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# Imitation, Representation, and Humanity in Spinoza's *Ethics*

JUSTIN STEINBERG\*

*He must be more or less than man, who kindles not in the common blaze.*

— David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, IX, Part I

BENEDICT DE SPINOZA WAS NO GREAT CHAMPION of pity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he claims that “pity [*commiseratio*], in a man who lives according to the guidance of reason, is evil of itself and useless” (*E* IVp50).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he suggests that for those who are incapable of acting from reason, pity might be a valuable surrogate. After all, pity often leads to socially beneficial behavior, including the assuagement of others’ pain and sadness (*E* IVp50dem). Moreover, pity is a sign of one’s humanity. Consider what Spinoza says of the person who lacks both nobility (*generositas*), or rational concern for others, and pity (hereafter: the “pitiless person”): “[O]ne who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is rightly called inhuman. For (by IIIp27) he seems to be unlike a man” (*E* IVp50s). Other things being equal, one who fails to imitate the affects of other humans is not herself human. I shall refer to this as the *Asympathy Implies Inhumanity [AII] Thesis*.

In this paper I examine the reasoning behind this thesis and what it reveals about Spinoza’s conception of humanity. The claim that the pitiless person is literally inhuman is rather bolder and less conventional than the views of the pitiless person expressed by three of Spinoza’s most influential predecessors: Justus Lipsius, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes. It also might appear to be somewhat implausible, as it relies on the assumption that beings will *necessarily* imitate the affects of conspecifics—non-imitation betraying a difference in nature. But since the imitation of affects seems to depend on an act of representation<sup>3</sup>—includ-

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<sup>1</sup>I adopt the following abbreviations for the *Ethics* (*E*): Roman numerals refer to parts; ‘p’ denotes proposition; ‘c’ denotes corollary; ‘d’ denotes definition; ‘dem’ denotes demonstration; and ‘s’ denotes scholium (e.g. *E* IIIp59s refers to *Ethics*, part III, proposition 59, scholium). Citations of the *Tractatus Politicus* [*TP*] refer to the chapters/sections (e.g. ‘5/4’ refers to chapter 5, section 4). Citations of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [*TTP*] refer to the chapter, followed by page number (e.g. 20/232 refers to chapter 20, page 232).

<sup>2</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche lists Spinoza among those who recognize the “worthlessness of pity” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, §5).

<sup>3</sup>See Michael Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology”; Della Rocca, “Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza”; and Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*.

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ing the representation of the target subject's state and her nature—one might well wonder why Spinoza excludes the possibility that non-imitation could be explained in terms of a representational failure, rather than concluding that it betrays a difference in nature. I spell out this problem in the form of a dilemma in the first section of this paper. This will be followed (section 2) by an attempt to save Spinoza from the dilemma, which requires investigating his multilayered account of perceptual representation. And in the final section (section 3), I offer an auxiliary defense of the *AII Thesis*, in which it is shown that, according to Spinoza, to be human is to be sociable and that, in the absence of reason, the capacity for imitating the affects of others is essential to one's sociality. Based on this sociality argument we can explain why Spinoza, who is otherwise critical of attempts to separate humans from the rest of nature (see e.g. *E III Preface*), is keen to draw a line of demarcation between the human and the inhuman: he is fundamentally interested in determining which beings are capable of forming larger ethical and political communities with us and are thereby capable of aiding our power of acting.

#### I. THE *AII THESIS* AND THE REPRESENTATION DILEMMA

The proposition that serves as the chief support for the *AII Thesis* is *E IIIp27*. This proposition reads, "If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect." From this it is supposed to follow that if a human does *not* imitate the affects of other humans with whom she interacts, she herself must not be human. The demonstration appeals to a variety of relational, and apparently representational, states. Our ideas "represent" (*repraesentare*) external bodies, we "imagine" (*imaginare*) these bodies, the imagining of which "involves" (*involvere*) the external body and leads to the "expression" (*exprimere*) of an affection of our bodies that is like the affection of the external body. Spinoza's use of representational language in *E IIIp27dem* seems to create a problem for the *AII Thesis*. This problem may be posed as a dilemma (hereafter: the "Representation Dilemma"):

- (1) Either it is the case that one who "imagines" an external body like one's own can misrepresent the (relative) likeness of the external body or it is not.
- (2) Horn One: If Spinoza does not allow that one can misrepresent the likeness of an affecting body, his account of representation is impoverished. Any satisfactory conception of representation must allow for misrepresentation of this sort.
- (3) Horn Two: If Spinoza allows that one can misrepresent likeness, then the *AII Thesis* fails, since the failure to imitate the affects of other humans might spring from a representational failure rather than constituting evidence of one's inhumanity. Therefore, either Spinoza has an impoverished conception of representation or the *AII Thesis* fails.

Now, there is an equivocation at the heart of the Representation Dilemma as formulated above, which reflects equivocation at the heart of the *AII Thesis*. The *AII Thesis* can be read either as excluding the possibility of even a *single instance* of pitilessness among conspecifics (stronger reading) or as excluding the possibility of *consistent* pitilessness among conspecifics (weaker reading).

The stronger reading leads to an especially thorny version of the Representation Dilemma, as it would imply that even a single instance of conspecific misrepresentation, and consequent pitilessness, would defeat the *All Thesis*. And this would either commit Spinoza to an implausible theory of mind—one that would preclude even a single instance of conspecific misrepresentation (horn one)—or render the *All Thesis* untenable (horn two).

While the direct textual evidence on this point is somewhat indeterminate, there are good reasons to resist the stronger reading. First, in terms of the direct evidence, the pitiless person is described as one who fails to be moved from pity to help others (*aliis*), suggesting that it is not just a one-off encounter with a single individual, but rather a pattern of behavior. Moreover, given the variability among particular members of the set of humans, Spinoza would have to allow that the differences between the minds and bodies of humans would be great enough that occasional miscommunications of affects would be inevitable.<sup>4</sup> But since the pitiless person is taken to be inhuman, it would seem that she must be *consistently* unempathetic.

If the *All Thesis* is read in the weaker sense, we must qualify the Representation Dilemma accordingly: the dilemma concerns the possibility of *consistent* misrepresentation of likeness. In this case, the Representation Dilemma might be thought to have lost some of its punch. It might be thought that one can have a perfectly adequate theory of mind without allowing for consistent conspecific misrepresentation. What reason do we have for thinking that such consistent misrepresentation and concomitant non-imitation is a possibility?

Well, consider a couple of classes of persons who appear to be fairly consistently pitiless (or unempathetic): the severely autistic and the psychopathic. What could possibly explain this empathic deficiency, on Spinoza's account? The *All Thesis* entails that this deficiency must be explained in terms of a difference in nature; severely autistic people and psychopaths are not human. However, not only will this strike some as implausible on its face, it is also a conclusion that one might think Spinoza ought not to draw. His account of misrepresentation seems to create space for a genuinely neglected alternative to the *All Thesis*: one can be human and yet suffer from a representational deficiency that prevents one from imitating the affects of another like being. Representational deficiencies are typically cited to explain decreased empathy in severely autistic people.<sup>5</sup> And some have also traced empathic deficiencies among psychopaths to representational deficits.<sup>6</sup> One could certainly describe the Ayn Randian egoist, who appears to be a model

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<sup>4</sup>I am sympathetic to the proposal that Michael Della Rocca made on an earlier draft of this paper that, for Spinoza, being human might be conceived of as a matter of degree, in which case we could reformulate the *All Thesis* to state that the less consistently one imitates other humans, the less human one is. More on this in section 3.

<sup>5</sup>See Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness*; see also Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules*.

<sup>6</sup>Kosson, Suchy, Mayer, and Libby ("Facial Affect Recognition in Criminal Psychopaths") suggest that psychopaths have trouble representing the emotions of others. This runs contrary to previous work that indicates that psychopaths are perfectly competent when it comes to reading minds. Mealey and Kinner accept James Blair's thesis that psychopaths do *not* have a deficit in their mind-reading mechanism, but suggest that the emotional poverty of psychopaths does stem from a different kind of representational failure, namely, the failure to "produce the same bodily representations as others" (Mealey and Kinner, "The Perception-Action Model of Empathy and Psychopathic 'Cold-Heartedness,'" 43).

of psychopathy,<sup>7</sup> as one whose purview does not include the humanity of others.<sup>8</sup> Because severely autistic persons and psychopaths—or, at least, the Randian egoist variety thereof—seem to be genuine human beings who consistently fail to represent the humanity of others, *either* Spinoza’s theory of mind is too impoverished to account for such cases in terms of representational deficiencies (horn one) *or* such cases are to be seen as counterexamples to the *All Thesis* (horn two). Thus, the dilemma seems still to hold, even on the weaker reading.

