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Spinoza's Really Confused Ideas

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Abstract
Spinoza's epistemology aims at the development of 'adequate' and the removal of 'confused' ideas. His theory of confusion raises many questions, however. It has often been thought that the confusion of an idea is mind-relative, such that an idea might be confused in my mind but adequate in God's. In this paper I argue that confusion cannot be mind-relative, because an idea's confusion is determined by what it represents and for Spinoza, ideas are individuated by their representational content. Instead, I propose that although it is possible to consider one and the same idea both adequately and confusedly, what such acts of considering pick up on are mind-independent features of ideas.

Keywords: representation, representational content, ideas, confusion, adequacy

1. Introduction

It is often said that for Spinoza, various features of ideas are 'mind-relative.' Both the *content* and the *confusion* of ideas are said to be mind-relative: in other words, one and the same idea can have one content, that is not confused, in God's mind[1] and a different content, that *is* confused, in a human mind. The most extensive defense of this view to date remains that of Michael Della Rocca,[2] but it has been widely accepted by other scholars as well. For example, Don Garrett has agreed with Della Rocca that

1 The term 'mind-relativity' implies that God has a mind, and I will refer to God's mind accordingly for convenience. However, it is controversial whether Spinoza thinks that God has a mind. He does not explicitly refer to God's mind but speaks of ideas 'in God's intellect' or simply 'in God'. I will speak indifferently of God's intellect and mind.

2 Michael Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chs. 3–6.

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> the truth, adequacy, and representational content of an idea can be partly determined for Spinoza by what other ideas are in the same mind with it, so that the same idea can be true and adequate in God while being at the same time false and inadequate in a human mind, distinctly representing its object in God while confusedly representing many things in a human mind.[3]

This view is supported by two main lines of argument. First, it is taken to be implied by what Spinoza himself says about ideas, knowledge and perception. Take the virtually incontestable facts that Spinoza believes (1) that the human mind is an idea in God's mind, as a result of which every idea in a human mind is an idea in God's mind (E2p13); (2) that humans have many confused ideas; and (3) that all ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are adequate (E2p36d).[4] From this it already appears to follow that one and the same idea can be confused in my mind but adequate in God's. Additionally, the way Spinoza explains sense perception—to be discussed below—suggests that ideas in my mind represent something different from what they do in God's mind.

Second, the relatively little that Spinoza has to say about adequate and confused ideas seems to support the mind-relativity of confusion. Spinoza is notoriously unclear on what confusion consists in. It is clearly related to the non-veridicality and inadequacy of ideas—such that an idea is confused iff it is non-veridical iff it is inadequate[5]—but Spinoza never provides a definition of confusion. However, he describes confused ideas as being like "conclusions without premises" (E2p28d/G II 113) and says that the human mind has an inadequate idea when God has the idea "not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind" (E2p11c/G II 95; see Della Rocca, *Representation*, 54). Plausibly, the point of this passage is that what goes wrong with inadequate ideas is that humans lack adequate ideas of their causes, because these are literally not part of their minds. Della Rocca calls this the "causal requirement" on adequate representation (ibid., 70–1). Since all ideas are in God, he does not form inadequate ideas. So it seems that one and the same idea can be confused in my mind and

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3 Don Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination," in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles Huenemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16. It is not always clear which authors accept the view, because it appears to often be accepted or assumed as a matter of course. But those who do subscribe to it include Michael LeBuffe (*From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55) and Karolina Hübner ("Representation and Mind-Body Identity in Spinoza's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60, no. 1 (2022): 66). For discussion, see Diane Steinberg, "Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

4 Spinoza's works are cited in Curley's translation (Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. E. M. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016).

5 See Della Rocca, *Representation*, 109, although unlike him, I claim a coextension of 'non-veridical' instead of 'false' ideas. I avoid the latter term because Spinoza identifies falsity with a "privation" involved in inadequate ideas (E2p35/G II 116). To LeBuffe, *From Bondage*, 79–81, and Justin Steinberg, "Two Puzzles Concerning Spinoza's Conception of Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 63—and compare Della Rocca, *Representation*, 116–117—this shows that not all inadequate ideas are necessarily false for Spinoza; they are false only if the mind lacks the knowledge required to correct the inadequate idea. If so, falsity in this sense is mind-relative for Spinoza, because it depends on the presence in a particular mind of ideas capable of correcting the confused idea. However, I think that it remains true that confused ideas are coextensive with what Steinberg also calls "non-veridical" ideas, i.e., ideas that do not agree with their objects (cf. E1a6).

adequate in God's, because the idea's confusion or adequacy in a mind is relative to what other adequate ideas are in that mind. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Spinoza seems to employ relational concepts of confusion, truth, and adequacy when he writes that ideas are confused "insofar as they are related [*referuntur*] only to the human mind" (E2p28/G II 113) or that they are true and adequate "insofar as they are related to God" (E2p36d/G II 118).

