

Spinoza on Essence and Ideal Individuation

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1 Introduction

In the second part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza discusses the topic of physical individuation.¹ In a few brief passages, Spinoza gives an account of the individuation of simple or non-composite extended bodies, the conditions under which a collection of such bodies composes a further extended whole, the metaphysical facts in virtue of which complex wholes are ultimately distinguished from one another, and the persistence of one and the same whole across time and through mereological change. Yet despite the level of detail at which Spinoza casts his discussion of the individuation of extended things, he nowhere presents a complementary account of the individuation of ideas. This is problematic, for at least two reasons.

¹Thanks to Elena Derksen, Brian Embry, Dan Garber, John R. T. Grey, Andrew Huddleston, Christia Mercer, Kristin Primus, Dan Rabinoff, Luke Roelofs, Michael Stack, Chris Tillman, Jessica Wilson, and participants at the 2010 Western Canadian Philosophical Association meeting at the University of Calgary, the 2011 Princeton-Columbia Graduate Conference in the History of Philosophy, and the University of Toronto Early Modern Research Group, for helpful discussion. Special thanks to Amy Schmitter, my commentator at Calgary, and to Katharine Gasdaglis, my commentator at Princeton, and to two anonymous referees for the Canadian Journal of Philosophy. Finally, extra special thanks to Karolina Hübner for discussion and extensive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* in this essay are to Curley's [1994] translation. Following the abbreviation system used in *Studia Spinozana*, 'E' abbreviates the *Ethics*, and 'Ep' the letters (*Epistolae*). I also follow the *Studia Spinozana* practice of using the upper-case 'A', 'P', 'D' and 'L' to denote axioms, propositions, definitions, and lemmas, respectively, and the lower-case 's' for scholia, 'c' for corollaries, and 'd' for demonstrations. Numerals immediately to the right of 'E' denote a particular part of the *Ethics*. Thus E1D4 is the fourth definition of the first part of the *Ethics*; E2P7 is the seventh proposition of part 2, E2P7d its demonstration, E2P7c its corollary, and E2P7s its scholium. References to Spinoza's letters (*Epistolae*) are to Shirley's [1995] translation.

The first stems from Spinoza's so-called doctrine of parallelism between the attributes, introduced at E2P7. There, Spinoza writes that "[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." In the instructive scholium which follows, Spinoza tells us that "[...] as long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone." Bracketing the question of what, precisely, Spinoza meant by "the order of the whole of Nature," it is clear that any explanation of the sort Spinoza might have had in mind will require what Brandom [1976, p.147] describes as a "principle which will tell us when we are confronted with two ideas and when we are confronted with only one." Yet Spinoza never explicitly provides any such individuating principle for ideas.

The second stems from Spinoza's reason for discussing the topic of physical individuation in the Ethics in the first place. As Spinoza makes clear in E2P13s, his ultimate interest in explicating the individuation of extended things lies in enabling us to understand certain differences that obtain between ideas. Spinoza writes:

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 [...] to know the nature of its object, that is, of the human body.

But absent any principle which might serve to individuate distinct ideas, it is unclear how Spinoza's discussion of the individuation of extended things might help us to "determine the difference between the human mind and the others, and how it surpasses them." Again, what seems to be required is a principle telling us when we have two distinct ideas (or minds), and when we have only one.

My aim in this paper is to provide an account of the individuation of ideas (henceforth: an account of ideal individuation) on Spinoza's behalf, and to situate that account in the broader context of Spinoza's metaphysical framework as a whole. The paper has three main parts. In §2, I review the details of Spinoza's metaphysical framework and his theory of physical individuation. In §3, I argue that one widely-accepted approach to ideal individuation ought to be rejected, in failing to sync with certain theses that

Spinoza clearly endorsed. In §4, I present my alternative account. According to the view I defend, each idea is individuated in terms of a certain subset of its essential properties: different essential properties, different ideas. More precisely, I argue that for Spinoza each idea essentially possesses the property of affirming the existence of its object, and that such properties are well-suited to serve as the principle of ideal individuation that Spinoza never explicitly provided. Along the way, I highlight the consistency of my proposal with Spinoza’s core metaphysical theses, and defend it from some objections that might be raised.²

2 Spinoza’s Metaphysics: An Overview

2.1 Substance, Attributes, and Modes

Spinoza defines *substance* at E1D3 as “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.” Spinoza is both a substance monist and a substance necessitarian. From E1D5 and E1P14 for example, we learn that there is only one substance in Spinoza’s ontology, and that this substance is God. And from E1P11 we learn that God, or “a substance consisting of infinite attributes,” necessarily exists. According to Spinoza then, God or substance is both a necessary being and the only thing whose existence does not depend on the concept of anything else.

Spinoza defines an *attribute* at E1D4, writing that “by attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.” Since for Spinoza God is the only substance, it follows from his definition of attribute that each attribute may be identified with an essential aspect of God. Indeed, as Spinoza points out at E1D6 God possess all possible attributes, and each attribute comprises one of God’s essential aspects.³

²The reader should bear in mind that my focus in what follows will be primarily on finite Spinozistic ideas—ideas in the human mind, for example—and not on the infinite modes of Thought (such as God’s infinite intellect). Given the uniqueness of each of the infinite modes (there is only one immediate infinite mode of Thought, for example), the conditions under which the infinite modes of Thought are individuated will presumably be relatively straightforward.