In order to defend the *All Thesis* and avoid the second horn of the dilemma, Spinoza would have to show that despite our capacity for misrepresentation—including the misrepresentation of likeness—there is something about the form of representation involved in the imitation of affects that does not allow for systematic false negatives. This, despite the fact that Spinoza apparently allows for a wide range of false positives—that is, cases where one represents as like, and consequently imitates (or q-imitates<sup>9</sup>) the affective state of, non-conspecifics (*EIVp68s*). In short, in order to escape the Representation Dilemma, Spinoza must provide an account of representation that explains these asymmetrical implications. In the next section, I will try to show that Spinoza offers precisely such an account.

## 2. OVERCOMING THE REPRESENTATION DILEMMA

### 2.1 *Avoiding the First Horn of the Representation Dilemma*

#### 2.1.1 De re content and the causal account of representation.

The crucial claim in *E IIIp27dem* is that “if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect.” What does it mean to “imagine” another like us? Here we would do well to bear in mind that for Spinoza imagination includes all form of sensory knowledge. The context—in particular the invocation of *E IIp16*—makes it clear that in *E IIIp27* “imagining” something amounts to having ideas derived from perception. We must then ask how it is that perceptual ideas represent objects.

Ideas of perception are triply representative. At the first level, such ideas represent their object (*objectum*). The object of the idea that constitutes the human mind is the (human) body, and the direct object of any sensation or percept will be an affection or mode of the body (*E IIp13* and *E IIp19*). Spinoza’s parallelism ensures that bodies and their modes are systematically correlated with minds and

<sup>7</sup>Consider Rand’s admiring portrait of the psychopathic killer William Edward Hickman: “[He is] a man who really stands alone, in action and in soul” (*Journals of Ayn Rand*, 37). Hickman is the inspiration for a character of whom she writes (approvingly): “Other people do not exist for him, and he does not see why they should. . . . He has the true, innate psychology of a Superman. *He can never realize and feel ‘other people’*” (*Journals of Ayn Rand*, 27).

<sup>8</sup>Consider Rand’s own description of Howard Roark, the protagonist of the *Fountainhead*, as one who is “born without the ability to consider others” (*Journals of Ayn Rand*, 49).

<sup>9</sup>Following Della Rocca, I am using the locution ‘q-imitates’ (short for ‘quasi-imitates’) to include instances of veridical imitation (where there is a real matching of affective states) and nonveridical imitation (where one’s affective state derives from the representation of another’s state, but where one misrepresents the affective state of another, and so one’s affective state does not match the state of the target subject) (“Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” 249). Della Rocca’s use of ‘q-’ prefix is rather loosely modeled on Derek Parfit’s notion of ‘q-memories’ in *Reasons and Persons*.

their modes. Because of this co-variation, we can be assured not only that every percept has as its (direct) object a mode of body, but also that every mode of body will be represented in the mind.<sup>10</sup>

Now, if this were Spinoza's only conception of representation, misrepresentation would be impossible, as ideas always agree with their *objectum*. However, while an idea always corresponds with its *objectum*, it might well misrepresent its *ideatum*.<sup>11</sup> But in virtue of what do ideas represent *ideata*?

One explanation that Spinoza gives us is that at least *part* of the content or *ideata* of perceptual ideas derives from the causal relationship that obtains between external bodies and one's own body. As Spinoza puts it in *E* IIp16, whenever our bodily affections are produced by an interaction with external bodies, our ideas will also "involve the nature" of these external bodies.<sup>12</sup> This follows from the notoriously ambiguous *E* Ia4: "[K]nowledge [*cognitio*] of an effect depends upon, and involves, knowledge of its cause" (*G* II.46). In *E* IIp16, Spinoza is suggesting that the nature of the cause of one's affection is implicated in one's bodily state.<sup>13</sup> Because the natures of external bodies are implicated in our affective states, our ideas of these states are also ideas *of* these causes—indeed they are ideas of the natures of these causes.<sup>14</sup>

This account of perceptual representation may be referred to as a causal theory of representation, since percepts represent external bodies in virtue of the causal relationship that holds between these external bodies and one's own.<sup>15</sup> So, for instance, my mind perceives coffee because my body is in an affective state that is caused by its interaction with coffee. My mind perceives coffee, in this example, just because my body bears information (on my taste buds, in my digestive system, in my neurons, etc.) that was produced or conveyed, at least in part, by the coffee

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<sup>10</sup>As Spinoza puts it, "[N]othing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the mind" (*E* IIp12). There is some dispute in the secondary literature over whether the relationship between an idea and its object (the body) is genuinely representational. Daisie Radner denies that this relationship should be understood as representational ("Spinoza's Theory of Ideas," 338–59). Bennett admits that it is representational, but regards it as a qualitatively different mode of representation from the (indirect) representation of external bodies (*Study*, 153–59). Della Rocca regards the relationship as representational, and claims—against Bennett—that we should not distinguish between different modes of representation. On his view, confused ideas are confused in part because we cannot distinguish the representation of our bodies from the representation of other bodies (*Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, 49–53). I shall not weigh in directly on this dispute, except to say that, *pace* Radner, I think that the language makes it clear that Spinoza regards this relationship as representational *in some sense*.

<sup>11</sup>This distinction was first brought to my attention by Don Garrett in "Representation and Misrepresentation in Spinoza's Philosophy of Mind."

<sup>12</sup>See also *A1* in the physical digression (*G* II.99).

<sup>13</sup>I follow Garrett in proposing that we understand 'involve' to mean something like "implicate" ("Representation and Misrepresentation," forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup>For more on why representing external things entails representing the essences of external things, see Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 96.

<sup>15</sup>As Wilson construes it, "[F]or a 'mind' 'represents' something just in case its body is causally affected by that thing" ("Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds,'" 131). Wilson proceeds to criticize Spinoza's theory of representation, taking Radner's interpretation—which emphasizes the causal features that I have sketched above—as authoritative. In what follows I will try to show that Spinoza's theory of representation is more complex than either Radner or Wilson suggest.

I consumed.<sup>16</sup> Representation, in this sense, is a matter of containing information about another object. Just as the tracks in a snowy field represent (the impact of) the fox that recently scurried through it, an affective state of one's body represents its source, whatever that source happens to be.

At this stage, then, we have sketched two ways in which a percept represents: it represents its object (*objectum*), which is a state of the body. But it also represents the external bodies that are partially responsible for the state of the body. The external bodies that are *indirectly* represented are *not* the *objectum* of the idea. Rather, they must be part of the *ideatum*.

The two forms of representation sketched above concern *what* it is that an idea represents, that is, the *de re* content of an idea.<sup>17</sup>

### *De Re Representation*

- (1) *De re* representation one's own body. The object (*objectum*) of an idea is a physical state of the body.
- (2) *De re* representation of other bodies. Insofar as the state of one's body is produced through the impact of an external body, the state of one's body implicates the external body that produced it, and so the affecting body will be part of the *de re* content of one's idea.

For a naturalist, like Spinoza, this account of representation has a certain appeal, as it reveals how non-human minds—including the minds of dishrags and daffodils—could represent external bodies. If this were all that there were to Spinoza's account of representation, it would seem to rule out the possibility of representational error. On this account, to say that "x imagines that Fy" is really to say that x *is* acted upon by y, and that this interaction carries the information that Fy. On this reading, "imagining," "perceiving," and so forth, are factive verbs, from which it would follow that Spinoza's claim in *E* IIIp27 is that if one is in an internal bodily state that *actually indicates* the affective state of another body like oneself, one will tend to inherit that affective state.

But while this account of representation is elegant, naturalistic, and supportive of the *All Thesis*, it is inadequate for generating a plausible theory of mind, since, at the very least, it fails to account for misrepresentation. It leaves us stuck on the first horn of the Representation Dilemma.

<sup>16</sup>This conception of representation might appear to be rather promiscuous, especially if it is supposed that our ideas represent every factor, no matter how distant or insignificant, that contributes to the affection. It might also raise concerns about indeterminacy (i.e. do I represent "coffee," "Ethiopian coffee," "acidic, oily chemicals," etc.?). See Wilson, "Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds,'" for an enumeration of these and other problems. For a rather compelling account of how Spinoza might have responded to these concerns, see Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination," 4–25.

<sup>17</sup>I will be following Fred Dretske in distinguishing between the *de re* and the *de dicto* content of beliefs (*Explaining Behavior*). Dretske construes the distinction thusly: "A great many representational contents are of [the] *de re* variety. There is a representation *of* the tank as being half full, *of* an animal as being lame or sick, *of* a doorbutton as being depressed, *of* a cat as being up a tree. . . . These are called *de re* contents because the things (*re*) about which a comment is made is determined by nonrepresentational means, by means other than *how* the item is represented" (*Explaining Behavior*, 73). By contrast, some representational states have "*de dicto* content, a content whose reference is determined by *how* it is represented" (*Explaining Behavior*, 73).

## 2.1.2 De dicto content and misrepresentation

But, of course, Spinoza does recognize the possibility—indeed, the pervasiveness—of misrepresentational mental states.<sup>18</sup> He also quite clearly allows for the possibility of misjudging the scope of similarity. To see this, consider his account of Adam:

And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he should eat of it, he would immediately fear death, rather than desiring to live; and then, that, the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she was; but that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see IIIp27) and to lose his freedom. (EIVp68s)

This passage reveals both that Spinoza thinks that in fact we can misrepresent likeness<sup>19</sup> and that a representation of likeness is sufficient to produce the imitation of affects.

