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## Spinoza on Imagination and the Affects

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**Abstract:** Spinoza defines imagination in *Ethics* 2p17s as those ideas which present external bodies to us as existing. That is, for him, imagination consists in our awareness of ~~bodies before~~<sup>of</sup> us. This paper considers how Spinoza accounts for our awareness of some bodies rather than others in the causally connected order of Nature and suggests that the affects, the ways in which things differentially impact our power of persevering, fix our awareness and explain our representing the particular things we do. This account helps to explain why Spinoza shifts from sensation to imagination as the model of our inadequate understanding of the world, and begins to explicate a more substantial relation between ~~Part 1 and 2~~<sup>ital</sup> of *Ethics*.

### 1.

What is imagining for Spinoza? There seems to be a quite straightforward answer to this question, for Spinoza defines his terms in *Ethics* 2p17s<sup>1</sup>:

Next, to retain the customary words, the affections of the human body whose ideas present [*repraesentant*] external bodies as present [*praesentia*] to us, we shall call images of things, though they do not reproduce [*referunt*] the figures of things. And when the mind regards [*contemplatur*] bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.

It thus seems that to imagine something (a body) is to be aware of that body as being there before us, that is, to take that body to exist. These imaginings, as modes of the human mind, have their parallel in modes of the human body, which Spinoza terms images. Think of our canonical cases of imagining, both historical and contemporary. When Descartes asks in the Sixth Meditation for his meditator to try to imagine a chiliagon and a pentagon, he is asking for him to form a mental image of ~~these~~<sup>each of</sup> figures, one that tracks perfectly their material existence, making them present to us. It is the meditator's failure to

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<sup>1</sup> References to Spinoza will be cited internally using the following abbreviations: the first numeral refers to parts; 'd' means definition; 'a' means axiom; 'p' means proposition; 'dem' means demonstration; 'post' means postulate; 'c' means corollary; 's' means scholium; e.g., 4p37s means *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 37, scholium. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from Curley 1984.

do this that undermines his effort to establish the existence of material things (7:72–74; 2:50–51).<sup>2</sup> Equally, when we are immersed in a good novel, we transport ourselves to that place and that time, and it is as if we are there then identifying and interacting with its characters. We take the world of the story as present to us. The genius of authors from Jane Austen and Marcel Proust to David Mitchell and Ian Rankin is their making it easy for us to do this. For Spinoza, imagining certainly can include cases like these, in which we take things to exist which we know do not<sup>3</sup>, but it also includes *all* cases of ideas which present bodies to us. And it is here that the question begins to get a grip. What is it to present an external body as present to us? What is it to be aware of a body as being there, to take a body to exist?

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There are two angles of approach to this set of questions. One begins with the epistemic: What is involved in representing things in the world as existing? We can then ask whether our representations are a guide to reality. The other begins with metaphysics: What things exist in the world? And we can go on to ask whether we can know things as they are. The view I will argue is Spinoza's takes the former route, but along a trail that is not often taken – one that runs through his discussion of the affects. I will conclude, however, with a suggestion that addresses the latter question. For while Spinoza certainly wants to hold that Nature exists prior to understanding of it, it is far from clear that he would maintain that we can make sense of particular things existing, if these particulars are to have a nature corresponding to, or resembling, our representations of them.

Let me begin by considering Spinoza's definition of imagining vis à vis a problem that frames Descartes' *Meditations*. Recent work on Descartes has highlighted the shift that occurs in that work from the First to the Sixth Meditation.<sup>4</sup> In the First Meditation, the skeptical arguments which undermine the authority of our sensory beliefs presuppose that our sense perceptions give us information about the world – represent it – through resemblance. The skeptic's arguments – that our senses sometime deceive us, that we cannot distinguish waking from realistic dreaming experience – hang on an assumption that for our sensations to tell us about the world, they must resemble what they represent. If there is any doubt that this assumption is front and center here, the analogy with painting should dispel that. As the meditator notes:

<sup>2</sup> Descartes's works will be cited internally and follow this format, Volume: page of AT; Volume: page of CSM/K. 'AT' refers to Descartes 1996/1964–74. 'CSM' and 'CSMK' refer respectively to Descartes 1984 and 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Much philosophical energy has been spent in efforts to articulate just how we can believe in things we recognize as fictions. I simply take the phenomenon for granted without aiming to explain it here.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Carriero 1987; Simmons 1999; De Rosa 2010.

Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things – eyes, hands, and the body as a whole – are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist. (Descartes, First Meditation 7:19–20; 2:13)

This same assumption that ideas resemble their objects seems to figure still in the Third Meditation, where the meditator characterizes ideas properly speaking to be “as it were the images of things” because they include only “the likeness of the thing” (7:37; 2:25–6). But by the Sixth Meditation this assumption has been rejected. The meditator is clear that our sensory ideas need not resemble their objects in the proof he offers for the existence of material things, for though corporeal things must exist as the cause of our ideas of them, on pain of God’s being a deceiver, “they may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them” (7:80; 2:55). While he acknowledges that the aspects of these sensory ideas that are clearly and distinctly perceived – those “comprised within the subject matter of pure mathematics” – do represent veridically the way things are, the meditator’s task in the rest of the meditation is to offer an account of how the other aspects of sensory ideas still can tell us something about the world without resembling it.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the *Meditations* are framed by a critique of accounts of sensory representation.<sup>6</sup>

Spinoza’s notion of imagination contains his own contribution to this critique. Spinoza makes a point of noting that the images of things, the ways things affect our body, do not report or reproduce the ‘figures’ of the things

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, “Similarly, although I feel heat when I go near a fire and feel pain when I go too near, there is no convincing argument for supposing that there is something in the fire which resembles the heat, any more than for supposing that there is something which resembles the pain. There is simply reason to suppose that there is something in the fire, whatever it may eventually turn out to be, which produces in us the feelings of heat or pain, And likewise, even though there is nothing in any given space that stimulates the senses, it does not follow that there is no body there. In these cases and many others I see that I have in that of misusing the order of nature. For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us.” (7:83; 2:57f.)

<sup>6</sup> In making this claim I do not want to deny in the least that a critique of an Aristotelian metaphysics and a proposal for a revisionist First Philosophy is central to the work. Many scholars have focused on this aspect of the work, as well as on the degree to which it is indebted to the Scholastic traditions it criticizes. See for instance, Carriero 2009; Rozemond 1998; Ariew, 1999. It is an interesting question how Cartesian metaphysics is related to the project of rethinking sensory representation, but one I will not address in the least here.

which cause those affections. That is, he makes a point of rejecting a resemblance account of representation. The effects of the world on our bodies do not resemble their causes, so our minds, in representing the states of our bodies, cannot in any way be thought to represent the causes of our bodily states – things in the world – by a resemblance relation. But if our imaginings of existing things do not necessarily conform to the natures of actually existing things, how do we imagine what we do? And how are we to think that our imaginings get us knowledge of the world? Built into Spinoza's definition of imagination, then, is a general problem of mental representation: if not by resemblance, how do our minds represent things in the world? So the first thing to note is that Spinoza is clearly invested in the form of Descartes' critique of sensory representation. Closely on its heels, the second thing to note is that Spinoza has replaced the faculty of sensation wholesale with imagination.

cn/ It is, if not natural, then common to think that the primary means through which bodies are represented as present to us is sensation. Descartes certainly thinks as much, as reflected not only in the First Meditation but also in his explicit reliance ~~of~~ sensation over imagination to establish the existence of corporeal things. But Spinoza very rarely alludes to sensation or sense perception of objects in the *Ethics*. Indeed, I can find only a handful of such occasions: E1Appendix, 2p10cS and 2p40s2<sup>7</sup> stand out.<sup>8</sup> In the Appendix to Part

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7 E1Appendix: "The other notions [of good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness through which natural things are explained] are also nothing but modes of imagining, by which the imagination is variously affected; and yet the ignorant consider them the chief attributes of things ... and call the nature of a thing good or evil, sound or rotten and corrupt, as they are affected by it. For example, if the motion the nerves receive from an object presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those that cause a contrary motion are called ugly. Those which move the sense through the nose, they call pleasant-smelling or stinking; through the tongue, sweet or bitter, tasty or tasteless; through touch, hard or soft, rough or smooth, and the like; and finally, those which move the ears are said to produce noise, sound or harmony. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because they could not assist knowledge of the divine nature. So it is no wonder that they have generally contradicted themselves."

