

# Spinoza on the Limits of Explanation

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## Abstract

Commentators standardly ascribe to Spinoza a belief in an exceptionless conceptual closure of mental and physical realms: no intention can allow us to understand a bodily movement, no bodily injury can make intelligible a sensation of pain. This counterintuitive doctrine, most often now referred to as Spinoza's 'attribute barrier', has weighty repercussions for his views on intelligibility, nature of the mind, identity, and causality. I argue against the standard reading of the doctrine, by showing that it produces an inconsistent epistemological picture, contradicting Spinoza's theory of mind and his commitment to universal intelligibility. The alternative account I propose is also philosophically more compelling and plausible as an account of thought in its essential intentionality.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the histories of the mind-body problem, Descartes is often cast in the role of a villain. Spinoza was one of the first to find fault with the Cartesian picture. He objected in particular to what he took to be the *unintelligibility* of Descartes's interactionist account of the mind-body "union". Given that, as Descartes had recognized, minds and bodies have nothing in common, positing causal relations between them was, in Spinoza's view, simply unintelligible:

<sup>1</sup>I'm very grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this paper to Michael Della Rocca, Martin Lin, John Morrison, Alison Peterman, Justin Steinberg, and to audiences at Queens University, the Margaret Wilson Conference at Syracuse University, and the American Philosophical Association Pacific and Central conferences.

In citing from Spinoza's *Ethics* I use the following abbreviations: a=axiom, c=corollary, def=definition, d=demonstration, pref=preface, p=proposition, s=scholium, followed by volume and page number references to the Latin (Gebhardt) edition. I rely on the following abbreviations for Spinoza's other works: Ep=Letters, KV=*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, TIE=*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

What, I ask, does he [Descartes] understand by the union of Mind and Body? What clear and distinct concept does he have of a thought so closely united to some little portion of quantity? Indeed, I wish he had explained this union by its proximate cause. But he had conceived the Mind to be so distinct from the Body that he could not assign any singular cause, either of this union or of the Mind itself. ... Again, I should like very much to know how many degrees of motion the Mind can give to that pineal gland, and how great a force is required to hold it in suspense. ... [O]f course, since there is no common measure [*ratio*] between the will and motion, there is also no comparison [*comparatio*] between the power, or forces, of the mind and those of the body (*Ethics*, 5pref; II/279-280).<sup>2</sup>

As is often stressed today, for Spinoza, universal intelligibility is a fundamental ontological and methodological commitment. As he puts it, there is nothing that cannot be “conceived [*concipi*]” (1a2).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the demonstrable *unintelligibility* of something suffices to rule it out of the domain of possible existents. Most commentators think that such considerations of intelligibility lead Spinoza to insist on the total closure of mental and physical realms. In other words, the scholarly consensus is that, in Spinoza’s view, minds and bodies not only cannot, *pace* Descartes, *causally* determine one another, but, more fundamentally, they also cannot be used to *explain* one another.<sup>4</sup> So no antecedent volition can allow us to understand a bodily movement, and no bodily injury can make intelligible a sensation of pain. If Spinoza is right, then, to the chagrin of materialists, thinking about physical events cannot help us understand what it is to be a thinking thing; and, to the chagrin of idealists, thinking about thought cannot help us understand the physical world.<sup>5</sup>

Today this rather counter-intuitive doctrine is often referred to as Spinoza’s ‘attribute barrier’, and I will retain this label here.<sup>6</sup> A Spinozistic “attribute” is a descendant of the Cartesian “principal attribute” (AT 8a.25): it is, roughly, the most basic qualitative kind to which something can be understood to belong. Paradigmatically, to say that something is a mental thing or a physical thing – or, in Spinoza’s and Descartes’s terminology, a “thinking” or “extended” thing – is to classify it under an attribute.

I take the following to represent the now-dominant interpretation of the Spinozistic ‘barrier’ between different attributes:

**Standard Reading of the Attribute Barrier:** No physical thing can enter into conceptual or explanatory relations with anything mental (and vice versa); in particular, no concept specific to extension (such as BODY) can be used to understand a mental thing, and no concept specific to thought (such as AFFIRMATION) can be used to understand a physical thing.

<sup>2</sup>Descartes of course didn’t agree that there was a problem; see his Letter to Clerselier (AT9.1); cf. Wilson (1999), p. 151.

<sup>3</sup>For discussion of this commitment see e.g. Bennett (1984), Della Rocca (2008), Newlands (2018), Renz (2018).

<sup>4</sup>I treat to “understand [*intelligere*]”, “make intelligible”, and “explain” as synonymous for my purposes in this paper.

<sup>5</sup>This sentence evolved thanks to input from Michael Della Rocca.

<sup>6</sup>‘Attribute barrier’ is often used to signify both conceptual and causal prohibitions. In this paper I focus only on the former, more fundamental, prohibition.

Spinoza’s barrier between mental and physical realms cannot be a product of distinct kinds of *causality*, or of absence of causal laws in one realm but not the other: one causal “order and connection” governs both “ideas” and “things” (2p7).

I use double quotation marks to identify extracts from primary texts, single quotation marks for artifacts of secondary literature, including my own terminology.

For example, Jonathan Bennett characterizes Spinoza's position as “rul[ing] out” any “explanatory flow between attributes.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Michael Della Rocca concludes that for Spinoza

thought and extension are conceptually or explanatorily independent of one another. ... [M]odes of extension are conceived or explained through the attribute of extension and not through any other attribute, such as thought. ... [T]he fact that there is an idea of a particular object is to be explained completely in mental terms and not in terms of any other attribute.<sup>8</sup>

What I will argue in this paper is that the Standard Reading of Spinoza's barrier doctrine is wrong, and that we should replace it with an alternative account – one that 1) is better grounded textually; 2) better meets Spinoza's own demand for universal intelligibility; 3) allows Spinoza to have a more consistent epistemological picture; and finally, 4) is philosophically more compelling as an account of thought, insofar as thought is, plausibly, essentially intentional.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not we get Spinoza's barrier doctrine wrong matters a great deal: it is one of the linchpins of Spinoza's system, with far-flung repercussions. For one, within the framework of a thinker notorious for his commitment to universal intelligibility, it articulates a fundamental condition on how mental and physical things can be made intelligible. It also shapes Spinoza's *causal* commitments, insofar as only what is conceptually possible is also causally possible. Additionally, it generates a stubborn puzzle about Spinoza's understanding of *identity*: token Spinozistic minds and bodies are supposed to be “one and the same thing” (2p7s), and yet, given their explanatory and causal quarantines, claims about them cannot be substituted for one another *salva veritate*.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, the barrier doctrine also has some less obvious implications: it affects how we construe Spinoza's aims for the *Ethics* as a whole, his account of thought in general and of the essence of the human mind in particular, as well as the relations between attributes and what Spinoza calls “modes”: essentially dependent entities, such as finite minds and bodies.

