his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, that “Peter … is something real; but a true idea of Peter is an objective essence of Peter, and something real in itself, and altogether different from Peter himself. So since an idea of Peter is

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6 Spinoza also appeals to E2def2 in E2p49dem. Though the argument is a bit confused, E2def2 is used to relate the idea or, presumably, nature of a triangle with a particular affirmation about some feature of a triangle. The affirmation is clearly a particular, so its use here cannot be construed along the ‘what belongs to an essence’ interpretation.

7 From the corollary for E2p8, which I discuss further on, “so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God’s infinite idea exists.”

8 AT VII 41–42, 102–4; CSM II 28–29, 74–5 and AT VII 42; CSM II 29.
something real, having its own particular essence, it will also be something intelligible, i.e., the object of a second idea, which will have in itself, objectively, whatever the idea of Peter has formally … (TIE 34). Many other passages attest that we should understand “formal reality” or “formal essence” to refer to the actual existence of some particular or its essence and “objective reality” or “objective essence” to refer to an idea whose representational content is some particular or its essence.9

With respect to their occurrence in E2p8, however, we should refine this to reflect Spinoza’s parallelism doctrine from E2p7, the sole line of support for E2p8. E2p7, you may recall, states that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” and Spinoza defends E2p8 only by noting that it is “evident” given E2p7, and understood more clearly from its scholium (E2p8dem). Though there are several interpretive controversies with E2p7 and its scholium, it is not much contested to say that Spinoza means in E2p7 to defend a pairing of the order and connection of ideas with the order and connection of things and, in the scholium, to further cast this pairing as an identity.10 We needn’t worry about this latter claim right now, as it suffices, whatever we are to make of this notion of identity, that in E2p7 Spinoza establishes a pairing or correspondence between things and their ideas in God. If so then it is natural to read E2p8, following immediately and entirely from E2p7, as a likewise pairing of the formal essences in God’s attributes and the idea of this essence in God’s mind. The pairing of “formal” and “objective” in E2p8 can be taken to mean, then, that on account of there being formal essences in God’s attributes, there is an idea of this essence, what I will refer to as the “objective essence” in God’s intellect.

Consider as a confirmational statement of this idea TIE 41, where Spinoza writes that “the idea is objectively in the same way as its object is really. So if there were something in Nature that did not interact with other things, and if there were an objective essence of that thing which would have to agree completely with its formal essence, then that objective essence would not interact with other ideas …” This parallel alignment occurs frequently in Spinoza’s early works. In TIE 85, for instance, the objective effects of a true idea are paired with the effects of the formal nature of its object, and Spinoza notes in his appendix on the soul in the Short Treatise that “the most immediate mode of the attribute we call thought has objectively in itself the formal essence of all things, so that if one posited any formal things whose essence did not exist

9 See also TIE 41, 91, and 108; Short Treatise 1/18, 1/117-118, DPP ax. 9 and MT ch. 2, as instances before the Ethics that convey this meaning of “formal” and “objective”.
10 Thinking substance and extended substance “are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that … So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways” (E2p7s). Melamed also reads the appeal to E2p7 as a clear reference to the idea thing parallelism, meaning that God’s idea of a nonactual essence has a ‘thing’ it corresponds to (181). Scholars debate how the parallelism doctrine of E2p7 relates to the apparent identity doctrine in its scholium, what Spinoza means by the “order and connection,” and whether the “things” in the proposition include ideas or not. For a characteristically careful account of these controversies see Melamed (…). See also …
objectively in the above-names attribute, it would not be infinite or supremely perfect in its kind” (I/117). These and other passages indicate that the objective essence is an idea in God’s mind of the formal essence in God’s other attributes.

What is the object of God’s comprehension in E2p8?

We have seen that E2def2 commits Spinoza to the claim that the essence of a particular can neither be nor be conceived exist except alongside its particular. If so, we should ask what it is that God comprehends in E2p8 when comprehending an essence in God’s attributes for a particular that does not actually exist. One response that has received considerable recent attention is that the idea of this essence is a being of reason, or idea with no corresponding object. I will refer to this as the ‘constructivist response’.