2p10cS: "The cause of this [confusion about the relation between God and created things], I believe, was that they did not observe the [proper] order of philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and the things which are called objects of sense are prior to all."

8 There are other uses of 'sense' (forms of the Latin *sentire*), but these uses seem to invoke a general feeling or sensibility rather than an awareness or apprehension of the properties

I, Spinoza takes to task views which take sense perception to give us some knowledge of properties of things. According to him they mistakenly connect the ways in which the ‘imagination is variously affected’ – that is, the ways in which things are beneficial and harmful to our health – and real properties things have independently of us. The examples he gives here appeal to the five sense modalities, and it is clear that Spinoza thinks that they give us little insight into the world around us. In E2p40s2 this dismissal of sense perception is affirmed. There, in outlining the three kinds of knowledge, he notes that we form universal notions “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.” Spinoza terms these perceptions “knowledge from random [*vaga*] experience.” From E2p29c, to which he alludes, it seems that all Spinoza means by sensation here is the basic way in which our bodies are affected by other bodies. There is indeed no immediately intelligible order to this, as presumably our bodies are impacted by multitudes of other bodies at every moment, and we are flooded with information about the world. However, that information does not come pre-packaged to consciousness. Any universal notions we might happen to form to organize that information would be ‘mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect’.<sup>9</sup>

The second ‘way of regarding things’ that Spinoza counts as part of the first kind of knowledge is what he calls knowledge from opinion or imagination. As Spinoza describes it, we form universal notions “from signs, for example, from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain [*quasdam*] ideas of them, like those through which we imagine things” (E2p40s2). It is hard to know how to parse this description, but Spinoza seems to be contrasting the certain ideas formed with the use of signs and those mutilated and confused notions without order gained from the senses. Thus, signs allow us to order our experience and for our ideas to gain some degree of definiteness. Moreover, Spinoza further maintains that our imaginings are paradigm cases of our having certain ideas in this sense. It is far from clear, however, whether our imaginings, like our recollections, involve the use of signs, or become ‘certain’ in some other way.

We thus arrive at some further questions about imagining for Spinoza. First, what is Spinoza’s motivation for moving from considering sensation as

<sup>8</sup> of particular objects. See E2ax4 and E2ax5; E2p13c; E2p49s; E3p26s; E3p50; E3p57s; E4p59; E4p57. E5p23s does align sensing with knowledge, but does not suggest that the sensation at issue is through the sense organs: “Still we feel [*sentimus*] and know by experience that we are eternal.”

<sup>9</sup> This characterization of sensory knowledge is consistent with Spinoza’s use of *sentire* to indicate a general awareness rather than a perception of properties.

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our principal way of accessing the world around us to his focus on imagination? Second, what distinguishes ideas without order from certain (or definite) ideas? How do signs serve to effect that distinction? How are we to understand imagination as a paradigm of our forming definite ideas through signs?

One approach to answering these questions might involve looking to possible historical antecedents to Spinoza's views. Have other philosophers, either contemporaries or precursors, also focused on the faculty of imagination over sensation? Do other accounts of imagination bear a relation to a theory of signs in the defining of ideas? How do Spinoza's views relate to or reconfigure standard faculty psychologies? These are important questions, but they will not be my concern here. Rather, I want to begin to address the original set of questions by considering imagination in relation to the discussion of the affects in *Ethics* Part III. My view is that this discussion is key to understanding Spinozistic imagination, and until we make a start at understanding Spinoza's own account, it will prove difficult to situate him properly with respect to other thinkers.

## 2.

As everyone is aware, Part III of the *Ethics* is devoted to introducing Spinoza's account of emotions, or what he terms the affects. What follows in Part IV very much depends on the moral psychology Spinoza lays out here, and so it is not surprising that commentators have treated Part III as laying the ground for the ethics proper articulated in Part IV. But Part III is not separated from what has come before. My suggestion will be that the account of the affects can help in addressing a number of the questions about the details of Spinoza's account of imagination in Part II.

