

Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations

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1. Introduction¹

Much has been written about two aspects of Spinoza's account of the mind-body relation – namely, about his prohibition on *causal* relations between minds and bodies, and the *identity* of certain pairs of minds and bodies. What has been less studied by comparison is the *intentional* ('of' or 'about') relation that, according to Spinoza, every human mind essentially has to some existing human body.² A prospective investigator might not be encouraged by the fact that Margaret Wilson deemed this part of Spinoza's system “mysterious”, and Jonathan Bennett thought it grounded on “deep” assumptions that Spinoza “does not discuss” but which simply “cannot be true”.³

For Spinoza, achieving “cognition of the human mind” is a supreme goal of philosophy (E2pref).⁴ And one of his fundamental theses about the mind is that every human mind is essentially an idea of an existing body. The basic aim of this paper is to clarify how Spinoza understands this intentional aspect of the mind-body relation insofar as this amounts to an account of the essential constitution of the human mind – an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of there being a human mind.

1 For invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I'm grateful to John Carriero, Olli Koistinen, John Morrison, and Justin Steinberg; to the audiences at UCLA, Yonsei University, and Ghent University; and to the students of the Collegium Spinozanum at the University of Groningen, and of Justin Steinberg's graduate seminar at CUNY.

2 Though see Garrett 2008, 2013, 2016, Koistinen 2016.

Spinoza himself talks in terms of ideas being “of”, “affirming” or “expressing” something. An idea “affirms” and “expresses” what it is 'of' (cf. Garrett 2009:288). I will sometimes use “represent” as a synonym for Spinoza's “be an idea of”. Throughout I will also use “concept”, “idea”, and “thought” interchangeably.

On the sense in which there can be a shared human kind in Spinoza's philosophy, see e.g. Carriero 2011, Hübner 2015, Newlands 2015, D. Steinberg 1987.

3 Wilson 1999:156, Bennett 1984:§37.3.

4 Throughout I translate *cognitio/cognoscere* as “cognition/cognize” rather than “knowledge/knowing”, given the normative associations of the latter pair of terms (Spinozistic *cognitio* can be false).

I rely on the following abbreviations for Spinoza's works: E=*Ethics*, Ep=Letters, KV=*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-being*, NS=*De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S.* (a 1677 Dutch edition of Spinoza's writings), TIE=*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. In citing from *Ethics* I use the following abbreviations: app=appendix, ax=axiom, c=corollary, def=definition, d=demonstration, pref=preface, p=proposition, s=scholium.

Prima facie, Spinoza's view seems to be that human minds exist *because* their essential intentional objects – human bodies – do. So one of the tasks of the paper will be to determine whether the existence of an essential intentional relation between human minds and bodies indeed commits Spinoza to an ontological and explanatory *dependence* of human minds on bodies,⁵ and thus to a version of materialism about the human mind.⁶ Several commentators have drawn some version of this conclusion.⁷ This is how Curley, for example, opens a chapter entitled “Spinoza's Materialism”:

it is the essence of the human mind to related to something else... Its essence is to be an idea of that existing body. If we conceive of it as being capable of existing apart, we must be conceiving of it inadequately... To understand the mind we must understand the body... In spite of all the parallelistic talk, the order of understanding never proceeds from mind to body.⁸

Likewise, Bennett notes that what Spinoza endorses is not a “mere parallelism, a matching of facts about the body with facts about the mind. What Spinoza says...is asymmetrical, with the body having primacy”.⁹ In a similar vein Nadler concludes,

Spinoza does have materialist tendencies insofar as the nature of the human mind and its functions are grounded in the nature of the human body. Perhaps we can call it an explanatory materialism, without thereby implying that mental phenomena or events are *causally* explained by physical phenomena or events.¹⁰

Finally, here is Koistinen:

5 By “explaining” I will mean providing adequate (veridical) cognition.

I will use the locutions “minds depend on bodies” and “mental properties depend on physical properties” interchangeably since in Spinoza's ontology minds are also properties (of substance).

6 Spinoza has been characterized as a “materialist” also for other reasons; here I'm interested in this assessment only insofar as it hinges a mind's *intentional* relation to a body.

7 See e.g. Ayers 2007:76; Barker 1938:159; Bennett 1984:§30.2; Curley 1988:74-5, 78; 2016:§1; Koistinen 2009:168-9, 182; Malinowski-Charles 2011:126; Matson 1971:577; Nadler 2008:597; Rice (Spinoza endorses a “representational dependence” of minds on bodies; “The content of an idea is a relation which it has to noncognitive entities” [1999:41-2]); D. Steinberg 2000:35-6.

8 Curley 1988:74-5, 78.

9 Bennett 1984:§30.

10 Nadler 2008:597, italics in the original. Nadler is discussing E2p13s and E5p39s but interprets the dependence expressed therein as grounded in “parallelism” (586). In fact however both passages describe the mind's intentional relation to a body (in E2p14, which grounds E539s via E4p338, it is a question of what the mind “perceives”).

that thinking does not produce objects of its own is a fundamental feature in Spinoza's philosophy of mind... Any idea of an object of an attribute X is ontologically dependent on the attribute of X... [I]deas are individuated through their other-attribute objects.¹¹

So understood, Spinoza would fundamentally disagree with Descartes that we can conceive of ourselves as thinking things without also, and indeed more fundamentally, conceiving of something extended.¹² Call such readings of Spinoza's account of the human mind 'Materialist Readings'.