Here is how the paper will proceed. In §2, I will show that the Standard Reading of the barrier is inconsistent with Spinoza's account of the human mind and with his commitment to universal intelligibility. I will then argue for an alternative interpretation of the barrier doctrine, in two stages. First, in §3, I will show that we should understand that doctrine as, first and foremost, a doctrine about dependence relations between qualitative concepts. Second, in §4, I will argue that, correctly understood, the doctrine allows for concepts of *various* attributes – and not just those that belong to the attribute of thought, as on the Standard Reading – to make thinking things and ideas more generally intelligible.

<sup>7</sup>Bennett (1984), §13.1, §19.2.

<sup>8</sup>Della Rocca (1996), p. 10, cf. (2008), p. 98. Cf. Gueroult (1969), p. 100, Jarrett (1991), LeBuffe (2017), p. 56, C. Marshall (2009), E. Marshall (2013), p. 53, Melamed (2013), p. 84, Newlands (2012), p. 34, (2018), pp. 69-70, Schmidt (2009), p. 96, Shein (2009). But see Koistinen (1996).

<sup>9</sup>Debate over the nature of Spinoza's ‘barrier doctrine’ is of course complicated by the fact that not just this label but the identification of some specific doctrine is an artifact of secondary literature. I will use the term to refer to Spinoza's stance on the possibility of conceptual relations between entities of different basic qualitative kinds, and one whose cardinal statement is 1p10.

<sup>10</sup>On this puzzle, see e.g. Bennett (1984), Delahunty (1985), Della Rocca (1996), Garrett (2017b), Hübner (2019), Jarrett (1991), C. Marshall (2009), Melamed (2013), Morrison (2013).

## 2 | SOME PROBLEMS FOR THE STANDARD READING

Here is one way to begin to recognize the inadequacy of the Standard Reading of Spinoza's barrier doctrine. As has been noted before, the barrier doctrine so understood is arguably simply inconsistent with Spinoza's own account of the human mind.<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, the problem is that that account seems to rest on concepts of *physical* things, such as BODY, thereby violating the uniform a priori ban on cross-attribute explanations imposed by the barrier on its Standard Reading. The result is that, if we accept the Standard Reading, Spinoza's own account of the human mind looks to be at odds with his fundamental explanatory principles, as enshrined in the barrier doctrine.

In the rest of this section, I will flesh out this problem in more detail, and also show that instead of representing an isolated moment of tension between doctrines, as is usually assumed, it generalizes to a much broader difficulty for Spinoza's account of ideas.

To see the problem more clearly, it will be useful to have in front of us the most germane elements of Spinoza's theory of mind.

So first, Spinoza holds what can be described as a *bundle* theory of mind:<sup>12</sup> all there is to "minds", in his view, are more or less complex ideas (2p15, 2p48). He also holds, arguably, that any idea is understood as the idea it is, distinct from all other ideas, only when its intentional "object [*objectum*]" is understood.<sup>13</sup> That is, for Spinoza, what individuates a particular idea is what this idea is *of*, or (to use non-Spinozistic language) what it represents. As Spinoza puts this point, we "cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do [*ideas inter se ut ipsa objecta differre*]" (2p13s, cf. 2p8c&s).

Intentional objects can play this individuating role in the realm of ideas because for Spinoza representing them is *essential* to ideas: the "essence" of an idea is what it "affirms" (3GenDefAff; II/204), i.e. what it is represents.<sup>14</sup> This is in line with how Spinoza thinks about the significance of essences for conceiving more generally: in his view, no "thing" can be "conceived" unless its "essence" is "conceived" (2def2). So if what is essential to an idea (which, in Spinoza's ontology, also counts as a "thing") is that it have a certain intentional object, then we cannot adequately conceive of this idea unless we first conceive of its essential intentional object.<sup>15</sup>

As befits Spinoza's commitment to universal explanatory principles (3pref; II/138), the above characterization of ideas applies also to the human mind specifically. It too is just a bundle of ideas (2p15), individuated by its essential intentional object (2p11). More precisely, for Spinoza, an idea counts as a

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Aquila (1978), p. 275, Della Rocca (1996), pp. 20-21, Jarrett (1982), p. 174, Matson (1971), p. 577.

On Spinoza's view of mind, see e.g. Alanen (2011), Della Rocca (2008), Garrett (2008), (2009), (2017a), Gueroult (1974), Jarrett (1991), Koistinen (2017), LeBuffe (2017), Macherey (1997), C. Marshall (2009), E. Marshall (2013), Melamed (2013), Nadler (2008), Renz (2018), Wilson (1996).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Della Rocca (1996).

<sup>13</sup>In this paper I use the term "intentional object" without distinguishing between this object understood as (1) the immanent, intramental, objectively real representational content, and (2) the external formally real referent of the idea. For some reasons why (1) may be preferable see Hübner 2019. On the distinction see also Garrett (2017a).

<sup>14</sup>The language of "affirmation" reflects Spinoza's belief that ideas have an intrinsic volitional component, affirming or negating their object or content (2p49). For discussion of this doctrine see e.g. Della Rocca (2003), D. Steinberg (2005), J. Steinberg (MS). For other views in the period on which thought is essentially intentional see e.g. Arnauld (1990), p. 53. For criticism of the claim that intentionality is the mark of the mental for Spinoza see Lin (2017).

<sup>15</sup>An idea is "essentially of *x*" if it is necessary and sufficient for an idea to be of *x* for it to be that idea. This same idea may also nonessentially be of other things.

human mind only if it is essentially of some actually existing, sufficiently complex body: “the essence of the Mind consists in this (by 2p11 and p13), that it affirms the actual existence of its body [*essentia mentis in hoc consistit...quod sui corporis actualem existentiam affirmat*]” (3GenDefAff; II/204).<sup>16</sup> Presumably this is supposed to hold both at the level of concrete particulars (*my* mind is essentially of *my* body) and at the level of kinds (human minds in general essentially bear intentional relations to certain kinds of bodies).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in Spinoza’s view, this intentional relation is precisely what the mind-body “union” consists in (2p13s) – not, pace Descartes, in any sort of causal interaction.<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, for Spinoza (1) any idea is understood as the idea it is, distinct from other ideas, only when its essential intentional object is understood; and (2) actually existing, sufficiently complex bodies are the essential intentional objects of human minds. It follows that (3) to adequately conceive of the human mind not just in its essence but even just simply as a thing distinct from other kinds of ideas, we must first understand the relevant body. Spinoza is explicit about this:

to determine what is the difference between the human Mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, i.e. of the human Body [*ad determinandum quid mens humana reliquis intersit quidque reliquis praestet necesse nobis est ejus objecti ut diximus hoc est corporis humani naturam cognoscere*] (2p13s)

Here Spinoza interrupts Part II of the *Ethics*, entitled *On the Nature and Origin of Mind*, by a mini-treatise on physics, often called his ‘Physical Digression’.