Let me begin by defending the plausibility of this suggestion, for it can seem to be an odd one. Consider E2p17, the proposition through which imagining is introduced:

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 actually existing, or as present to it, until the body is affected by an *affect* that excludes the existence or presence of that body. (Emphasis added.)

Though the term 'affect' appears in this proposition, and equally in the definition of imagination itself in the scholium, it is tempting to think it must be a different sense of the term than that defined in Part III. After all, if it were the same sense wouldn't it be a somewhat surprising deviation from the geometri-

cal method Spinoza is deploying to wait until Part III to define ‘affection’ and ‘affect’? Moreover, the definition of E3d3 of affects – as “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and the same time, the ideas of these affections”<sup>10</sup> – increases this temptation. It is quite commonplace to think of our ideas of objects – of bodies that are present to us – as attaching to affective states, but not as themselves intrinsically affective. It would seem that objects, simply in being what they are, do not differentially impact our power of acting. If our imaginings are just ideas of existing objects, then, they should not be affects, according to E3d3.

And yet in E2p17s Spinoza does characterize imaginings as affects, and there is no good indication that he is using ‘affect’ in a sense different from the E3 definition. Ought we to take Spinoza as holding the counter-intuitive view that our imaginings are about the differential impact of the world on our body’s power of acting? It can seem as if we can both attribute a consistent usage of ‘affect’ to Spinoza and deny that our imaginings are about differential impacts on our power of acting. In E3post1, Spinoza does allow for some affections which have no differential impact on our power of acting: “The human body can be affected in many ways in which its power of acting is increased or diminished, and also in others which render its power of acting neither greater or less.” Reading the characterization of imaginings as affects through this postulate can seem supported by the account he offers of affects such as love and hate, and other affects internal to the propositions. In E3p13s, he writes:

From this we understand clearly what love and hate are. Love is nothing but joy with the accompanying [*concomitante*] idea of an external cause, and hate is nothing but sadness with the accompanying [*concomitante*] idea of an external cause.<sup>11</sup>

Given that this scholium aims to explicate E3p13, which concerns the mind’s imagining things, it can seem natural to read Spinoza as here explaining how our ideas of an external cause – our imaginations – are themselves intrinsically neutral with respect to our power of acting, but then come to ‘accompany’ a basic affect – joy, sadness, and desire – and then through this attachment come to have value.

I do not think that this can be Spinoza’s view. For one, Spinoza himself does not explicitly identify imaginations and those affects that are neutral with

<sup>10</sup> A passion is just an affection caused, at least in part, by something external to us, whereas an action is an affection for which we can be an adequate cause.

<sup>11</sup> See also E3p18s2.



regard to our *conatus*, and there is no good reason to presuppose he implicitly does so. Here it is useful to reconsider the definitions of the affects. Other than joy, sadness and desire, every affect is *defined* as involving an imagination. While Spinoza's language is similar to that in the definition of love and hate – as a primitive affect accompanied by imagination – it is clear that the imagination itself is integral to the non-primitive affects. Insofar as affects such as love, hatred, inclination, hope, fear, and so on, are distinct species of increase or decrease of power to act, and so distinct from the joy or sadness which figures in them, it must be the case that the imaginative dimension of these affects *itself* impacts our power to act. Moreover, it is clear that our imaginations themselves have this differential impact on our power of acting. Consider E3p12: “The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting.” The proposition itself suggests that our imaginations, our taking some things to be present, themselves stand to change our power of acting, and the demonstration affirms this unequivocally, appealing quite simply to E2p7, the principle of parallelism:

So long as the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same body as present (by 2p17) and consequently (by 2p7) so long as the human mind regards some external body as present, that is (by 2p17s), imagines it, the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of that external body. Hence, so long as the mind imagines those things that increase or aid our body's power of acting, the body is affected with modes that increase or aid its power of acting (see Post. 1), and consequently (by p11) the mind's power of thinking is increased or aided. Therefore, (by p6 or p9), the mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things, q.e.d. (E3p12dem)

Spinoza here maintains that simply representing an external body as present to us entails an increase (or presumably a decrease) of our power of acting consistent with that thing's impact on us. For that reason, we can increase our power of persevering in existence simply by calling to mind those things that benefit us. The imagination itself impacts our power of acting. That is, an imagination is properly speaking an affect, according to the definition of Part III.