As we shall see in what follows, *prima facie* at least Materialist Readings find plenty of straightforward textual support. One may also of course have independent reasons for cheering on Spinoza's apparent insight that there can be no human mind without a brain. Nonetheless, once we take a more comprehensive view of Spinoza's philosophy as a whole, Materialist Readings begin to appear much less plausible. This is because, as we shall see in more detail below, they violate some fundamental commitments of Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology. In particular, they violate two basic constraints Spinoza places on all possible cognition: one, that cognition be of a thing's *causes*, and two, that only *like things* explain one another (only ideas can explain ideas, bodies bodies, etc).

As this hopefully makes clear, what is at stake in investigating the intentional element of Spinoza's account of the mind are thus not merely the details of Spinoza's account of the mind, or of mind-body relations. What is also at stake is the internal consistency of Spinoza's philosophical system in the *Ethics*.

The paper that follows has two parts, a negative and a positive one. In the first, negative part I show that Materialist Readings are inconsistent with Spinoza's other major epistemological and metaphysical commitments, and argue that this gives us a definitive reason to reject such readings, together with their central conclusion that, on Spinoza's view, human minds depend, ontologically and explanatorily, on bodies. In the second, positive part of the paper I argue for an alternative interpretation of Spinoza's account of the human mind, as a plausible alternative that does not suffer from the weaknesses of Materialist Readings. Those unconvinced by my positive proposal will, I hope, have been convinced at least by my case for the non-viability of Materialist Readings.

Here, in a nutshell, is my positive proposal. It is an incontrovertible textual fact that Spinoza appeals to physical properties in explaining the essential constitution of the human mind. However, contrary to what is suggested by Materialist Readings, such appeals should not be understood as references to some extra-mental reality. Instead, I will argue, they should be understood as references to the body as the *immanent* essential intentional object of the human mind, that is, to the body *as represented* (or, to use Spinoza's scholastic terminology, the body as merely "objectively real"). So understood, Spinoza's account of the human mind in its essential intentional body-directedness does

¹¹ Koistinen 2016:§1.

¹² Cf. Ayers 2007:76.

not commit him to an explanatory or ontological dependence of minds on some extra-mental reality, and thus also does not undermine his larger epistemological and metaphysical commitments.

Finally, let me say a few words about how this paper is organized. In the next section (§2) I outline how, within a Cartesian context, Spinoza understands the essential nature of minds, and what constraints he places on minds' relations to bodies. Next, I present the case for Materialist Readings of Spinoza's position (§3), before demonstrating that Spinoza's basic epistemological and metaphysical commitments call such readings into question (§4). I then survey two plausible but ultimately inadequate alternatives to Materialism (§5). Finally, the last section of the paper contains the positive view I wish to put forward (§6).

2. Spinoza on the essence of minds: a brief survey

There are five doctrines that will be particularly salient to our inquiry into Spinoza's account of the essential constitution of the human mind.¹³ Some of these doctrines are general metaphysical and epistemological principles; others are claims specifically about the human mind. Since there exists a rough scholarly consensus about these doctrines, for the most part I will assume them as given in the paper. I will also not attend to all five in equal measure, but limit myself to discussing only what is necessary for our purposes.

The first doctrine I want to mention is

(1) *Reduction*: Minds are just more or less complex ideas.¹⁴

In line with Spinoza's nominalism, there is nothing more to a Spinozistic “mind” than ideas, that is, particular acts of “affirmation” or “negation” (E2p49). Such a mind has no faculties, no general powers, and no underlying substratum to which idea-acts might belong (E2p15, E2p48-9). Thus, in particular, the “idea that constitutes the formal being [*esse*] of the human Mind is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas” (E2p15).

The second doctrine salient to our inquiry is the following basic premise of Spinoza's epistemology:

(2) *Causal Cognition*: All cognition of a thing is cognition of its causes.

This is how most interpreters today gloss the axiom, “Cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause” (E1ax4, transl. alt.): if *x* is conceived or cognized

¹³ In this paper I explore only Spinoza's account of the *essential* constitution of human minds. I do not offer a general account of Spinozistic ideas, including the sensory ideas that human minds acquire in the course of their existence. It is in this circumscribed sense of mind-as-essentially-constituted that I use the term “mind” throughout.

¹⁴ Cf. Della Rocca 1996:41-2; Parkinson 1954:102-3; Renz 2011:102; Taylor 1937:148.

For criticisms of *Reduction* see e.g. Barker 1938:418; Leibniz 1989:277; D. Steinberg 2000:34; Taylor 1937:148ff; Wilson 1999:126ff.

through y , then x is also caused by y .¹⁵

The third doctrine I want to draw our attention to is the aforementioned claim that that only like things can explain one another – only ideas can explain other ideas, and only bodies other bodies. Another way to think about this doctrine is in terms of an explanatory closure, or self-sufficiency, of basic kinds of being (“attributes”); hence the doctrine is often referred to as Spinoza’s “attribute barrier”:

(3) *Barrier*: Nothing mental can be explained by anything physical, and vice versa.¹⁶