Constructivists suggest that only particular essences exist outside of thought, and that anything other than particular essences, such as kind-essences, are being of reason with objective and no formal reality. The kind, then, is only a being of reason. The largest problem with this reading is that it fails entirely to account for E2p8 (and it is telling that neither Jarrett nor Hubner address this proposition in their accounts).

There are, however, compelling reasons to understand God’s ideas about the essences of nonexistent particulars as ideas about things, meaning that there is some object of God’s idea. First, Spinoza’s draws a clear distinction between ideas of real beings and ideas, such as beings of reason, fictitious ideas, and the like, that are not ideas about actual beings. Fictitious ideas are fictitious because they lack objects. Likewise, beings of reason are modes of thinking arising from various actual objects but which nevertheless lack a distinct and unique object (DPP I.233-34). Yet, according to E2p8, God has an idea of the essence of a nonexistent particular “in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things … are contained in God’s attributes.” We do not yet have a clear understanding of what the formal essence is exactly (for more on which see below), but Spinoza’s resting E2p8 entirely on E2p7 provides strong evidence that there is some thing that God’s idea is an idea of.

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11 See also TIE 108, ST I/18 and MT ch. 2. These references are brief and often cased within other complicated ideas and terms, making a complete analysis, for our purposes here, not worth the effort as the precedent of E2p7 for E2p8 should be more than sufficient to establish the pairing I have in mind.

12 I argue further on that this idea in God—the objective being or idea of the essence, is one and the same as the essence conceived under the attribute of thought not, as other commentators suggest, a kind of second-order idea of the essence as idea. [There is a deep and important question that I will briefly raise but not otherwise address here, viz., whether the formal essence in God’s attributes includes the attribute of thought, meaning that the objective essence is an idea in thought part of whose content is the formal essence which is also in thought, or whether the formal essence in thought is given the name “objective essence” just to note that the essence in this attribute (thought) is representational. Point being, are there at least two ideas in thought for each essence—the formal essence in this attribute and the idea of this—or is it better to read ‘formal’ as a reference to attributes other than thought so that the formal essence is found there and, in thought, an idea of this—the objective essence? I believe the latter scenario is the best reading of E2p3, an important but implicit premise for E2p7, the basis for E2p8.]

13 See Jarrett, in Essays on Spinoza’s Ethical Theory and Hubner, 2015, 3.2.
Second, the best reading of E2p8 with E2p7 as its sole line of defense is that God has an idea of these essences because the essences themselves are already paired with some object—the formal essence—that God’s ideas are ideas of.\textsuperscript{14} This resonates with remarks in Spinoza’s *Metaphysical Thoughts* where, in reply to certain questions concerning essences, Spinoza stipulates that essences have being outside the intellect, and shortly thereafter adds that “a thing that is conceived clearly and distinctly, or truly, outside the intellect is something different from the idea” (I/238.24-32). The formal essence is one thing, God’s idea of it is another, and it would seem that the point of E2p8, drawing solely on E2p7, is to insure that God’s idea of an essence and the essence itself are paired in whatever way objects and their ideas are paired in E2p7.

Finally, for this interpretation to work it will need to be applicable to ideas in God’s mind as well. Alas, a quick review of Spinoza’s truth doctrine shows that this interpretation cannot extend to God, meaning that E2p8, a proposition specifically about ideas in God’s mind, cannot be read along constructivist lines.\textsuperscript{15} Spinoza stipulates in E1a6 that “a true idea must agree with its object.” If God’s ideas are true ideas then it follows from E1a6 that God’s ideas about the essences of nonexistent particulars require objects on account of which they are true. That is, as Spinoza writes in E1p32, “all ideas, insofar as they are relate to God, are true,” and in the demonstration he notes, more specifically, that “all ideas which are in God agree entirely with their objects.” So however we understand the relation between a “formal” and “objective” essence (more on which later), it is clear from E2p8 that the idea in God of the formal essence—the objective being of the essence—is the idea of some object, namely, the formal essence. God’s ideas of the essences of nonexistent particulars, then, are not fictitious; these ideas have objects, and by E2p8, the objects of these ideas are formal essences.\textsuperscript{16} These arguments should convince us that the essences comprehended by God in E2p8 are genuine realities.