³We might reconstruct Spinoza’s reasoning for this claim as follows. According to Spinoza at E1P9, the number of attributes that belong to a thing is a function of its degree of “reality” or “being.” Assuming that God is the entity with the most possible reality or being, it therefore follows that God has all possible attributes. Finally, since an attribute is an essential aspect of substance, it follows that God has all possible attributes essentially.

However, it is important to note that for Spinoza only two of these—the attributes of Thought and Extension, respectively—are accessible to the human mind: this is the force of Spinoza’s claim at E2A5 that “we neither feel nor perceive any singular things [...] except bodies and modes of thinking.”

Finally: *modes*. Whereas substance is that which is “in itself” and whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, a mode is defined by Spinoza at E1D5 as “[an affection] of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.” For Spinoza, what we intuitively take to be independently existing, extended objects—our physical bodies, for instance—are in fact really just modes (“affections”) of substance, insofar as the latter is considered under the attribute of Extension. Likewise, the idea of any extended object—such as my idea of my physical body—is simply a mode of substance considered under the attribute of Thought.⁴ Much of my discussion down the line will concern modes of substance considered under the attributes of Thought and Extension, and in particular the relation between the two. But this brief overview should suffice to get the core elements of Spinoza’s ontology on the table. I turn now to the account of physical individuation Spinoza develops in the second part of the Ethics.

2.2 Spinoza’s Theory of Physical Individuation

Spinoza held that both mereologically simple and complex extended things are individuated primarily in terms of degrees or proportions of motion and rest with which they are uniquely associated. Take the case of simple bodies first. While Spinoza’s discussion of the individuation of simple bodies is brief, it is clear that he takes each simple body’s association with a unique degree of motion or rest to constitute that body’s primary individuating characteristic. Thus, Spinoza writes at E2L1 that simple bodies are “distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance.” And as Spinoza goes on to explain, the individuation of a mereologically complex extended whole is something that can be ultimately explained in terms of the degrees of motion or rest that individuate its simpler parts. Immediately following E2A2'', Spinoza writes that

[w]hen a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one

⁴For more on the relation between Spinoza’s substance and its modes, see (e.g.) Curley [1969], Jarrett [1979], and Della Rocca [2008].

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 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.

These remarks suggest that for Spinoza a collection of spatially contiguous, simple bodies—bodies which “lie upon one another” in the right sort of way—jointly compose an extended whole (or individual) just when each member of the collection succeeds in communicating its unique, individuating degree of motion to each of the others.⁵ Moreover, Spinoza’s view appears to be that it is the “certain fixed manner” in which the members of a collection of extended modes communicate their motions to one another that ultimately individuates the complex whole they compose (i.e., which “distinguishes [an individual] from the others”). We might put this by saying that for Spinoza, a complex whole is individuated in terms of a unique proportion of motion holding between its parts, and that this individuating proportion is itself somehow grounded in the fact that each of the whole’s parts manages to communicate its degree of motion to each of the others in a determinate way.⁶

It is difficult to overstate the role of motion both in Spinoza’s theory of composition and in his account of physical individuation proper. Spinoza appeals to degrees or proportions of motion not only in explicating a theory of synchronic individuation—accounting for the individuation of distinct extended things at-a-time—but also in articulating a theory of diachronic individuation, explaining how a given whole persists across time despite the loss or addition of proper parts. For instance, in E2L4 Spinoza tells us that an individual can survive the loss and subsequent replacement of some of its proper parts so long as its new parts make the same contribution

⁵Elsewhere, Spinoza speaks of the conditions under which a collection of simple bodies compose a whole in terms of a relation of coherence or mutual adaptation holding between the members of the collection. See, for example, Ep. 32 | IV/171.

⁶To be sure, there remains the difficult question of just what degrees or proportions of motion (and its cognate, rest), really amount to, for Spinoza. I lack the space here to discuss this issue in more detail, but for present purposes we might follow Bennett [1984] and Curley [1969] in taking motion and rest to be placeholders for fundamental physical properties which Spinoza was in no position to precisely describe. For more on the overall role of motion in Spinoza’s theories of composition and individuation, see (e.g.) Barbone [2003] and Huenemann [2004].

to its individuating proportion of motion as did the old. And in E2L5 Spinoza tells us that an individual can survive the loss (without subsequent replacement) of a proper part as long as the individual's remaining parts "pick up the slack", and continue to jointly maintain the individual's unique individuating proportion of motion.

In light of the level of detail at which Spinoza casts his discussion of physical individuation, it is noteworthy that he nowhere provides a complementary account of the individuation of modes of Thought, or ideas. Here, we may isolate two questions to which Spinoza provides no explicit answer. First, what accounts for the synchronic individuation of a given idea? What distinguishes, with respect to a particular time, the idea of (say) the Eiffel Tower from the idea I have of my own body, or the idea that you have of yours? And second, what accounts for the diachronic individuation of ideas? In virtue of what does a given idea persist through time as one and the same mode of Thought? Any adequate account of the individuation of ideas ought to be able to answer these, and related, questions.

Despite Spinoza's silence on these matters, it is somewhat tempting to think that an account of ideal individuation may be directly read-off his account of extended individuation. On one way of developing this line of thought, each idea might be individuated in terms of the fact that it has some finite extended body or individual as its object. For brevity in what follows, I will call this the Extension-Based approach to ideal individuation. In the next section, I develop the Extension-Based approach in more detail, focusing in particular on its implementation in Garrett [1994] and [2008].

