

REPRESENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN SPINOZA'S

NATURALISTIC THEORY OF THE IMAGINATION

Don Garrett, New York University

Introduction

Spinoza identifies the *minds* or *souls* of finite things with *God's ideas* of those things. Margaret Wilson famously suggests that this identification prevents Spinoza from giving an adequate account of the human mind:

Descartes's position on the mind-body issue is notoriously beset with difficulties. Still, [his] theory of *res cogitantes* does recognize and take account of certain propositions about the mental that seem either self-evidently true or fundamental to the whole concept. These include ... that the mind (in a straightforward and common sense of the terms) *represents* or *has knowledge of* external bodies; that *it is ignorant of* much that happens in "its" body; that having a mind is associated with thinking and being conscious; that mentality is recognizable from behavior of a certain sort, and the absence of mentality from "behavior" of other sorts. Will not Spinoza's theory of "minds" simply *fail to be a theory of the mental* if it carries the denial of all or most of these propositions? More specifically, will it not fail to make sense of the specific phenomena of human mentality by attempting to construe the human mind as just a circumscribed piece of God's omniscience? (Wilson 1980: 111)

This is the primary question that I will try to address: Can Spinoza "recognize and take account of" such "specific phenomena of human mentality" as (i) ignorance of many internal bodily states, (ii) representation of the external world, (iii) consciousness, and (iv) expression in behavior? In order to answer this question, we must solve four puzzles about his theory of the imagination, each corresponding to one of the four phenomena of our primary question. In order to solve these puzzles, in turn, we must first understand some of Spinoza's central doctrines concerning a number of closely related topics—and we must understand an aspect of Spinoza's approach to philosophy that I will call his *incremental naturalism*. Doing so will

allow us to see a good deal of his philosophy in a clearer and potentially more attractive light—or at least, so I imagine.

Four Puzzles about the Imagination

Imagination Defined. Spinoza defines ‘imagination’ in *Ethics* 2p17s:

[T]he affections of the human Body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.

As this indicates, his use of the term ‘imagination’ is broad enough to include sensation as well as mental imagery and to include modalities of bodily representation that do not represent shape. He goes on to identify *imagination* as the first and lowest of the three kinds of knowledge or cognition [*cognitio*], with the intellect (constituted by distinct and adequate ideas) providing the higher (second and third) kinds of knowledge.¹

¹ Thus, at 2p40s, he writes:

It is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:

I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;

II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination. III. Finally, [we have cognition] from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, and P40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.

[IV.] In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge [*scientia intuitiva*]. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.

Ethics 2p17s treats imagination as the having of a certain kind of idea, while 2p40s2 characterizes it as a way of perceiving or having knowledge [*cognitio*]; but this does not mark any distinction between senses of *imagination*, since all ideation is perception or knowledge, and vice versa, for Spinoza. See, for example, his use of 1a4 (which concerns “knowledge”) in 1p25d. See also his comment about “perception” and “conception” in 2d3, and his very similar account of “four kinds of perception” in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* §§18-29.

A Puzzle about the Scope of the Imagination. One puzzle about the imagination concerns its seemingly unlimited *scope*. Prior to his initial definition of *imagination*, Spinoza asserts in 2p12 that

whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human Mind must be perceived by the human Mind, or there will necessarily be an idea of that thing in the Mind; i.e., if the object of the idea constituting a human Mind is a body, [then] nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the Mind.

In the next proposition, he goes on to specify that “the object of the idea constituting the human mind” indeed *is* the human body—with the obvious consequence that nothing can happen in the human body that is not perceived by the human mind.² Furthermore, it is clear that this “perception of whatever happens in the human body” must be *imagination*, rather than intellection.³ Hence, it seems that, for Spinoza, a human being’s mind perceives by way of imagination *everything* that happens in his or her body—including, to borrow Michael Della Rocca’s example (1996: 9), each specific chemical reaction in the pancreas.

This result is surprising enough. But it seems that we have not yet reached the limits of imagination. For in the immediately following scholium, Spinoza remarks:

The things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other Individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are animate. For of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the idea of the human Body. And so, whatever we have said of the idea of the human Body must also be said of the idea of any thing. (2p13s)

² 2p13: “The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension that actually exists, and nothing else.”

³ Spinoza regularly treats his distinction of three kinds of knowledge or cognition as jointly exhaustive of all perception. Yet he holds that the human mind’s perception of what occurs in the human body is both inadequate and confused. (According to 2p19, “the human Mind does not know the human Body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the Body is affected”; and according to 3p27, “the idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human body itself.” Furthermore, according to 3p28, “the ideas of the affections of the human Body, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused.”) And of the three kinds of knowledge, only the first kind, *imagination*, can be either inadequate or confused (2p28s, 2p41d, 5p28d).

Thus, *every* “individual” or “thing” has an idea that is related to that individual in just the way that the human mind is related to the human body; and, at least once (3p1d), he uses the term ‘minds’ to designate these ideas of non-human things.”⁴ It appears, then, that even individual things whose behavior may seem to express no sentience at all will nevertheless have “minds” and perceive by imagination whatever happens in their “bodies”: it seems, for example, that toasters must perceive the flow of electricity to their heating elements. Hence, the first puzzle: How can Spinoza seriously maintain that the phenomenon of imagination is so pervasive as to include perception, by every individual thing, of “whatever happens in” its body?