Here is how Spinoza himself describes how this principle of explanatory self-sufficiency bears on “modes”, that is, on dependent or non-substantial beings, the ontological category that includes all minds and bodies:

each attribute is conceived through itself without any other [*per se absque alio concipitur*] (by 1p10). So the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one [*conceptum sui attributi involvunt non autem alterius*] (E2p6d)

Spinoza’s own glosses in the *Ethics* suggest that for an attribute to be “conceived through itself” means that the “cognition” or the “form[ing] a concept” of this attribute does not “require [*indigere*]” the cognition or the concept of a different attribute (E1def3, E1p2, E1p8s2 [II/50]).¹⁷ For example, cognition of the fundamental nature of physical reality (i.e., cognition of the attribute of extension) cannot, by *Barrier*, be necessary for the cognition of the attribute of thought. Like Descartes, Spinoza regards <thought> and <extension> as incommensurate conceptual primitives.¹⁸

For our purposes, the most important part of the above passage is Spinoza’s assertion that modes of each attribute (thus also particular minds and bodies) “involve” the concept of their own attribute alone. For instance, any mind will “involve” <thought>, but not <extension>. What exactly does that mean? Scholars usually gloss *involvere* as implying or implicating,¹⁹ but in fact Spinoza uses this term to denote a broader range of conceptual relations. *Involvere* can indeed mean implication (as when

15 Cf. e.g. Della Rocca 1996:11; Garrett 2002:136; Jarrett 1978:20, 29, 1991:472; Melamed 2013:89-90; Newlands 2010:475-6; Wilson 1999:162n27.

For the debate over the scope of E1ax4, see e.g. Morrison 2015, Wilson 1999.

16 See e.g. Aquila 1978:275; Bennett 1984:§19.2; Della Rocca 1996:10, 2002:18, 2008:43; Jarrett 1991:466-9; Melamed 2013:84; Newlands 2012:41; Shein 2009:1.3.1; D. Steinberg 2000:33; Taylor 1947:150. For dissent see Koistinen 1996, Hübner-MS.

17 Presumably this is a condition on *adequate* cognition.

On “conceiving through” see also e.g. Lin 2006:145; Morrison 2013; Newlands 2012.

18 See e.g. *Sixth Meditation*, AT7.78.

19 E.g. Gabbey 1996. For another proposal, see J. Steinberg 2011.

God's essence “involves” existence [E1def1]) but it also describe cases where the concepts in question merely have something “in common [*commune cum se invicem habere*]” and can “be understood through [*intelligere per*] one another” (E1ax5). This is precisely the case of modes of one and the same attribute. For example, <paper> and <scissors>, both concepts of corporeal things, have something “in common” in the relevant sense (namely, <extension> as their fundamental explanans), and so can also be “understood through” one another (and through <extension>), just as God's existence can be “understood through” his essence. In contrast, any idea and any movement, being modes of two different attributes and so radically different kinds of things, have “no common measure [*ratio*]” (E5pref; II/280), no shared attribute-concept that could function as a common explanans. In short, for Spinoza conceptual “involvement” is a basic condition of intelligibility: a condition of the possibility of putting things into an intelligible relation.

Since for Spinoza only what is intelligible is also metaphysically possible (E1ax2, E1p11altd2), *causal* relations will be possible only among modes of the same attribute. And so Spinoza concludes that the “Body cannot determine the Mind to thinking, and the Mind cannot determine the Body to motion, to rest or to anything else” (E3p2), clarifying in the demonstration that in the proposition “determination” has a causal sense. This unintelligibility of causal relations between minds and bodies is precisely what dooms, in Spinoza's view, Descartes's interactionist account of the mind-body “union”:

What, I ask, does he [Descartes] understand by the union of Mind and Body [*mentis et corporis unionem*]? What clear and distinct concept does he have of a thought so closely united to some little portion of quantity? ...[H]e had conceived the Mind to be so distinct [*distinctam*] from the Body that he could not assign any singular cause, either of this union or of the Mind itself. [...O]f course, since there is no common measure [*ratio*] between the will and motion...the forces of the Body cannot in any way be determined [*determinare*] by those of the Mind. (E5pref; II/278-80)²⁰

Now, Spinoza's commitment to *Barrier* naturally prompts the following question: Can entities that, like minds and bodies, have nothing “in common” and so cannot be causally related, nonetheless can be intelligibly related in some other way? Perhaps surprisingly, Spinoza's answer is 'yes'.

The answer has two parts. First, Spinoza proposes that things that differ in attribute can nonetheless can be “one and the same thing [*una eademque...res*]” (E2p7s). Establishing the relevant sense of “oneness and sameness” has proved to be an intractable interpretative challenge, but many scholars today think that what Spinoza has in mind is

²⁰ Of course Descartes himself doesn't think that only things of the same attribute can intelligibly causally interact (AT 7.213).

Spinoza's ban on trans-attribute causal relations has of course also the benefit of the causal closure of the physical realm.

best approximated by the notion of a numerical identity of token minds and bodies.²¹ This then is the fourth doctrine relevant to our investigation:

(4) *Identity*: Every mind is numerically identical to some body, and vice versa.²²

The second, less well-known part of Spinoza's answer to the question, Can things with nothing “in common” nonetheless be intelligibly related?, gives us our fifth and final background doctrine:

(5) *Intentionality*: Every human mind essentially has an intentional ('of' or 'about') relation to some existing body.²³

Since this principle is of central importance to what follows, it will be worth our while to flesh it out in more detail. First, here are the key passages asserting *Intentionality*:

The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind [*Primum quod actuale mentis humanae esse constituit*] is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists (E1p11)

The object of the idea constituting the human Mind [*Objectum ideae humanam mentem constituentis*] is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else. (E2p13)²⁴

²¹ E.g. Della Rocca 1996:118f; Melamed 2013:187; for dissent see e.g. Bennett 1984:§34-5; Delahunty 1985:197; Marshall 2009; Schmidt 2009.