How does Spinoza's account of representation enable one to explain Adam representing lower animals as like himself? For this we need to introduce Spinoza's conception of *de dicto* content, which rounds out the three conceptions of representation.<sup>20</sup>

*De Dicto Representation*

(3) *De dicto* content: *how* the objective information is represented by the individual.

Unlike the two forms of *de re* representation, the *de dicto* content of an idea may misrepresent its *ideatum*, and the contexts in which these representational terms occur are intensional. A full account of how Spinoza can allow for *de dicto* content within the confines of his naturalism would go well beyond what I could hope to offer here.<sup>21</sup> But without attempting to work out all of the details, we can simply note that at the base of his account of how ideas of perception acquire their *de dicto* content is a theory of association.

Consider Spinoza's explanation of why one will continue to affirm and regard as present external bodies that “neither exist nor are present” (EIIp17c):

While external bodies so determine the fluid parts of the human body that they often thrust against the softer parts, they change (by Post. 5) their surfaces with the result

<sup>18</sup>In the very scholium on which the demonstration of EIIIp27 depends, Spinoza shows one way in which nonveridical representation is possible. It should be noted that nonveridical imaginations are not the same as errors: “[T]he mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to it” (EIIp17s). So, to use Spinoza's example, insofar as one's body is affected by the sun, one cannot help but imagine it as nearby; but one will avoid making an erroneous judgment if one has stronger countervailing idea that represents the true distance of the sun. Nevertheless, non-veridical imaginations count as misrepresentations.

<sup>19</sup>The belief that lower animals (*bruta*) are like us is evidently a mistake, as Spinoza indicates elsewhere that lower animals “do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects” (EIVp37s1).

<sup>20</sup>I have argued elsewhere (Steinberg, “Spinoza on Human Purposiveness and Mental Causation”) that drawing this distinction between the *de re* and *de dicto* mental content enables us also to see how representational content can be causally efficacious, for Spinoza.

<sup>21</sup>For some promising steps in this direction, see Garrett, “Representation and Misrepresentation.”

(see A2” after L3) that they are reflected from it in another way than they use to be before, and still later, when the fluid parts, by their spontaneous motion, encounter those new surfaces, they are reflected in the same way as when they were driven against those surfaces by the external bodies. (IIp17c dem)

The general idea here is that when Paul perceives Peter, Paul’s body is affected (e.g. the fluid parts are set in motion) in a particular way, and an image or trace is formed (E IIp17s). The physical trace will be represented by an idea. This parallel idea will at once “involve the nature of the human body”—in this case, Paul’s body—and “the nature of the external body”—in this case, Peter’s body (E IIp16). The resulting idea will *de re* represent both a state of Paul’s body (its *objectum*) and the external body implicated in the production of that state, Peter’s body. Because of the historical causal connection, the mind associates this image or state of the body with the existence of Peter, so that even if this image of the body (i.e. this particular motion of its “fluid parts”) is triggered again by some other cause (e.g. a “spontaneous motion”<sup>22</sup>), the mind will affirm Peter’s existence.<sup>23</sup>

Now imagine that, unbeknownst to Paul, Peter has an identical twin brother, Harry.<sup>24</sup> Paul perceives Harry in the marketplace and mutters to himself, “Ah, there is Peter.” How are we to construe the representational states of Paul’s mind? This is where the threefold account of representation comes in. On the one hand, Paul has a *de re* idea of his own bodily state. He also has a *de re* idea of Harry, since his idea implicates its external cause (E IIp16). However, because this bodily state has historically been associated with Peter’s presence, Paul takes (*de dicto*) this state to be about Peter. Paul represents Harry, but he does so in a Peterly way, if you will. Non-veridical representations and misjudgments, like this one, abound due to wayward associations of the mind.

The potential for error is compounded by the fact that the images themselves may be obscured or confused, a process that is also explained through the mechanism of association. Distinct images or ideas tend to get bound together by association. For instance, Spinoza describes in some detail the ways in which images can come to be connected (or fused) through being imprinted at the same time (E IIp18). In these largely haphazard ways, we build up associations that reflect the order of our experiences:

[E]ach one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. (E IIp18s)

On the basis of these associations, larger constellations of images and corresponding ideas build up. And associative ties can become so tight as to blur the very boundaries between images: “[I]t is evident from p17c and p18, that the human mind will be able to imagine distinctly, at the same time, as many bodies as there

<sup>22</sup>‘Spontaneous motion’ here means an internally produced motion, not an *uncaused* motion, which would be incoherent, according to Spinoza.

<sup>23</sup>Compare with Descartes’s explanation of what appear to be mistakes of nature (e.g. dropsy and phantom limb pain) in the Sixth Meditation (CSM II, 58–61).

<sup>24</sup>This type of example is suggested in Garrett, “Representation and Misrepresentation.”

can be images formed at the same time in its body. But when the images in the body are completely confused, the mind also will imagine all the bodies confusedly, without any distinction" (*E IIp40s*). The bodily imprint itself becomes indistinct, bearing the traces of countless different objects. The imprint becomes what some commentators have called a "composite image."<sup>25</sup>

With this in mind, let us return to the case of Adam. How is it that he came to believe that lower animals were like him? Based on the preceding discussion of misrepresentation we can offer a couple of suggestions. Perhaps lower animals stimulated the same motions of the fluid parts in Adam's body as humans had in the past. Or perhaps the images of lower animals became so closely conjoined to Adam's images of himself and other humans that a single composite image was formed, leading him to take the lower animals to be like him.<sup>26</sup>

The distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* content enables us to account for many of those passages where Spinoza treats psychological verbs, like 'imagine' and 'represent,' fully extensionally. While it is true that, as Bennett points out, Spinoza is not always as careful about the placement of intensional operators as he should be (*Study*, 174–75), it is equally true that in many cases what appear to be intensional operators are factive verbs. Separating out these senses of representation thus allows us to make sense both of (a) misrepresentation, and (b) contexts where misrepresentation is precluded.

Distinguishing between these senses of representation also helps to shed light on an important and often misunderstood point in Spinoza's epistemology. In several key passages, Spinoza writes as though we have ideas about things of which we evince no awareness. For instance, Spinoza famously claims that nothing happens in the body that is not perceived by the mind (*E IIp12* and *E IIp14dem*). Since we obviously are not *aware* of every change that takes place in the state of our bodies, this claim cries out for further explanation—as does his claim that all minds contain an adequate idea of God (*E IIp47*).<sup>27</sup> This claim becomes especially

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<sup>25</sup>See Della Rocca (*Representation*, 60), who himself is following Francis Haserot, "Spinoza and the Status of Universals," 52. Bennett describes this as a "piling up of images" (*Study*, 39). A metaphor often invoked here is that of a waxen surface that bears two distinct, but now indistinguishable, imprints. While each imprint was formed distinctly, the result is, as Della Rocca puts it, that there are "not two separate images, but rather a single (physical) image that we can meaningfully call *confused* because it combines what would have been two separate images" (*Representation*, 61). This is how universal ideas are formed (see *E IIp40s*). The blending of images can lead one to have ideas the *de dicto* content of which does not accurately capture the *ideatum*.

<sup>26</sup>Della Rocca offers an account of the relationship between association and imitation that is consistent with this: "Typically, I become aware of sadness in *y* by observing *y*'s behavior. In the past, when I was sad I may have behaved similarly and I may have been aware of such behavior on my part. Thus my own experience has established an association between an idea of a certain kind of behavior and a feeling of sadness. When I perceive such behavior in *y*, the general principle of the association of mental states determines that I will also experience sadness" ("Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," 251; Della Rocca, "Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza," 141–42). I offer a slightly different proposal in §2.3.

<sup>27</sup>Bennett concludes that Spinoza does not have the kind of account of selective consciousness that would enable him to defend such a claim: "Since Spinoza's naturalistic programme will not permit *him* to behave in that manner, he has a problem about how to defend his philosophy from a charge of epistemic overload: he must explain how our minds contain so many details of which we are unaware. I am afraid that he did not squarely face this problem and probably did not see its gravity" (*Study*, 174; see also *Study*, 189–90). Against Bennett, I am suggesting that Spinoza's multilayered approach

perplexing when taken in conjunction with the assertion, just four propositions prior, that one who has an adequate idea knows that he has an adequate idea (*E* IIp43 and *E* IIp43dem). If everyone has an adequate idea of God (as Nature) and knows that she has this adequate idea, why were Spinoza's contemporaries so resistant to his metaphysics? And how can there be atheists?<sup>28</sup>

We can at least begin to see how sense might be made of these passages by distinguishing between what is merely perceived by, or objectively contained in, the mind and how we consciously represent—or, more often, *fail to represent*—this information. Our minds contain *de re* content about the state of our bodies, though this content, as apprehended, is too indeterminate for us to form adequate ideas of it (see *E* IIp25–p28).<sup>29</sup> Our minds also adequately contain *de re* content about God's essence, since the idea of any singular thing ultimately implicates God and God's infinite essence, since without God that thing could neither be nor be conceived (*E* Ip15). But even though adequate information in our minds about God is available to us, there is certainly no guarantee that we will *grasp* this adequately. To put it somewhat paradoxically, we can misrepresent something that we represent perfectly accurately. Of course, this is not a paradox once we separate out these two senses of representation. Our *de dicto* grasp of what our minds represent *de re* may not be especially secure.