A Puzzle about the Representational Content of the Imagination. A second puzzle concerns the *external representational content* of imagination. According to Spinoza’s own definition, *all* imagination involves not merely perception of an *internal* state or “affection,” but *also* representation of an *external body*. Yet the seemingly universal scope of the Spinozistic imagination seems to render this utterly incredible. How can each individual’s perception of *each* occurrence within it—seemingly including such occurrences as pancreatic chemical reactions or flows of electricity to heating elements—also serve to represent one or more external bodies? Yet that is just what Spinoza seems to think they do. He asserts in 2p16: “The idea of *any mode* in which the human Body is *affected by external bodies* must *involve* the nature of the human Body and *at the same time the nature of the external body*” (emphasis added). And in 2p17, he adds: “If the human Body is affected with a mode that *involves the nature of an external body*, the human Mind will *regard the same external body as present*” (emphasis added)—which is the very condition that he immediately goes on to define in 2p17s as “imagination.” It seems to follow that a perception of any internal bodily state that has been even partly *influenced* by an external body will qualify as an imaginative *representation* of that body on Spinoza’s account. But while this may help to explain why so many internal states are supposed to qualify as representations of the external for Spinoza, so

⁴ In 3p57d, he uses the term ‘soul’ [*anima*], which is also suggested, of course, by his use of ‘animate’ [*animata*] in 2p13s.

minimal a requirement on representation seems (as Wilson urges) not so much to *account* for external representation as to *change the subject* to a relation much weaker than genuine representation of the external. Hence, the second puzzle: How can Spinoza suppose that imagination as he conceives it always represents something external?

A Puzzle about the Consciousness of the Imagination. A third puzzle concerns the *consciousness* of imagination. It seems that Spinoza could render the seemingly incredible scope of the imagination less incredible if he could maintain that much of this imagination is unconscious, or at least of a very low degree of consciousness. And he does make a number of claims about consciousness in the *Ethics*⁵ that appear to be restricted to human beings. One might suppose, then, that only human beings—and perhaps some higher animals⁶—have conscious imagination on Spinoza’s view.

As Wilson rightly argues, however, this interpretive supposition cannot be maintained. Whenever Spinoza offers a demonstration for a claim that human beings are *conscious of* something, the argument always takes the form of showing simply that *an idea of* that thing is *in* the human mind; and *that* argument, in turn, always appeals ultimately only to features of the human mind that are, according to 2p13s “completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other Individuals.”⁷ It seems, then that if human minds are conscious, so too must be the minds of all other individual things.

⁵ These claims include the following: that “men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” (3p2s; see also Appendix to Part 1 and 2p35s); that “the Mind ... strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has” (3p9); that “desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetites [so that] *desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*” (3p9s); that “man is conscious of himself through the affections by which he is determined to act” (3p30d); and that “knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it” (4p8; see also 4p19d and 4p64d).

⁶ In Part 3, Spinoza writes of animals such as horses as having “lusts” (3p57s); and a “lust” is defined as a kind of “love and desire” (3p56s, Definition of the Affects 48). From this it seems to follow (by 3p9s) that a lust consists partly in an “appetite together with consciousness of the appetite,” and hence that horses, at least, are also conscious to some extent.

⁷ Wilson devotes particular attention to the argument of 3p9d that human beings are conscious of the Mind’s striving to persevere in its being. The core of this demonstration is the citation of 2p23 to show that human beings are conscious of the ideas of the affections of their bodies. But 2p23 does not use the term ‘conscious’ at all; rather, it claims that human beings have ideas of the ideas of the affections of the body, and the argument for this claim, in turn, depends on noting that God must have an idea of *each* of his affections *including* the human

Still, when he reaches Part 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza does clearly imply that there are at least degrees of consciousness. In 5p31s, he writes, “The more each of us is able to achieve in this [third] kind of knowledge, the more he is conscious of himself and of God, i.e., the more perfect and blessed he is” (see also 5p42s). In 5p39s, he explains further:

[H]e who, like an infant or a child, has a Body capable of very few things, and very heavily dependent on external causes, has a Mind which considered solely in itself is conscious of almost nothing of itself, or of God, or of things. On the other hand, he who has a Body capable of a great many things, has a Mind which considered only in itself is very much conscious of itself, and of God, and of things.

In this life, therefore, we strive especially that the infant’s Body may change (as much as its nature allows and assists) into another, capable of a great many things and related to a Mind very much conscious of itself, of God, and of things. We strive, that is, that whatever is related to its memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect.

These passages suggest that differences in *degrees* of consciousness are grounded in differences of bodily capacity and/or intellectual knowledge.

Yet upon examination, this suggestion does not seem to offer a promising approach to distinguishing degrees of consciousness in the imagination. The appeal to mere *bodily capacities or skills* of the sort that infants lack seems of doubtful relevance to degrees of consciousness of any kind. And the appeal to differences of *intellect*—such as greater achievements of “the third kind of knowledge”—seems no more helpful, for two reasons. First, it is not obvious why differences of *intellect* should have any bearing on differences in the consciousness of *imagination*. Second, as Wilson argues, it seems doubtful whether Spinoza’s own account of the intellect provides any basis for *distinguishing* different minds with respect to the contents of their intellects. For according to that account (2pp37-46), the

mind, and an *idea of* any mind must be united to that *mind* in the same way—i.e., by identity—that a *mind* is united to the *body* that is its object. Her special attention to this argument is the result, in part, of the identification of consciousness with having *ideas of ideas* in Curley 1969 (see also Curley 1988:71-72).

foundation for knowledge of the higher, intellectual kinds lies in certain “common notions” that must be perceived adequately in any act of perception performed by any mind.⁸ For example, Spinoza holds that *every* idea—and hence every idea of imagination, regardless of what mind perceives it—necessarily involves an “adequate and perfect” knowledge of God’s essence. So far, then, it seems that the minds of even seemingly inanimate individuals, such as toasters, may well have *as many* adequate ideas of intellect as do human minds; and, if that is so, then the mere possession of ideas of intellect cannot provide any useful basis for distinguishing degrees of consciousness among things. Thus, the third puzzle: How can Spinoza regard some instances of imagination as more conscious than others?