Given *Barrier*, *Identity* gives rise to a much-discussed puzzle regarding the sense in which we can talk of “unity and sameness” when faced with substitution failures of co-referring expressions in causal claims. For original statements of this problem see Bennett 1984:141; Delahunty 1985:197; for solutions focusing on the intensionality of causal contexts see Della Rocca 1996:118ff; Jarrett 1991.

²² *Identity* of course applies both to minds and bodies and to their properties, since for Spinoza my body and a property of my body are equally modes and so subject to *Identity*. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.)

²³ For the rare denials that Spinoza holds *Intentionality* see Allison 1987:88-9; Matson 1971:577; Pollock 1880:132.

One might think that Spinoza asserts a stronger thesis, namely that a human mind essentially affirms the *essence* of an existing body, given his claim that “the essence of Peter's mind...directly explains [*explicitat*] the essence of Peter's body” (E2p17s). But arguably *explicare* denotes a conceptual relation holding in principle: a mind “explains” a bodily essence in the sense that the ideas constituting this mind imply this essence by representing something else about this body.

²⁴ For accounts of “nothing else” see e.g. Allison 1987:96; Della Rocca 1996:25-8; Matson 1971:574; Melamed 2013; Radner 1971; Renz 2011. For a reading on which E2p13 describes only the epistemic grounds for self-ascription of affections see Renz 2011:110.

the essence of the Mind consists in this (by E2p11 and p13), that it affirms the actual existence of its body (E3GenDefAff; II/204)

the essence of the mind (*Ethics*, II. Prop. xiii) consists solely in this, that it is the idea of body actually existing (Ep. 64)

The upshot of such passages is that an idea will count as a “human mind” only if it is essentially *of* some actually (i.e., durationally) existing body.²⁵ An idea or “cognition” (E4p37d) of such a body is the essence of a human mind, i.e. what is necessary and sufficient for a human mind to exist (cf. E2def2). Spinoza talks about this in terms of what must be a human mind's *objectum* or *ideatum*.²⁶

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, for Spinoza the mind-body relation thus turns out to be an instance of the idea-intentional object relation.²⁷ (Note that for Spinoza it is the mind itself that is intentional – rather than merely *having* intentional states).²⁸ *Intentionality* also helps us to flesh out the *Reduction* thesis: to the latter's claim that ontologically there is nothing more to a Spinozistic “mind” than ideas, we can now add the clarification that what is required for the existence of a *human* mind specifically is the existence of an idea of a thing that is both (1) an actual existent and (2) extended or corporeal – corporeal *in the right way*, we may want to add: to count as a *human* body, rather than as a canine body or a plant body, the body being represented by the human-mind-constituting idea must have the right sort of complexity and powers (E2p13s, E5p39s).²⁹

25 Cf. Della Rocca 1996:37.

Spinoza also acknowledges another sense of “actuality”; see E5p29s.

26 Cf. Barker 1938:164.

That *ideatum* and *objectum* are interchangeable terms is suggested e.g., by E2def4 and its Explanation, as well as from E2p5, which derives a point about “*ideata sive res perceptas*” from a point about “*ideae objectum*” in E2p5d (emphases added). But see also Garrett 2016 who claims that Spinoza distinguishes between *objectum* as what an idea is *identical* with, and *ideatum* as what it is *of* (cf. J. Steinberg, 2013:387-9). See also note 68.

27 Cf. Ayers 1998:1077; Parkinson 1954:105.

28 Cf. Renz 2011:102; Parkinson 1954:105.

Spinoza's claim is less surprising once we take into account his reduction of minds to ideas: if there is no difference in kind between minds and ideas, any property of ideas, such as intentionality, could presumably be a property of a mind.

29 Unlike the four doctrines I introduced prior to it, *Intentionality* bears not on minds or thinking generally but on *human* minds specifically. However, Spinoza is, notoriously, also a panpsychist (E1def6; E2p13s; KV2app[9, 12]; Ep. 66). So being minded as such is not uniquely associated with having a human body specifically; moreover, not all “minds” essentially represent bodies: there are minds that are essentially ideas of modes in humanly unknowable attributes, that is, of modes endowed with a non-physical and non-mental reality (Ep. 66, E2ax5). Moreover, not all minds that essentially represent bodies presumably constitute *human* minds: minds that are essentially of bodies of lesser

As Leibniz will do later,³⁰ Spinoza claims that it is precisely in this intentional relation that the mind-body “union” consists (and not, per impossibile, in a causal relation between them, as on Descartes's account):³¹ “We have shown that the Mind is united [*unitam*] to the Body from the fact that the Body is the object of the Mind [*corpus mentis sit objectum*] (see [2]p12 and 13)” (E2p21d).³²

3. The case for Materialism

With this preliminary sketch of how Spinoza understands minds in hand, let us now turn to Materialist Readings – that is, to interpretations on which Spinoza takes human minds to depend on bodies. Different commentators understand this purported dependence differently, and spell it out to different degrees; in what follows I will lay out what I take to be the most compelling version of such a reading.