3 The Extension-Based Approach

The Extension-Based approach is motivated by Spinoza's remarks at E2P13 and E2P15 on the topic of the mind's relation to the body. In E2P13 Spinoza writes that "[t]he object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else." And in E2P15 Spinoza writes that the human mind is "composed of a great many ideas," citing in the demonstration both E2P13 and the fact that the human body is a complex extended individual. On the most straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15, Spinoza is claiming that the human mind is a complex mental "whole" and that its object is the human body. And from the demonstration of E2P15 we may infer that the complexity of the human mind is due, in the first instance, to the fact that it is composed of

simpler ideas each of which has as its object some part of the human body.⁷ Moreover, Spinoza is clear that the relation between the human body and the human mind is not unique in this respect. Spinoza writes in E2P13s that “whatever we have said of the idea of the human body [i.e., the human mind] must also be said of the ideas of any thing.” This passage together with the straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15 strongly suggests that for Spinoza every (finite) mode of Thought has an extended body or individual as its object.⁸

On the basis of this straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15, Garrett [1994] proposes that we identify a collection of ideas with a complex mental individual just in case the object of the collection is a complex extended individual. And on the basis of this identification, Garrett proposes the following Extension-Based account of both synchronic and diachronic ideal individuation. First, Garrett suggests that a pair of complex ideas or mental individuals may be distinguished from one another (at a time) in virtue of the fact that each is an idea of a distinct extended individual, which is individuated in terms of a unique proportion of motion. And second, Garrett suggests that a given mental individual persists through time as one and the same idea in virtue of the fact that it is an idea of one and the same persisting extended individual. While Garrett does not propose an account of ideal individuation for the simplest ideas (those ideas which, on the straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15, have simple extended bodies as their objects) it is not difficult to see how such details might be filled-in. For presumably on a natural extension of Garrett’s proposal a pair of simple ideas will be synchronically individuated in terms of the fact that each has a distinct simple body as its object, while a single simple idea will be

⁷Indeed, Spinoza writes at E2P12 that “[w]hatever 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; that is, if the object of the idea constituting a human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by its mind.”

⁸Thus Spinoza endorses a version of panpsychism, the thesis that for each extended thing there corresponds some mind or idea. Spinoza’s commitment to this doctrine is brought out in E2P7c, in which he writes that “[...] whatever follows formally from God’s infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection.” From this passage, and from E2P13s above, we may infer that for Spinoza each extended thing—that is, each thing which follows “formally” from God’s infinite nature—corresponds to some idea, which follows “objectively” from God’s (infinite) idea. It’s worth emphasizing that Spinoza’s comments here do not plausibly generalize to the infinite mode(s) of thought. God’s infinite intellect, for example, has the whole of substance as its object, but substance is neither an extended simple body nor an individual. Thanks to Karolina Hübner for discussion on this point.

diachronically individuated in virtue of persisting as an idea of one and the same simple body over time. Thus, on the picture of ideal individuation we get from Garrett, simple and complex ideas are directly individuated (both synchronically and diachronically) by the fact that their extended objects are distinct.⁹

The Extension-Based account has its advantages. First, it is motivated by a straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15, according to which the principal object of every (finite) idea is a mode of Extension. And second, on the basis of this straightforward reading, the Extension-Based account explicates ideal individuation in terms of elements of Spinoza’s framework which are more-or-less well understood: individuating degrees of motion or rest, in the case of simple bodies, and proportions of motion in the case of extended wholes. It is therefore *prima facie* intuitive to suppose that the distinction between any pair of ideas will be directly grounded in the distinctness of their extended objects. Nevertheless, I believe that any approach to ideal individuation along these lines conflicts with a pair of substantive metaphysical theses that Spinoza clearly endorsed. Let me explain.

3.1 Object-Switching and Brute Facts

Consider the following scenario: at time t_1 , a certain mode of Thought i has extended mode m as its object; however, at some later time t_2 , i has some distinct extended m' its object. Yet i is one and the same idea at both t_1 and t_2 . Such diachronic “object-switching” scenarios are impossible by Spinoza’s lights. And, to be sure, Garrett’s implementation of the Extension-Based approach also entails that object-switching is impossible, since it is a consequence of Garrett’s account that ideas with different (extended) objects are distinct. However, nothing about Garrett’s proposal in itself explains why this must be the case for each Spinozistic idea. Rather, Garrett implicitly assumes that each idea has one and the same mode of extension as its object, at every time at which the idea exists. And this leaves the impossibility of diachronic object-switching a brute fact on Garrett’s approach.

Of course, every theory has its primitives. But I want to suggest that Spinoza would have no truck with any account of ideal individuation that treats the impossibility of object-switching as an inexplicable yet necessary

⁹Brandom [1976] offers an Extension-Based account of ideal individuation along roughly the same lines as Garrett. However, the bulk of Brandom’s discussion concerns the orthogonal question of when a given Spinozistic idea may be said to be adequate or inadequate; thus, for simplicity I have focused here on Garrett’s implementation of the view. Garrett offers essentially the same proposal in his [2008, pp.11-12].

fact about the idea-object relation. And this is because Spinoza endorses a particularly strong form of the principle of sufficient reason, or PSR—the principle that absolutely everything is explicable. To take just two examples from the Ethics alone: at E1A2, Spinoza writes that “[w]hat cannot be conceived through itself, must be conceived through another.” And at E2P11d2, Spinoza writes that “[f]or each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence.”¹⁰ Here, Spinoza is clear that he takes absolutely everything—every fact, individual and state of affairs—to be both conceivable and explicable either in terms of itself or through some other fact, individual or state of affairs.¹¹ Given this explicit commitment to the PSR, the request for a (non-circular) explanation of the impossibility of diachronic object-switching is therefore legitimate, by Spinoza’s lights. What is it about the nature of ideas (or the idea-object relation) that explains why no persisting idea could ever have distinct objects at different times? My first objection to the Extension-Based approach (at least as implemented by Garrett) is that it appears unable to provide any satisfying answer to this question. For brevity in what follows, I will call this *the objection from brute facts*.