A Puzzle about Expression in Behavior. A fourth puzzle concerns the *expression in behavior* of imagination. Spinoza appears to hold that all individuals perceive, by way of imagination, whatever happens in them. Perception is a mental state. Yet it seems that many individuals, such as rocks and toasters, never express this or any other mental state in behavior. Hence, the fourth puzzle: How can Spinoza explain why many individuals’ mental states, such as imaginative perception, are seemingly never expressed in behavior?

Some Central Doctrines and the Approach of Incremental Naturalism

To resolve these puzzles, it is essential to understand some of Spinoza’s central doctrines concerning such topics as inherence, individuality, *conatus*, power of thinking, minds, confusion, and intellection. I will take up these topics in that order.

Inherence. Perhaps the most fundamental relation in Spinoza’s metaphysics is the relation of “being in.” Spinoza introduces the relation at the very outset of the *Ethics*, in 1d3 and 1d5, when he defines ‘substance’ as “what is in itself and is conceived through itself” and ‘modes’

⁸ These common notions must be adequately perceived in any act of perception, according to Spinoza, because they are ideas of things that are common to all and are “equally in the part and in the whole,” so that they cannot be perceived only incompletely.

as “the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.”⁹ I will use the term ‘inherence’ to designate this relation of being “in” and to distinguish it from the ‘in’ of spatial containment and from the ‘in’ of the relation of parts to wholes.¹⁰

Although the definition of ‘mode’ indicates that the affections or modes of a substance are in that substance, it is not only substances that can have modes or affections in them.¹¹ In 2d7, Spinoza defines *singular things [res singulares]* as

things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.

Singular things are, of course, affections or modes of God, on Spinoza’s view. He nevertheless regularly refers to singular things as being “subjects” (e.g., 3p5, 5a1, Letter 23) and as having affections that are “in” them (e.g., 2p13d, 2p22d, 2p38d, 2p39s, 3p52s). Thus, it is evident that he accepts the

Inherence in Singular Things Doctrine: Singular things have modes or affections that inhere in them.

Individuality. Spinoza defines ‘individual’ (in a definition after 2p13s) as follows:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say

⁹ The very first axiom of the *Ethics* (1a1) also concerns this relation: “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another.”

¹⁰ It is important to distinguish among these relations because, for Spinoza, the relation of inherence characterizes (non-spatial) thought just as much as it does (spatial) extension, and while everything inheres *in* God (1p15), which is the only substance, God has no real parts at all (1pp12d-15d). I choose the term ‘inherence’ simply because it is commonly used for the relation between modes and substances; I do not mean to suggest that Spinoza’s conception of this relation (and its relata) is not highly distinctive; and I especially do not mean to suggest that it involves an unknowable substratum.

¹¹ In addition, it is not *only* affections or modes that can be *in* something, since, as Spinoza has already indicated in 1d3, a substance is also *in* itself. Furthermore, I have argued (Garrett, 2001) that 3p6 should be read literally, as claiming that singular things (which are finite approximations to substance) are *to some extent in* themselves.

that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.¹²

It follows from the definitions of ‘singular thing’ and ‘individual’ that every *finite* individual is *also* a singular thing.¹³ Hence, these definitions and the *Inherence in Singular Things Doctrine* together entail the

Inherence in Finite Individuals Doctrine: Finite individuals have modes or affections that inhere in them.

Spinoza’s definition of the term ‘individual’ suggests that he regards the persistence of an individual complex body through time as consisting not in the sameness of underlying substance but in the persistence of a distinctive pattern of communication of motion among parts. This is confirmed when he concludes (in lemmas 4-7 plus the scholium following 2p13s) from the definition that individuals can undergo replacements of parts, growth and shrinkage, change of direction, change of overall speed, and changes within their parts, so long as the distinctive pattern of communication of motion that constitutes their “nature” or “form” is preserved. Thus, he is committed to the

Extended Pattern Preservation Doctrine: The persistence of an individual through time consists not in the sameness of underlying substance but, insofar as it is conceived through extension, in the persistence of a distinctive pattern of communication of motion among parts.

In *Ethics* 2p7, Spinoza affirms the

Parallelism Doctrine: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

In the scholium to the proposition, he also affirms the

¹² Although this definition specifies that individuals are complex bodies, elsewhere in the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses the term *individual* to characterize not only complex bodies but also their minds (2a3, 2p11d, 2p21d, 2p57,d,s).

¹³ This is in contrast to the “infinite Individual” having all bodies as its parts, described in Lemma7s following 2p13s; this infinite individual is *not* a singular thing, for singular things are by definition finite. Likewise, some singular things may not be individuals. For a number of individuals “concurring together in one action” may count to that extent as a singular thing but perhaps not as a further individual; and, in addition, singular things, unlike individuals, are not required by definition to be complex.

Mode Identity Doctrine: A mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways [i.e., under the two attributes of extension and thought, respectively].