While the preceding interpretation of Spinoza's account of representation might lend some coherence to Spinoza's epistemology as a whole, it seems, however, only to heighten the difficulty with the second horn of the representation dilemma. After all, if widespread misrepresentation is a possibility, then it is at least conceivable that pitiless persons might fail to imitate the affects of conspecifics due to a representational deficiency. This possibility seems all the more live since we have seen that Adam's *overempathizing* (i.e. imitating the affects of lower animals of a different nature) is a function of his *overrepresenting* likeness (i.e. imagining unlike beings as like oneself) (*E* IVp68s). If one can *overrepresent* likeness, and consequently *overempathize*, why cannot one also *underrepresent* likeness, and consequently *underempathize*? The task of the next section will be to explain

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to representation precisely allows him to admit selective consciousness, even if the full details of this account are not worked out.

<sup>28</sup>Spinoza's own explanation for why people espouse false views of God is that people are accustomed to reasoning through imagination. They form an image of other things derived from the senses and affix the name 'God' to this image. And this image obscures their access to a clear and distinct idea, leading them to confusedly express the contents of their true idea of God (*E* IIp47s). Spinoza could be read as claiming here that we fail to accurately *interpret* or *apprehend* the contents of our own minds, a point that harmonizes well with my analysis. As for *E* IIp43 and *E* IIp43s, what Spinoza actually establishes is, at most, that adequate ideas do not depend on any extrinsic validation, not that one could never doubt (or be confused about) what one has adequate information about at the *de re* level. This is primarily a way of escaping skeptical challenges like the Cartesian Circle problem or the Problem of the Criterion.

<sup>29</sup>Garrett illustrates the indeterminacy of content thusly: "Consider, for example, the change in internal state that occurs when an apple is dropped and becomes slightly bruised. The state is, according to Spinoza, due partly to the nature of the apple, as an individual self-preserving mechanism: partly to the nature of its parts; and partly to the external causes that operated on it. But there are *many* combinations of internal and external causes that could produce this same state or affection; merely from the bruise, one could discern very little about its causes, either internal or external" ("Representation and Consciousness," 21).

why underrepresentation of likeness and underempathizing are not possible. I will follow this with an attempt to explain the resultant asymmetry.

## 2.2 *Avoiding the Second Horn: Ruling out False Negatives*

Having limned how misrepresentation can occur on Spinoza's scheme, it remains for me to show why this is not a serious problem for the *All Thesis*. Specifically, I must show why a consistent failure to pity conspecifics cannot spring from a representational defect. To see this, we must turn, again, to the demonstration of *E* IIIp27, on which the *All Thesis* rests. The full demonstration reads,

The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us (by IIp17s), that is (by IIp16), whose ideas involve the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body. So if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body like the affection of the external body. Consequently, if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect. (IIIp27dem)

There are really just two steps in this proof:

- (1) The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us (by IIp17s), that is (by IIp16), whose ideas involve the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body.
- (2) So if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body like the affection of the external body.

Step (1) straightforwardly articulates the causal (*de re*) account of representation articulated in *E* IIp16dem and *E* IIp17s. Images represent external bodies as present because they are ideas of affections of one's body that implicate the nature of the affecting bodies. But how does one move from the claim that one will represent (*de re*) the nature of an external body to (2) the claim that if the nature of an external body is similar to our own nature, "then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body like the affection of the external body"? Nothing in the demonstration itself supplies an answer to this question.

However, I think that we can reconstruct why Spinoza concludes that beings will mirror the affective states of like beings. As we have noted, the notion of representation that is at work here—*de re* representation—is based on a physico-mechanistic framework. Given this framework, the argument seems to assume something like this: two bodies that are structurally similar will transmit motion in similar ways and will directly communicate motions to one another upon impact. So, just as an inflamed body will, other things being equal, set ablaze an adjacent body of a like nature, and just as a billiard ball imparts its motion to another billiard ball when it strikes it, so too like beings will communicate affective states to one another.

The imitation of affects, at the most basic level, consists in the direct communication of the motion—specifically, the motion that constitutes an affective state—from one body to another.<sup>30</sup> We will refer to this level of imitation as the

<sup>30</sup>One problem that this seems to raise is why it is that certain physical states do not transfer between like bodies, even when causally implicated in an interaction. Suppose for example that I am

“direct transmission of affects” (DTA). This explanation of the imitation of the affects is at once elegant and naturalistic. Indeed, the account of the mechanism that explains affect contagion is surely *too* elegant. Utilizing the notion of *de re* representation, Spinoza writes as though the perception that begets imitation were as simple as two bodies colliding.

But while, as an account of the representational basis of empathy, this is too crude, the basic phenomenon to which he is referring—the transmission of affects without the aid of sophisticated forms of conscious mental representation—is widely accepted and well supported. Contemporary psychologists note that from a very early age, human children, and even other young primates, begin directly mimicking the facial expressions and affects of others.<sup>31</sup>

In a particularly prescient passage, Spinoza seizes on the fact even small children imitate affects in support of his principle: “[W]e find from experience that children, because their bodies are continually, as it were, in a state of equilibrium, laugh or cry simply because they see others laugh or cry. Moreover, whatever they see others do, they immediately desire to imitate it” (*E* IIIp32s). At least at one level, then, pity is a byproduct of the general principle that like bodies will, upon impact, transmit like affects, or states of motion, to one another.

To appreciate what is most interesting about Spinoza’s account of pity and the pitiless person, it might be helpful briefly to compare his view with the views of two of his greatest immediate predecessors: Hobbes and Descartes. Despite having distinct conceptions of pity, Hobbes and Descartes have rather similar things to say about the pitiless person.<sup>32</sup>

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in the perceptual state of noticing that a friend of mine has blue eyes. In this case the blueness of the eyes (or the structural features that account for the blueness of the eyes) is causally responsible for my physical state of which I have a corresponding idea. But despite the fact that I am perceiving this property in a like being—that is, I am directly affected by it—my body apparently does not express *this* property. For challenges along these lines, see Bennett, *Study*, 281; and Della Rocca, “Metaphysical Psychology,” 251. How might Spinoza deal with apparent counterexamples like this? One possibility is that he could accept the counterintuitive implication that my body does in fact tend to imitate the properties of another’s body that are responsible for my perception of blue eyes, while acknowledging that for a host of reasons my eye colors would never actually take on a new shade. Here he could appeal back to his claim in the physical digression that the parts of an individual “can be forced to change with more or less difficulty” (*A*<sub>3</sub>”), depending on their relative hardness or fluidity. Affects, which track the relative force of acting of a body, seem to involve the “fluid parts of our body” and so are easily communicable, whereas eye color, as a structural feature, involves the hard parts of the body. So affects will be transmitted with ease, where structural features will not.

<sup>31</sup>Young infants and nonhuman animals exhibit empathy of this form. For instance, reactive crying among infants—where infants begin to cry upon the sound of another crying—is a well-documented phenomenon (Mark L. Simner, “Newborn’s Response to the Cry of Another Infant”). And both human infants and very young non-human primates have been shown to imitate the facial expressions of others (see Pier Francesco Ferrari and Vittorio Gallese, “Mirror Neurons and Intersubjectivity,” 79). Adult humans are susceptible to this form of (automatic) mimicry well, evidenced in our tendency to yawn in the presence of other yawners, and laugh in a room full of laughter. This level of empathy is hardwired and automatic (see Karsten Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy*). It does not require that the empathizer have a “theory of mind,” understood broadly to mean the capacity to attribute beliefs to others.

<sup>32</sup>In *The Elements of Law* (1640), Hobbes claims, “The contrary of pity is HARDNESS of heart, proceeding either from slowness of imagination, or from extreme great opinion of their own exemption of the like calamity, or from hatred of all, or most men” (53). A few years later, Descartes echoes this characterization in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649): “Those who are insensible to pity comprise only evil-minded and envious people who naturally hate all mankind, or people who are so brutish and so

Both claim that pity often arises through an egocentric process, even if the object of pity is not the self. This is especially pronounced for Hobbes, who regards pity as springing from imagining that the calamity that one is witnessing might befall oneself.<sup>33</sup> Pity, for Hobbes, depends on our ability to *see ourselves* in the sufferer.<sup>34</sup> While Descartes does not endorse the view that pity always arises through an egocentric process, he agrees that it is *often* the case that people are “moved to pity more by the love they bear towards themselves than by the love they have for others.”<sup>35</sup> And, like Hobbes, Descartes thinks that one prominent explanation of why one might fail to pity another is that one simply takes oneself to be immune to such evils. In short, both Hobbes and Descartes think that pity is typically grounded in a sort of assessment of one’s own likelihood of suffering. Pity, thus, involves a rather sophisticated imaginative act whereby one perceives the affective state of another and assesses the likelihood that the circumstances that gave rise to the affect could befall oneself. If the result is that the circumstances *are* relatable, one feels a similar affect; if not, one does not.