As noted earlier, however, this position might seem counter-intuitive. We regularly take bodies to exist independently of the way they affect us and indeed recognize that on different occasions the same existing body can affect us in different ways. One day I might find the house I am considering buying warm and inviting, but the next day, on a second visit, I might find it sterile and cold. The house itself hasn't changed, nor, it might seem, has my idea of it. We are inclined to say, rather, that my *feeling* towards the house has



changed. On the reading of Spinoza I am suggesting, it is true that our feeling towards the house has changed, but that change of feeling *comprises* a change in our idea of the house: we feel differently insofar as we are imagining something different, insofar as we are taking something different as present to us. Thus, on this reading, Spinoza effectively reverses the standard order of explanation. For him, it is not the case that we first take things to exist and then find ourselves affected by them. Rather we take as existing the things we do because of how we are affected.

While this reversal of the order of explanation might seem counter-intuitive to contemporary philosophical sensibilities, it ought not to be so surprising from the point of view of Spinoza's system. At the end of Part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza denies the distinction between will and intellect and instead asserts that every idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or a negation (E2p49). That is to say our ideas are not intrinsically inert. Spinoza cautions his readers against conceiving of ideas in this way in the scholium to this proposition:

I begin therefore by warning my readers, first, to distinguish accurately between an idea, or concept, of the mind, and the images of things which we imagine. And then it is necessary to distinguish between ideas and the words by which we signify things. For because many people either completely confuse these three – ideas, images and words – or do not distinguish them accurately enough, or carefully enough, they have been completely ignorant of this doctrine concerning the will ... Indeed, those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us from encounters with [NS:external] bodies, are convinced that those ideas of things [NS:which can make no trace in our brains, or] of which we can form no similar image [NS: in our brain] are not ideas, but only fictions which we feign from a free choice of the will. *They look on ideas, therefore, as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice, do not see that an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation.* (E2p49s, emphasis added.)

From the discussion, it becomes clear that the ideas he is referring to are imaginations. The ideas that involve an affirmation are those of which we are aware, that is, those ideas that present some thing as present to us. Spinoza is denying the possibility of merely entertaining an idea of a thing without regarding that thing as present to us, that is, without affirming the existence of that thing. He denies that we can simply consider the content of an idea independently of an attitude we take to that content. But this denial on Spinoza's part invites a further question. What is it that moves us to affirm what we do? That is, what is it that moves us to regard as present the things we take to exist? What explains our imagining what we do?

## 3.

Indeed, Spinoza does owe us an answer to this question. Let us return to the scholium of E2p17. There Spinoza distinguishes two senses in which an idea is about something. Spinoza illustrates through the example of the idea of Peter had in one case by Peter and another by Paul:

We clearly understand what is the difference between the idea of, say, Peter, which constitutes the essence of Peter's mind, and the idea of Peter which is in another man, say in Paul. For the former directly explains the essence of Peter's body, and does not involve existence, except so long as Peter exists; but the latter indicates the condition of Paul's body more than Peter's nature, and therefore, while that condition of Paul's body lasts, Paul's mind will still regard Peter as present to itself, even though Peter does not exist. (E2p17s)

Paul's idea of Peter is importantly different from the idea of Peter constituting Peter's mind. The latter idea is explained by Spinoza's metaphysics and in particular his doctrine of parallelism. Peter's mind has Peter's body as its object, just in so far as Peter's mind and Peter's body are the same thing expressed under different attributes. While Peter's mind can be said to represent or be about all that occurs in Peter's body, on pain of absurdity, this representation cannot involve *awareness* of all that occurs in Peter's body. The former idea, the idea that presents Peter as existing to Paul, or Paul's *imagining* of Peter, has Peter as an object in a different sense, one that *does* intrinsically involve Paul's being *aware* of his representation of Peter. What explains this *imaginative content*?