3.1. As we saw above, one of the pillars of Spinoza's metaphysics of mind is *Intentionality*, the doctrine that every human mind is essentially an idea of some existing and sufficiently complex body. Proponents of Materialist Readings, quite plausibly, take *Intentionality* to commit Spinoza to an ontological and explanatory dependence of the mental on the physical. For the doctrine clearly seems to imply that a human mind can exist only if there is an idea of some existing corporeal thing, and also that cognition of this corporeal thing is necessary for an adequate cognition of the mind in question.

At first blush, there seems to be plenty of straightforward textual support for Materialist Readings. In particular, Spinoza's introduction of the doctrine that the human mind is essentially an idea of a body is followed immediately by his mini-discourse on physics (E2p13s ff), on the expressly stated principle that all ideas depend on the “objects” they represent. The passage is worth quoting at length:

The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain

power and complexity will not count as “human” minds. What is essential to *any* “mind” is, arguably, an intentional relation to some existing thing (cf. Bennett 1984:§37.3; Renz 2011:102): any mind, human or not, must represent something that actually exists (rather than, for example, a mere possible) (E2p8c&s, E2p11). For these reasons, if Materialist Readings are right that an intentional relation as such introduces dependence of the mental on something extra-mental, what is at stake in assessing such readings is not simply any narrowly conceived “materialism” about minds, but the explanatory self-sufficiency of minds generally, where what a mind would depend on could be a body or something of a different attribute-kind.

³⁰ In his correspondence with Des Bosses (Leibniz 2007) Leibniz explains the mind-body union of his corporeal substances by the harmonious perceptual relations between the dominant monad and subordinate monads of the organic body.

³¹ Cf. Jarrett 1982:172; Malinowski-Charles 2011:126; and KV2app[7-8], 1.19[11]. For a different account of this “union” see Marshall 2009:913-4.

³² In E2p21s Spinoza claims that this union can be understood also through *Identity*; for why this is consistent with the present account see Hübner-MS.

mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else... *Schol.* From these [propositions] we understand not only that the human Mind is united to the Body, but also what should be understood by the union of Mind and Body. But no one will be able to understand it adequately, *or* distinctly, unless he first knows adequately the nature of our Body [*ipsam adaequate sive distincte intelligere nemo poterit nisi prius nostri corporis naturam adaequate cognoscat*]... [W]e also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality [*ideas inter se ut ipsa objecta differre unamque alia praestantiorum esse plusque realitatis continere prout objectum unius objecto alterius praestantius est plusque realitatis continet*]. And so to determine what is the difference between the human Mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, i.e., of the human Body [*ad determinandum quid mens humana reliquis intersit quidque reliquis praestet necesse nobis est ejus objecti ut diximus hoc est corporis humani naturam cognoscere*] (E2p13)

Here are other passages that seem to point in the direction of the human mind's dependence on the body, thus bolstering Materialist Readings:

an idea is the first thing that constitutes the being of a human Mind. But not the idea of a thing which does not exist. For then (by [2]p8c³³) the idea itself could not be said to exist. Therefore, it will be the idea of a thing which actually exists. (E2p11d)

the idea which constitutes the essence of the Mind involves the existence of the Body so long as [*tamdiu...quamdiu*] the Body itself exists. Next from what we have shown in 2p8c and its scholium, it follows that the present existence of our Mind depends only on this, that the Mind involves the actual existence of the Body [*praesentem nostrae mentis existentiam ab hoc solo pendere quod scilicet mens actualem corporis existentiam involvit*]. Finally, we have shown that the power of the Mind by which it imagines things and recollects them also depends on this (see 2p17, [3]p18, [3]p18s), that it involves the actual existence of the Body. From these things it follows that the present existence of the Mind and its power of imagining are taken away [*tolli*] as soon as the Mind ceases to affirm the present existence of the Body. (E3p11s; II/48)

because the essence of the Mind consists in this...that it affirms the actual

33 This seems to be the relevant part of E2p8c: "when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration."

existence of its body, and we understand by perfection the very essence of the thing, it follows that the Mind passes to a greater or lesser perfection when [*quando*]...it affirms of its body...something which involves more or less reality than before (E3GenDefAff; II/203-4)

The Mind neither expresses the actual existence of its Body, nor conceives the Body's affections as actual, except while the Body endures (by 2p8c); consequently (by 2p26), it conceives no body as actually existing except while its body endures. Therefore, it can neither imagine anything...nor recollect past things...except while the body endures (E5p21d)³⁴

Passages like these may seem to suggest a dependence of minds on bodies, a dependence that obtains in the following (related) respects:

- (i) existence (E2p11, E3p11s): a human mind exists durationally only if a body durationally exists;
- (ii) essence (E3p11s, E3GenDefAff): the essence of a human mind consists in a representation of a body;
- (iii) individuation and unity (E2p11, E2p13s): to remain in existence as a particular human mind, this mind must represent a particular body, and this representation renders this mind distinct from all other minds; the simpler ideas constitutive of a mind are presumably united into one mind-bundle by virtue of being ideas of parts of one body;
- (iv) causal power (E3GenDefAff, E2p13s): the degree to which a mind is causally autonomous and productive (of further ideas) depends on how powerful the body it essentially represents is (i.e., on how many different actions this body's parts bring about on their own at any time);³⁵
- (v) representational content (E2p11, E2p13s, E3p11s, E3GenDefAff, E5p21d): a mind not only essentially represents a particular body, this body's existence makes possible further ideas with empirical content ("imagination" or ideas of this body's changes).³⁶