For Spinoza, pity is generally *not* tied to self-love through improbable feats of imagination. In this respect, his account of empathy is much more like Humean sympathy.<sup>36</sup> Affect imitation is, at least much of the time, a far more basic phenomenon, consisting as it does in the direct transmission of motion between like bodies. This allows Spinoza to claim that in order to experience pity, it is sufficient that one *is* like the sufferer; one need not also *see oneself* in the sufferer.

According to Spinoza, this form of imitation is automatically triggered *when and only when* one perceives a being that is structurally like oneself.<sup>37</sup> That is, likeness, or structural similarity, is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the direct transmission of affects between causally interacting bodies. One cannot,

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thoroughly blinded by good fortune or rendered desperate by bad fortune, that they do not think any evil could possibly befall them” (CSM I.396). One might also note similarities with great early-modern neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius, who, in *On Constancy*, has his sagacious Stoic protagonist, Langius, say of the pitiless person: “whosoever is not moved with these matters, nor oppressed with the multitude of so many and manifold miseries, must either be very stayed and wise, or else very hardhearted” (43).

<sup>33</sup>See *Elements*, 53; and *Leviathan*, 43.

<sup>34</sup>And in the *Elements* and *Leviathan*, Hobbes repeats the point that the extent of our pity varies according to the likelihood that we could suffer such an outcome. Ultimately, pity arises out of self-love coupled with an act of imagination. In the *Elements*, pity is presented as an expression of concern *for oneself*, while the definition of pity in *Leviathan* suggests that Hobbes comes to regard pity as compassion *for another* rather than as fear for oneself.

<sup>35</sup>CSM I.395. This form of pity arises only in the timid or weak-minded.

<sup>36</sup>See e.g. *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section V, Part II, where Hume maintains that one cannot plausibly explain why utility (of others) pleases us in terms self-love. To explain why utility pleases, even when we are not directly benefited, we must appeal to sympathy. Whereas Hobbes and Descartes seem to suggest that one will feel very little pity for the famished or persecuted if one regards it as highly unlikely that one will suffer from famine or persecution, Spinoza and Hume allow that one can empathize with other humans in radically different circumstances.

<sup>37</sup>The suggestion that the degree of empathy between beings will (generally) co-vary with physical similarity receives some support from contemporary psychology. Linda Mealey and Stuart Kinner, following Stephanie Preston and Frans De Waal (“Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases”), claim that empathy depends on representation, but that representation is (typically) “automatic” in the case of individuals with similar bodies (“The Perception-Action Model,” 42–43). They present the psychopath as one with a “‘different’ nervous system” than the rest of us, a point that Spinoza would apparently embrace.

strictly speaking, imitate the affects of beings of a different nature, because affects themselves are individuated in part in terms of the nature of the being of which they are modes. As Spinoza states at *E IIIp57*, “[E]ach affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other” (*G II.186*). Spinoza concludes from this that the affects of other animals “differ from men’s affects as much as their nature differs from human nature. Both the horse and the man are driven by a lust to procreate; but the one is driven by an equine lust, the other by a human lust. So also the lusts and appetites of insects, fish, and birds must vary” (*E IIIp57s*). This point about how affects are individuated serves as a conceptual, and hence causal, barrier to the transmission of affects. For even if the joyful purr of my cat induces in me a feeling of joy, my joy *cannot be* the same joy experienced by the cat—that joy is specific to its nature.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, the affects of other humans are comprised of motions that other humans are capable of expressing. Indeed, as we saw above, not only are humans capable of inheriting the affects of other humans, they necessarily *will* do so when they are acted upon by like beings, other things being equal. The way that the affective state of a like being will be *de re* registered is in terms of the direct inheritance of this very state. The fact that likeness is a sufficient condition for inheriting the affects of other bodies rules out the possibility of false negatives, or cases where like beings fail to communicate affects. This leads Spinoza to reject the other explanation for pitilessness offered by Hobbes, Descartes, and the influential neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius, namely, that it springs from a “hardness of heart” or “hatred of humanity” (*On Constancy*, 43). According to Spinoza, the Randian egoist, for instance, is not merely hardhearted; she is inhuman.

We must, however, add a couple of provisos to the claim that likeness is a sufficient condition for imitation. First, the direct transmission of affects between like beings will occur only in those circumstances where the interaction is strong enough for the information to be adequately registered. Typically, this will require the satisfaction of some sort of proximity condition. If, for example, I am simply too far away from a person to register her affective state, the fact that I am like her will not guarantee imitation. This adequate registration condition helps to explain why one would not imitate the affects of a man dressed up in a convincing bear suit, to use an example from Michael Della Rocca.<sup>39</sup> The bear suit serves as a buffer to registration; the human being underneath the suit is only indirectly and weakly implicated in this encounter.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup>The idea that an affect is always tied to, and expressive of, a particular kind of thing seems to be grounded in Spinoza’s conception of the relation of immanence. Modes are always caused by and understood through the things of which they are modifications (*E Id5*). While strictly speaking modes are defined as modifications of substance, Spinoza apparently believes that singular things can themselves have modes (affects), and, in some albeit weaker sense, a thing is the immanent cause or ground of its modes. Spinoza’s basic insight here seems to be that the kinds of motion, or affects, that a body is capable of depend on its particular structure. The motions that constitute cat happiness are not motions that human bodies are capable of expressing, and vice versa. Our bodies are not sufficiently like the bodies of cats for such a transmission of affects to take place.

<sup>39</sup>“Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza,” 160.

<sup>40</sup>Consider as a parallel the case of a pedestrian who is struck by a car. Her body and its affections will reflect the nature of the car, rather than the nature of the driver of the car, even though the car is

The second proviso is that the direct transmission of affects will be *observable* only in the absence of countervailing forces. Spinoza turns to small children when he wants to illustrate the DTA because their bodies/minds are less encumbered by predisposing attitudes; they are, as he puts it, in a “state of equilibrium” (EIIIp32s). However, when it comes to most adult human beings, the psychic landscape is full of competing forces, making the predictive power of the DTA rather limited.<sup>41</sup>

But even if antipathetic attitudes obscure the effects of the DTA, the imitation of affects occurs even when the resulting affects are too muted to produce appreciable effects. We see this, for instance, in Spinoza’s claim that the joy that one feels upon witnessing the suffering of another human being whom one hates “can hardly be enduring and without conflict of mind. For (as I shall show immediately in p27) insofar as one imagines a thing like oneself to be affected with an affect of sadness, one must be saddened” (EIIIp23s; cf. EIIIp47 and EIIIp47 dem). The effects of imitation are indelible, even if overpowered. Della Rocca points out that the inescapability of imitation is consistent with the claim that we will form an affect contrary to the affect of one whom we hate by noting that when Spinoza writes, “[I]f we hate a things like us, then [*eatenus*] (by p23) we shall be affected with an affect contrary to its affect, not like it” (*si rem nobis similem odio habeamus, eatenus [per Prop. 23 hujus] contrario affectu cum ipsa afficiemur, non autem simili*) (EIIIp27dem), ‘*eatenus*’ can be read as “to the extent that.” The claim would then be understood as “to the extent that [*eatenus*] x hates y, x is affected by an affect contrary to y’s, not by a like affect” (“Metaphysical Psychology,” 248). And, as Spinoza makes clear (see EIIIp23s and EIIIp47), in cases where one hates another, one feels conflicted: one rejoices in her suffering, but this joy is alloyed with a sense of sadness arising through the DTA.

### 2.3 Accounting for Asymmetry

What remains to be shown now is how one can render compatible the claims of the last two sections, namely, that on the one hand one can misrepresent the

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operated by the human. Similarly, one’s encounter with a bear-suited man will primarily implicate the bear suit, even if it is “operated” by a human. While I cannot here offer a full account of what adequate registration would require, we may conclude, on the basis of examples like this, that it would have to involve the production of a discernible mark or image based on *direct* impact. Spelling the adequate registration condition out in this way might also answer some of the concerns about representational profligacy mentioned in note 16.