According to Spinoza, the human mind does not perceive any external body as existing except through the ideas of the ways its own body has been causally affected by external causes (E2p26). However, for Spinoza, there is an order to nature; all things, and so all bodies and all ideas, are connected. A particular thing, a human body, say, is causally connected not only with all the things currently impacting it, but also with the various things that have made it what it now is. My body is causally connected with what is impinging on my skin and the air I am breathing in, but it is also causally connected with the food and drink I have ingested and incorporated as I've grown, the various bodies with which it has collided and which have left scars both visible and internal, as well as the bodies of my parents, and those of their parents, and all the other bodies which have causally affected them, and so on *ad infinitum* (E1p28). Following from Spinoza's parallelism, the idea constituting my mind is connected logically (for that is the sort of connection proper to ideas) with each of the ideas of the particular things whose objects are causally connected with my body. In order to determine, or fix, the imaginative content

of an idea, Spinoza thus faces a problem endemic to any causal account of representation. Paul's body is causally affected not only by Peter, but also by the intermediary entities effecting the causal interaction between Peter's body and his own body, and equally, it is causally affected by all those bodies which have causally affected Peter's body to make it as it is at the time it is causally affecting Paul. Spinoza owes us an explanation of how the imaginative content of Paul's idea of Peter is fixed to make it the idea of *Peter*, as opposed to of some other body within the causal nexus. That is, Spinoza owes us an explanation of why we are aware of the things we are, of why we affirm the existence of what we do, of why the external bodies which are presented to us as present are so presented.

Don Garrett has suggested that we might understand the affects, or passions, as manners of conceiving of ideas, and that this manner of conceiving serves to fix the imaginative intentional content of an imagination.<sup>12</sup> That is, according to Garrett, for Spinoza, the human mind becomes aware of one object rather than one of the infinitely many others in the causal order through the affects, and so through the affects Spinoza solves the problem of the causal account of reference. Each of our ideas consists in an array of ideas, containing, as a whole, information about how we are situated causally in the world. But we are faced with a problem of making sense of this torrent of information. How do we attend to some feature of our causal situation? How do we pick out one object as the one affecting us? The ways in which our own power to act is differentially impacted, that is, the affects, serve to focus our attention. This differential impact effectively highlights some element of the array of ideas, such that we identify and become aware of some object as existing and present to us. Insofar as we become aware of one element of our array of ideas, we fix the imaginative content of our idea, and we imagine an object, affirming its existence. On this reading, being aware of objects in the world around us essentially involves the affects – we cannot become aware of any particular thing in the world without our power to act being differentially impacted, that is, without the affects. On this reading, it should be clear, that it is no accident or equivocation that Spinoza characterizes imaginations as affects in Part II. Furthermore, on this line, our ideas of things are far from being mute pictures

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<sup>12</sup> Garrett (MS). Garrett 2008, Nadler 2008 and LeBuffe 2010 also discuss imaginings as conscious ideas, but they are primarily interested in a different aspect of Spinoza's account of consciousness: that it admits of degrees, so that a mind can come to be more aware of things, and thereby more powerful. My concern here can be characterized as offering an account of the starting point from which we have an initial consciousness of Nature from which we can move to increase our awareness and understanding and so our power of thinking.

on a panel; our ideas of things just in being the ideas of the things they are speak volumes about our own natures, understood in Spinozistic terms as our power to persevere, and about our relations to the world around us.<sup>13</sup> We imagine what we do – are presented with the external bodies present to us that we are – just insofar as our power of acting is differentially impacted.

I will conclude by considering the advantages of this reading of Spinoza's notion of imagination, and in particular the resources it affords for addressing the questions raised at the outset of the paper, but let me first raise one concern about this reading. I have been arguing that for Spinoza all of our imaginings of objects are essentially affective, for it is the affect itself that focuses in attention on a particular part of the causal order. That focus constitutes a conscious representation of an object. Is this view consistent with the definitions of the affects of love and hatred, which, as noted earlier, seem to suggest that these affects are a primitive affect combined with an affectively neutral imagining. This reading takes the affect and the imagining to be distinct and separable mental states. But there is another natural way to read these definitions. We can read Spinoza as detailing one entity, an object as conceived in a particular manner. On this reading there is but a distinction of reason between the content of the imagination and the manner of conceiving that content. It is not as if there is any sense to be made of an object conceived in no manner at all. The manner of conceiving the object is intrinsic to the conception of the object itself, intrinsic to the content of the imagination.