Thus, Spinoza also holds the

Thinking Pattern Preservation Doctrine: The persistence of an individual through time consists not in the sameness of underlying substance but, insofar as it is expressed and conceived through thought, in the persistence of an idea of a distinctive pattern of communication of motion among parts.

Conatus. *Ethics* 3p6 states: “Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being.” In what follows, I will use Spinoza’s term ‘*conatus*’ to designate this striving to persevere in being. His demonstration of this proposition makes it clear that the scope of the proposition includes all singular things. In the demonstration of the immediately following proposition,¹⁴ Spinoza asserts that each thing’s *conatus*, or specific striving to persevere in its being, is the thing’s *actual essence* and is “the *power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything*” (emphasis added). Thus, Spinoza holds the

Conatus as Power Doctrine: The power of each singular thing is (i.e., consists entirely in) its *conatus*, which is its striving to persevere in its being.

The doctrine that *every* singular thing has some power to persevere in its being may seem surprising; but consider the central case of finite individuals. It is the nature of an individual to communicate motion among its parts in a fixed manner or pattern. But a communication of motion among elements that does not tend to persist cannot be a fixed manner or pattern; and whatever does tend to persist or repeat itself as such a pattern has a nature that serves to explain, at least in part, its persistence under particular circumstances. Take, for example the simple case of a rock or a toaster. If force is successfully exerted to move one part of a rock or a toaster, the rest of the rock or toaster will tend to move as well, maintaining contact with the

¹⁴ 3p7: “This striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.”

part on which force was originally exerted in such a way that the rock or toaster remains able to continue communicating motion among its parts in its distinctive fashion. Some individual bodies, however, have far more resources than a rock or toaster for maintaining the distinctive patterns of communication of motion that constitute their continued existence. Specifically, some individual bodies have systems that *register* small differences in their environments and *utilize* the registration of those differences in pursuing bodies and circumstances that will be beneficial to their own preservation while avoiding bodies and circumstances that will be detrimental to it. In other words, they have relatively well-developed sensory systems that are well-integrated into their self-preservatory activities. Rudimentary self-preservers such as rocks and toasters undergo very little if any increase or decrease in their power to preserve themselves. But bodies with well-developed sensory systems can undergo far more variation in their degree of fitness to preserve themselves—depending on the operational fitness of those sensory systems and of the information-processing and motor systems with which those systems interact.

Spinoza also identifies a thing's *power* with its *perfection*. For example, he defines *joy* as “a passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection” (3p11s), but he characterizes it equally as one by which “the power of the Mind ... is increased” (3p15c, citing the previous definition as support); and in the same passages he defines ‘sadness’ in terms of passage to lesser perfection, while characterizing it equally in terms of decrease in power.¹⁵ And in 2d6, he writes, “By reality and perfection I understand the same thing.” Hence he is committed to the following:

Power as Perfection Doctrine: The degree of a singular thing's power is the degree of its perfection, which is also the degree of its reality.

It is clear that, for Spinoza, different singular things can have different degrees of perfection-or-reality, of power, and hence of *conatus*. For example, when he affirms in 2p13s

¹⁵ See also 3p53d; Part 3 Appendix, Definition of the Affects 3; and, for confirmation of the general relation between power and perfection, Part 4 Preface.

(a passage already quoted in part) that all individuals are *animate* “though in different degrees,” he goes on to explain these differences precisely in terms of differences of reality and power:

However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other, and contains more reality. And so to determine what is the difference between the human Mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, i.e., of the human Body I say this in general, that in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, and being acted on in many ways at once, its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. And from these [truths] we can know the excellence of one mind over the others

But differences of power, perfection, and *conatus* are not limited to comparisons among different things. From the very existence of joy and sadness, as Spinoza has defined them, it follows that at least some singular things will *themselves* vary through time in the degree of their perfection, their power, and hence, their *conatus*. Thus, it is clear that Spinoza is committed to the

Variability of Power Doctrine: Different singular things have different degrees of power, perfection, and *conatus*; and the same singular thing may undergo increase or decrease in its power, perfection, and *conatus*.

Power of Thinking. Despite the *Mode Identity Doctrine*, God’s attributes, such as thought and extension, are causally independent of one another according to Spinoza—that is, any effect produced in a given attribute must be produced through a cause belonging to that attribute (2p6). It is a mistake, on Spinoza’s view, to suppose that an act of thought causes a bodily motion as such, or vice versa; as a mode of extension, a given mode can only cause another mode of extension, while the idea of the first mode, as a mode of thought, causes the

idea of the second mode. Just as God exists through multiple attributes constituting his essence, which is also his power (1p34), so too a singular thing is a mode of multiple attributes through which are conceived that singular thing's actual essence—i.e., its *conatus* (3p7)—which is also *its* power. Since all power is God's power, the power of a singular thing is an expression or share of God's power. Spinoza calls God's power as expressed and conceived under the attribute of thought “power of thinking” [*cogitandi potentia*] (2p1s, 2p7c, 2p21s); and, not surprisingly, he also uses this term very frequently to describe the power of each singular thing as that power is expressed and conceived in the attribute of thought (2p49s, 3p2s, 3p11, 3p12d, 3p15d, and 3p28d). This power of thinking is the power by which ideas produce other ideas—ideas that follow from them. Thus, Spinoza holds the

Power of Thinking Doctrine: The power of a singular thing, as it is expressed under the attribute of thought, is its power of thinking.