As that moniker suggests, the Digression has not impressed commentators looking for a bona fide, full-blown natural philosophy.<sup>19</sup> But such criticisms are misdirected. For producing a genuine physics for its own sake isn’t Spinoza’s aim here. Rather, his aim is to give us sufficient information about the human mind’s essential intentional object to enable us to *distinguish* this mind from other kinds of ideas. Hence the first two Lemmas of the Digression bear on how bodies generally are “distinguished [*distinguere*][*convenire*]” (II/97-8). Likewise, the Digression’s sole definition tells us what it takes to compose a bodily “Individual, which is distinguished from the others” (II/100). Finally, the remaining Lemmas explain under what conditions this individual’s essential “form” or “nature” remains the same over time (2L4-7; II/100-2). In short, at its core, the Physical Digression is aimed at explaining the conditions of the distinctness of a certain kind of composite body, and of its identity over time, in order to then allow us to distinguish the *idea* of that body from other sorts of ideas. In Spinoza’s panpsychist framework, with its omnipresent

<sup>16</sup>Cf. 2p13, 4p37d. I distinguish here ideas that *essentially constitute* a human mind (i.e. constitute the essence of that mind) from sensory and other ideas acquires in the course of existence, and which come to co-constitute human minds.

<sup>17</sup>On why Spinoza is entitled to *adequate* concepts of kinds, see Hübner (2015b), (forthcoming-b).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Jarrett (1982), p. 172, Malinowski-Charles (2011), p. 126; and KV 2app[7-8], 1.19[11]. For another account of Spinozistic mind-body “union” see Marshall (2009), pp. 913-914.

Spinoza sometimes describes this “union” in terms of identity; on the relation between identity and intentionality in his framework see Hübner (forthcoming-a). Thanks to John Morrison for pressing me on this.

Spinoza is not alone among early moderns in explaining the mind-body union by appealing to a representational relation: in his correspondence with Des Bosses, Leibniz explains the union of corporeal substances by appealing to the harmonious perceptual relations between the dominant monad and subordinate monads of the organic body Leibniz (1989).

<sup>19</sup>E.g. Bennett (1984).

“minds” (2p13s), strictly universal laws, and plenty of other sorts of composite bodies, distinguishing human minds from other kinds of ideas is no mean feat.

Spinoza’s failure to offer a full-fledged physics, rather than a mere ‘placeholder’ theory, is thus not, I suggest, a genuine failure on his part. Moreover, many contemporary readers will applaud Spinoza’s insistence that we must know about the physical stuff we’re made of to understand mindedness (even if few would want to link this explanatory dependence to an *intentional* relation). But the above account of the essential constitution of the human mind *does* create a different kind of problem for the coherence of Spinoza’s picture.

Recall that according to the Standard Reading, Spinoza places an exceptionless apriori prohibition on cross-attribute explanations: no physical thing can enter into explanatory relations with anything mental; no physical concept can be used to understand an idea. To quote from Della Rocca’s characterization of the barrier above, the “conceptua[l] and explanator[y] independen[ce]” of the mental and physical means that the existence of “an idea of a particular object” “is to be explained completely in mental terms”. And yet, as we just saw, Spinoza’s account of the essential constitution of the human mind seems to be a clear-cut case of not just *allowing* for such cross-attribute explanations, but of *requiring* them. Spinoza’s claim is that the human mind cannot be conceived unless we first conceive of its essential intentional object, a certain kind of body: any conception of the human mind capable of distinguishing it from other sorts of ideas, and of adequately articulating what that mind is essentially, requires us to “know the nature of” (2p13s) a certain kind of body.

In short, if the Standard Reading of the barrier correctly spells out what is necessary, in Spinoza’s eyes, for making minds and bodies intelligible, then, by his own lights, his account of the human mind will not count as intelligible. Presumably, making some thing intelligible — conceiving of it “adequately”, to use Spinoza’s terminology — minimally requires grasping it as a thing distinct from other things, and ideally, in an essentialist framework like Spinoza’s, it requires adequately grasping its essence, that is, adequately grasping what makes it the thing that it is.<sup>20</sup> At this point one may rightfully wonder then whether Spinoza’s account of the mind-body union is indeed a genuine improvement on Descartes’s account, as Spinoza hopes. But even without engaging in such comparative judgments, an unintelligible account of the human mind would be no minor failure within Spinoza’s own framework. As he announces just a few propositions before characterizing the human mind as an idea of a body, acquiring knowledge of the human mind is an aim of the

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<sup>20</sup>One possible response to this interpretive dilemma is to downplay the significance of Spinoza’s appeal to the body in his account of the human mind. After all, Spinoza describes this appeal as what is necessary “for us” (2p13s). One might take this to suggest that Spinoza is merely making a concession to our cognitive limitations, but that there is some other, barrier-conforming way to characterize the human mind. Thus Della Rocca (1996) proposes that 2p13s is not a genuine philosophical “explanation” of the human mind but simply “the way we come to appreciate a certain fact” (pp. 20-21, 177 n9; cf. Jarrett (1982), p. 174). This proposal is tempting, but ultimately flawed, for several reasons: (1) The intended extension of “us” is not obvious. (Is it all humans? Philosophers? Those seeking knowledge of the human mind?) But, depending on the answer, what is “necessary for us” will differ: a concession to cognitive limitations might be pedagogically necessary on one interpretation; on another, what is “necessary for us” will be what is dictated by the proper order of a philosophical demonstration. (2) Earlier in the same scholium, Spinoza says that “no one [nemo]” can understand the mind-body union unless the body is understood first. (3) It’s unclear what cognitive limitations might force Spinoza to appeal to extension-specific concepts, since thought-specific concepts, the use of which would have avoided contradiction, are equally available to human knowers. (4) If we take Spinoza’s account of ideas and their objects in 2p8 for a straightforwardly true account, not doing so in the case of the account of the human mind only a few propositions later seems textually ad hoc. (5) Since obeying the barrier seems to be a fundamental condition of intelligibility (recall that it is grounds for Spinoza’s criticism of Descartes’s account), it’s difficult to see how a fundamentally unintelligible account of a mind known through a body could aid us in “appreciating” any fact, other than by a mystical throwing away of the ladder.



*Ethics* as a whole (2pref).<sup>21</sup> So the very thing whose intelligibility is now in question is meant to be a crowning achievement of his system. Furthermore, Spinoza holds that human beings are constitutively limited to knowing reality under two attributes only: thought and extension (2a5). That is, the only kinds of real things we are capable of knowing are ideas and bodies. So if his account of the human mind were indeed inconsistent with the barrier doctrine, then Spinoza would have failed to fully observe his own strictures on explanation in the only case in which, given our cognitive limitations, he could apply them.