There might, however, appear to be a further problem with this reading. Spinoza does define the affects of joy, sadness and desire, the so-called primitive affects, separately, and it is quite natural to treat each of these affects as distinct and separable mental states, as ideas in the mind. Can joy, sadness and desire be proper ideas unto themselves on the one hand, and manners of conceiving on the other? A full answer to this question would involve delving into Spinoza's theory of ideas, a task beyond the scope of this paper. Let me note, however, that there is no reason to think that all Spinozistic ideas are of the same kind. It might well be that our imaginings can be thought of separate and distinct ideas, in virtue of their having distinct objects, but in Part II of the *Ethics* Spinoza has introduced the ideas of the common notions, ideas which can only be conceived adequately. Eugene Marshall has argued that common notions such as motion and rest and extension are conceived ade-

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<sup>13</sup> Radner and Della Rocca offer related accounts of Spinoza's theory of ideas, but they are both more focused on the epistemic import of that account and not the constitution of the content of an idea. See Radner 1971 and Della Rocca 2003. See also Garrett 2008 and LeBuffe 2010.

quately insofar as they are integral to any idea of a body.<sup>14</sup> That is, these common notions seem to be structurally necessary to having any thought of a body at all. It is hard to see how, on this reading, our ideas of common notions could be taken to be distinct and separable from other (inadequate) ideas, not of the common notions. I would like to suggest, along an analogous line, that joy, sadness and desire, be thought of as manners of conceiving things, valences which weight the information we receive about the world, and which as such are structurally necessary to any affect, and so not distinguishable or separate from other (non-primitive) affects.

#### 4.

Let me now conclude by returning to my original puzzles about Spinoza's claims about imagination. This account of imagination as intrinsically affective can help us in understanding why Spinoza shifts from sensation to imagination as the key epistemic category, as well as his claim that imagination is a paradigm of forming definite ideas through signs.

First, Spinoza recognizes that once we reject a resemblance account of sensory representation, we are only entitled to claim that our sensory experiences tell us that we have been causally impacted by the world in some way. That is, in accordance with Spinoza's most frequent usage of forms of the verb *sentire*,<sup>15</sup> our sensations afford us an indeterminate feeling. While this feeling is referred to no determinate or particular thing, it does, given Spinoza's parallelism and his commitment to a principle of sufficient reason, reflect a change in us. And for this reason our sensations do give us some knowledge; the change must have been caused by something. It is something to know that there exists something other than us – but this knowledge is vague and indeterminate. Our sensations on their own tell us that something exists but not what exists. Thus, the knowledge afforded by sensation is minimal.

Knowing something more determinate about the world that is causally affecting us, requires that we have more definite ideas about things in the world. For Spinoza, we do not come to have these ideas of things by piecing together simple sensory ideas. This makes sense, for there is nothing internal to our sensations to guide us in ordering these ideas, in fitting them together. Rather, for him, imagination affords us ideas of particular things insofar as our

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall 2008.

<sup>15</sup> See note 8 above for instances of this usage.

imaginings contain within them a principle for ordering experience. How so? For Spinoza, “ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of external bodies” (E2p16C2) and so “the human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing except through the affections of its own body” (E2p26). That is, we can only access the world around us through what we are. And our essence, as per E3p6, is just our striving to persevere in existence. The way the world impacts our ability to strive to persevere, our power to act, is our measure of things, our way of ordering the world. Through differentials in our power to act, through the affects, we come to be aware of particular things – objects in the world – and part of coming to be aware of particular things is taking them to exist. Imagination is the means through which we become aware of objects as objects.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, imagination is like a sign. A sign marks where we are and so provides an anchor through which we can orient ourselves. We can return again and again to a particular place just insofar as there is a mark through which we can readily distinguish it from other places. In this way, a sign organizes our world. Imagination, in presenting the external things as present to us that it does, affirms the existence of things and so sets up landmarks in the ever-changing causal order; it stabilizes the world in which we find ourselves, allowing us to make our way in it.