<sup>41</sup>Antipathetic dispositions in particular will interfere with the product of the direct transmission of affects: “[I]f we hate a thing like us, then (by p23) we shall be affected with an affect contrary to its affect, not like it, q.e.d.” (EIIIp27dem). The reason for this is that we strive to imagine the destruction of things that bring us sadness, or reduce our power of acting (EIIIp23). So we will rue the enhancement, and rejoice in the diminution, of the power of a hateful or harmful thing. Through association and the formation of *de dicto* representational content, an image of a thing becomes loaded. So whereas at the *de re* level Alice might normally inherit the affective states of Burt, her image of Burt as hateful leads to the inhibition of the natural response, and, indeed, leads to a contrary response. And, of course, the story gets endlessly more complicated once one takes into consideration the myriad sympathies and antipathies formed through the association of images (EIIIp15, IIIp15s, etc.), e.g. Burt may resemble Alice’s beloved nephew, or may be a member of a group toward which she is sympathetically disposed (see EIIIp46). In short, our minds/bodies are never really in a state of equilibrium, so even in response to humans whom we have never met, associations are likely to obscure the DTA.

likeness of another and so can q-imitate the affects of unlike beings (§2.1), and on the other hand one cannot fail to imitate the affective state of beings with similar structures (§2.2). While these two claims help to point the way out of the Representation Dilemma, it is difficult to see how they can be jointly maintained.

In order to make sense of this asymmetry—i.e. that one can overrepresent but not underrepresent likeness—Spinoza must allow that imitation of the affects can arise in some way other than direct (physical) transmission. In §2.1 I argued that Adam's form of q-imitation arises simply from representing (*de dicto*) other animals as like him. Just by thinking that another is like oneself, one will mirror the affects of that other person to some extent. Now, as I argued above, strictly speaking, inter-species affect contagion is impossible. Nevertheless inter-species q-imitation is possible—that is, one can seem to imitate the state that one, mistakenly, takes to be the (imitable) state of a like being. But here the explanation cannot be as simple as the account of DTA (“motion transmission”). In fact, Spinoza never gives us any precise account of how this happens.

We know, however, that when one imitates the affects of an unlike being, there is a misrepresentation involved, and misrepresentations depend on the *de dicto* content of one's idea. We can imagine the account of *overempathizing* running something like this. In the past, when I have witnessed human suffering, I have found that I directly inherit this feeling of suffering. Through this association a pathway is forged between the image of suffering-behavior of other humans and the idea of my own suffering, such that when my image of “human suffering” is elicited, I immediately anticipate my own suffering, which is, by *E IIIp18dem*, to experience a present suffering.<sup>42</sup> Now, when I perceive a bird with a broken wing, flailing its one wing and shrieking, I mistakenly join this image to an image of the suffering of human beings, and the result is that I respond as if I were inheriting the affects of a human: I feel pity for the bird.

On Spinoza's account, one's pity for lower animals is doubly irrational. It is irrational in the sense that it is a passion and all passions are irrational, inadequate ideas (*E IIIp3*; General Definition of Affects, *G II*, 203–4). But it is also irrational in the sense that is predicated on a false judgment that is implicit in my representation, namely, that such a being is sufficiently like me to experience a similar affect. It is grounded in a mis-assimilation of images.<sup>43</sup> For Spinoza, compassion for lower animals is grounded on a mistaken judgment, as “*they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects*” (*EIVp37s1*; my emphasis).

It follows from this that Spinoza thinks that q-imitation can arise *both* from direct transmission between like beings and from merely representing another as like oneself. Spinoza has, as it were, a multilayered account of empathy, which corresponds to his multilayered account of representation. At one level is the direct, mechanistic transmission of motion, and hence emotion, between like beings. This involves only *de re* representation (or registration) of motions; it will

<sup>42</sup>Compare with Della Rocca's account, outlined in note 26.

<sup>43</sup>Spinoza goes well beyond Nagel here (“What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”). We do not know what gorilla-experiences or horse-experiences are like, let alone bat-experiences. And pity that is directed toward them is predicated on a false assumption that they are sufficiently like us to experience suffering like ours.

necessarily track like and only like beings. On the other hand, Spinoza suggests that the imitation of affects can also follow from the *de dicto* representation that another is in an affective state like one that I could experience, which helps to explain more complex forms of empathy than what is enabled by direct contagion, and which opens the door for misplaced imitation.

Spinoza can thus account for (pervasive) false positives without admitting (pervasive) false negatives by relying on the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* content. When Adam imitates other animals it is because he has misrepresented them as like him at the *de dicto* level. However, as we have seen, one cannot fail to indicate (*de re*) another's humanity and in turn inherit the affective state of another human. Even if one fails to represent another human as human at the *de dicto* level—as happens all too often between members of warring ethnic groups for instance—the affective response of hatred or indifference would just mask the natural pity that arises at the *de re* level and persists to some degree (*E IIIp23s* and *E IIIp47*).<sup>44</sup> By showing that we can misrepresent likeness without failing to inherit the affects of like beings, I have indicated how the *All Thesis* can be spared from the Representation Dilemma.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. SOCIALITY AND HUMANITY

#### 3.1 *The Sociality Argument*

In this section, I will offer an additional path to the *All Thesis* that further illuminates Spinoza's conception of humanity, while adding force to the preceding account. I will argue that, for Spinoza, to be human is to possess certain social qualities, qualities that supervene on one's biological constitution. The argument can be presented in just a few steps.

(1) Human beings are beings like us.

One of the more interesting features of *E IIIp27*, where Spinoza advances the imitation of affects thesis, is that it makes no reference to "humans"; rather, it

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<sup>44</sup>We may illustrate Spinoza's account with the following idealized analogy. Our natures are such that—other things being equal—when we consume caffeine, our heart rates, blood pressure rates, and synaptic activities are altered. One result is that we generally feel more alert. But even if we are not aware of this at the conscious level, our bodies have been stimulated; the effects of the caffeine are objectively registered. Now, there is some reason to believe that these effects can be stimulated—to a lesser degree—by simply *believing* that one consumed a caffeinated beverage. This is, of course, an example of the well-known placebo effect. That is, one can, through misrepresenting the object that one has consumed, be stimulated in ways that resemble the effects of caffeine. Stimulation can result *either* from the objective representation (via bodily traces) of a stimulant in one's system *or* through the *de dicto* representation that one has been acted on by such an agent (see, e.g. C. Anderson and J. A. Horne, "Placebo Response to Caffeine Improves Reaction Time Performance in Sleepy People").

<sup>45</sup>It would seem that on the basis of this multilayered approach, Spinoza could argue that the strength of an imitated affect might depend in part on whether it is based solely on one form of representation, or whether one represents likeness at *both* levels. In other words, one might necessarily imitate conspecifics insofar as one will always accurately represents likeness at the *de re* level (assuming adequate registration, etc.). However, unless one also represents likeness—and thereby imitates the affects—at the *de dicto* level, the imitated affect might be rather weak and easily overpowered. Thanks to Michael Della Rocca for suggesting something along these lines.

says that “we” will imitate the affective states of beings “like us.” This formulation is felicitous for a couple of reasons. First, it is evidently consistent with Spinoza’s naturalism. As the demonstration makes clear, the imitation of affects is a law that holds of all beings—it is not something that separates humans from the rest of nature. Second, it allows Spinoza later in the *Ethics* to speak of “human beings” as a loose set of beings who are structurally “like him”—the relation of “likeness” admitting of degrees—rather than a set of beings with a shared substantial form or essence.<sup>46</sup>

Jonathan Bennett, who is generally quite parsimonious when it comes to praise, refers to this move as a “brilliant metaphysical *tour de force*” that enables Spinoza to “calmly handle borderline cases” (*Study*, 280). However, as Bennett is quick to point out (*Study*, 281), Spinoza does not spell out why we should be similar to all and only humans. In many important respects, I am very similar to other primates, and in many other respects, I am quite unlike many other human beings. Why should we understand the category of beings “like us” as mapping onto species lines, as the *All Thesis* suggests?

This raises a more general problem concerning Spinoza’s approach to classification. On one prevalent reading (see note 46), Spinoza wants to replace the idea that nature is differentiated according to substantial forms with the view that nature clusters into bodies with relatively similar structures; yet he deploys the notion of the “human being” as though it were a rigidly bound class. Why is he keen to draw a demarcation line between human and inhuman, especially given his denial of substantial forms and his insistence that human beings are not an *imperium in imperio* (*E* III Preface)? I will refer to this as the demarcation problem. We will return to this problem in a moment. For now, let us continue to unpack this notion of “like us”:

- (2) Things are like us to the extent and only to the extent that they agree with our natures.

Even if human beings do not share a single essence, our natures can agree to a large extent. Unfortunately, “agreement in nature” does not define itself.<sup>47</sup> So, if

<sup>46</sup>The question of whether Spinoza believes that there is such a thing as a “human nature” that is shared by all particular humans has been the subject of lively scholarly debate. The evidence is ambiguous. Spinoza frequently does suggest that humans share a common nature (see e.g. *E* Ip8s2), that they “agree entirely according to their essence” (*E* Ip17s2). However, he also cites “Man” as an example of a universal, or a confused idea that arises only due to limitations of the human imagination (*E* IIp40s1; see also *E* IV Preface). And his very definition of essence as “that which, being given, the things is (NS: also) necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily (NS: also) taken away” (*E* IId2) seems to rule out the possibility of multiple things sharing an essence, since it makes essence both a necessary and *sufficient* criterion for the thing. And if multiple things share an essence, positing the essence need not be sufficient for positing any one of the things. For a thorough presentation and original interpretation of the relevant texts, along with a helpful survey of the current French literature on the topic, see Julien Busse, *Le Problème de l'essence de l'homme chez Spinoza*. For a provocative, if not unproblematic, account of how Spinoza might reconcile “human nature” with nominalism, see Diane Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Ethical Doctrine and the Unity of Human Nature.” While I am increasingly becoming convinced that Spinoza actually *does* believe that humans share one and the same formal essence, in what follows I suggest that he has the resources for providing a pragmatic basis for demarcation even if he is not a realist.