3.2 Conceptual and Explanatory Independence

A second problem with the Extension-Based account involves Spinoza’s insistence that Thought and Extension are not conceptually or explanatorily connected in any way.¹² At E2P10 Spinoza writes that “each attribute of substance must be conceived through itself,” citing in the demonstration the definitions of substance and attribute given in E1D3 and E1D4, respectively.¹³ As Spinoza makes clear, he takes the conceptual independence of

¹⁰My brief discussion here on Spinoza and the PSR closely follows Melamed and Lin [2011]. See also Della Rocca [2008].

¹¹It is worth noting (as Della Rocca [2008] has persuasively argued) that for Spinoza conceivability and explicability are plausibly taken to be the same relation.

¹²This is not to say that there are not certain facts that pertain equally to both finite modes of Thought and Extension: for example, as we shall see below Spinoza held that the human mind and the human body occupy the same position in the causal and explanatory hierarchies of their respective attributes. Spinoza’s point is rather that explanatory/causal relations do not transcend distinct attributes: no fact that is entirely about modes of Extension, for example, could ever explain some fact entirely about modes of Thought.

¹³Spinoza’s reasoning underlying E1P10 may be reconstructed as follows. From E1D4, the various attributes—Thought, Extension, etc.—may each be seen as constituting the essence of substance. Since (from E1D3) what it is to be substance is to be something

the attributes to entail a corresponding independence between modes of distinct attributes. At E2P6d for instance, Spinoza writes that “the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one,” citing the fact—trivially entailed by E1P10—that “each attribute is conceived through itself without any other.” Thus, in particular for Spinoza modes of Extension and Thought are conceptually independent: facts about extended modes cannot be directly conceived through facts about modes of Thought, and facts about modes of Thought cannot be directly conceived through facts about modes of Extension (similarly for facts about modes of attributes other than Thought or Extension; henceforth I leave this qualification implicit).

Moreover, as Jarrett [1991] notes in connection with the question of mental explanation the sort of independence that Spinoza took to obtain between modes of the various attributes is not only conceptual, but also explanatory. Spinoza writes in the scholium to E2P7 that

So long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of extension, the order of the whole of Nature must be explained through the attribute of extension alone. I understand the same concerning the other attributes.

Plausibly, Spinoza’s insistence that facts about “the order of the whole of nature” must be explicable through the attribute of Thought alone entails that any explanation of a uniquely mental phenomenon which appeals to facts about the physical domain will be illegitimate. Expanding on his interpretation of E2P7s, Jarrett writes that for Spinoza

[...] if an explanation requires citation of a cause, you will not get an explanation of your thought by citing facts about cell membrane permeability, the properties of sodium ions, and synaptic gaps. Nor will you get an explanation of the motion of your body, or of brain events, by citing facts about what you think or feel.¹⁴

conceived only through itself, without the mediating conception of anything else, so too the various attributes of substance, in constituting its essence, must also be conceived through themselves, just as Spinoza claims in E1P10.

¹⁴[1991, p. 469]. Of course, this should come as no surprise if conceivability and explicabil-

Applying Jarrett’s interpretation of E2P7s as articulating an explanatory independence between the attributes of Thought and Extension, I would suggest that insofar as facts about the individuation of ideas are primarily facts about the mental, we should think that Spinoza would reject any account of ideal individuation cast primarily in terms of irreducibly physical facts.

But this is precisely what the Extension-Based account amounts to. According to the Extension-Based account, ideas are directly individuated in terms of the unique proportions of motion (or degrees of motion or rest, in the case of the simplest bodies) that individuate their extended objects. Now, this alone would not obviously conflict with the conceptual and explanatory independence of Thought and Extension unless facts about particular distributions of motion and rest were themselves irreducibly physical facts, for Spinoza. However, it is arguable that they are since Spinoza identifies motion and rest with what later commentators have come to call Extension’s *immediate infinite mode*.¹⁵ In other words, for Spinoza facts about particular distributions of motion and rest are ultimately facts about the physical (i.e., extended) domain (they are facts about one of its infinite modes). It follows that on the Extension-Based approach, one must “go through” the attribute of Extension in order to explain or conceive the individuation of any mode of Thought. And this is inconsistent with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes Spinoza defends in E2P10 and E2P7S. Call this *the objection from independence*.

Any adequate account of the individuation of ideas developed on Spinoza’s behalf ought to be consistent with core theses he clearly endorsed.¹⁶ Since the PSR and the conceptual/explanatory independence of the attributes are

ity amount to the same thing for Spinoza, as they arguably do. See Della Rocca [2008] for discussion. For further applications of Spinoza’s independence doctrine, see Huenemann ([2004], in connection with the explanation of mental autonomy) and Nadler ([2008], in connection with the distinction between conscious and non-conscious ideas in Spinoza).