In spite of this seemingly impressive textual support, this paper argues against the view that content and confusion are mind-relative for Spinoza. It puts forward a realist understanding of content and confusion. The content of an idea, on this view, is intrinsic to it and does not change depending on what mind it is in. Meanwhile, the idea's confusion or adequacy *is* relative, but in a different sense than on the mind-relative reading, and such that confusion and adequacy are nevertheless determined by the idea's content. Different minds can take different epistemic perspectives on the same idea, and in this way end up with more or less confused representations, but what any such perspective reveals is nevertheless a mind-independent (though relational) property of the idea itself. I will argue that this interpretation is preferable to the mind-relativity view on both conceptual and textual grounds.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces Spinoza's theory of perception, which will help produce a clearer sense of how confused ideas occur according to him and which of his specific doctrines appear to support the mind-relativity of content. Then, in section 3, I argue that representational content for Spinoza is not mind-relative. Section 4 presents an alternative interpretation of the passages that seem to support mind-relativity by appealing to the notion of epistemic perspectives. Section 5 goes on to argue that confusion is not mind-relative for Spinoza.

2. A Sketch of Spinoza's Theory of Perception

For Spinoza, all ideas that are formed on the basis of affection by external bodies are confused. These are all cases of what Spinoza calls "imagination" in his technical sense, where to imagine a thing means to think about it on the basis of a (physical) "image" that this thing has left behind in one's body (E2p17s). Spinoza takes imagination to encompass any mental process based on such images, including sense perception (E2p16), memory (E2p18s), and the passions (E3def3). To simplify the discussion, however, I will mostly restrict myself to sense perception.

In a nutshell, Spinoza's theory of perception is as follows. The mind is the idea that represents the current total state of the body (E2p13). When anything changes in the body, therefore, this is perceived by the mind (E2p12).[6] Sense perception is an instance of this process: external bodies

6 Spinoza's theory raises major issues related to the extent of consciousness in the mind. It is implausible to say that the mind is conscious of any change in the body (for a forceful statement of this objection, see Margaret Wilson, "Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds': Comments on Spinoza's Theory of Mind," in *Ideas and Mechanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); see Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness" for a response). This question has motivated much of the recent literature on Spinoza's theory of consciousness: besides Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness," see Steven Nadler, "Spinoza and Consciousness," *Mind* 117, no. 467 (2008): 575–601; Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 2008), 108–118; Michael LeBuffe, "Theories about Consciousness in Spinoza's Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 4 (2010): 531–563; Eugene Marshall, *The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza's Science of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104–140; Jon Miller, "The Status of

causally impact our sense organs, generating a physical response in the body. The mind perceives external bodies by forming ideas of the physical "traces"—as Spinoza sometimes calls them (E2post5, E3post2)—left by them. Spinoza clearly thinks that the body, as a result of the physiology of the senses, is capable of responding particularly discriminatively to certain (types of) external stimuli.[7] To use an example drawn from modern science, the body can distinguish minor variations in light along a certain band of wavelengths, but no variations outside of them.

For Spinoza, then, perception is directly the perception of certain physical images in the body or (presumably) the brain, and only indirectly the perception of external bodies.[8] As he puts it, the latter are perceived only to the extent that they are "involved" in these images (E2p16). Spinoza writes that "to say that A must involve the concept of B is the same as to say that A cannot be conceived without B" (E2p49d/G II 130; see also E1def1, E1a5). In other words, A involves B iff conceiving B is necessary for conceiving A. Spinoza also holds that the cognition of an effect "depends on, and involves" the cognition of its cause (E1a4/G II 46). An image of an external body is partly caused by that body (it also partly depends on the body of the perceiver). As a result, the image involves the external body: it cannot be conceived without forming *some* idea of the external body, no matter how general.

Naturally, this process is subject to inevitable epistemic limitations. As I just said, Spinoza thinks that we can only represent external bodies to the extent that our own body is capable of being affected by them. He writes that "the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies." (E2p16c2/G II 104) For this reason, sense perception is subject to various cognitive illusions or distortions. There is a straightforward sense in which confused perceptions indicate the conditions of our own bodies more than that of external bodies. What we can perceive, and how we perceive it, obviously depends on the kinds of sensory organs we have. To continue the previous example, we cannot perceive ultraviolet light because our eyes are incapable of responding to light of that wavelength. Spinoza writes that all ideas formed "after the common order of nature"—this includes all ideas formed on the basis of affection—produce "only a confused and fragmentary knowledge" (E2p29c/G II 114).

The theory so far is mostly clear. Problems arise, however, when we consider the relation of confused perceptions to God's understanding. God can be called 'omniscient' in the sense that he has ideas of everything that exists (see E1p16, E2p7c). For Spinoza, the human mind is itself an

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Consciousness in Spinoza's Concept of Mind," in *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, eds. Sara Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmäki and Pauliina Remes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007); as well as Daniel Garber, "Spinoza's Non–Theory of Non–Consciousness," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2021). I will sidestep this issue here, simply noting that sense perception is a clear case where the mind does consciously perceive changes in the body.