<sup>47</sup>Nor can we rely on external appearances as a guide to one’s internal structure. Outwardly, the Spanish poet (*E* IVp39s) or the suicidal person (*E* IVp20s) might appear to maintain their identity

we want to pick out which beings agree with our nature and which do not, we are going to need a further criterion, which we get in *E IVp31c*:

- (3) Things agree with one another's nature to the extent and only to the extent that they are useful to one another.<sup>48</sup>

Half of the biconditional—namely, the claim that to the extent that things agree with one another, they must be useful to one another—is just a restatement of *E IVp31*.<sup>49</sup> The other half—namely, the claim that things can be useful to one another only to the extent that they agree with one another—follows from the assumption that all things agree with one another, disagree with one another (i.e. are contrary to one another), or are simply different from one another (*E IVp31dem*). To the extent they disagree, they restrain one another (*E IVp31dem*), and to the extent that they are different from one another, they neither aid nor restrain one another (*E IVp29*). So, things aid one another only to the extent that they agree in their natures. This allows us to conclude that utility can be taken as an indicator of essential agreement. From the preceding three theses we may infer

- (4) Things are human if and only if they are *sufficiently* useful to us.

It is no mere contingent fact then that “to man . . . there is nothing more useful than man” (*E IVp18s*); it is an *a priori* truth. As Spinoza puts it in *E IVp35c*, “[W]hat is most useful to man is what most agrees with his nature (by *E p31c*), that is (as is known through itself), man.”

So far, so good. However, a couple of clarificatory notes are in order. First, as the formulation of (4) indicates, “human” is a threshold concept: to be human is to cross some threshold of agreement with, or utility for, other humans. Of course, this way of formulating the criterion for being human, or being identified as human, sounds circular—humans are those beings that are most useful to other humans. However, this need not be seen as a problem, provided that we do not think that there must be some antecedent paradigm of humanity. All that is required is coherence: the set of humans is just a set of beings with overlapping properties. Moreover, if we wish to find some paradigm against which to measure who counts as human, we need not look any further than ourselves, since, after all, humans are just those things that are (sufficiently) “like us.”

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despite the fact that they have, according to Spinoza, undergone a change in their nature. And the pitiless person appears to be human, but, *ex hypothesi*, is not.

<sup>48</sup>From this it follows that the more a things agrees with our nature, the more useful, or better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature” (*E IVp31c*). In the appendix to Part IV, he adds, “[I]f [one] lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged” (G II.268).

<sup>49</sup>Admittedly, the demonstration of *E IVp31* is somewhat problematic. It depends on reading *E IIIp6* as entailing that things that agree with our nature must aid our preservation. *E IIIp6* supports this reading only if (a) “striving to persevere in its being [*esse*]” entails striving to preserve one's nature and (b) striving to preserve one's nature entails striving to preserve the individuals that share the same nature. It is difficult to see how *IIIp6* and its demonstration could possibly support this reading. Moreover, as Michael Della Rocca has pointed out, (a) and (b) seem to stand in tension with one another, since (a) is made plausible only if a thing's being is identical with its nature, in which case essences are unique to individuals, whereas (b) lends support to *E IVp31* based on the assumption that multiple individuals can share an essence (“Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza,” 128–134).

Now, it might seem strange to judge likeness on the basis of utility. Can openers, allergy medications, tomato plants, reading glasses, and Internet search engines are quite useful to many of us—indeed, they might appear to be more useful than other humans, at times—but their utility hardly seems to make them human-like. It is worth noting, though, that the utility of such objects—whether they are natural or artifactual—is derived largely from the utility of other human beings. Such objects might not exist, and certainly would not be as useful to us, if there were not human societies. We ought to recognize, then, that other humans not only offer friendship, aid, and security, but they also make possible a structure from which a great many other conveniences may be derived; humans are thus far more useful than any other type of being. And the superior utility of other human beings finds its fullest expression in our ability to form larger social bodies. With this in mind, it seems not unreasonable to conclude

- (5) Things are sufficiently useful to us to be regarded as human (see [4]) if and only if they are capable of entering into society with us.

Otherwise put, sociality with things “like us” is a necessary and sufficient condition for being human. This insight stands behind Spinoza’s qualified endorsement of the Aristotelian view that man is by nature a social animal.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2 *Sociality and the Imitation of Affects*

If we take “human” then to be a placeholder for “one with whom we can form a larger social body,” we can then push the analysis further to ask what the necessary conditions are for sociality. One’s capacity for integration into a larger social body, and in turn one’s utility to others, comes in degrees.<sup>51</sup> At one end of the spectrum are those who are perfectly rational. To the extent that two human beings are rational, they will agree with one another’s nature (*EIVp35*) and will aid one another’s striving.<sup>52</sup> A society of free men is, of course, an ideal: it is not possible for any of us to be rational all of the time (*EIVp2–p4*). And, while some of us will be more rational than others, Spinoza thinks that even those who are largely irrational agree with one another sufficiently to provide aid unrivalled by anything else in nature. We derive “many more advantages than disadvantages” (*EIVp35s*) from even the society of largely irrational humans. This is a point that is stated forcefully in the *Tractatus Politicus*, where Spinoza notes that despite the fact that “men are led by blind desire more than reason” (*TP2/5*), entering a larger social body with even such irrational beings is essential to the preservation and augmentation of our power (*TP2/13, 2/15*). But what makes sociality a possibility? What are the minimal (psychological) conditions for being a part of human society?

At the very least, one must be capable of having one’s behavior regulated by the laws and mores that bind a community. This requires that one be responsive

<sup>50</sup>See *EIVp35s2*; and *TP2/15*.

<sup>51</sup>See, for instance, *EIVp35* and *IVp35dem*, where Spinoza is quite clear that agreement is a matter of degree and those who are rational are most in agreement.

<sup>52</sup>A community of free, or fully rational, human beings would constitute the strongest social union imaginable, one in which all parties regard as good those things that further one’s understanding and in which all pursue this good for one another (*EIVp37dem, IVp26*).

to rewards and punishments, without which laws can hardly be effective. One who is unmoved by the punishments or rewards of the state is to be regarded as “a fool or madman” (*TP* 3/8). Such a person evidently has a different nature than the rest of us.

This helps to explain why Spinoza regards those who have no knowledge of God either from reason or revelation as “inhuman” and “brutish” (*TTP* 5/77). Such beings will not acknowledge the “dogmas of universal faith” described in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, chapter 14, about which Spinoza writes, “[I]f any of these is removed, obedience too is gone.” (*TTP* 14/183). Those who are godless are inhuman, as their actions are not regulable by civil laws in the way the rest of our actions are.<sup>53</sup>

It should be noted, though, that formal (legal) regulation constitutes only the ground floor of social regulation. In order to form a genuinely harmonious society, we must be responsive to one another’s interests or attitudes, to some degree. This is where imitation comes in. The imitation of affects explains our responsiveness to one another’s emotional states. Without this responsiveness, without the capacity to be affected by the states of others, humans would not strive to win the approval of others. Just two propositions after introducing the imitation of affects thesis, Spinoza uses this thesis to show that “we shall strive to do also whatever we imagine men to look on with joy, and on the other hand, we shall be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to” (*E* IIIp29). Spinoza calls this striving to please others “ambition” (*E* IIIp29s). When we believe that others are saddened by our actions and blame us for their performance, we feel shame (*pudor*) (*E* IIIp30s; Definitions of the Affects, XXXI, G II.199). When others express what appears to be praise or approbation, we feel self-esteem (*acquiescentia in se*) (*E* IIIp30s; Definitions of the Affects, XXV, G II.196). Concern with others’ judgments plays an important role in our motivational economy, and such concern is explained by the mechanism of imitation: we inherit at least a modicum of the scorn or affection for ourselves that others feel toward us.<sup>54</sup>

Now, shame and guilt, as forms of sadness, are not good in themselves; and many sources of shame or guilt may be entirely superstitious or absurd. Still, in the absence of reason, the capacity for these emotions—facilitated by the imitation of affects—is essential to sociability, that is, by (5) above, to one’s humanity. Untouched by shame or concern for esteem, one would be indifferent to many of the customs that unify society. As Spinoza puts it, “[B]ecause men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects, humility and repentance, and in addition, hope and fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage. So since men must sin, they ought rather to sin in that direction. If weak-minded men were all

<sup>53</sup>The notion that atheists could not be moral was, of course, a typical belief at the time. This is why Spinoza was so eager to dispel the charge of atheism (see Letters 30 and 43).