From this plus the *Conatus as Power Doctrine* and the *Power as Perfection Doctrine*, it follows that a singular thing's power of thinking is simply its *conatus* and perfection (and reality) insofar as these are conceived under the attribute of thought. By the *Variability of Power Doctrine*, it follows that different minds can have different degrees of power of thinking, and the same mind can have different degrees of power of thinking at different times. This is so even though all of these minds of singular things are themselves ideas in God. Thus, some of *God's* ideas have more power of thinking than do others, and they can increase or decrease in their power of thinking. The same is true of particular ideas in *human* and other finite minds.¹⁶ The more power an idea has to determine how the singular thing whose idea it is does or does not exercise its power or *conatus* at a given time, the greater will be the power of thinking of that idea in that particular mind at that particular time—for it is only or chiefly through contributing to the determination of the strength and direction of an

¹⁶ For example, most of the early propositions of *Ethics* Part 4 (up through 4p18) largely concern the circumstances under which particular ideas—namely, the affects or emotions—have greater or lesser power; and 4p44s explains how it is that *especially powerful* affects can lead the mind to think more of one thing than of other things.

individual's *conatus* that an idea can exert power *in* that individual. Thus, Spinoza is committed to the

Variable Power of Ideas Doctrine: Particular ideas in the mind of a singular thing may have more or less power of thinking than other ideas in the same mind, and they may increase or decrease in power of thinking at different times, depending at least in part on the idea's power for determining *how* the singular thing strives for self-preservation.

As Spinoza indicates in 4p5, the power of thinking possessed by an externally caused idea in a particular mind is partly a result of the mind's own power and partly a result of the power of that idea's external cause.

Minds. Human and non-human minds have ideas that are "in" them; and yet everything is "in" God. Hence, it follows that some ideas are in human minds *and* in God; and Spinoza confirms this by writing of the same ideas "as they are in the human mind" and "as they are in God." As Della Rocca (1996) has argued convincingly, the truth, adequacy, and representational content of an idea can be partly determined for Spinoza by what other ideas are in the same mind with it, so that the same idea can be true and adequate in God while being at the same time false and inadequate in a human mind, distinctly representing its object in God while confusedly representing many things in a human mind. Furthermore, because the common notions are ideas of things present everywhere and equally in the part and in the whole, these ideas must, on Spinoza's account, literally exist *in* many different minds at the same time. In addition, because the human body is composed of bodies that are its parts, the human mind is, by the *Parallelism Doctrine* (2p7) and the *Mode Identity Doctrine* (2p7s), composed of the ideas of those parts, as Spinoza affirms in 2p15;¹⁷ and since individuals can have parts within parts, it follows that the same idea can be a *part of* more than one mind. There is no reason why an idea need have exactly the same degree of power in relation to each of the minds or thinkers that it is in, or of which it is a part. On the contrary, since the

¹⁷ Note that 2p15 is derived not from 2p12—which concerns affections rather than parts—but from 2p7 and 2p13.

minds that have the common notions evidently include the minds of philosophers and the minds of their toasters, it seems impossible to deny that the common notions themselves will occur with different power of thinking relative to different minds. Thus, it seems that Spinoza must accept the

Differential Power of Thinking Doctrine: The same idea may have greater or less power of thinking as it exists in, or as part of, different thinkers or minds.

Confusion. In Cartesian psychology, the *confusion* or *confusedness* of ideas is to be contrasted with their *distinctness*, and Spinoza follows this usage (2p28, 2p28s, 2p29, 2p36, 3p9, 3p58d, 4p1s, 4p59, 5p3d). Confusion, he holds, is a “privation of knowledge” (2p35) that prevents the mind from distinguishing things that are different (1p8d, 2p41s1). He regards all ideas of imagination as at least somewhat confused (2p40s2), but he does recognize *degrees* of confusion and distinctness in the imagination (2p40s1, 3p53,d, 3p55d, 4d6, 5p6d), and he characterizes *relative distinctness* of imagination as allowing what is imagined to be distinguished from other things (see especially 2p40s1, 3p55d, and 4d6).

As we have seen, Spinoza asserts (in 2p16d) that “the idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human Body and at the same time the nature of the external body.” His grounds are that the conception of an effect always (by 1a4) involves the nature of the cause. Della Rocca (1996: 57-64) has inferred that every idea of imagination is confused, for Spinoza, at least in part because it represents both an internal state of the body *and* the external cause of that state in such a way that the mind cannot distinguish between them. Even if this is correct, however, inability to distinguish between the internal state and an external cause is not the *only* aspect of confusion present in imagination. For one thing, Spinoza holds that an idea of imagination owes part of its nature to the *nature of the human body itself* and part of its nature to *the nature of the parts of the human body* (2p28d), as well as owing part of its nature to external causes, even though the idea often does not allow the mind to distinguish these contributions. Furthermore, an idea

of imagination does not represent *any* of the finite causes of its corresponding bodily state adequately, but rather in a way that *only* reflects that cause's ability to produce the particular state of the body in question. Yet a given state of the body can ordinarily be produced by things that otherwise differ in many respects; for example, the same bruise could be produced by a rock or a toaster, and the same state of the auditory processing areas of the brain could be produced by a live voice or a recording. Thus, an idea of imagination can also be confused because it does not itself allow the mind to distinguish among any of the various alternatives that could equally have produced the same effect. Since greater degrees of distinctness involve greater ability to distinguish that which is actually perceived from other things, degrees of confusion will be correlated with the *variety* of alternative causes among which the mind cannot distinguish. Hence, Spinoza accepts the

Causal Confusion Doctrine: An idea is *confused* in a mind to the extent that it represents its object's causes in a way that does not allow them to be distinguished from one another or from other possible causes.