Assuming this is correct, we should consider what exactly a formal or objective essence is. There are a few different ways in which we might understand the content of these essences. On a narrow reading, we might regard the content of an essence as nothing more than an account of its cause or, more narrowly still, a kind of recipe through which its subject may come into being. On this reading, the essence of a thing includes only what produced it or, for a thing that is not actual, only an account of the process and prerequisite other things through which it may be brought into being. There can be little question that one feature of the essence of a thing is to provide an account of its actual or perhaps just possible cause for Spinoza, but we might augment this conception of an essence by including other qualities.\textsuperscript{17} Spinoza includes essences in

\textsuperscript{14} Melamed (181) reads E2p8 along these lines as well.

\textsuperscript{15} The constructivist reading can be traced back to Charles Jarrett, who writes in .. in *Essays on Spinoza’s Ethical Theory* …

\textsuperscript{16} See also E5p22, where Spinoza writes that “in God there is necessarily an idea that expresses the essence of this or that human Body, under a species of eternity.” Hubner does not extend her analysis to God’s ideas—just ideas within finite minds. Nevertheless, God’s ideas of these essences is a distinct problem for this reading.

\textsuperscript{17} I explain in the next section why I think this conception of formal essences is correct in its positive account but mistaken if it suggests this is all there is to a formal essence—and, more so, that the formal essence cannot be akin to a recipe for a particular.
whatever causal interactions their particular enters into for instance, so it is likely that essences house some kind of nomological blueprint for all of the ways their particular might act and/or be acted upon by some particular(s). Finally, though it may differ from these first components in description but not content, the essence of a thing needs also to include a kind of organizational blueprint for the types, arrangement, and relations between various parts that compose it [digression]. Spinoza defines an “individual” in his digression on bodies for instance as … And he shortly thereafter refers to this as the “nature or form” of the thing. This organizational blueprint, then, is also included in the essence of each thing.

What is the act of God’s Comprehension in E2p8?
We can shed further light on what the formal essence in E2p8 is by considering now what God’s act of comprehending the essence of a nonexistent particular consists of. We saw above that one view of the formal essence—the aspectualist reading—understands the formal essence of nonexistent particulars as a way of comprehending the essence of some actual particular, meaning that God in E2p8 should be understood to comprehend the process or way in which a particular with a certain essence might come into being.

Mogens Laerke believes that particular essences can exist only alongside their particular, and as such that the object of God’s idea of the essence of a non-existent particular must be something other than the object’s actual essence. More directly, on Laerke’s view, God’s idea is true and has as its object the causal origin through which an object with this particular essence would come into being. For Laerke, formal essences are contained within God’s attributes in something like the respect in which chocolate chip cookies are contained within the recipe and set of ingredients from which actual cookies may follow; the essence of the cookies is contained within the recipe and ingredients only because I can comprehend the what-it-its-to-be-a-chocolate-chip-cookie from the items that, properly motivated, would produce just such a cookie.

There are also several passages that speak seemingly in favor of this reading of essences. In his first explicit reference to our ability to comprehend nonexistent particulars in the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that “we can have true ideas of modifications which do not exist; for though they do not actually exist outside the intellect, nevertheless their essences are comprehended in another in such a way that they can be conceived through it” (E1p8s2). Spinoza does not claim that these essences exist as discrete and actual objects outside the intellect but, rather, that they are “comprehended in another,” and so, may be conceived through this. We might interpret E2p8 along these lines as claiming that formal essences are contained within God’s attributes only in the sense that we can understand, from God’s attributes, how different formal essences might follow.