It's difficult to imagine that all these problems would have escaped Spinoza's notice. And yet some scholars have concluded that Spinoza is indeed simply guilty of inconsistency on this point.<sup>22</sup> What *hasn't* been noted, to my knowledge, is that the problem with which we are confronted here – the problem of the apparent unintelligibility (by Spinoza's own lights) of his account of the human mind – easily generalizes.<sup>23</sup> That is, his account of the human mind is not an isolated problematic case (as extant discussions suggest), but the tip of an epistemological iceberg that puts at risk Spinoza's theory of ideas much more generally. For if, as Spinoza seems to hold, ideas generally are individuated as distinct things by their essential intentional objects, and if conceiving of an idea adequately—making it truly intelligible—requires conceiving of its essence (2def2), then conceiving of *any* idea that is essentially of a body (so conceiving not merely of the human mind, but of ideas of cats, stars, atoms, etc) as an idea distinct from other ideas seems to require us to first understand the body (the cat, star or atom) that is this idea's essential intentional object. But this, again, is at odds with the Standard Reading of the barrier doctrine, which rules out appealing to anything physical when trying to understand ideas.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, it seems that one of the heretofore unacknowledged consequences of the Standard Reading of the attribute barrier is that the great majority of human ideas – all ideas that are essentially of something physical – turn out to be unintelligible. Moreover, if, we put aside for a moment the limits of specifically *human* cognition, we can generalize the problem even further. According to Spinoza there is not just thought and extension but “infinite” attributes (1def6), i.e. infinitely many (Ep66) irreducible, qualitative kinds of being, all of them and all their modifications represented by some idea, given divine omniscience (2p3, 2p7c). Now if all Spinozistic ideas are individuated by what they represent, then infinitely many other metaphysically possible ideas – all ideas that are essentially of something neither mental nor extended – will be unintelligible for the same reason, namely insofar as knowing their essences would require us to appeal to something non-mental to explain a mental thing, in contravention of the fundamental principle of intelligibility enshrined in the barrier doctrine, on its usual reading. So, stated in full generality, the interpretative problem we are now faced with is that on the Standard Reading of the barrier doctrine, Spinoza's views about what is necessary to secure intelligibility (disallowing any explanatory flows across attributes) appear to be at odds with what he takes to be necessary for understanding ideas (understanding their intentional objects).

<sup>21</sup>Not the only aim: “blessedness” of the mind is another (2pref).

<sup>22</sup>E.g. Matson (1971:577), Aquila (1978:275).

<sup>23</sup>I'm grateful to John Morrison for discussion of this point.

<sup>24</sup>In Hübner (2019), I argued that we can block the apparent inconsistency between Spinoza's commitment to a barrier and his account of the human mind by understanding the “body” that is the essential intentional object of the human mind as an *immanent, intramental* object. One can think of the present article as a companion piece, one that attacks the other horn of the dilemma. In light of the textual evidence offered in the last section of the paper, the present solution also strikes me as preferable.

In the remainder of this paper I want to propose a way out of this interpretive dilemma. I will argue that the reason Spinoza's various epistemological commitments – to a barrier doctrine, to universal intelligibility, to the existence of ideas essentially of nonmental things – appear to be inconsistent is that, in interpreting the barrier doctrine along the lines of the Standard Reading, we *misinterpret* that doctrine, and with it the apriori constraints on what can count as intelligible for Spinoza. Once the doctrine is understood correctly, the apparent contradictions disappear.

### 3 | THE BARRIER AND CONCEPTUAL RELATIONS

Let me start, in this section, with some preliminary clarifications about the meaning of the barrier doctrine — clarifications that, in principle at least, should be amenable also to proponents of the Standard Reading.

So what claim exactly are we ascribing to Spinoza when we talk of his ‘attribute-barrier’ doctrine? The proposition that is the doctrine’s locus classicus is brief: “Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself [*per se concipi debet*]” (1p10). The demonstration of this proposition is equally succinct: it simply refers us to the definitions of attribute and substance. Spinoza seems to be reasoning as follows. An attribute is essentially how “intellect” veridically<sup>25</sup> apprehends the essence of substance (),<sup>26</sup> i.e. the essence of what is ontologically and explanatorily fundamental (1def3). But, an essential feature of substance is that it is “conceived through itself” (1def3). That is, at a first pass, substance is in some sense essentially explanatorily or conceptually self-sufficient. Hence, any veridical conception of what substance is essentially must reflect this conceptual self-sufficiency.

But what exactly does it mean to be conceptually self-sufficient, or, in Spinoza’s terminology, conceived per se? Passages where Spinoza glosses this and related phrases (1def3, 1p2, 1a5, Ep64)<sup>27</sup> indicate that the following holds true of something conceived per se: (1) it cannot be “understood [*intelligere*]” or “conceived through another [*alterius*]” thing, nor “inferred [*concludere*]” or “conceived from” it; (2) it has “nothing in common with it [*nihil inter se commune habere*]”; (3) to “form its concept”, no concept of another thing is “required [*indigere*]”; and, finally, (4) its concept does not “involve [*involvere*]”, i.e. imply,<sup>28</sup> the concept of another thing. Together these glosses suggest that per se conception has to do with the possibility of *relations between concepts*, and, in particular, relations of *dependence* between concepts. So, first of all, decreeing something to be “conceived per se” is a move in a game of determining which concepts are necessary for forming which other concepts; which concepts imply which other ones; which, finally, cannot be intelligibly related at all.

<sup>25</sup>The identification of “intellect” and veridical thought is suggested collectively by 2p41, 1p15s[v] (II/59), 1app (II/82).

<sup>26</sup>In omitting the definition’s mention of the “constitution” of substantial essence my formulation simplifies Spinoza’s definition of attribute, but I think this omission does not matter for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>27</sup>“By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (1def3), “Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another. *Dem.*: This also evident from [1]d3. For each must be in itself and be conceived through itself, *or* [*sive*] the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other”(1p2); “Things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another, *or* the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other” (1a5); “from these two attributes, or their modifications, no other attribute of God can (*Ethics*, 1p10) be inferred or conceived” (Ep64).

<sup>28</sup>See e.g. Gabbey (2008). See also Garrett (1991), Hübner (2015-a) on problems with modeling inferential relations in Spinoza’s framework on standard models of implication.



In the next, second, Part of the *Ethics* we learn furthermore that the concepts at issue in per se conception of the attributes<sup>29</sup> are, more specifically, concepts of *qualitative kinds*, paradigmatically concepts such as THOUGHT and EXTENSION. This means that it is a difference in qualitative kind (the difference, for example, between being a *thinking* substance and an *extended* substance) and not, for example, numerical or modal difference that Spinoza has in mind with when describing things as “other” or different in the context of per se conception in the above passages.<sup>30</sup> And since, qualitatively, we only know substance as a *res cogitans* and a *res extensa* (2p1-2), of all the different concepts of physical and mental qualities which we are capable of forming, only THOUGHT and EXTENSION (but not, for example, MOTION or AFFIRMATION) have the sort of self-sufficiency that is necessary for conceiving adequately of substantial essence.