If correct, collectively these five commitments would describe a general ontological and explanatory dependence of human minds on bodies. More precisely, a human mind will depend on human bodies *ontologically*, if they depend on existing, sufficiently complex bodies for their existence, individuation, unity as composite ideas,

34 Cf. E5p23d, E3p2s[I] (II/142), E2p14.

35 Cf. E2p49s[III.A.(iii)].

36 In the case of a mind, 'essence' overlaps with 'representational content'; but not all representational contents are essential to a given mind. (For example, the contents of sensory ideas I acquire on occasion of subsequent causal encounters with external bodies will not be essential to my mind.)

for having a certain essence or representational content and a certain essential causal power. To put this differently, if Spinoza's view is indeed that there is a human mind only if this mind essentially represents some existing body, it appears to be part of the essence of any human mind that it exists only if some body exists. We could thus characterize this sort of ontological dependence as essential existential dependence.

In second place, human minds will depend human bodies *explanatorily* insofar as we must, it seems, refer to bodily properties (such as the existence of a body and its degree of reality) to explain a mind's essence, existence, its fundamental representational content, at least some of the ideas it can produce, and why it is the same mind over time, distinct from other minds.³⁷ In other words, Spinoza seems to be committed to an explanatory dependence of human minds on physical things insofar as acquiring cognition of a human mind seems to require us to make an irreducible and non-reciprocal reference to some existing body. Physical properties may not suffice to explain *all* the properties of a human mind – in particular, one may wonder whether it would even be possible to account a mind's intentional 'aboutness' by appealing to physical properties³⁸ – nonetheless, references to the physical realm appear to be necessary in Spinoza's view at least for understanding the properties listed above.

It is worth stressing here that Spinoza never similarly infers claims about physical properties from claims about mental properties.³⁹ In particular, Spinoza's definition of the essence of any (non-simple) body as a “proportion of motion and rest” (E2L5) is articulated in terms of physical properties alone, in stark contrast to his trans-attribute definition of the essence of the human mind. Such asymmetry in exposition certainly does not prove dependence, but it is plausibly explained by it.

It is also worth emphasizing that the majority of the passages cited above explicitly tie the apparent dependence of the mental on the physical to what is true of the mind qua *idea of a body* – that is, to the mind's intentional and representational relation to a body. (Thus E2p13s appeals to a general principle governing “ideas” and their “objects”; E3GenDefAff to what a mind “affirms”; E3p11s to what it “involves”.) In short, the passages cited appear to confirm not only the existence of an explanatory and ontological dependence of human minds on bodies, but also link this dependence explicitly to the intentional relation in particular.

This ostensible dependence of human minds on bodies seems to be a straightforward consequence of the general dependence of *all* ideas on their intentional objects. This is a point Spinoza makes quite explicitly in E2p13s: all ideas are distinguished from other ideas by virtue of the objects they represent. So it is the intentionality of human minds, the intentionality proper to them simply qua ideas that, to all appearances, introduces dependence into Spinoza's account of the human mind

3.2. There is one further consideration in favour of Materialist Readings. This is that Spinoza's account of the human mind, read as an account of ontological and explanatory

37 Cf. Allison 1987:98.

38 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.

39 Cf. Bennett 1984:§37.1-2; Curley 1988:78; Della Rocca 1996:22.

dependence, fits well with how Spinoza approaches dependence in other contexts, in particular in the context of substance-mode relations. Arguably, his model there is the ontological priority of Aristotelian substances.⁴⁰ Very roughly, in an Aristotelian framework, an account of dependent entities such as accidents will make reference to substance as to what is ontologically prior (for example, a heart rate will be healthy if it indicates the health of the relevant substance); however, an account of the substance does not have to make reference to any other entity.⁴¹ If we apply this way of thinking about dependence to Spinoza's account of the human mind, we can think of human bodies as quasi-substances, and of human minds as quasi-accidents. This allows us to make sense of the asymmetrical nature of trans-attribute references in Spinoza's characterizations of mind and body: namely, his account of the human mind must make reference to physical properties precisely because, on this interpretation of the Materialist thesis, the human mind depends on the human body in the same way that Aristotelian accidents depend on substance. In contrast, Spinoza's account of the human body does not have to make a reciprocal reference to the human mind because, on the hypothesis, the human body is ontologically prior to the human mind. Note that Spinoza's handling of substances and modes is analogous: the definition of a mode makes a reference to what modes are "in" (E1def5); but the definition of substance makes no mention of modes (E1def3). On this reading, we can also understand why it would be "necessary", as Spinoza says (E2p13s) for us to refer to bodies in giving an account of the mind: this is precisely what ontological priority requires of accounts of dependent entities.