7 For a short discussion of Spinoza's theory of consciousness that stresses the role of physiology, see Genevieve Lloyd, "Spinoza and the Problem of Consciousness," in *Consciousness and the Great Philosophers*, eds. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

8 On the distinction between direct and indirect representation, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 155–158, and Martin Lin, *Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 95–98, as well as below. Note that although these have sometimes been treated as two kinds of representation (e.g., Daisie Radner, "Spinoza's Theory of Ideas," *Philosophical Review* 80, no. 3 (1971): 338-359), I take Spinoza to operate with only one sense of representation. In this I follow Della Rocca (*Representation*, 49–53).

idea; hence, both the mind itself and all of its ideas are also ideas had by God. This raises two problems, as ideas seem to have two properties when related to God's mind that contradict their properties when related to human minds. First, all of God's ideas are adequate: Spinoza says that all ideas, when related to God, are not only true (E2p32) but also adequate (E2p36d). The result seems to be that one and the same idea can be adequate in God's mind but confused in mine. Secondly, it also seems as if God represents something different than I do when forming the same idea of the affection. My representation of the affection presents me with external objects, and accordingly is confused. If God's representation is adequate, then it seems he must have a direct representation of my body's affection, and *not* of the external bodies. But how is this possible? How can one idea represent one thing in one mind, and something else in another? The theory of the mind-relativity of content and confusion, to which I now turn, is an attempt to answer these questions.

3. Representational Content is Not Mind-relative

Suppose my body *b* undergoes an affection *a*, which is caused by an external body *c*. My mind forms an idea that represents *a*, I(*a*). (I use 'I(*x*)' to refer to the idea that has *x* for its object, whose representational content is the objective reality of *x*. More on this terminology in a moment.) According to the view that content is mind-relative, I(*a*) represents *a* non-confusedly in God's mind, while it represents *c* confusedly in my mind. In this section I want to argue that any such statement has to be understood very carefully and that even then, the terminology raises more problems than it answers.

According to the view that content is mind-relative, the content of one and the same idea can change depending on which mind it is related to. My objection is that ideas' content cannot be mind-relative, because ideas are individuated by their content (or, more precisely, by their *direct* content; the difference is explained below). I will first argue for this latter claim and then explain how it undermines the mind-relativity of content. My argument takes the following shape:

1. for Spinoza, things are individuated by their essences;
2. an idea's essence is constituted by its content;
3. therefore, ideas are individuated by their contents.

By saying that things are individuated by their essences for Spinoza, I mean that he holds that a thing's essence makes it the thing it is and not something else. Spinoza's definition of essence (E2def2/G II 84) implies that essences cannot be shared between individuals:

> I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [NS: also] taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.

This definition states that what "pertains to" a thing's essence is that which is both necessary and sufficient for both "positing" and/or "conceiving" the thing, and is also such that positing and/or

conceiving the thing is both necessary and sufficient for positing and/or conceiving the essence.[9] Given this definition, it is not possible for what pertains to an individual's essence to not be strictly individual *to* that essence; as Della Rocca puts it, essences are "unique" to individuals.[10] To see this, suppose that *p* pertains to the essences of the distinct individuals A and B. Then, positing or conceiving *p* is not sufficient to posit or conceive either A or B. But in that case, *p* violates E2def2. It must be the case, then, that essences of individuals are unique to that individual.[11]

Of course, there are typically many things that are either necessarily prior or necessarily posterior to individual essences. For example, Spinoza is clear that no mode can be conceived without its attribute, and more generally that nothing can be or be conceived without God. However, he explains in E2p10cs, his definition of essence, by requiring that positing and conceiving the thing is necessary and sufficient for positing and conceiving the essence, excludes God or the attributes from pertaining to the essence of modes. For, presumably God and the attributes can exist and/or be conceived without the modes.[12] Similarly, the causal effects of the existence of any mode do not pertain to its essence, because these effects can exist and/or be conceived without the mode (for example, children can exist after their parents have passed away).

What constitutes the essence of an idea? I argue that it is its representational content. It is now common to identify an idea's representational content with the *objective reality* of its object.[13] So the content of I(*a*)—that which it represents—is *a* itself, insofar as it is represented, which Spinoza expresses by saying that I(*a*) contains the objective reality of *a*. For Spinoza (as for Descartes, from whom he inherits this terminology), objective reality is to be contrasted with *formal* reality, or reality independent of being represented.[14] For Spinoza, any existing thing possesses both kinds of reality,

9 See Michael Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Substance Monism," in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, eds. Olli Koistinen and J. I. Biro (New York: Oxford University Press), 19; Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza II: L'âme (Éthique, II)* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), 20–21.

10 Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 94–95.

11 Compare E2p37d for a similar argument. The discussion here raises the question of *species essences*, such as *human* or *horse*. Karolina Hübner ("Spinoza on Essences, Universals, and Beings of Reason," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2016): 64–65) has argued that E2def2 does not rule out the existence of such species essences. If Hübner is right, Spinoza's metaphysics is compatible with such sharable essences. However, the question of whether or not Spinoza allows for sharable essences is orthogonal to the present discussion. Species essences do not constitute the essences of individuals, because their being posited is by definition insufficient to posit any individual. And species essences are themselves unique, in the sense that each species has one and only one essence that individuates it.

12 See Gueroult, *Spinoza II*, 20–21.

13 See Don Garrett, "Representation, Misrepresentation, and Error in Spinoza's Philosophy of Mind," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Karolina Hübner, "Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations," *Philosophers' Imprint* 19, no. 43 (2019); "Representation." I follow much of the (Anglophone) literature in using 'representational content' instead of 'objective reality' as the more familiar term.

14 For Descartes on objective reality, see the *First Replies* at AT VII, 102-3, as well as Deborah Brown, "Being, Formal versus Objective," in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, ed. Lawrence Nolan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Calvin Normore, "Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For the distinction more generally, see Michael Ayers, "Ideas and Objective Being," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

in virtue of both being produced by God's infinite power of acting (E1p16) and being represented in God's intellect as a result of his omniscience.