Although the barrier doctrine is first articulated, in 1p10, with respect to substance, derivatively it also governs our qualitative conceptions of non-substantial, essentially dependent things, i.e. “modes”. This is the ontological category into which Spinoza puts all particular ideas, motions, finite minds and bodies, which for Spinoza are just ways that the one substance necessarily modifies itself. Applied at this ontological level, the barrier doctrine stipulates that any conception of a mode as a mental or physical thing will necessarily “involve”, i.e. imply, the relevant attribute-concept, to the exclusion of all other attribute-concepts. Or, as Spinoza puts it,

each attribute is conceived through itself without any other [*per se absque alio*] (by 1p10). So [*Quare*] the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one. (2p6d)

Thus, “there belongs to God [i.e. substance] an attribute whose concept all singular thoughts involve, and through which they are also conceived” (2p1d); likewise, “all bodies agree [*conveniunt*] in that they involve the concept of one and the same attribute” (2L2d). Of course it remains possible to think of modes in abstraction from such attribute-specific concepts (for example, precisely simply as a “mode”).

At this point, to get a better grip on Spinoza’s picture here it will be illuminating to bring in Descartes’s account of “principal attributes”. For, despite all the disagreements between the two thinkers (not least about the possibility of multiple finite substances with the same attribute), Spinoza’s understanding of the conceptual self-sufficiency of attributes owes a great deal to Descartes’s. Like Spinoza, Descartes thinks that we can identify the essential qualitative nature of a substance through two concepts: THOUGHT and EXTENSION. Spinoza also borrows from Descartes’s theory of distinctions to characterize attributes as “really distinct”, such that “one may be conceived without the aid of the other” (1p10s).<sup>31</sup> Descartes, similarly, describes his “really distinct” single-principal-attribute substances as “clearly and distinctly understand one apart from [*absque*] the other” (*Principles*

<sup>29</sup>I specify ‘attributes’ here since any adequate conception of *substance* will also be per se. So for example, conceptions of substance’s absolute infinity and existence (eternity) must also be per se conceptions, although these are not conceptions of an attribute.

<sup>30</sup>This allows us to see why the objection that attributes *do* after all have something “in common” (since each is an attribute, a conception of substantial essence, etc) would be misguided. This objection misses the fact that in the context of per se conception and 1p10 Spinoza is interested in a specific kind of “commonality”: attribute-relative or attribute-specific commonality. (Cf. 1p2: “Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another”.)

<sup>31</sup>Descartes’s theory of distinctions builds of course on very rich medieval theories.

On the influence of Descartes’s real distinction on Spinoza see e.g. Nelson (2014). For a reading of Spinozistic attributes as substances see Gueroult (1968).

of *Philosophy* 1.60, AT 8a.28).<sup>32</sup> Although THOUGHT and EXTENSION are neither contrary nor contradictory predicates, nonetheless, in Descartes's view, they are also not related such that one of these predicates presupposes, or could be inferred from, the other. For Descartes, such relations of presupposition and inference obtain only downstream from each concept: thus, everything that can be intelligibly ascribed to a thinking substance (particular ideas, doubts, volitions, and so on) "presupposes [*praesupponit*]" THOUGHT for its intelligibility, and is not "intelligible" except "in" a thinking substance (*Principles* 1.53, AT 8a.25). *Mutatis mutandis* for what can be ascribed to an extended substance (such as motions, shapes, or sizes): such properties, and the predicates that describe them, all "presuppose" EXTENSION for their intelligibility.

When Descartes talks here about what is "presupposed" for the "intelligibility" of certain less general concepts such as MOTION, I take at least part of his point to be that we cannot understand what it *means* to "move" unless we first understand a more explanatorily fundamental concept, namely what it means to be "extended". One way to think about the picture he is proposing here is that the two most general, further irreducible, concepts of qualitative kinds, THOUGHT and EXTENSION, make possible two mutually independent domains of concepts, linked together through semantic-dependence relations. The intelligibility of less fundamental and less general (non-abstract)<sup>33</sup> concepts, such as MOTION, as having a certain meaning, presupposes the existence and intelligibility of more general, presuppositionless concepts – concepts of "principal attributes", such as EXTENSION.

I propose that we understand Spinoza's barrier doctrine precisely in these Cartesian terms – that is, in terms of mutually exclusive, incommensurate domains of qualitative concepts, consisting of hierarchies of semantic-dependence relations. The different conceptual domains are "really distinct" insofar as the concepts that fundamentally "involve", say, EXTENSION, have the meanings they do independently of how concepts that imply THOUGHT get their meaning. In short, I take the basic thrust of Spinoza's barrier-doctrine to be this regimentation of possible relations between qualitative conceptions of reality, introducing an irreducible diversity, and a principle of semantic isolation, into our thinking.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Descartes, however, Spinoza does not want to say merely that, say, VOLITION and MOTION presuppose different attribute-concepts. His criticism of Descartes's interactionist account of the mind-body union as unintelligible suggests that in his view it is not just *concepts* that presuppose other concepts for their intelligibility. Rather, for Spinoza, *relations* between concepts also have conditions of intelligibility: namely, any genuinely possible conceptual relation requires the existence of a single non-abstract qualitative concept under which all its *relata* could fall. In a slogan, no relation without a concept: no *comparatio* without a *ratio* (5pref). To give a not-quite-Spinozistic example, a REPRESENTATION of something can explain its consequent AFFIRMATION by the will because both REPRESENTATION and AFFIRMATION are ultimately understandable through THOUGHT.<sup>35</sup> But VOLITION cannot be related to MOVEMENT

<sup>32</sup>Unlike Descartes, Spinoza thinks that the "real distinction" between attributes is *merely* qualitative, and does not suffice to establish also a *numerical* distinction between substances (1p10s); so, for Spinoza, all attribute-concepts apply to a single substance, and it is the attributes, not substances, that are really distinct.

<sup>33</sup>By "abstract" qualitative concepts I mean concepts not inferred from any particular attribute-concept, for example, concepts like "real".

<sup>34</sup>Likewise, I suggest, when Spinoza says that an attribute is how "intellect" apprehends substance (1def4), a key part of what he has in mind is precisely apprehension through *concepts*. For another interpretation see e.g. Shein (2009).

<sup>35</sup>The example is not Spinozistic because Spinoza treats representation and affirmation as equally intrinsic to particular ideas and would presumably deny that one preceded the other (2p48-9).

because, on the understanding of mental and physical concepts shared by Descartes and Spinoza, no qualitative, non-abstract concept is presupposed by *both* MOVEMENT and VOLITION. So, from Spinoza's perspective, Descartes's account of the mind-body union fails because when we try to understand something physical like a motion of the limbs through something mental like an occurrent thought, such an attempt cannot produce genuine "understanding". Instead, we hit a wall of unintelligibility, a confusion of inadequate ideas, produce little more than a hodgepodge of words.