Spinoza's own explicit discussion of "priority" in nature and knowledge (E2p10cs, E1p1, E2p11d) fits well with this gloss of mental dependence as Aristotelian ontological priority. If we take what is "posterior" in knowledge to be what is conceived through what is prior in knowledge, again this holds of both the substance-mode relation and of the mind-body relation as interpreted by Materialist Readings: just as modes are conceived through substance (E1p15, E1p16d), at least some properties of human minds (e.g. its existence and fundamental representational content), on such readings, are conceived through our ideas of bodies. To observe the "proper order of philosophizing", we must explain substance's nature before we explain anything else, since all things depend on substance (E1p15, E1p10cs). On Materialist Readings it is for this same reason – that of reasoning in line with the direction of dependence – that we must explain the nature of bodies before we can explain the nature of human minds, as Spinoza insists in E2p13s.

It would seem then that Materialist Readings can claim in their favor not only considerable explanatory power, but also the economy of an interpretation that does not introduce any new relations into Spinoza's picture. But there are also disanalogies between the dependence relation in the substance-mode case and the body-mind case:

⁴⁰ On Spinoza's debt to the Aristotelian tradition in characterizing the substance-mode relation see e.g. Carriero 1995. On some problems created by applying purely modal analysis of dependence in Spinoza's framework see Garrett 1991. For other accounts of Spinozistic dependence see Koistinen 2016; Morrison 2013; Newlands 2010.

⁴¹ See *Met.* 1003a35 ff; cf. Corkum 2013:79, 83.

Spinoza cashes out the substance-mode relation as a cause-effect relation (E1p16c1) and, arguably,⁴² also as a thing-property relation (E1p16d). Yet it seems implausible that minds should be understood as properties of bodies, and, by *Barrier*, it is metaphysically impossible that they should be considered as bodily effects.⁴³ So a proponent of Materialist Readings would have to allow for a multiplication of relations after all: in addition to causal dependence (relating substance and its modes, and also modes among themselves), she would have to allow for a sui generis, non-causal relation of ontological dependence between human minds and bodies. (Hence Koistinen for example characterizes this dependence as “constituent” dependence; other scholars gloss it in terms of “functions.”)⁴⁴ This is not a damning result, however: given that Spinoza seems to allow for other non-causal relations of ontological dependence in his metaphysics (for example, for part-whole relations [e.g. E5p40s]), this multiplication of ontological dependence relations is not out of step with the rest of his metaphysical picture. Indeed, the proposal that minds depend on bodies in some sui generis, non-causal, sense seems to fit well with the title Spinoza gives to the Part of the *Ethics* devoted to the mind: that title invokes the “origin [*origo*]”, not the “causes”, of the mind (II/83).⁴⁵

4. The undoing of Materialism

In the preceding section we saw that there is a non-negligible amount of textual evidence in favor of Materialist Readings. Such readings represent not only a very natural interpretation of Spinoza's claims about the human mind, but also one that fits well with his more systematic commitments about dependence.

In this section I will argue that Materialist Readings should nonetheless be rejected, on the grounds of their inconsistency with Spinoza's fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments, commitments nearly universally ascribed to Spinoza by contemporary commentators.

Here are three worries one may have about the coherence of Materialist Readings with Spinoza's other doctrines.

First, it is unclear that Materialist Readings are consistent with *Identity*, that is, with the thesis that token minds and bodies are numerically identical. Assuming that the dependence posited by Materialist Readings is a robust, asymmetric ontological dependence of the sort sketched in the preceding section, can minds genuinely ontologically depend on bodies if they are also numerically identical to them?

Second, any reading that treats an instance of thought such as a human mind as explanatorily dependent on a bit of physical reality, as Materialist Readings do, also violates Spinoza's commitment to *Barrier*, or to the explanatory closure of the attributes.⁴⁶

42 But see Curley 1969.

43 Cf. “[B]y 2p6...the cause of the Mind’s affirming the Body’s existence is not that the Body has begun to exist” (E3p1us, emphasis added).

44 Koistinen 2009:169, 2016n3; for the terminology of “function” see Allison 1987:95; Matson 1975:577.

45 Cf. Wilson 1999:183.

46 Cf. Barker 1938:159-60.

As we saw in §3, on Materialist Readings, the cognition of key properties of human minds requires irreducible reference to an existing complex body. But *Barrier* demands that, as a thinking thing, a human mind be explained by reference to thinking things alone – to other ideas, other minds, the infinite divine intellect, substance as a thinking thing, etc. Given *Barrier*, we may have expected Spinoza to characterize the essence of the human mind as, for example, a certain pattern of “affirmations” or “negations”, just as he characterizes the essence of a composite body as a certain “proportion of motion and rest”. A mental “affirmation” is just an idea; it is a property of thought alone. However, on Spinoza's account, what is essential to a human mind is not just *any* affirmation (or negation), but specifically an affirmation – an idea – of a body. That is, what is essential to a human mind is an idea individuated like any idea (E2p13s), by its object – an certain kind of body.⁴⁷ In short, since on Materialist Readings cognition of human minds requires cognition of entities of a different attribute-kind, in violation of *Barrier*, we have a second reason to reject Materialist Readings.