It is plausible that Spinoza believes that ideas can be individuated in terms of their content. That is, in line with Spinoza's understanding of essence, the objective reality of *x* is necessary and sufficient for I(*x*); and conversely, I(*x*) is necessary and sufficient for the objective reality of *x*. The objective reality of *x* is necessary for I(*x*), because I(*x*) cannot be formed without conceiving *x*; and sufficient, because in representing *x*, we thereby form I(*x*). For example, to form the idea of a triangle, it is sufficient to think of a triangle; whereas it is not possible to form this idea without thinking of a triangle.

A similar argument shows that I(*x*) is necessary and sufficient for the objective reality of *x*. That it is sufficient is obvious. Is it necessary? It seems that we could conceive *x* without forming I(*x*), for the reason that one and the same *x* can have objective reality in several distinct ideas. For example, the triangle *x* may be part of a larger figure *y*. In that case, it seems like we could represent *x* by forming I(*y*) instead of I(*x*). However, the obvious response is that this is not really a counterexample, because I(*y*) involves I(*x*): to form I(*y*), it is necessary to form I(*x*). Similarly, the idea of any effect of *x* will, per E1a4, involve I(*x*). It appears, then, that it is in fact necessary to form I(*x*) in order to represent *x*.

If this is right, then ideas' essences are constituted by what they represent—i.e., by the objective reality of their objects. This claim needs to be constrained by the observation just made, that ideas can involve other things besides their objects, such as their causal antecedents. In other words, not *everything* an idea represents constitutes its essence, but only that "without which the [idea] can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the [idea]" (E2def2/ G II 84). Although Spinoza himself does not use it, I will (as indicated before) follow previous commentators in flagging a distinction between what might be called "essential" or "direct" and "non-essential" or "indirect" content. In case of I(*x*), its direct content appears to be just the objective reality of *x* itself, whereas its indirect content represents what *x* involves but is not essential to *x*.[15]

Ideas, then, are individuated by their direct content. It follows that direct content cannot be mind-relative. Because if the direct content of I(*x*) is different in God's mind than it is in mine, then God and I are not actually forming the same idea. Moreover, consider the essence of I(*x*) itself. If the direct content of I(*x*) is mind-relative, then it seems that the essence of I(*x*) is itself relative in some way—that its essence is not intrinsic to it. But this is absurd, because a thing's essence is

15 There appear to be other categories of indirect content as well, covering, for example, that which "follows" from an idea, or (perhaps) the other relations the idea stands in. But I restrict myself here to what is "involved" in ideas.

intrinsic to it by definition.[16] It is much more natural to say that an idea's direct content is not mind-relative.[17]

Now, the defenders of mind-relativity do not intend to hold that ideas' direct contents are mind-relative. Della Rocca recognizes that Spinoza holds what he calls an "essence requirement" on representation, but he restricts this requirement to *adequate* ideas.[18] So, ideas are individuated by what they adequately represent—hence by their content in God's mind alone. His view is that the idea in my mind represents something more than it does in God's mind: in God's mind, I(*a*) represents only *a*, whereas in my mind it additionally represents *c*.[19] However, this distinction does not appear to be tenable. For, as the term is used here, an idea's indirect content is involved in its direct content. For that reason, the latter entails the former. That is to say, the latter cannot be conceived without the former; but to say that *p* cannot be conceived without *q* is to say that *p* logically entails *q*.[20] A triangle cannot be conceived without sides; so the conception of a triangle entails the conception of sides. If the indirect content is involved in the direct content, then representing the direct content of an idea is sufficient for representing its complete content, because everything it

16 Samuel Newlands appears to contradict this claim when he argues that for Spinoza, a thing can have multiple essences depending on how it is conceived (Samuel Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 133). However, on the point at issue we are in agreement. Newlands argues that Spinozan essences can be conceived either narrowly—such that a thing's essence comprises only that in virtue of which it is an adequate cause – or more broadly—such that a thing's essence also comprises that in virtue of which it is an *in*adequate or partial cause. Newlands himself argues that Spinozan essences have to be construed broadly. As a result, for him, a thing's essence can change, insofar as what it can inadequately cause can change depending on the circumstances; hence its essence would not be intrinsic to it, apparently contrary to my claim in the text. This is only true on Newlands' broad conception of essences, however. On the narrow conception, we agree that a thing's narrow essence is "invariant across narrower and broader ways of conceiving it" (ibid., 131). My claim in the text relates to an idea's direct content, or its causal powers as an adequate cause; and this, Newlands agrees, is intrinsic to the idea. When it comes to his larger point about the correct way to conceive essences, I think my reading has the advantage that on it, essences can play their traditional role of principles of individuation, a role that moreover is strongly suggested by E2def2's emphasis on what is needed for a thing to be "given," "conceived" or "taken away." My reading gives Spinoza a more robust notion of individuation, something Newlands admits to struggling with.

17 Perhaps it could be said that the totality of an idea's mind-relative manifestations constitutes its essence. But this move has the unfortunate consequence of making I(*x*)'s essence dependent on its representation by other finite minds. Say I(*t*) is the idea of a certain triangle. On the current view, the essence of I(*t*) depends on every thought of this triangle had by anyone ever. This is hard to square with Spinoza's claim that essences are prior to existents, and that all essences are caused by God (E1p25). It also appears to conflict with his parallelism, in that I(*t*) exhibits dependence on other modes of its attribute, which *t* itself presumably does not.