One may already find lots of reasons to disagree with Spinoza's account of concepts. For example, one might disagree generally with his conclusion that qualitative concepts can be sorted into mutually exclusive domains; or more specifically with his analyses of particular concepts; or again with the claim that, because MOTION and VOLITION derive their individual meanings from different concepts, things they describe cannot have explanatory bearing on one another.

I leave all such worries aside here, for what interests me in this paper is more simply how the barrier doctrine bears on the question of the internal consistency of Spinoza's epistemology. As we saw earlier, his adoption of that doctrine seemed inconsistent with his own account of the essential constitution of the human mind, and, more generally, with his implied commitment to the intelligibility of all metaphysically possible ideas. If my explanation of the reasoning behind Spinoza's criticism of Descartes's account of the mind-body union barrier is right, then it seems to be all the more pressing to understand why Spinoza's own account of the human mind's essential explanatory relation to an actually existing body is not open to the same sort of criticism of crossing attribute-domains, without the benefit of a shared concept.

#### 4 | THE BARRIER AND ATTRIBUTE-MODE RELATIONS

The account of Spinoza's barrier doctrine offered in the previous section was offered in the spirit of clarification: it is an account that, in principle at least, proponents of the Standard Reading of the doctrine should also be able to take on board. So Bennett is correct, in my estimation, that Spinoza's doctrine aims at "ruling out" an "explanatory flow" between the mental and physical, and Della Rocca that it is a matter of "conceptual or explanatory" "independence". In this final section of the paper, however, I want to add a further element to my account of Spinoza's barrier doctrine, one that will be *incompatible* with its Standard Reading.

Here is how the two readings part ways. It seems to me that the Standard Reading of the barrier (and indeed most accounts of Spinoza's philosophy) get wrong how Spinoza thinks about the relation between the attributes and *ideas*. More precisely, it seems to me that it is *not* part of Spinoza's attribute-barrier doctrine that every idea must be explained, as the Standard Reading holds, through the attribute of thought *alone*. That is, it seems to me that it is not Spinoza's view that (to quote Della Rocca) "the fact that there is an idea of a particular object is to be explained completely in mental terms and not in terms of any other attribute". Rather, I suggest, depending on the representational content of an idea, *concepts belonging to more than one attribute may be required to make that idea intelligible*. In particular, concepts derived from *both* THOUGHT and EXTENSION will be necessary to make any idea essentially of a body intelligible, insofar as concepts that ultimately imply, and depend on, EXTENSION will be necessary to make intelligible the representational contents of such ideas, and thus what makes them *those* ideas specifically.

In line with my exposition of Spinoza's barrier doctrine as, fundamentally, a doctrine governing relations between concepts, my proposal concerns solely the legitimacy of using *concepts* such as BODY to understand the representational contents of certain ideas. So the claim is *not* that we must

appeal to some actually existing body in nature to understand an idea of that body, as on causal theories of representation. That is, I'm *not* proposing that some actual extended existent does the work of individuation of ideas in Spinoza's philosophy. The claim is rather that, in the case of ideas essentially of bodies, the representational contents of those ideas, responsible for their individuation, can be made intelligible only by *concepts* derived from EXTENSION.

The account I am proposing draws our attention to the fact that for Spinoza, any idea is analyzable into two conceptually distinct components. First of all, all ideas are *acts* of thinking. That is, to use Spinoza's Scholastic terminology, they have a certain "formal" reality.<sup>36</sup> But, secondly, all ideas also have a certain representational content, i.e. they manifest a certain "objective" reality. My suggestion is that in the case of any idea of something extended each of these two components will require a different family of concepts in order to be made fully intelligible. What is formally real about such an idea – the fact that it is an act of thinking or a modification of a thinking thing – is something that we can make intelligible with the help of qualitative concepts derived from THOUGHT (concepts such as AFFIRMATION), and no other attribute-concept. But the fact that the idea in question is *of* a body, i.e. that its representational content *is* an objectively-real body, is something that, I suggest, can be made intelligible only by appealing to qualitative concepts derived from EXTENSION (concepts such as, precisely, BODY), and no other attribute-concept.

So, on this reading, to give a *complete* account of any idea of something physical – that is, an account both of its representational content *and* its act-nature – it will be necessary to draw on the concepts of *both* attributes. Conversely, concepts that "presuppose" EXTENSION will apply equally to formally-real bodies in nature and to certain purely mental objects, that is, to objectively-real bodies, or bodies-as-represented. On my reading, both ways of being, or of having reality, as a body require EXTENSION to be made intelligible. And if we now also take into account the "infinity" of attributes that Spinoza allows in his metaphysics (1def6), we can give the above proposal its most general formulation: to make intelligible the representational contents of all metaphysically possible Spinozistic ideas, we will have to draw on concepts of *every* attribute. Furthermore, for any attribute A, understanding both formally-real A-instances and ideas of A-instances will require us to draw on the very same concept-"involvements".

On the reading being proposed, there is still an conceptual and thus explanatory 'barrier' between the attributes insofar as there are irreducibly distinct domains of conceptual dependencies: formally-real motions still cannot be explained by THOUGHT, and THOUGHT still cannot be derived from EXTENSION. But, to build on the spatial metaphor of a 'barrier', I'm proposing that we shift where we draw the dividing line: ideas of bodies no longer lie exclusively on the thought-side of the barrier, in the domain of what is made intelligible by THOUGHT-derived concepts, as on the Standard Reading. Rather, Spinoza's barrier now runs *through* such modes, grouping, on the side of what is made intelligible by EXTENSION-involving concepts, both formally- and objectively-real bodies.<sup>37</sup>

This is my non-standard reading of Spinoza's barrier in a nutshell. What I want to offer in the remainder of the paper is some reasons to subscribe to this reading. I hope to show that this non-standard account 1) is better grounded textually, 2) allows Spinoza to have a more consistent theory of ideas, 3)

<sup>36</sup>See e.g., 2p5-7, 2p15, TIE[33-36].

On this distinction, in Spinoza's predecessors, see e.g. Brown (2007), Kaufman (2000), King (2006), Nadler (1989), Normore (1986); in Spinoza, see e.g. Aquila (1978), Carriero (2011:77), (2016), Garrett (2008), (2017a), Gueroult (1974), Hübner (2019), Jarrett (1982), pp. 168, Nadler (2006:124-25).

<sup>37</sup>Does adopting this new reading of the barrier in place of the Standard Reading change what *causal* relations are possible in Spinoza's framework? No, since, plausibly, things can enter into causal relations only qua *formally*-real.

better meets his demand for universal intelligibility, and, finally, 4) is philosophically more compelling as an account of thought insofar as thought is, plausibly, essentially intentional.