Let me return briefly to consider to other issues with which I opened this paper. As I noted, Spinoza follows Descartes in moving away from a resemblance account of representation. Descartes, in the Sixth Meditation, remarks that “the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful” to the human being (7:83; 2:57), and it certainly seems that Descartes takes it that our sensations represent these benefits and harms.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, then, we can see Spinoza as following Descartes’s efforts to offer an alternative account of our representation of the world. Yet Descartes maintains a focus on sensation while Spinoza shifts to focus on imagination. Addressing the reasons for this shift comprehensively would be the topic of another paper, but one might think that reasons for Spinoza’s shift of focus can be found in Descartes’ own account. Indeed, Descartes himself has trouble negotiating the terrain of his new account of sensation, as reflected in the Sixth Replies to Objections. There, in

<sup>16</sup> Note that this reading dovetails neatly with the story, explored in Della Rocca 2003, Nadler 2008, Garrett 2008 and LeBuffe 2010, of how we can increase our power of thinking or our degree of consciousness for Spinoza. For that increase in our consciousness is effected through the regulation of the affects.

<sup>17</sup> See Simmons 1999 for a defense of this claim.



response to a worry about his privileging the reliability of the intellect over that of the senses, Descartes distinguishes three grades of sensation. While it is clear what Descartes intends by the first grade – the neurological response to stimulation of sense organs – ~~but~~ it is hard to understand what he intends by the second grade – the perception of colour and light – and third grade – the judgement that there is an object before me (see 7:437f; 2:295). In particular, it is ambiguous whether Descartes intends the third grade of sensation to consist in an affirmation that an object, already perceived under the second grade, exists or to constitute the perception of an object itself. The former reading would be consistent with Descartes' use of 'judgement' in the Fourth Meditation, whereas the latter would flesh out the discussion of perception in the Second Meditation. At the very least, Spinoza's refocusing on imagination can serve to disambiguate the discussion of sensation.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, it is worth highlighting that this way of understanding our knowledge of bodies is importantly different from the way the resemblance theorist of representation would demand of us. The resemblance theorist demands that, in order to have knowledge of things in the world, our ideas correspond to things as they exist independently of us. On the reading of Spinoza's account of imagination I have been proposing, a different epistemic model is in play, one which is neither a correspondence theory of knowledge nor succumbs to idealism. It is certainly the case that the world, or in Spinozistic terms, Nature, exists independently of our perception of it, and that our perceptions are a function of the causal workings of that world. In this sense, Spinoza is not an idealist. But for Spinoza the world is not best understood as built up out of particular things populating it, each with their own independent natures, which then stand in determinate causal relations to each other. Rather, Nature is one unified substance, characterized by the causal order structuring it, no matter which of its infinitely many infinite attributes under which it is conceived. We, as the finite knowers, ~~we~~ are, do not begin by grasping this unity, but rather ~~are~~ are bound by the situation in which we find ourselves. And in that situation, after noting that we do not exist alone, our first task must be to situate ourselves as part of the whole. But this involves conceiving of other things to which we can relate ourselves. My suggestion is that for Spinoza imagining just is conceiving of the particular things we take to populate our world, and ~~that~~ imagination insofar as it is essentially affective, intrinsically

<sup>18</sup> There is more much more to be said here. On my reading of Spinoza, he is adopting the latter reading of the third grade of sensation, with imagination replacing judgement or the act of the intellect. In another paper, one might explore how imagination assumes ~~the~~ <sup>this</sup> role of intellect, and how this emerges from his rejection of the freedom of will.



involves our relational situation in the world. Imagination is thus importantly different from sense perception as the resemblance theorist conceives it. Its aim is not to grasp particular things that already exist, but rather to model a world, approximating the one we find ourselves in. The knowledge imagination affords us is essentially an approximation,<sup>19</sup> but one that helps us to make our way through the world.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> And like all approximations, they can be refined.

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see Garrett (2008) → AQ21

see note 14 → AQ22