<sup>54</sup>Alexandre Matheron famously argues that by the time he began to compose the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* Spinoza had fully developed his account of the passions, which enabled him to explain the emergence of the state as a byproduct of natural affective forces, including, most importantly, the imitation of affects (*Individu et Communauté chez Spinoza*, esp. 307–30 and 150–79).

equally proud, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, *how could they be united or restrained by any bonds?*" (*E* IVp54s; my emphasis).<sup>55</sup>

The imitation of affects enables humans to act in a coordinated fashion even without the aid of reason or the iron fist of the law. This is a point that Spinoza's contemporary, and sometimes critic,<sup>56</sup> Lambert van Velthuysen made in moving from Hobbesian premises to more liberal, republican conclusions. Velthuysen claimed that the impulse for self-preservation (*conservatio sui*) naturally leads one to accommodate one's behavior to the social mores of one's community.<sup>57</sup> According to Velthuysen, shame ( *pudor*) often leads one to moderate one's behavior to suit the community, even in the absence of laws (both civil and natural).<sup>58</sup> Spinoza takes this basic Velthuysenian point and gives us a deeper explanation of the mechanism through which the attitudes of others enter into our attitudes and so regulate our behavior. The reason why the impulse toward *conservatio sui* results in sociability is that, through imitation, we imitate or internalize the attitudes of others, and, to that extent, modify our behavior accordingly.

The imitation of the affects, thus, serves as the foundation of human sociability. This should not be too surprising, considering that, as Bennett points out, the imitation of the affects (in *E* IIIp27) is "the source of the entire interpersonal element in Part 3, that is, of the eighteen propositions about how people relate to people."<sup>59</sup> It is the foundation for compassion, ambition, and even emulation

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<sup>55</sup>See also his claim that "like pity, shame, though not a virtue, is still good insofar as it indicates, in the man who blushes with shame, a desire to live honorably. In the same way pain is said to be good insofar as it indicates that the injured part is not yet decayed. So though a man who is ashamed of some deed is really sad, he is still more perfect than one who is shameless, who has no desire to live honorably" (*E* IVp58s). Similar remarks can be found in the discussion of shame and shamelessness (of which Spinoza writes, "we need only its definition to see its deformity") in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (Part II, chapter XII).

<sup>56</sup>Velthuysen wrote a treatise that appeared in 1680, after Spinoza's death, entitled *Tractatus de Cultu Naturali, et Origine Moralitatis*, in which he announces his critical intentions on the title page: *Oppositus Tractatus Theologico-Politico [sic] et Operi Posthumo B.D.S.* See also Letter 42.

<sup>57</sup>Lambert van Velthuysen, *Dissertatio*, Section XX. Velthuysen claims that there are many forms of behavior, such as public nudity, public urination, indecorous discourse, etc., which, while not contrary to Natural Law, are contrary to Natural Decency. Nevertheless, strangely enough, what is naturally decent seems to vary somewhat between cultures: "Whoever leaves naked those Parts of his Body, which according to the *custom* of the *Country* ought to be cover'd, offends against *Natural Decency* whenever he *exposes* them; which those who live in another *part* of the *World*, where that *custom* doth not obtain, may do without any *Offense* or *Absurdity*" (51). But despite the fact that decency is, to a certain degree, culturally relative, compliance with one's own country's standard of decency is enjoined by self-love: "*Offenses* against the *natural Decency* are *evil*, because they are against the primary and fundamental *Law of Self-preservation*; for no *Man* can be ignorant, how much it is in his *Interest* not to be the object of any *Man's Contempt*; but those that are *Impudent* and *Immodest*, are universally *scorn'd* and *contemn'd*" (56).

<sup>58</sup>*Dissertatio*, 55–56. For a more thorough discussion of this feature of Velthuysen's thought, see Hans Blom, *Causality and Morality in Politics: The Rise of Naturalism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Political Thought*, 120–28.

<sup>59</sup>*Study*, 282. For a rich discussion of how the imitation of the affects contributes to human sociability and subserves the state, see Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et Communauté chez Spinoza*, esp. 150–79. I agree with much of Matheron's analysis, though I think he underestimates the importance of imitation in a well-organized state (e.g. 156–57). And while it might be, in some sense, trivially true that "*la pitié joue donc, dans la communauté humaine, un rôle régulateur qui varie en raison inverse de la stabilité de cette communauté elle-même*" (158)—in the same trivial sense that a spell-check function will be more useful for a poor speller than it will be for a good speller—it is misleading in the sense that, as Spinoza makes clear in *TP*, chapter 1, a well-organized state begins with humans as they actually are,

(*aemulatio*)—our tendency to desire objects that others desire (Definitions of the Affects, XXXIII, G II, 200)—all of which contribute to some degree to social coordination.<sup>60</sup>

We are thus led to conclude that

- (6) For those who are not guided by reason, the imitation of (other humans') affects is a necessary condition for sociality.

Taking (6) in conjunction with (5), we get

- (7) For those who are not guided by reason, the imitation of (other humans') affects is a necessary condition for being human.

By way of a very different route than the one that Spinoza cites in *E IVp50s*, we have arrived once more at the *All Thesis*: one who is neither rational nor imitative of other humans appears to be inhuman.

### 3.3 *The Significance of the Sociality Argument for the All Thesis*

What does the sociality argument add to the direct proof of the *All Thesis*? One thing it does is situate the argument in a somewhat more familiar light. There is a history of portraying the social outcast as inhuman that goes back at least as far as Aristotle.<sup>61</sup> And the further claim that the pitiless person is inhuman because she is impervious to social regulation has been advanced by philosophers after Spinoza, including David Hume<sup>62</sup> and, more recently, P. F. Strawson.<sup>63</sup> Strawson claims that when we imagine someone who is immune to reactive attitudes, which are themselves empathically rooted, “we imagine something far below or far above the level of our common humanity—a moral idiot or saint . . . these types of attitude alike have common roots in our human nature and our membership of human communities” (“Freedom and Resentment,” 58). What distinguishes Spinoza’s claim from Strawson’s is that for Strawson ‘human’ is treated not so much as a biological category as it is a moral and social category: ‘inhuman’ means something like “inhumane.” By contrast, for Spinoza, it is one’s antecedent inhumanity that explains why she is inhumane. So, the sociality argument helps to place the *All Thesis* into a recognizable tradition, but it does so without abandoning what is most radical about the claim, namely, that the failure to imitate betrays a real ontological difference.

The sociality argument also helps us to answer the demarcation problem mentioned above. We will recall that the problem is that Spinoza seems to deny that

including their natural tendency to imitate. So, whereas Matheron claims that pity is “*inutile dans les sociétés idéales que décrit le Traité Politique*” (158), I would argue that the ideal regimes described there are, oxymoronic though it might sound, realistic ideals, ideals that are based on the natural imitation of affects (ambition, envy, shame, etc.).

<sup>60</sup>It should be conceded that imitation can also breed certain forms of antisocial passions such as envy and resentment. As Spinoza puts it, “[F]rom the same property of human nature from which it follows that men are compassionate, it also follows that the same men are envious” (*E IIp32s*). But even if we acknowledge the ways that the imitation of affects may contribute to social friction, it remains apparent, still, that Spinoza thinks that, since most people are not moved by reason, imitation is, on the whole, highly conducive to social unity.

<sup>61</sup>See Aristotle, *Politics* I.2, 1253a2–4.

<sup>62</sup>*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section IX, Part I, 275.

<sup>63</sup>Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment.”

species are rigidly bound, and he explicitly rejects the separation of human beings from the rest of nature. The question then is why he is keen to distinguish the human and the inhuman. We may see now that one of the reasons why Spinoza is concerned to draw this distinction is just that he is interested in determining which beings are capable of forming larger social communities with us, thereby aiding our power of acting.<sup>64</sup> Spinoza might not be particularly interested in taxonomy, but he is interested in determining how powerful social bodies are formed, and the imitation of affects plays a critical role here. Those beings with whom we can form larger social communities have a unique status in relation to us: “[A]part from men we know no singular thing in Nature whose mind we can enjoy, and which we can join to ourselves in friendship, or some kind of association” (E IV Appendix XXVI; G II.273).

We have important moral and political interests, then, in separating the human from the inhuman. Humans are uniquely valuable to us and thus have a special moral standing in relation to us. As for the inhuman, Spinoza makes it clear in the continuation of the preceding passage that we owe them no special moral consideration: “And so whatever there is in Nature apart from men, the principle of seeking our own advantage does not demand that we preserve it. Instead, it teaches us to preserve or destroy it according to its use, or to adapt it to our use in any way whatsoever” (E IV Appendix Cap. XXVI; G II.273). The message for the pitiless is clear: there is a considerable downside to falling on the wrong side of the demarcation line.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>So, for instance, if hair color or blood type were significant indicators of one’s utility for others they might well be species-defining properties. However, they are not. What is crucial is whether or not one is capable of entering into socio-moral communities with others.

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