I will start making my case for the new reading by pointing to a benefit of that reading that by now is probably obvious to the reader, namely the resulting greater coherence of Spinoza's epistemology and philosophy of mind.

Recall the specific threat to that coherence which had set off our search for alternatives to the Standard Reading of Spinoza's barrier in the first place: on that reading, Spinoza apriori uniformly bans all EXTENSION-involving concepts from explanations of thinking things: no concept like MOTION or BODY can do anything to illuminate thinking or mindedness. But, this ban seems to be simply violated by Spinoza's own account of the essential constitution of the human mind, on which, as we have seen, we must know about human bodies in order to understand human minds. Furthermore, as we also saw, the problem easily generalizes, since violating the barrier on its Standard Reading seems equally necessary in order to make intelligible any of the infinitely many ideas of non-mental objects permitted by Spinoza's metaphysics. All such ideas, on Spinoza's view, are individuated as distinct ideas only by reference to those objects. And, presumably, making some thing intelligible minimally requires grasping it as a thing distinct from other things, and, ideally, requires grasping its essence.

This apparent inconsistency of Spinoza's theory of ideas vanishes if we reinterpret the barrier doctrine along the lines now being proposed. For on that reading, the barrier doctrine specifies that, although any idea in its *formal* reality – as an act or modification of a thinking thing – can be made intelligible only by reference to THOUGHT-involving concepts, any idea of something non-mental, such as the human mind, will be made intelligible in its objective reality or representational content by non-THOUGHT-involving concepts. (Again, my proposal bears on the legitimate – intelligible – scope of application of Spinozistic concepts: it is *not* meant to suggest that some actually existing body in nature does the work of individuating human minds for Spinoza.) On my reading, in claiming that the essence of the human mind is constituted by an idea of an actually existing body, Spinoza is making a claim about the essential objective reality of that idea, using EXTENSION and its derivatives to understand what this idea is of, not to understand its formal reality or act-nature. And while this violates the Standard Reading of the barrier, saddling Spinoza with contradiction, it is entirely consistent with the new reading of the doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

So understood, Spinoza's commitment to an attribute barrier is no longer at odds with his account of the human mind in the *Ethics*. Nor, more generally, is his commitment to a barrier at odds with the underlying more general position on explanation that I have ascribed to him, namely the view that to understand *any* idea essentially of something non-mental as that particular idea we must understand its non-mental essential intentional object.

<sup>38</sup>Here is a possible objection. If the essence of a thing is that without which this thing can neither nor be conceived (2def2), and if the human mind's essence is an idea of a body, then also the *existence* of the human mind as a *formally-real* thing requires its essence and so can only be explained by appealing to EXTENSION. But this seems to violate the barrier doctrine even on the new reading of it.

Here is one way to answer this objection. For Spinoza, the essence of a human mind is just a certain idea (of a complex, actually existing body). As an *idea*, this essence itself can be conceived either as an act of thinking or as a certain representational content. Since we are dealing with an idea of a body, its formal reality is made intelligible through different concepts (through thought-specific concepts) than its objective reality (through extension-specific concepts). The objection then fails because the (reinterpreted, non-Standard) attribute barrier is in fact preserved: the mind's essence *qua formally real act* allows us to conceive, through mental concepts, the existence of the mind as *formally real* (the existence of a certain complex act of affirmation); the mind's essence *qua content* allows us conceive, through extension-specific concepts, of this mind as a distinct particular.



A second reason to prefer my new interpretation of the barrier over the Standard one is textual. I'll start with the best kind of textual evidence an interpreter could wish for: a passage that simply explicitly asserts the point one wants to make. Consider this passage from a late letter in which Spinoza elaborates on his account of the human mind in the *Ethics*:

the essence of the mind (*Ethics*, 2p12) consists solely in this, that it is the idea of body actually existing... [T]his idea of body does not involve or express any of God's attributes, save extension and thought. For its object [*ideatum*], namely, body (*Ethics*, 2p6), has God for its cause insofar as he is regarded under the attribute of extension... therefore (*Ethics*, 1a4) this idea of the body involves cognition of God, only insofar as He is regarded under the attribute of extension. ... It is therefore plain, that the human mind, or the idea of the human body, neither involves nor expresses any attributes of God save these two. (Ep64, transl. alt.)

Contrary to the conclusions of those readers who charge Spinoza with inconsistency, the letter confirms that Spinoza himself sees no contradiction in identifying the human mind's essence with an idea of a body on the one hand, and endorsing attribute-relative restrictions on explanation (according to which only certain ideas can intelligibly "involve" other ideas) on the other. These two doctrines appear side by side in the above passage. More importantly, the letter unequivocally states – twice – that the human mind "involves" *both* attributes (thus, "this idea of body does not involve or express any of God's attributes, save extension and thought").<sup>39</sup> As we know from §3, a Spinozistic concept "involves" the concepts it presupposes for its intelligibility. So, according to the above letter, the idea that is the essence of the human mind is to be understood through *two* attributes, both extension and thought. Two irreducible attribute-concepts, and two different conceptual domains are required to make the human mind intelligible. While this passage quite explicitly confirms my reading of the attribute barrier, it is inconsistent with its Standard Reading.

Let me move on to a different kind of textual evidence, one that has the advantage of being found in Spinoza's magnum opus, the *Ethics*, rather than in a letter, but also the disadvantage of being merely suggestive rather than explicit.

The evidence comes from the same passages in which Spinoza first explains how 1p10 (which, as we have seen, governs possible conceptions of what is ontologically fundamental) derivatively applies to essentially dependent entities such as minds and bodies. What I want to draw our attention to is the fact that in these very passages Spinoza explicitly links being a mode of thought, and "involving" the attribute-concept THOUGHT, *solely* to the *formal* reality, or act-nature, of ideas, just as my reading above proposes:

The formal being of ideas is a mode of thinking [*Esse formale idearum modus est cogitandi*] (as is known through itself), i.e. (by 1p25c), a mode that expresses, in a certain way, God's nature insofar as he is a thinking thing. And so (by 1p10) it involves the concept of no other attribute of God (2p5d)

When I said [NS: before] that God is the cause of the idea, say of a circle, only insofar as he is a thinking thing... this was for no other reason than because the formal being of the idea of the circle can be perceived only through another mode of thinking [*esse formale*

<sup>39</sup>On "expression" as a relation of representation, see Garrett (2009).