18 Della Rocca, *Representation*, 84.

19 This is his view because he takes it as a requirement on representational parallelism, the view that (adequate) ideas are parallel to what they represent (E2p7), that adequate ideas represent only their directly corresponding objects (Della Rocca, *Representation*, 44–46, 94). But by distinguishing between direct and indirect representation, we can easily see how adequate ideas may be representationally parallel only to their direct objects, while still indirectly representing other objects as well.

20 Compare Alan Gabbey, "Spinoza, Infinite Modes and the Infinitive Mood," *Studia Spinozana* 16 (2008): 47n10 (cited in Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Spinoza's Deification of Existence," in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy VI*, eds. Daniel Garber and Donald Rutherford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88): "Spinoza uses *involvere* to mean 'to contain necessarily,' that is 'to imply' or 'to entail,' though implication seems closer than entailment to the notion of necessary containment."

represents can be deduced from it. Hence God's representation of *a* is sufficient to represent *c* (insofar as *c* is involved in *a*).

That said, the essence requirement does allow for a more promising way of understanding the distinction between God's perspective on I(*x*) and my own, although I still have some reservations. If this is the correct reading of the view, then it must be stressed how misleading the terminology of mind-relativity is. For my limited understanding of I(*x*) does not alter its content—its direct content remains intrinsic to it, despite my limited grasp of this content. Nor is it the case that the indirect content can be absent from God's mind. As we saw, an idea's indirect content is entailed by its direct content. An idea's indirect content is due to the way (part of) its direct content is related to something that the idea does not directly represent: for example, I(*x*) is related to *y*, which is external to *x* and which I(*x*) only represents to the extent that it involves *y*. But because *x* nevertheless involves *y*, whether it represents *y* or not cannot be mind-relative. Given that the direct content entails the indirect content, it cannot be the case that God represents the former without also (at least implicitly) representing the latter. Hence, indirect content cannot be mind-relative any more than direct content. The upshot of the interpretation so far is that whatever differences obtain between I(*a*) insofar as it is related to God and insofar as it is related to my mind, they do not bear on what I(*a*) represents, because this is the same in my mind as in relation to God.

4. Perspectives on Representational Content

My preferred alternative is to specify the distinction between how God and I grasp I(*x*) not in terms of its content but in terms of how I(*x*) is *understood* by God and me. That is, I read Spinoza as making a foundational, yet merely epistemic distinction between the God's-eye view of the human mind and the point of view of the embodied human subject.[21] That Spinoza needs some such distinction between an idea's content and the way a particular mind understands that content is already implied by his theory of affection itself, given that, in forming I(*a*), I am apparently not conscious of its direct content (a bodily trace or image), but of its external cause *c*. I refer to these ways of understanding ideas as 'epistemic perspectives'. Which epistemic perspective on an idea is taken is determined by how the idea is caused – as will become clear in a moment. The notion of an epistemic distinction makes it possible to see how one and the same idea can be understood differently by God and me, without this entailing that the idea's content is mind-relative.

To see this, consider E2p17s/G II 105, where Spinoza distinguishes 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." The idea that "constitutes the essence of Peter's mind" is a perfect representation of Peter's body; it is the mode of thought parallel to Peter's body. This idea is in God's mind but not in Paul's. Paul's idea of Peter, by contrast, originates in the imagination. Hence, Paul's idea of Peter is not parallel to Peter's body, but to the sensory affections of Paul's body produced by Peter. Note,

21 Renz, *The Explainability of Experience: Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*, trans. Mark Ilsemann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Renz and Hutchins, "Spinoza on Human and Divine Knowledge," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), make the stronger claim that human subjectivity as such is unavailable to God.

however, that Peter's idea of *himself* will also, much like Paul's idea, be based in affections. Peter does not have the same understanding of himself that God has. This is confirmed by E2p23/G II 110: "The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body." E2p23 belongs to a string of propositions that relate to the mind's ability to reflexively form ideas of its ideas. Spinoza is saying here that the only way the mind can "know" itself is through this process of reflecting on its affections. The mind does not know itself immediately and the perfect representation of Peter's body is not itself in Peter's mind.

E2p17s introduces a fundamental distinction between two ways of understanding the world. To use Spinoza's own terms, we can understand the world either according to the "order and connection of the affections of the human body" or the "order of the intellect" (E2p18s/G II 107).[22] I will speak of 'affective' and 'intellectual' ideas, where these are ideas formed according to the order of the affections of the body and the order of the intellect, respectively. Note that these are relational definitions and that one and the same idea can be 'affective' in one sense and 'intellectual' in another.

On this view, I(*a*) has the *same* content in God's mind as it does in mine. However, as a finite subject, I understand *a* in the 'subjective' manner of E2p17s. As a result, I relate *a* primarily to *c* and take I(*a*) to represent *c* instead of *a*. This is an illusion about I(*a*)'s representational content that results from the distinctive, affection-based way in which I apprehend *a*. (However, it is not a complete error, as I(*a*) *does* represent *c*, albeit indirectly—to the extent that *c* is involved in *a*. That is, *c* has objective reality in I(*a*).) God is not subject to this illusion.