This helps to explain why an idea's distinctness or confusion can vary depending on the mind or thinker that it is in—for example, being confused in a human mind and yet distinct in God—for the presence of other ideas in the same mind may allow the making of distinctions that could not otherwise be made.

Intellection. Although persistence through time or duration is one kind of *persevering in being*, it is not the only kind, nor even the most important kind. Spinoza argues in Part 4 of the *Ethics* (4pp26d-28d) that the mind strives to understand and that understanding God is the mind's highest good. Yet 'good' is defined as "what is useful to ... preserving our being" (4p8d), and many individual things with little understanding seem to endure far longer than the individuals whose understanding is greatest. This seeming paradox is resolved in Part 5, where Spinoza argues that the intellect consists of ideas that are *eternal*, ideas that can nonetheless come to constitute a greater part of one's own mind the more one understands by the second and third kinds of knowledge. Thus, Spinoza also holds the

Perseverance Through Intellection Doctrine: Development of the intellect constitutes a kind of persevering in being that consists in making a greater part of one's mind eternal.

Incremental Naturalism. An especially important aspect of Spinoza's approach to philosophy is what I will call his incremental naturalism. By 'naturalism', I mean the project of fully integrating the study and understanding of human beings, including the human mind, into the study and understanding of nature, so that human beings are not contrasted with nature but are instead understood as entities governed by the same principles that govern all other things.¹⁸ By 'incrementalism', I mean the methodology of treating important explanatory properties and relations not as simply present-or-absent but rather as properties and relations that are pervasively present to greater or lesser degrees.¹⁹ His incremental naturalism is simply the result of applying this incremental approach to the project of naturalism: it consists in his seeking to explain such crucial elements of human life as intentionality, desire, belief, understanding, and consciousness as already present in their most rudimentary (and perhaps even initially unrecognizable) forms throughout all of nature, so that humanity can be seen as a complex and sophisticated expression of nature rather than as something arising from the introduction of non-natural elements. With an understanding of this aspect of Spinoza's approach to philosophy in place, we are now in a position to resolve the four puzzles concerning the imagination's scope, representative content, consciousness, and expression in behavior.

¹⁸ Spinoza's most memorable endorsement of naturalism, in this sense, occurs in the beginning of the Preface to Part 3 of the Ethics, where he describes those whose approach he opposes: Most of those who have written about the Affects, and men's way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside of nature. Indeed, they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature . . .

¹⁹ Spinoza's incrementalism is evident in, among other things, the prevalence of the locution 'insofar as' [quatenus] in his writing.

The Four Puzzles Resolved

The Scope of the Imagination. The first puzzle was this: How can Spinoza seriously maintain that the phenomenon of imagination is so pervasive as to include perception, by every individual thing, of “whatever happens in” its body? There can be no question that Spinoza does commit himself to this doctrine in 2pp12-17s. It is a consequence of his monism and his conception of God as infinitely thinking, which together lead him to identify God’s ideas of things with the minds of those things. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the doctrine is in any way an unwanted or unintended consequence for Spinoza, for it constitutes a key element in his program of incremental naturalism.

Of course, if the doctrine is to have plausibility as well as programmatic value, Spinoza must be able to explain why it is not simply *belied* by the facts of everyday experience. However, he has three resources available for doing so: the distinction among different senses of ‘in’, the distinction among degrees of imaginative confusion, and the distinction among degrees of power of thinking. The first of these allows him to *limit the scope* of ‘everything that happens in’. The second and third allow him to *minimize the force* of ‘perceives’.

In claiming that each thing perceives everything that happens *in* it, Spinoza is not committed to the view that each thing perceives everything that occurs *within its outer spatial boundaries*. To take an obvious example, one need not perceive what occurs in an object that has been swallowed or implanted under one’s skin, if what occurs in that object has not been incorporated into the functioning of the structure of parts communicating motion in a distinctive manner that constitutes one’s own body. Spinoza’s argument in 2p12d that the mind perceives everything that happens in the body concerns the ‘in’ of inherence, not the ‘in’ of spatial containment. This is confirmed by Spinoza’s later applications of 2p12, all of which concern perception of *affections* of the body—i.e., qualities that inhere *in* a body, not things that are *within the boundaries* by a body. A thing must perceive any change of its *affections*,

on Spinoza's account, for that is a change *in* the thing, in the relevant sense. But many changes may occur within the external boundaries of an individual that are not such changes *in* the individual.

Of course, as previously noted, Spinoza also holds that, just as an individual body is composed of bodies that are its parts, the mind of that body is composed of the ideas of those parts (2p15). Hence, ideas of bodily parts are “in” the mind in the non-inherence sense that they are parts of the whole; and thus any change to an idea of a part of a human body is also a change to an idea that is a part of the human mind. Nevertheless, Spinoza asserts in 2p24 that

the parts composing the human Body pertain to the essence of the Body only insofar as they communicate their motions to one another in a certain fixed manner ... and not insofar as they can be considered as Individuals, without relation to the human Body. For the parts of the human Body are highly complex Individuals, whose parts can be separated from the human body and communicate their motions to other bodies in another manner, while the human Body completely preserves its nature and form.