¹⁵Spinoza discusses the nature of the infinite modes in E1P21 and E1P22. For Spinoza’s identification of the immediate infinite mode of Extension with motion and rest, see his exchange with Schuller in *Ep.* 63 and *Ep.* 64. The precise nature and role of the infinite modes in Spinoza’s metaphysical framework is discussed in Bennett [1984], Curley [1969], Gueroult [1969] and Ward [2011].

¹⁶Here and elsewhere, by talk of adequacy I do not mean to suggest that Spinoza himself sets up any explicit constraints on a viable theory of ideal individuation. I mean only that any proposal on Spinoza’s behalf ought to be consistent with core elements of his metaphysical framework. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

such theses, I conclude on the basis of the objections from brute facts and independence that the Extension-Based account ought to be rejected. In the remainder of this paper, I develop and defend an alternative view which is immune to both of these objections, and which is otherwise consistent with the metaphysical framework Spinoza sets out in the Ethics.

4 The Affirmation-Based Account

4.1 Object-Affirmation as Essential Property

Spinoza held that it is an inherent feature of each idea that it affirm the existence of its object. In E3P10d for example, Spinoza writes that “the first and principal tendency of the striving of our mind is to affirm the existence of our body,” and at E2P49 that “there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves *insofar as it is an idea*.”¹⁷ These passages suggest that for Spinoza the affirmation of the body’s existence constitutes a distinctive mental property of the mind, a property not exemplified by any extended object. And while in these passages Spinoza is primarily concerned with articulating certain properties of the human mind, we have already noted (in §3 above) Spinoza’s claim at E2P13s that “whatever we have said of the idea of the human body [i.e., of the human mind] must also be said of the ideas of any thing.” Thus it is reasonable to suppose that for Spinoza every finite idea will essentially affirm the existence of its object: object-affirmation, on this view, is a fully general feature of modes of Thought.¹⁸

Moreover, Spinoza’s comments in the third scholium to E2P49s indicate that object-affirmation is not (at least in the first instance) a “generic” mental property that is common to every finite idea, and which is exemplified

¹⁷My emphasis.

¹⁸One might wonder why Spinoza held that each idea affirm the *existence*, and not the simply the *possibility*, of its object. A plausible case can be made—mostly in connection with Spinoza’s defense of necessitarianism in E1P33, and the propositions which immediately follow—that for Spinoza, possibility entails existence, and hence actuality. In support of this claim one might consider E1P35, wherein Spinoza writes that “[w]hatever we conceive to be in God’s power, necessarily exists.” Insofar as the possibility of a thing amounts to its existence being “in God’s power” to bring about, Spinoza seems to here be asserting that absolutely anything possible exists (necessarily). Thus, existence-affirmation and possibility-affirmation are arguably equivalent, at least for Spinoza. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to consider this issue.

by every idea to the same degree.¹⁹ There Spinoza writes that

[T]he will is something universal, which is predicated of all ideas, and which signifies only what is common to all ideas, namely, the affirmation, whose adequate essence, therefore, insofar as it is conceived abstractly, must be in each idea and in this way only must be the same in all, but not insofar as it considered to constitute the idea's essence; for in that regard the singular affirmations *differ from one another as much as the ideas themselves do*. For example, the affirmation which the idea of a circle involves differs from that which the idea of a triangle involves as much as the idea of the circle differs from the idea of the triangle.²⁰

What Spinoza appears to be suggesting here is that insofar as affirmation is understood as pertaining to an idea's essence, each distinct idea should be understood as (essentially) exemplifying a unique, numerically distinct object-affirming property, one that differs from other object-affirming properties in the same way (and to the same degree) as distinct ideas differ from one another. Taking this passage from E2P492 at face-value, and in keeping with Spinoza's claim above that each idea involves a "singular" affirmation, I suggest we see the object-affirming properties at issue as appropriately object-involving in the sense that an idea's object will somehow figure in its essential object-affirming property as a logical constituent.²¹ On this way of implementing the suggestion—and supposing, as per the straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15, that the object of my mind is my extended body—it will be an essential property of my mind that it affirm the existence of my body, and my body itself will be a logical constituent of this essential property. Similarly, assuming that your extended body is the object of your mind, it will be essential to your mind that it affirm the existence of your

¹⁹Indeed, it is arguable that Spinoza's definition of essence at E2D2—as involving “that which, being given, the thing is also necessarily posited [...]”—rules out the very possibility of generic (i.e., shared or common) essential properties.

²⁰My emphasis.

²¹I want to emphasize here that by “object-involving,” I do not mean to commit myself to any particular metaphysical conception of properties as, for example, somehow literally “containing” an object as a constituent. Instead, I understand a property to be object-involving if its exemplification necessarily entails that the bearer of the property stand in some relation to a specific object.

body, and your body will itself be a logical constituent of that essential property. These properties of our minds are singular, or object-involving, just in the sense that mine essentially involves my body, while yours essentially involves... yours. And in virtue of involving distinct objects, these essential properties will be numerically distinct.