The distinction between God's and my ideas, then, does not relate to the content of I(*a*). Instead, it has to do with the distinct ways in which we apprehend *c*. As a finite subject, I can only form an idea of *c* on the basis of I(*a*). In the affective order of my ideas, then, I(*c*) depends on I(*a*), whereas in reality it is the other way around. Spinoza's distinction between the two orders relates both to the order in which I form my ideas of external objects *and* to what I am able to understand of I(*a*) (its involvement of *c*, but not, or only very dimly, its intrinsic nature as a representation of *a*).

An analogy might make this clearer. Suppose I am using a microscope to look at a tiny worm in the blood, invisible to the naked eye. The microscope projects an image of the worm onto its ocular lens, which I see. I accordingly form an affective idea of this lens image, I(*l*). However, I am not interested in and, in fact, not perceptually aware of the way the microscope co-constitutes this image. Although I may know in the abstract that the microscope can distort my perception of the worm in certain ways, I will not normally be immediately aware of this while looking at the lens image (especially if I am untrained in the use of microscopes). I cannot see these distortions in the way that I can see *l*. As a result, instead of taking I(*l*) for what it is—a representation of a lens image—I will take it for a representation of the worm, *w*. This is not a complete error, as I(*l*) *does* represent *w*, if indirectly—to the extent that *w* is involved in *l*. However, my situation here, with its necessary epistemic limitation due to the limits of my natural sight, would not occur for an omniscient entity like God, who could form I(*w*) directly and who would immediately understand exactly how both *w* and the microscope together constitute *l*, and hence could deduce I(*l*) from the ideas of *w* and the microscope.

22 See Margaret Wilson, "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103.

Let me stress again that the difference between these two ways of conceiving does not bear on the content of the idea. God and I really have one and the same idea I(*a*). The difference between us is only that God is able to understand the object of the idea according to the order of the intellect, whereas I am determined, insofar as I have formed the idea affectively, to understand it according to the order of the affections. When I speak loosely of 'understanding,' 'grasping,' 'considering' or 'having a perspective on' an idea here, I am *not* referring to the formation of an idea of the original idea, but simply using these expressions as shorthand for the different ways in which God and I form ideas of *a* (and *b* and *c*).[23] Spinoza does, of course, have a doctrine of such 'ideas of ideas' or 'reflexive ideas' (see E2p20-23), but I don't think it can help to explain confusion. There have been several previous attempts to use this doctrine to develop a theory of consciousness or subjectivity for Spinoza.[24] Such a theory, if successful, would be highly relevant to explaining the distinction between adequate and confused representation, because only finite subjects form confused representations. However, I agree with critics that the prospects for such a theory are dim.[25] To account for the distinction between adequate and confused ideas (without falling back on mind-relativity), it would seemingly have to be the case that God and I form distinct second-order ideas when experiencing an affection. However, this clearly is not what happens. For one, ideas of ideas are parallel to the original idea (see the citations of E2p7 in E2p20d and E2p21s), suggesting that the causal relations of I(I(*x*)) are parallel to those of I(*x*). It is difficult to see, then, how God and I could form different higher-order ideas of I(*x*), given that they would share all their causal relations. Second, the suggestion is flawed because in suggesting that God's and my second-order ideas are distinct, it also appears to suggest that my second-order idea would be irremediably confused. This contradicts Spinoza's statement, quoted before, that all ideas insofar as they are related to God are adequate (E2p36d). It must therefore be the case that one and the same idea can be understood both adequately and confusedly. To take this understanding to involve the formation of a second-order idea is, as far as I can see, acceptable, and perhaps even required by Spinoza's theory of ideas; but it does not help explain what confused and adequate understanding consists in. It only pushes the explanation back by now raising the question how this second-order idea can be both confused and adequate.

Instead, the distinction between the two ways of understanding picks up on the idea's representational properties, insofar as I(*a*) can be situated *both* in the order of affections and the order of the intellect. Which way it is understood is furthermore determined by how it is caused in a particular mind—this is a genuine element of mind-relativity. However, the idea's representational properties do not change between the different epistemic perspectives. What does this imply for ideas' confusion and adequacy? My claim will be that the notion of epistemic perspectives allows

23 For the same reason, I am also not claiming that there is a mind 'behind' the idea. Such a 'Cartesian' image is inappropriate in relation to Spinoza, who is rightly understood to have a bundle theory of mind (see Della Rocca, *Representation*, 41–3).

24 See Edwin M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 128; Lee Rice, "Reflexive Ideas in Spinoza," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (1990); and Christopher Martin, "Consciousness in Spinoza's Philosophy of Mind," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 2 (2007).

25 See Wilson ("Objects," 135–138; Wilson criticizes it while also ascribing it to Spinoza), Bennett (*A Study*, 184–191), Nadler ("Spinoza and Consciousness," 581–585) and Marshall (*Spiritual Automaton*, 108–111).

us to see that the fact that I understand *a* confusedly and God understands it adequately does not alter I(*a*)'s representational properties.