Thus, Spinoza need not maintain that every change involving a part of the body—or even a complete replacement of one part by another—would make any difference to the qualitative character of a mind's perceptions, so long as the parts themselves were playing the same role, in the same way, in the functioning of that body. A watch may, considered as a watch, undergo little or no qualitative change as the result of incidental changes to or complete replacement of one of its parts. In a similar way, although one's mind includes as a part some idea of one's pancreas, and the ideas of each part of the pancreas make some contribution, as parts, to the idea of the pancreas that is a part of one's mind, the *qualitative character* of the ideas of one's mind may change very little or perhaps not at all in response to some changes—or even replacements—that occur to parts of the pancreas. A change to a part of a body is something that happens “in” the body, in the sense relevant to Spinoza's claim in 2p12, only to the extent that it also constitutes a change in affections of the body itself.

Second, a mind's perception of what happens in its body may be very highly *confused*.²⁰ To the extent that a given state or affection of the body is something that any number of very different causes would have the power to produce, the mind will perceive the cause of that affection only very confusedly, without an ability to distinguish among these alternative causes. Consider, for example, the change in internal state that occurs when an apple is dropped and becomes slightly bruised. This state is, according to Spinoza, due partly to the nature of the apple, as an individual self-preserving mechanism; partly to the nature of its parts; and partly to the external causes that operated on it. But there are *many* combinations of internal and external causes that could produce this same state or affection; merely from the bruise, one could discern very little about its causes, either internal or external. Thus, the idea consisting in the perception of this state in the "mind" of the apple will be *extremely* confused—as contrasted with, for example, the complex and intricately structured state produced in the visual cortex of a mammal by exposure to a greengrocer dropping an apple in plain daylight. Yet, compared to most of the slow internal changes in an apple, the apple's perception of its bruise, poor as it is, must no doubt constitute one of its *least* confused (i.e., most distinct) imaginative perceptions.

Third, a mind's perception of what happens in its body may have very little *power of thinking*. Rudimentary individuals such as rocks and toasters have very few ways of utilizing their internal states to persevere in their being, and hence they have very little *conatus* and very little power of thinking for *any* of their perceptions. Humans and animals with very sophisticated sensory and information processing systems, in contrast, have much greater *conatus* and hence power of thinking; but many of the internal states or affections of even a very powerful individual (for example, the pancreatic states of a human being) will be capable of only very minimal roles in shaping or determining the direction of that individual's exertion of power; hence, the perceptions of *those* states or affections will occur, in those

²⁰ Curley 1988:72 also mentions the inadequacy or confusion of many ideas as a factor ameliorating the incredibility of 2p12.

minds, with very little power of thinking. It should be emphasized that *degree of power of thinking* is not the same thing as *degree of distinctness*. For an idea that is very confused with respect to representation of its causes—for example, a state of intense but nameless dread—may still have very considerable power of thinking, while an idea that is very distinct with respect to representation of its cause—such as the pictorial internal state of a high-resolution digital camera—may still have very little power of thinking, because it is capable of little in determining the individual's striving to persevere in being.

Representational Content. The second puzzle was this: How can Spinoza suppose that imagination as he conceives it always represents something external? While this supposition might appear to involve a merely naïve or simplistic view of representation, it should instead be viewed as an application of incremental naturalism to the relation of representation. Spinoza is not trying to replace a relation of genuine representation with the simpler relation of “being an effect of.” Rather, he is maintaining that a given internal state of a thing *represents* its external cause insofar as its production by that cause is able to play a role in determining the self-preserving behavior of a self-preserving individual. The pervasiveness of representation then follows from three further claims: (i) that every finite individual must tend, to some extent, to preserve itself; (ii) that even at the level of very rudimentary individuals, every affection of an individual has the capacity to play *some* role in determining the individual's self-preserving behavior; and (iii) that every affection of an individual involves *to some extent* the nature of the external causes of that state. At higher levels of “perfection,” some affections of some individuals—such as human beings—owe a great deal of their very specific natures to very specific features of their external causes in a way that allows them to represent their causes quite *distinctly*; and some of these affections have a great deal of *power* to determine the sophisticated and highly discriminating self-preservatory behavior of the individuals in ways that are very sensitive to specific features of their causes. Since plants and animals occupy various points on the scale between rudimentary individuals

and human beings, representation is not, on Spinoza's account, a sudden addition to nature at a certain level of complexity. Rather, it is a development and articulation of a phenomenon that is already present even in the least complex of individuals, all of which are self-preserving mechanisms to at least some extent. How distinctly or confusedly representation will occur depends, of course, on how specifically or narrowly an idea serves to distinguish its real cause from other things.²¹ How *powerfully* representation will occur depends on the power of the idea in determining self-preserving activity.

Consciousness. The third puzzle was this: How can Spinoza regard some instances of imagination as more conscious than others? Given the scope of the Spinozistic imagination, his willingness to infer propositions of the form "M is conscious of O" from propositions of the form "M has an idea of O" certainly commits him to the view that all finite individuals are conscious to at least some degree. Once again, however, this is not an embarrassment to Spinoza. Rather, it is a result that is entirely in accordance with his incremental naturalism: he intends to place human consciousness high on a scale that has its beginnings at the most rudimentary level of nature. Furthermore, he can do so, in his system, simply by identifying degrees of *consciousness* with degrees of *power of thinking*. This identification is almost irresistibly implied by the conjunction of 2p13s with 5p39s, both of which have been cited previously. In the former passage, he claims that a mind's degree of "reality" or perfection — which is its *power of thinking*—increases "in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once" and is "more capable of understanding distinctly." Similarly, in the latter passage, he claims that an individual's mind is *more conscious* to the extent that it has "a Body capable of a great many things" and has an imagination that is "of little moment in relation to the intellect." *Ethics* 5p31 strengthens the identification of consciousness with perfection and power: "The more each of us is able to achieve in this

²¹ *Error* occurs when an idea is confused between several possible causes *and* the idea causes the mind to act in a way that would tend to be self-preserving if one of the other possible causes had been the actual cause. Although there is not sufficient time to develop this idea here, I believe it is the key to explaining how mere confusion and inadequacy can give rise to actual *error*.