What does the property of affirming the existence of a particular object really amount to? Though I lack the space here to discuss this question in sufficient detail, I would suggest that affirmation, for Spinoza, is really just a cognate of the inherently representational character of ideas.²² On this view, the fact that an idea *i* affirms *Fness* of its object *o* just is the fact that *i* represents the state of affairs of its object being *F*. The dual notions of representation and affirmation, I am suggesting, really come down to the same thing. Now we noted above (§3, in connection with the straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15) that Spinoza arguably identified the object of the human mind with the human body (and furthermore, the object of each idea in the human mind with some part of the human body). Combining these results, Spinoza's claim at E3P10d that "the first and principal tendency of the striving of our mind is to affirm the existence of our body" may be understood as simply the claim that it is an essential feature of the human mind that it represent the existence of the human body. Given Spinoza's insistence (at E2P13s) that "whatever we have said of the idea of the human body must also be said of the ideas of any thing", the fact that each Spinozistic idea essentially affirms the existence of its object may be understood in a similar manner, i.e., as just the fact that each idea essentially represents the fact that its object exists.

Of course, Spinoza also held that ideas in the human mind typically represent states of affairs involving things external to the human body. But it is important to bear in mind that for Spinoza an idea in the human mind will represent a state of affairs involving something external to the body only indirectly, in virtue of directly representing some state of affairs involving a part of the human body. This is the force of Spinoza's claim at E2P16c2, according to which "the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies."²³

²²For an excellent discussion of Spinoza's views on the inherently representational character of ideas, see Della Rocca [2008, pp.118-123].

²³As Della Rocca [2008; p.106] notes, "one's body, for Spinoza, provides the point of view from which one represents anything else." See also Radner [1971] for a thorough discussion of Spinoza's views on the way an idea in the human mind represents states of affairs external to the human body.

To see what’s going on here, consider (a) Spinoza’s claim at E1A4 that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause”; and (b), his claim at E2P7 that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” Now, take any idea in the human mind which seems, *prima facie*, to directly represent some external state of affairs—my idea that the sun is warm, for instance. Spinoza’s claim that such ideas “indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies” may be understood as simply the claim that the “direct” object of this idea will be some state of my body—a state of my skin, retinas, or brain, for example, which is the effect of the sun’s warmth as it causally impinges on my body. But since (by E1A4) the cognition of a given effect involves the cognition of the cause of that effect, my idea of this state of my body will involve a cognition (i.e., an idea) of the sun itself, and hence will represent (albeit indirectly) the fact that the sun is warm. And this is just what we should expect, given Spinoza’s claim at E2P7 that the order and connection of ideas is isomorphic to the order and connection of things: my idea of the sun indirectly represents the sun in virtue of being causally downstream of an idea which has the sun itself as its direct object.

4.2 Object-Affirmation and Brute Facts

Enough detail is now on the table to articulate a first-pass characterization of the Affirmation-Based account, and to show how the resulting view is immune to the objection from brute facts. So here’s the first-pass. Begin by identifying a collection of ideas with a complex mental individual just in case it is an essential property of the collection that its members jointly affirm the existence of an extended individual. A pair of mental individuals may then be synchronically individuated in terms of the fact that (a) each has the essential property of affirming the existence of its object, and (b) these properties are numerically distinct, in virtue of the fact that they involve distinct extended individuals. Similarly a given mental individual may be diachronically individuated in virtue of the fact that it continues to exemplify one of its essential properties, namely, the singular property of affirming the existence of its object. Finally, extending this first-pass characterization to simple ideas is straightforward, since a simple idea may be individuated in virtue of the fact that its essential, object-affirming property involves a unique simple body, distinguished from other bodies by its individuating degree of motion or rest.

How does the Affirmation-Based account as developed so far avoid the objection from brute facts? By explaining the impossibility of diachronic

object-switching in terms of facts about the essence or nature of an idea. Recall that according to the objection from brute facts, any adequate account of ideal individuation must explain the impossibility of diachronic object-switching without appealing to inexplicable primitives. But on the Affirmation-Based account, there is a reason (and thus an explanation) for the impossibility at issue: object-switching is impossible because it pertains to the essence of each idea that it affirm the existence of a particular object and not another. Equivalently, the impossibility of diachronic object-switching is grounded in the essences of ideas: no idea could affirm the existence of distinct objects at different times without ceasing to be one and the same idea.²⁴ Unlike Garrett’s implementation of the Extension-Based account, the Affirmation-Based account as developed so far has a straightforward response to the objection from brute-facts, a response that respects Spinoza’s insistence that absolutely every thing, fact or state of affairs be explicable.

4.3 Ideas and their Objects as “One and the Same Thing”

In articulating the first-pass characterization of the Affirmation-Based account I have implicitly followed Garrett—and the associated “straightforward reading” of E2P13 and E2P15—in identifying the object of each (finite) idea with a (simple or complex) mode of Extension. But since on the Affirmation-Based account distinct ideas are individuated in virtue of their (distinct) object-affirming properties, and since the distinctness of these properties is ultimately grounded in the distinctness of the objects they involve, this first-pass characterization of the approach is open to the charge that it too violates the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes.