5. Confusion is Not Mind-relative

To say that an idea's confusion or adequacy is mind-relative is to say that its confusion or adequacy depends on the way the idea is conceived. To deny that claim is to hold that whether an idea is adequate or not is not determined by how it is conceived, but by mind-independent features of the idea. In particular, I will argue, it is determined by the idea's content. Ideas can, then, be 'really' confused or adequate, and confused or adequate epistemic perspectives on these ideas are confused or adequate because they pick up on these mind-independent features. It is important to note that these features can themselves be relational, provided that they are not mind-relative in the sense that they depend for their existence on being conceived. (In other words, they must not be 'metaphysically' mind-dependent.) This is not to deny that the way an idea is apprehended—the 'epistemic perspective' taken on the idea—can differ depending on the mind that is apprehending it. It remains to explain how all of this works, as well as to interpret Spinoza's own explicit references to ideas "related to" or "in" God.

As a starting point, consider Spinoza's definition of adequate idea (E2def4/G II 85):

> By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, *or* intrinsic denominations of a true idea.
> *Exp.:* I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, viz. the agreement of the idea with its object.

Spinoza states that the agreement of an idea with its object is "extrinsic" to that idea. A true idea is defined by him as an idea that "agree[s] with its object" (E1a6/G II 47). What the definition of adequacy apparently comes down to, then, is that an adequate idea is the same as a true idea in all respects (it has "all [its] properties"), except for its agreement with what it represents and its other "extrinsic denominations," which are disregarded in its definition. Spinoza adds elsewhere that he does not "recognize any difference between a true idea and an adequate one, except that the term 'true' concerns only the agreement of the idea with its object, whereas the term 'adequate' concerns the nature of the idea in itself" (Ep60/G IV, 270). If a true idea can be characterized in terms of the agreement between its content and the object it represents, the adequate idea, even when considered apart from this agreement, still contains this same content. In other words, an adequate idea incorporates the objective reality of its object entirely.

With the possible exception of "simplest bodies" (see E2p13s), all finite entities in Spinoza's metaphysics are complex. All entities also stand in causal and modal relations to substance and other modes. Adequate ideas must reproduce these constitutive, causal and modal relations of their objects. What this suggests is that one way in which ideas can fail to be adequate is by failing to reproduce, or by distorting, these relations and properties.

These passages support an interpretation on which the confusion of adequacy of an idea is determined by whether that idea correctly reproduces the properties and relations of its object. I follow LeBuffe's "simpler" account of confusion here, which says that for Spinoza, "an idea is

confused just because it represents its object or objects in a fragmentary and incomplete way."[26] I understand "object or objects" broadly, to refer to anything that an idea can represent (i.e., that has objective reality in an idea). In other words, *c* is an object of I(*a*) in this sense.

A further source of support for this understanding of confusion is E2p28d/G II 113, where Spinoza writes that "these ideas of the affections, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are like conclusions without premises, i.e. (as is known through itself), they are confused ideas." I(*a*) is like a conclusion without premises because the mind arrives at it without being able to deduce it from its causes. The 'premises' from which I(*a*) could be deduced—I(*b*) and I(*c*)—are, after all, not in the human mind; in fact, the mind forms the latter two ideas on the basis of its affective ideas, instead of the other way around. Spinoza also refers to ideas understood in the order of affections as "mutilated and confused" (e.g., E2p29c/G II 114, E2p29s/G II 114, E2p35/G II 116, E2p40s2/G II 122), again emphasizing the faulty order in which these ideas are formed by the human mind.

On the simple account of confusion, I(*a*) represents *a* adequately but *b* and *c* confusedly. Whether I(*a*) is adequate or inadequate, on this picture, is clearly a relational fact about it: it can only be determined in relation to some specific object that I(*a*) is taken to represent. (That said, there appears to be a presumption in favor of taking I(*a*)'s proper object to be that which its direct content represents – that is, *a*.) However, this dependence of an idea's adequacy on the objects to which it is related is not mind-relative. That I(*a*) is a confused representation of *c* is as true when the idea is in my mind as when it is in God's. It is a confused representation of *c* because it represents *c* only partially – to the extent that *c* is involved in *a*. And this is just a fact about the idea; it is not dependent on how it is conceived or on what other ideas it is connected to.

This suggests a requirement for the adequacy or inadequacy of an idea: an idea is adequate iff it is identical to its object, where it is understood that different epistemic perspectives relate ideas to different objects. So, I(*a*), being identical to *a*, is an adequate representation of *a*, but an inadequate representation of *b* and *c*, which have their own adequate representations in I(*b*) and I(*c*), respectively.[27] This identity requirement improves on Della Rocca's causal requirement on unconfused representation. Della Rocca formulates the requirement as follows:

> In order for a mind to have an unconfused idea of *x*, that mind must have an unconfused idea of *x*'s finite cause, *c*.[28]

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26 LeBuffe, *From Bondage*, 58. He also describes a more complex account (advocated by Della Rocca, *Representation*, 59–61; see also Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness," 16–18, for a generalized version of this view), according to which confused ideas are the result of the body's capacity for forming distinct images being exceeded. Spinoza discusses this process in E2p40s1. However, this scholium is primarily an explanation of how the mind forms the transcendental terms *being*, *thing* and *something*, and universal ideas like *horse* and *human being*. It is not clear to me that every confused idea must be either transcendental or universal, so I'm not sure that Spinoza's discussion here is meant as an explanation of all confused ideas. I would suggest that Spinoza would consider even my first affective idea of a horse as confused, whereas the process described in E2p40s1 appears to only explain the confusedness of ideas that result from multiple horse sightings. At any rate, the "simple" account suffices for my purposes here.