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18 There are grounds for considering Laerke a rejectionist as opposed to a deflationist, but he later argues, in contrast and improving clearly upon Hubner, that the formal essences are objects of the adequate ideas in God, and so, have some form of objecthood in their own right (29). Laerke uses “being” so as to avoid using “essence” since he will ultimately argue that this is not a genuine essence. 2019, 26-30.
19 This is in line with Spinoza’s genetic conception of a definition, as laid out in TIE 96.
20 Laerke objects to Garrett’s position, and claims God’s idea in his account is not contentless, but is a comprehension of the non-actual essence. But without an object to accompany the truth, I think Laerke’s view is also void of content.
This view is definitely worth considering, but with respect to E2p8, for several reasons, it simply won’t do. First, Laerke seems to mischaracterize how Spinoza talks about what God comprehends when God has an idea of the essence of a nonexistent particular. On Laerke’s reading, the object of God’s ides is the mere recipe for such a thing to come into being. These seem to me to place God’s knowledge into a kind of superposition, meaning that God knows under what circumstances a particular with a certain structure may exist, but lacks knowledge of the actual essence until the particular itself is actual. Yet Spinoza writes in the corollary for E2p8 that “so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their … ideas do not exist except insofar as God’s infinite idea exists. And when singular things are said to exist…insofar as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration.” The idea comprehended by God, in other words, is the very same idea whether a particular with the essence of that idea exists or not. And since the essence of the actual particular is a distinct and discrete essence, God’s idea, whether the particular exists or not, will need to be at least as discrete and at least as distinct as the object itself. Spinoza also writes in E2p8 that God comprehends the essence “of singular things” that do not exist, meaning that God’s comprehension is meant to include the object itself, which I submit is something considerably more than the mere ingredients, or recipe from which the thing may come to be.

This point is best understood with a brief review of Spinoza’s parallelism doctrine in E2p7&s, the sole line of support proffered for E2p8. One interpretive controversy with E2p7 is whether we should understand “things” in E2p7 to include ideas or not. If not, then the pairing of ideas and things suggests a single parallel structure between bodies and whatever other modes under whatever other attributes there may be and the idea of these things. If “things” in E2p7 do include ideas, however, then the point of E2p7 is to introduce a set of ideas that tracks all things, including ideas, as a second tier of ideas in thought. If we then extend this to E2p8, the issue would be whether the idea of the formal essence in God (what the corollary refers to as the “objective being, or idea” of the formal essence) is likewise a simple first-order pairing with the formal essence under every other attribute other than thought, or a second-tier idea of a formal essence that is itself, under the attribute of thought, an idea. In the former scenario, E2p8 would establish a simple pairing of an objective essence in thought with a formal essence under every attribute other than thought; in the latter scenario, E2p8 would establish a second-order pairing of an objective essence in thought with a formal essence under every attribute including thought, in which case there would be the first-order essence as an idea or thought and a second-tier idea of it.

I would like to offer one line of support in favor of the simpler pairing in E2p7 of ideas with things that do not include ideas. Spinoza’s defense of E2p7 is akin to his defense of E2p8—it is decidedly and unhelpfully brief. He defends E2p7 only by noting that E2p7 is clear if we only but recall E1ax4, that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.” It isn’t, and what’s worse, E1ax4 does not guarantee an idea for every object, which would be a decisive problem for E2p7 unless we
include as an implicit premise E2p3, which establishes in God an idea of God’s essence and everything that follows from it. Every defense of E2p7 that I am aware of agrees that it relies implicitly but crucially on E2p3. And in E2p3 Spinoza makes it clear that the idea of a thing is a first-order idea that is paired with a first-order object. If this is the precedent for E2p7 then we should read E2p7 along these same lines, meaning that E2p7 establishes a first-order pairing of ideas and objects, nothing more. And if this is the better reading of E2p7 then the same carries over to E2p8, in which case we should read E2p8 as establishing an idea of objective essence in the attribute of thought for every formal essence in God’s other attributes. This, incidentally, is how I understand Spinoza’s claim in the *Short Treatise* that “the most immediate mode of the attribute we call thought has objectively in itself the formal essence of all things” (I/117).