Properly understood however, the Affirmation-Based account avoids this difficulty as well. In order to see this it will be helpful to first clarify a potential equivocation suggested by Spinoza’s discussion of the relation between modes of Thought and Extension. In the course of reiterating his substance monism at E2P7s Spinoza makes the surprising claim that a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are in fact one and the same thing, expressed

²⁴Recall that Spinoza in E2D2 takes a thing’s essential properties to be such that “being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away.” Assuming Spinoza’s definition extends beyond (extended) things and includes the essences of ideas as well, the impossibility of diachronic object-switching may then be explained in terms of the modal co-variation that holds between an idea’s existence and its essential, object-affirming property.

in two different ways. Spinoza writes

[...] whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting the essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently [...] the thinking substance and the 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.²⁵

As this passage makes clear, Spinoza appears to take the fact that thinking and extended substance are identical to entail a corresponding identity at the level of modes of Thought and Extension, respectively. But how should this identification be understood? As Jarrett [1991] has argued, any literal identification of a mode of Thought with a mode of Extension is problematic, in appearing to conflict with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes. To paraphrase Jarrett’s concern, suppose that some fact about a mode of Extension e causally explains some further fact about a distinct mode of Extension e' . Assuming that e is literally one and the same thing (in the sense of numerical identity) as the idea of e it follows (by the indiscernibility of identicals) that the idea of e is causally and explanatorily related to e' . But this would violate the explanatory independence of Thought and Extension.²⁶ On the basis of considerations such as these, Jarrett concludes that Spinoza should not be read as defending the literal identification of modes of Thought with modes of Extension. Instead, Jarrett argues that in E2P7s Spinoza is merely claiming that an idea and its corresponding extended object are attribute-relative “expressions” of one and the same thing. In Jarrett’s idiom, there is merely a “conceptual,” but not an “ontological”, distinction between modes of Thought and modes of Extension: parallel pairs of ideas and objects are ontologically one and the same thing, but are conceptually distinct.

I want to suggest that this “one and the same thing” which, according to Jarrett’s interpretation of E2P7s, may be “expressed” in Thought as an idea and as a corporeal body in Extension, corresponds to what Melamed [2012] refers to as a mode of God. On Melamed’s account, modes of particular attributes (such as modes of Thought and Extension) pertain uniquely to the

²⁵My emphasis.

²⁶For a recent discussion of this style of argument against a literal reading of Spinoza’s claim in E2P7s, see Marshall [2009].

attribute under which they are conceived, and hence may only be conceived under a particular attribute (a mode of Extension, for example, *qua* mode of a particular attribute, may only be considered under the attribute of Extension). By contrast, modes of God are not modes of any particular attribute at all, and may—according to Melamed—be considered “under all attributes” [2011; p.11]. Crucially, on this view for any parallel pair consisting of modes of particular attributes (such as the pair consisting of my mind and my body), each member of the pair may be understood as an aspect of one and the same mode of God; and more generally, each mode of a particular attribute may be understood as a merely an attribute-relative aspect of a particular mode of God. Once we carefully distinguish between modes of an attribute and modes of God, Spinoza’s claim (at E2P7s) that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways” can be understood as the claim that a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are two aspects of one and the same mode of God. Since, on this view, parallel modes under distinct attributes are never numerically identical—rather, they are distinct aspects of one and the same mode of God—Spinoza’s views on the relation between mind and body can be consistently interpreted against the backdrop of the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes.

Now, notice what happens when we combine Melamed’s distinction between modes of an attribute and modes of God with the straightforward reading of E2P13 and E2P15 (according to which the object of each (finite) idea is its parallel mode of Extension). On the resulting view, since each idea and its parallel mode of Extension amount to distinct aspects of one and the same mode of God, the “extended aspect” of each mode of God will then be identified with the object of its “thinking aspect.” I propose a simpler view: rather than identifying the object of each idea with its parallel mode of Extension, identify its object with the mode of God of which it is the thinking aspect. Spinoza’s claim that it pertains to the essence of each idea that it affirm the existence of its object may then be understood as the claim that each idea essentially affirms (i.e., represents) the existence of a particular mode of God—namely, the mode of God of which it is the aspect under the attribute of Thought. This modification to the first-pass characterization of the Affirmation-Based account outlined above then allows for the following picture of ideal individuation.

First, call a collection of ideas a *mental individual* (i.e., a mind) just when it is an essential property of the collection as a whole that it affirm the existence of a complex or “structured” mode of God (more below on what such structure or complexity at the level of modes of God might amount to). Dis-

tinct mental individuals may then be synchronically individuated in terms of the facts that (a) each essentially exemplifies the singular, object-involving property of affirming the existence of its object, and (b) these properties are numerically distinct, in virtue of involving distinct modes of God. Similarly, a mental individual may be diachronically individuated in virtue of continuing to affirm the existence of one and the same mode of God throughout its temporal career, as a matter grounded in the idea’s essence. Analogous considerations will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the individuation of simple ideas themselves, i.e., those ideas which essentially affirm the existence of a simple or “unstructured” mode of God.

Doesn’t the identification of a finite idea’s object with the mode of God of which it is the thinking aspect conflict with Spinoza’s claim (at E2P13) that “[t]he object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else”? I don’t believe that it does. For once we distinguish between modes of a particular attribute—such as ideas and extended things—and modes of God (and see the former as something like attribute-relative aspects of the latter), Spinoza’s claim that the object of the human mind is the (extended) body may be understood as the claim that the human mind is only capable of considering its object under its extended aspect. On this interpretation of E2P13, being extended is akin to a mode of presentation that the object of the human mind (a mode of God, on my proposal) necessarily takes on when considered as the object of the human mind. Indeed, this is just what we should expect given Spinoza’s claim at E2A5 that “we neither feel nor perceive any singular things [...] except bodies and modes of thinking.” If Thought and Extension are the only attributes accessible to human perception, it should come as no surprise that the human mind is only capable of conceiving of its object under an “extended” mode of presentation, that is, *qua* extended thing.