27 Garrett, "Representation, Misrepresentation," and Hübner, "Representation," both stress the role of identity in Spinoza's thinking about representation. However, they do not extend this role to a discussion of confusion in the way I do here, instead following Della Rocca's line that confusion is mind-relative.

28 Della Rocca, *Representation*, 70.

On this requirement, whether I(*a*) is confused or not depends on whether the mind conceiving it has unconfused ideas of *a*'s causes. God does have these ideas but I do not, so that I(*a*) is confused in my mind but unconfused in God's. This requirement is compelling so long as the mind-relativity of content is held to. But once it is let go, it loses its grip. It is natural to think that whether an idea is confused or not is determined by its representational content. But if this content is the same in God's mind as it is in my own, then how could it be confused in my mind but not in God?

Instead, what makes the difference between God's conception and my own is that we pick up on distinct properties of the idea's content: I mistakenly relate it to its causes whereas God, who already has adequate ideas of these causes, relates the idea to its total and direct content.

What supports the reading defended here is that I(*a*) just is not an adequate representation of its causes, no matter how it is considered. Again, the analogy with the ocular lens image may help here. I(*a*) is not an adequate representation of *b* or *c*, because no consideration of *a* by itself will support the construction of adequate ideas of *b* or *c*. Analogously, no consideration of the content of I(*l*) by itself, no matter how detailed, will enable the construction of adequate ideas of the worm and the microscope. It will only lead to an idea of *w* to the extent that *w*'s nature is involved in I(*l*). In this respect, then, I(*l*) and I(*a*) are intrinsically confused – their confusion is a property of their representational content. At the same time, as representations of *l* and *a*, respectively, they are also intrinsically adequate, in a way that is also determined by their representational content.

Even in God's mind, I(*a*) is not an adequate representation of *a*'s causes. This is irrelevant for God, because God already possesses adequate ideas of *a*'s causes. God, of course, also has adequate knowledge of *a*. This adequate knowledge, however, "is in God, not insofar as he is considered to be affected with the human mind, but insofar as he is considered to be affected with other ideas" (E2p28d/G II 113). It is in him, that is, insofar as he has the ideas from which I(*a*) can be deduced, but not insofar as he has the idea of the human mind that contains I(*a*).

Spinoza's other references to ideas "related to God" or "related to the human mind" must be read along similar lines. These include his claims that "The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused" (E2p28/G II 113), "All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true" (E2p32/G II 116) and "there are no inadequate or confused ideas except insofar as they are related to the singular mind of someone" (E2p36d/G II 118). The last of these says explicitly that confusion, at least, is mind-relative somehow.

However, on the reading defended here, the relativity stated in these passages is not one of ideas to the minds that conceive them, but of ideas to their causes. To consider an idea "insofar as it is related to *x*" is to consider it insofar as it is caused by *x*. This is to situate it in a causal order: that of the intellect or of the affections. Affective ideas are also always positioned in the intellectual order of ideas; hence they can be considered in both ways.

On this reading, when Spinoza says that ideas of affections are confused when related to the human mind alone, he is saying that these ideas cannot be deduced from the idea that constitutes the human mind alone. This is why they are like "conclusions without premises," as he puts it in E2p28d/G II 113: to be properly deduced, they require an idea that is external to the idea that constitutes the human mind. In Spinoza's own words, these ideas are "in God, not insofar as he is considered to be affected with the human mind, but insofar as he is considered to be affected with other ideas" (E2p28d/G II 113; cf. E2p11c). Thus, the inadequacy of the idea in relation to the human mind alone is

determined by its only partial inherence in that mind; but as I have argued, this determination relation itself is not made true by how it is conceived. This is how my interpretation accommodates Spinoza's apparent talk of mind-relativity (which is real relativity, but primarily of causal dependence relations).

A similar reading applies to E2p32 and E2p36d. To relate an idea to God is to understand it according to the order of the intellect, on which it will come out adequate, because any idea is part of his intellect. Understood this way, the idea is also true, because to understand an idea adequately is also to relate it to its direct object. This is in virtue of the representational parallelism that ensures that ideas agree with their direct objects (E2p7c, which is cited in E2p32d). Finally, the sense in which there are no confused ideas except in singular minds (E2p36d) is that only singular minds form affective ideas. That is, I(*c*) is only confused when it is related to my mind, by being formed on the basis of I(*a*). The idea I(*c*) that is the direct expression of *c* in the attribute of thought is not confused.

6. Conclusion

According to a prominent view, both the content and the confusion of ideas can, for Spinoza, be mind-relative. In this paper I have argued against this view and proposed an alternative account, according to which the content of an idea is the objective reality of its object and the confusion of an idea consists in its non-identity with its object. On the resulting reading, the following three claims are distinct yet are each true for Spinoza: 1) the confusion or adequacy of an idea in relation to a certain object is determined by its representational content; 2) the relations between things that confused and adequate epistemic perspectives pick up on hold independently of the way the idea is conceived (are not mind-relative); 3) whether a mind understands something confusedly or not depends on the way the idea is formed in that mind (either affectively or intellectually).[29]

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