[third] kind of knowledge, the more he is conscious of himself and of God, i.e., the more *perfect* and blessed he is” (emphasis added).²²

This identification of degrees of consciousness with degrees of power of thinking allows Spinoza to meet many of the explanatory demands on his theory of consciousness. First, it can explain why some minds enjoy a higher degree of consciousness than others, and why a given mind can increase or decrease in consciousness—for, as we have seen, power of thinking varies in just this way.²³ Second, it can explain why some ideas are more conscious than others in a given mind, and why the degree of consciousness of an idea in a given mind can increase or decrease; for, as we have seen, power of thinking varies in this way as well.²⁴ Third, it can explain why both confused and distinct ideas can be conscious; for either kind of idea *may* play a powerful role in determining self-preservatory activity. Fourth, it can explain why relatively distinct ideas are more *likely* to have higher degrees of consciousness than relatively confused ideas; for the more distinct an idea is, the better fitted it is likely to be for guiding the sophisticated self-preservatory activity of individuals that have a high level of power of thinking. Fifth, it can explain why high degrees of consciousness should be correlated, as Spinoza says they are, with “having a body that is capable of many things at once”; for only individuals that have such bodies will have high degrees of *conatus*, which are expressed, under the attribute of thought, as high degrees of power of thinking. Finally, it can explain why higher degrees of consciousness are correlated with the development of the intellect; for although Spinoza’s theory requires (as Wilson argues) that all individuals *have* the intellectual ideas that constitute the common notions, those individuals who succeed in

²² It is worth emphasizing also that Spinoza’s explanation, in the Definition of the Affects, for his inclusion of the phrase ‘from any given affection of it’ in the definition of ‘desire’ seems to indicate that this phrase allows the inference that desire is *conscious* precisely because it explains how desire derives its *power*.

²³ This is because some individuals are more powerful self-preservers than others (i.e., tend to produce more and greater effects through efforts at self-preservation); and an individual’s *conatus*, or power for self-preservation, can increase or decrease through time—especially if the individual is a highly complex one with highly complex self-preservatory systems.

²⁴ This is because some ideas can exert more power on the determination of an individual’s self-preservatory activity than others, and an idea’s degree of power to do so may change with other changes in the individual. For example, an idea of an object may suddenly become more powerful, and so more conscious, when it is recognized as the idea of a dangerous object.

having these ideas with greater power of thinking thereby achieve the highest kind of power for perseverance in being, because they maximize the parts of their minds that are eternal.

Expression in Behavior. The fourth and final puzzle was this: How can Spinoza explain why many individuals' mental states such as imaginative perception are seemingly never expressed in their behavior? Of course, the causal independence of the attributes in Spinoza's metaphysics guarantees that no individual's ideas strictly *cause* that individual's bodily behavior; for Spinoza, ideas cause only other ideas (which may or may not be in the same mind as their causes). But bodily behavior can certainly be caused by bodily states that parallel (and by the *Mode Identity Doctrine* are identical to) an individual's mental states, and in that sense bodily behavior might be said to "express" mental states such as imaginative perception. Once we understand Spinoza's theory of the universality of *conatus*, however, we see that all individuals engage in at least *some* self-preservatory bodily activity that is a result of their *conatus* or perfection, and hence in activity that expresses some power of thinking. We fail to recognize the tendencies of rudimentary individuals to resist destruction and to persist in their distinct patterns of communicating motion as tendencies to self-preservatory activity only because the behavior is so minimal and indiscriminating. If Spinoza is right, however, it is nonetheless the rudimentary behavior of which more recognizably intentional activity is a sophisticated development.

Conclusion. I conclude that Spinoza has surprisingly rich resources for answering Wilson's original question: namely, the question of whether he can identify the mind of a thing with God's idea of that thing while still "recognizing and taking account of" the occurrence of such "specific phenomena of human mentality" as ignorance of many bodily states, representation of the external world, consciousness, and expression in behavior. The identification itself results, in part, from his joint commitment to substance monism and a requirement that God be infinitely thinking. While some of his readers may well share his commitment to one or the other of these two doctrines, perhaps very few will share his

commitment to both. If the interpretation I have offered is correct, however, Spinoza was encouraged by his identification of minds with God's ideas to develop the outlines of a striking incremental naturalism concerning perception, representation, consciousness, and intentional behavior that may prove of considerable independent interest to philosophical naturalists as they seek to understand the human mind and imagination.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barker, H. 1938. "Notes on the Second Part of Spinoza's *Ethics*," *Mind* 47, reprinted in S. Paul Kashap, ed., *Studies in Spinoza: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1978).
- Curley, Edwin. 1969. *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____ 1988. *Behind the Geometrical Method*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Della Rocca, Michael. 1996. *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, Don. 2001. "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument," in Koistinen, Olli, and Biro, John. *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Loeb, Louis. 1981. *From Descartes to Hume*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Radner, Daisie. 1971. "Spinoza's Theory of Ideas," *The Philosophical Review* 80: 338-359.
- Wilson, Margaret. 1980. "Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds' in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, edited by Richard Kennington (Washington: Catholic University of America Press): 103-120.
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu, ed. 1994. *Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind*, Leiden: E. J. Brill.