With this pairing and/or identity in mind, let’s return to the demonstration of E2p8, where Spinoza identifies E2p7 as its sole line of support. Spinoza writes that “this proposition is evident from the preceding one, but is understood more clearly from the preceding scholium.” As we have just seen, the parallelism between an object and its idea for actual particulars is extended in E2p8 to include as well the essences of nonactual particulars. Laerke, in his analysis, identifies the clearest rationale for E2p8 as E2p7 corollary, where Spinoza explains that God’s power of thinking is “equal to” his power of acting. Laerke takes this to mean, in E2p8, that the objective being in God’s idea of the essence is God’s way of comprehending the formal essence, which is itself actual only when a particular with that essence is actual. That is, the content of God’s idea, though eternal, is equal to the content of the formal essence while it exists since God’s idea just is the idea of this content. By Spinoza’s own word, however, the clearest rationale for E2p8 lies in the *scholium* to E2p7, not its corollary. This is significant because the leading idea in this famous scholium is that an object and the idea of this object “are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. … For example, a circle existing in nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing, which is explained through different attributes.” Spinoza transitions in E2p8 to ideas God has of nonexistent particulars, but since he bases his demonstration for E2p8 entirely on E2p7 and, in particular, its scholium, the lesson is clearly that God has an idea of whatever formal essences of nonexistent particulars are contained within his attributes because God’s idea of an essence and the essence itself are one and the same thing explained in two ways. On Laerke’s reading in particular, however, the formal essence of a particular is actual only so long as the particular itself is actual. If so, then the formal essence exists only alongside its durational particular while simultaneously being identical to an eternal idea in God. This is inconsistent and not how Spinoza explains or defends his view.

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21 “This proposition [E2p8] is evident from the preceding one, but is understood more clearly from the preceding scholium [E2p7].” (E2p8d).

22 It is clear, with this line, why Laerke elects to refer to the corollary to E2p7 rather than the scholium but, again, this is not how Spinoza intended it.
Kind and Particular Essences:

I have argued thus far that the objective being or idea comprehended by God in E2p8 is an idea of an actual and distinct formal essence. The corollary explains that this essence is in some sense shared with the essence of a particular, but we saw from E2def2 that the formal essence of E2p8 cannot be the selfsame essence as the essence within a particular since the latter but not the former exists and can be conceived only alongside its particular. Where E2def2 purports to define the essence of a particular, E2p8 discusses instead the essence whether its particular exists or not. I argue in this section that the essence that exists and is comprehended by God is a kind-essence, and that this essence is expressed through but is not the entirety of the essence of an actual particular.

My proposal is this: the essences within particulars are unique to and exist only alongside their particular, but each of these essences express some eternal essence, and the eternal essence, which is to say, the essence apart from any particular, is a kind-essence. Because the two essences differ in content, the ‘individuated essence’ can be said to exist and be conceived only alongside the particular it defines where the ‘kind-essence’ can be understood to exist independent of and apart from particulars. I believe that the corollary and scholium for E2p8 lend important evidence to this interpretation, and turn to them now. 23

Let’s turn to the corollary and scholium Spinoza appends to E2p8. In the corollary attached to E2p8, Spinoza writes that:

it follows [from E2p8] that so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God’s infinite idea exists. And when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration.

The reality of the essence apart from its particular is seemingly restricted to its being the content of an idea in God’s mind. And when a particular with this essence as its actual nature comes into existence, the essence assumes a durational mode of existence as the essence of some actual particular.24

The important point for our purposes is that while there is a distinct difference between the two essences since one is actual while the other is not, there is in addition an important sameness—neigh, identity. I will not pursue the difficulties of this issue here except to note that there is some sense in which Spinoza intends for the formal essence outside a particular to be expressed or instantiated in the essence of a particular. The formal essence, in other words, can exist in two different respects—as an eternal object in

23 Gueroult (see Laerke, 30, n.54), Framework, Thomas Ward, maybe Viljanen?
24 In another passage from the Short Treatise, where Spinoza explains that an essence without existence is a kind of meaning which cannot be considered as something singular meaning, apparently, actual, he continues, “That can only happen [an essence can be something singular] when the existence is there together with the essence, and that because then there is an object which did not exist before. E.g., when the whole wall is white, then there is no this or that in etc.” (ST I.97.14-18).
God’s attribute but also, for a time, as the finite and durational essence of an actual particular. Though I will say more about this later, I do not here attempt to clarify how one essence can exist in two different respects.