4.4 Independence

To see that the Affirmation-Based account is consistent with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes, it will be useful to first consider how Spinoza might answer the following question: what individuates distinct modes of God? One promising strategy is to individuate a mode of God according to its various attribute-relative aspects. Thus, in particular, we might individuate a given mode of God by considering the conditions which individuate its extended aspect, since being extended is just one of the ways that a mode of God might be considered under an attribute (as I pro-

ceed, I'll bring into further relief why this strategy is unproblematic). On this approach, distinct "simple" or unstructured modes of God may be distinguished by the fact that their extended aspects are distinct simple bodies, individuated by their particular degrees of motion or rest. Similarly, distinct "complex" or structured modes of God might be individuated by the fact that their extended aspects are complex individuals, whose extended parts jointly maintain individuating proportions of motion.²⁷ This is just one of the ways that the notion of a structured or complex mode of God may be made more precise: to be a structured mode of God is to be a mode of God whose extended aspect has parts which jointly maintain an individuating proportion of motion.

It is important to note that this approach to the individuation of modes of God is entirely consistent with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes. Spinoza is clear that this barrier applies only to conceptual or explanatory relations that obtain between modes of distinct attributes (in E2P6d, recall, Spinoza writes that "the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one"). And in light of the distinction between modes of God and modes of a particular attribute, this amounts to the claim that no conceptual or explanatory connections obtain between distinct, attribute-relative aspects of a given mode of God. But the above approach to the individuation of modes of God does not involve any such conceptual or explanatory relations.

Moreover, these considerations illustrate just why the Affirmation-Based account itself is consistent with attribute independence. On the Affirmation-Based account, ideas are individuated in terms of the fact that each essentially affirms the existence of a distinct mode of God. Since, as above, the individuation of modes of God is consistent with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes, so too the individuation of ideas in terms of essential, singular properties involving such modes is unproblematic. One might put the matter in terms of distinct "token" relations of explanation holding between sets of facts, as follows. On the Affirmation-Based account, the project of explaining the individuation of ideas involves two distinct (token) relations of explanation, not one. The first relation of explanation holds between each mode of God and the conditions that individuate its extended aspect. As we have seen, this first explanatory relation respects independence, since it does not involve any explanatory or concep-

²⁷This is not to say that a given mode of God must be understood as *intrinsically* simple or structured. It may well be that a mode of God is imbued with simplicity or structure only when it is considered under an attribute such as Extension.

tual relations between modes of distinct attributes (equivalently: between distinct attribute-relative aspects of one and the same mode of God). The second (token) relation of explanation holds between an essential, object-involving property of an idea, and a mode of God (the object whose existence is affirmed by the idea). But since it is the distinction between a pair of modes of God which ultimately grounds the (numerical) distinctness of any pair of object-affirming properties, this second explanatory relation respects the independence of the attributes as well. After all, a mode of God is not a mode of any particular attribute; thus, this second (token) relation of explanation requires no problematic conceptual or explanatory relations between distinct, attribute-relative aspects of one and the same mode of God. But the Affirmation-Based account just is the result of combining the first token explanation with the second, and so at no point in the analysis does a single (token) relation of explanation hold between facts pertaining to modes of distinct attributes. Nor does the Affirmation-Based account require that one simultaneously conceive of facts which pertain to Extension, and to facts which pertain to Thought, in conceiving of the individuation of ideas. Instead, in order to conceive of the individuation of ideas, one first conceives of the individuation of their objects (in terms of their extended aspects), subsequently conceiving of ideal individuation in terms of the fact that each idea essentially affirms the existence of a distinct mode of God. Since—in contrast with the Extension-Based account—on this view ideas are not directly individuated in terms of facts which pertain to any particular attribute other than Thought, the Affirmation-Based approach respects the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes.

One might worry that the Affirmation-Based account affords a bizarre sort of primacy to facts about Extension in the order of explanation. But I'm not sure that this is really much of a concern. On the contrary, I would argue that facts about Extension have no ultimate priority in the explanation of ideal individuation, and that their role in the Affirmation-Based account as presented here merely reflects what, for Spinoza, are certain intrinsic conceptual limitations of the human mind. Consider again Spinoza's claim, at E2A5, that "[w]e neither feel nor perceive any singular things except bodies and modes of thinking." Given the distinction between modes of God and their attribute-relative aspects, E2A5 plausibly entails that for Spinoza, the human mind is only able to conceive of (and explain) the individuation of a mode of God insofar as it is considered as a mode of Thought or as a mode of Extension (i.e., considered under its thinking or extended aspect). But this is consistent with the possibility of a mode of God being individuated according to facts which pertain to its expression under any of

the infinitely many attributes inaccessible to the human intellect. The fact that we cannot conceive of or explain what such conditions might be like is no reason to suppose that Extension itself has any ultimate priority in the order of analysis.

5 Conclusion

Extension-Based approaches to the individuation of ideas fail to provide an illuminating explanation of the strong modal tie between each idea and its object, and are otherwise inconsistent with the conceptual and explanatory independence of the attributes. By contrast, the Affirmation-Based account developed here explains the necessary connection between ideas and their objects in terms of each idea's essential, object-affirming property, meanwhile respecting the conceptual and explanatory independence between Thought and Extension. I conclude that the Affirmation-Based account is a strong candidate for being the theory of ideal individuation Spinoza never explicitly provided.

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