*ideae circuli non nisi per alium cogitandi modum...potest percipi*], as its proximate cause (2p7s)

According to these passages, ideas in their act-nature are to be explained through concepts derived from THOUGHT alone (hence, the “formal being of ideas is a mode of thinking” and “involves the concept of no other attribute”).<sup>40</sup> That is, as long as ideas are considered as acts or modifications of a thinking thing, so as more-or-less complex affirmations and negations, we must conceive of them through concepts that “involve” THOUGHT alone. So far all this is of course consistent also with the Standard Reading of the barrier. However, I want to suggest that by repeatedly and explicitly singling out the *formal* reality of ideas as what must be understood through THOUGHT, the above passages at least open up the possibility that, when we attend not to the formal reality of ideas, but instead to their representational contents, or to their “relation to the object” (2p21s), ideas can be understood through concepts *other* than those derived from THOUGHT. In short, the passages that constitute Spinoza’s primary discussion of how the barrier governs our conceptions of modes in the *Ethics* clearly at the very least leave open the possibility that the “objective being of ideas” involves and can be “perceived through” attribute concepts other than THOUGHT.

Consider also the following. Above I noted that on the reading being proposed, a *complete* account of any idea of something physical – that is, an account of both its representational content and its act-nature – will require us to draw on concepts of two attributes. This claim is again at least consistent with the fact that Spinoza describes the human mind *twice* in the *Ethics*, separating out these two perspectives. First, in 2p13, he gives an account of human mind’s essence, characterizing it in terms of what it essentially represents, and so in terms of concepts involving EXTENSION: “The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body”. Second, in 2p15, he characterizes the human mind in terms of what it is in its formal reality, with concepts derived from THOUGHT: “The idea that constitutes the formal being [*esse formale*] of the human Mind is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas”.

Here is one final textual consideration: there are other cases in the *Ethics* of multiple attributes contributing to the complete conception of a thing. Take the concept of “appetite”: appetite is striving considered under *both* thought and extension (3p9s). My suggestion is that Spinoza’s complete concept of the human mind is, in this respect, very much like his concept of appetite: a *conjunction* of two kinds of descriptions, and two, “really distinct,” families of concepts.

My final argument in favor of the non-standard reading of the barrier doctrine is not a new consideration; rather it is meant to bring out more explicitly and systematically two advantages of that reading that have been in the background of some of the foregoing discussion. Namely it seems to me that the new reading is better than the Standard one at satisfying Spinoza’s own demand for universal intelligibility, and at offering a compelling account of what it might mean to understand an idea, given that ideas are, plausibly, essentially intentional.

One does not have to commit to the existence of an infinite number of attributes to agree that potential intentional objects are not limited to other ideas: that is, not all our ideas, plausibly not even the majority of them, are *about* other ideas. If we now grant Spinoza his commitment to universal intelligibility, we can ask, What must be true about explanatory relations for all possible ideas to be capable of being made intelligible? To take a concrete example, what would it take for my idea, say, of *this cat on this mat* to be made intelligible?

<sup>40</sup>This phrasing (the “formal being of ideas is a mode of thinking”) suggests that we could see ideas of bodies as modes *both* of thought and extension.

A plausible answer, and one permitted by the new reading of the barrier but not by its Standard Reading, is that to understand *that* particular idea, not only completely, nor in its essence, but simply as *distinct* from other ideas, we must appeal to concepts such as CAT, MAT, etc, that is to concepts that, for Spinoza, “presuppose” EXTENSION. It seems to me that in Spinoza’s epistemological framework there is simply no way to understand an idea essentially of some body, such as my idea of *the cat on the mat*, other than through concepts derived from EXTENSION: there seems to be no other way to conceive of the essential intentional objects of such ideas, the cats-on-mats that do the work of individuating these ideas. To propose that, as the Standard Reading demands, we could somehow redescribe these objects in terms of THOUGHT-involving concepts is to suggest that there is, after all (to use Bennett’s phrase) an “explanatory flow” between THOUGHT and EXTENSION, and that physical things *can* be reduced to, and explained as, mental things. It would in short be to violate the barrier, on both the Standard and non-standard reading of it. Perhaps this is what leads Spinoza to say in 2p13 that “no one [*nemo*]” (and not for example, only the most prejudiced of his readers) can understand human minds without first understanding human bodies.

In other words, it seems to me that, in the case of ideas essentially of non-mental things, concepts that presuppose THOUGHT are simply *insufficient* for making these ideas intelligible as the particular ideas they are, distinct from other ideas. THOUGHT-involving concepts alone won’t allow me to say that this idea is an idea of a cat rather than (say) of a tree. To be sure, an account of the act-nature of an idea essentially of something physical, and so an account articulated in terms of THOUGHT-involving concepts alone, does give us *some* true conception of this idea. We will be able to understand, for example, that this idea is a more-or-less complex bundle of affirmations or negations, and that it enters into causal relations with a certain number of other, more-or-less complex modes of thought. But we will not be able to conceive of that idea’s essence, nor will we be able, in every case, to distinguish this idea from all other ideas, given that presumably very many ideas will share the same degree of formal complexity and the same numbers of causes and effects.<sup>41</sup> So, if in trying to understand ideas essentially of bodies we restrict ourselves to drawing solely on concepts involving THOUGHT (as the Standard Reading requires), we will not be in the position to understand anything about such ideas other than their formally-real properties.<sup>42</sup>

It is only such impoverished and incomplete explanations of ideas of non-mental things that are permitted under the Standard Reading. If we adopt that reading, then what ideas of non-mental things essentially represent, and hence these ideas themselves as distinct particulars, must remain in principle – for any thinking thing operating with concepts – inexplicable.

Such a result, it seems to me, is in profound tension with Spinoza’s commitment to universal intelligibility. Since in Spinoza’s framework intentional objects can belong to any one of the infinite attributes his metaphysics allows, if it is to be possible for all metaphysically possible ideas to be made

<sup>41</sup>Knowledge of formal reality alone would exceptionally allow me to distinguish the idea of God from all other ideas, since on Spinoza’s account the idea of God uniquely produces all other ideas (1p16).

<sup>42</sup>In the case of ideas of *ideas*, concepts derived from THOUGHT will be sufficient for a complete explanation of the ideas in question. Both the new reading I’m proposing and the Standard Reading generate this result, but they justify it on very different grounds. On the Standard Reading, explanation of any idea, *regardless of its content*, can draw only on concepts that depend on THOUGHT is just what the barrier requires as a principle of explanation; on my reading, in contrast, it is because of what the intelligibility of the idea’s content requires that we do not have to appeal to any concepts other than those that presuppose THOUGHT.

intelligible, then it must also be possible for such explanations to draw on all possible concept-“involvements” – all possible qualitative concepts that an infinite or unlimited intellect is capable of forming.

Contrary then to worries one might have had about the *unintelligibility* of any account that violates the barrier on its Standard Reading, we can now see that allowing appeals to EXTENSION-involving concepts to explain ideas is plausibly *demand*ed by considerations of intelligibility. That is, it is demanded by the same sort of considerations that had led Spinoza, in his rejection of Descartes’s picture of the mind-body union, to rule out the possibility of a relation between my (formally-real) volition and a (formally-real) motion of my foot in the first place.

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