Spinoza adds a scholium after the corollary in which he tries to illustrate what he recognizes is a “unique” conception of essences. The illustration employs a theorem from Euclid’s *Elements* where Euclid shows that the area of any rectangles formed by the lengths of intersecting lines within a circle will be the same. Briefly, for any two chords that intersect at some point within a circle, let the length of each chord on either side of the point serve as the length and width of a rectangle. Euclid shows in his theorem that the area (length x width) of the rectangles formed by chords intersecting at some point will be the same. Spinoza means for the circle to stand as an analogue to God’s infinite idea; just as the circle contains within it an infinite number of possible chords whose intersection at some point produces a pair of rectangles with the same area, so too does God’s infinite idea contain ideas of the infinitely many essences that may follow from God’s nature. “Now of these infinitely many [chords] let two only, viz., D and E, exist. Of course their ideas also exist now, not only insofar as they are only comprehended in the idea of the circle, but also insofar as they involve the existence of those rectangles.” Note that God’s infinite idea does not identify or distinguish lines D and E until they are actually drawn. Quite the opposite: God comprehends only that any pair of intersecting chords drawn within the circle will if made into rectangles have the same area. God’s idea, in other words, is of a general or abstract claim, and this idea is particularized only once chords D and E are drawn.25 By analogy, God’s comprehension of the essences of non-actual particulars are only general or kind-essences, and these essences are distinguished only by being instantiated in some particular.

There are several other passages which strongly suggest kind-essences and, more tellingly, passages that cannot be interpreted as endorsing kind-essences. For the former, consider E1p8s2, where Spinoza stipulates that “no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals … For example, the definition of the triangle expresses nothing but the simple nature of the triangle, but not any certain number of triangles.” I take Spinoza here to mean that the definition of a triangle, in expressing only its nature, is true of any individual triangle.26 He is attempting to provide another argument for why there cannot be multiple substances of the same nature, which he does with a *reductio*, so perhaps we should take his remarks to be hypothetical,27 but Spinoza continues, following the precedent with the nature of a triangle, by noting that “if

25 Spinoza makes a strikingly similar claim in his early *Short Treatise*, where he notes that God’s idea of a white wall will not distinguish the ‘white here’ from the ‘white there’ until something is done to distinguish this area from that.
26 Laerke criticizes my earlier appeal to this passage on account of its being housed within a hypothetical. While this may be true of the appeal to a shared human nature, it is not applicable to his appeal to the nature of a triangle, and since this is a clear precedent for the example with human nature, we should not dismiss that example as an indication of a commitment to a shared human nature so quickly. Spinoza also appeals to the nature of a triangle as a common essence in E1p17s, …
27 This refutes Hubner’s argument that God’s essence must be unique. Spinoza argues for such, so it is not a natural restriction on essences simpliciter.
twenty men exist in nature, it will not be enough to show the cause of human nature in general; but it will be necessary in addition to show the cause why not more and not fewer than twenty exist” (E1p8s).

Spinoza also states in E2ax1 that “the essence of man does not involve necessary existence; the order of nature governs whether this or that man exists or not,” which may be read as stating, with E1p8s in mind, that the essence of man alone, which all men possess, is not sufficient to produce any individual man—that we need the order of nature to bring this or that individual man (and however many men there may actually be) into existence. Furthermore, the latin for E2ax1 does not include a definite article, of course, but the transition from “hominis essentia” to “hic et ille homo” in the same axiom is a definite cause for concern—again, particularly for those favoring a consistent nominalist interpretation of Spinoza. On the reading defended here, conversely, the axiom makes perfect sense. Spinoza opens by making a comment about the essence of man apart from any particular man, where this essence is a kind of universal, or shared essence, and once this essence is expressed in some particular through the common order of nature, the general essence becomes the essence of “hic et ille homo”.

In another passage from E2, Spinoza offers a second argument for his claim that the being of substance and the essence of man are distinct by arguing, again through a reductio, that if the essence of man were a part of the being of substance then since many men exist, there would be many instances of the same essence, which by E1p5 is impossible. Though these passages are not conclusive since they are within only hypothetical arguments, if other texts offer direct evidence of kind essences then these passages would certainly provide confirmation and reinforcing support.

Other passages cannot be made sense of without a seeming commitment to common or shared essences. Consider E2p10s, where Spinoza provides another proof for his claim that the essence of man is not included in the essence of substance by arguing that “this proposition is also demonstrated from E1p5, namely, that there are not two substances of the same nature. Since a number of men can exist, what constitutes the form of man is not the being of substance.” Spinoza argues in E1p5 that two substances with the same nature cannot exist at the same time, which he defends by arguing, in an early instance of Leibniz’s identity of indiscernibles, that two or more substances would have to be distinguished from one another but that if they had the same nature then they could not be. Because there can only be one substance, this

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28 E1p17s includes another example that appeals to a shared human nature, but this reference is clearly hypothetical, so I will not include it as evidence for my claim here.

29 “This proposition is also demonstrated from 1p5, namely, that there are not two substances of the same nature. Since a number of men can exist, what constitutes the form of man is not the being of substance.” I refrain from appealing to the common notions as another instance of shared natures since I would prefer to not overly confuse the argument and the common notions deserve further scrutiny in their own right.

30 Spinoza curiously adds that two substances with the same nature but different affections could not be distinguished since if we put the different affections aside, the natures of the two substances will not enable us to distinguish them. I will not pursue it here, but the reading I defend here can, I think, help us make sense of this curious deflection. Briefly, if we put the affections of each substance aside then we would be considering only the essence they have in common,
problem doesn’t arise. But if the essence of man were part of the essence of substance then just as the essence of substance entails the necessity of its subject, so too would the essence of man entail the necessity of its subject, but since there are many men, this would entail many individuals with the same nature, which according to E1p5 is impossible. Though we might quibble about the precise nuance of Spinoza’s premises, the basic point is uncontestable—Spinoza argues that if the essence of man entailed its subject in the same way in which the essence of substance does its subject then there would be many instances of one essence, which by E1p5 is impossible. This argument works, then, only if we understand Spinoza’s conception of “the essence of man” to refer to a common or shared essence. I should add that Spinoza does not introduce this argument to assert that there cannot be an essence or form of man. His point, rather, is to distinguish the essence or form of man on the grounds that, in the scholium, to do otherwise would entail multiple instances of a shared or common nature.

The most compelling arguments for a shared human nature may be found in E4 where, in particular, Spinoza asserts that “Only insofar as men live in accordance with the guidance of reason, must they always agrees in nature” (E4p35). Spinoza explains that I do what is best for me when I act from the rational guidance of my nature alone, meaning that I benefit myself best when the dictates of reason housed within my nature are alone responsible for my behavior. Spinoza curiously adds next that when I act from the guidance of my own nature, and in so doing seek what is best for me, I at the same time act from the guidance of and seek the best of human nature in general (E4p35d). It immediately follows, furthermore, that this is what is good for each man.31 This is a curious inference, and I will pass on the specific details and steps here except to note that it is evident even just on the surface of this argument that one person can do what is best for their nature and therefore for the nature of any other person only if their natures share something in common.

which with the identity of indiscernibles would not enable us to recognize any distinction; the substances can only be distinguished, in other words, if the nature in each actual substance is individuated by its affections.
31 Diane Steinberg (1984, 312-315) argues persuasively that Spinoza’s reasoning in this proposition can work only if the natures in question are identical, meaning that we cannot read this as only affirming an objective resemblance or similarity. I agree with her assessment. Hubner offers a similar reading.