Third, the sort of explanatory dependence of the mental on the physical that is at the heart of Materialist Readings of the human mind also goes against *Causal Cognition*, that is, against the doctrine that any cognition of a thing is cognition of its causes. As entities of incommensurate kinds, minds and bodies cannot stand in causal relations to one another, on pain of unintelligibility. So, by *Causal Cognition*, they also cannot serve to explain one another, contrary to the central thesis of Materialist Readings. Spinoza not only endorses the general principle that cognition is of causes (E1ax4), he also reiterates it explicitly in relation to questions of existence, specifying that the “reasons” for a thing's existence (or nonexistence) must be sought in the relevant “causes” (E1p11altd1).⁴⁸ However, on Materialist Readings, the reason for the existence of any human mind is found in an entity (a body) with which a mind cannot enter into a causal relation. Materialist Readings thus either simply violate *Causal Cognition* or are committed to the claim that the existence of a human mind depends in two different ways on two different variables: causally on other thinking things (in line with *Causal Cognition*), and non-causally on bodies (in line with Materialist Readings' claims of ontological dependence). This dual dependence is not obviously incoherent, but it remains unclear how exactly it's supposed to work: How do the two sorts of dependency relate? And, given Spinoza's commitment to intelligibility, why must there be two? (We cannot say for example that the mind depends for existence non-causally on the same thing on which it depends causally under a different attribute, since the body on which the mind purportedly depends non-causally is the body to which it is identical, whereas causally this mind depends on a thinking thing identical to the cause of that body.)

We can summarize the last two, epistemological, difficulties faced by Materialist Readings by saying that bodies, as Spinoza understands them, are simply not the right sort of thing to give us cognition of a mind. And this, as we just saw, is for at least two,

⁴⁷ Pace Della Rocca 1996:37.

⁴⁸ Cf. Newlands 2010:474-5. Garrett thinks it is difficult to square the claim that minds depend on bodies for existence with the fact that minds cannot causally depend on bodies (1991:208).

closely related reasons: first, because minds and bodies are radically different in kind (while all cognition is internal to an attribute-kind); second, because as entities radically different in kind minds and bodies cannot stand in causal relations (while all cognition is of causes). To put this still differently, an explanatory dependence of minds on bodies is incompatible with the standard interpretation of Spinozistic cognition: on Materialist Readings, cognition of minds is tied not to the causal relations in which minds stand (to other thinking things), but to the minds' intentional relations (to the bodies they essentially represent). And yet, as Materialist Readings insist, Spinoza's own account of the essential constitution of the human mind as an entity intentionally directed toward the human body seems to require nothing less than precisely such an explanatory dependence of the mind on the body – that is, on a thing of a radically different kind, with which no causal relations are metaphysically possible.

Finally, if the purported dependence of human minds on bodies is taken to be simply the consequence of the intentional nature of ideas, the above difficulties quickly generalize beyond Spinoza's account of the essential constitution of the human mind. First of all, if an intentional relation as such introduces dependence on the entity being represented, then not merely the essence of the human mind but also all of our *sensory* ideas will depend on entities in a different attribute, in violation once again of both *Barrier* and *Causal Cognition*. (These sensory ideas will depend on the various external bodies that have causally contributed to the bodily “images” that such ideas represent [E2p16].) Insofar as such ideas become part of the make-up of the human mind, as its non-essential constituents, human minds will turn out to depend not just on the bodies they essentially represent, but on indefinitely many bodies.⁴⁹ And the problem extends beyond the human mind, to *all* ideas of non-thinking things – whatever mind or intellect such ideas belong to.

5. Alternatives to Materialism

In the previous section we saw that Materialist Readings of the human mind seem inconsistent with at least three metaphysical and epistemological principles standardly ascribed to Spinoza: *Identity*, *Barrier*, and *Causal Cognition*. If Materialist Readings are correct, one may well doubt that Spinoza succeeds in his stated goal of providing a more intelligible replacement for Descartes's causal account of the mind's “union” with the body.⁵⁰

49 Cf. Matson 1975:59, Matheron 1969:34, Taylor 1947:15of. Thanks to John Morrison for pressing me on this.

50 Of course, proponents of Materialist Readings may simply bite the bullet and take their interpretation as evidence that standard interpretations of Spinoza's epistemology and metaphysics are misguided – misguided in particular in holding that Spinoza is committed either to a nonporous explanatory barrier between different kinds of things, or to an exclusively causal account of cognition. For the purposes of this paper, I will hold the standard reading of Spinoza's doctrines fixed but for alternatives to the standard reading of the relevant doctrines see e.g. Koistinen 1996, Morrison 2013, Marshall 2009, Hübner-MS.

There is thus significant pressure to find an alternative to Materialism. This will be my task in the remainder of the paper. First, in this section, I will outline two plausible but ultimately unsatisfactory solutions; in the next, concluding section, I will offer my own proposal.

5.1. Perhaps the most obvious alternative to Materialism is the proposal that all references to bodily properties in Spinoza's account of the human mind can be explained by his commitment to *Identity*.⁵¹ On this reading, what Bennett, Curley, Nadler, Koistinen and others treat as evidence of a dependence of the mental on the physical is to be regarded instead as the consequence of minds and bodies being “one and the same thing”. This is how both Jarrett and Della Rocca gloss Spinoza's prima facie *Barrier*-violating assertion in E2p13s that we can infer a human mind's degree of reality from the corresponding body's degree of reality.⁵² The assertion seems to be a flagrant violation of *Barrier*'s prohibition on trans-attribute explanations. To save Spinoza from this charge, Della Rocca proposes that *Identity* entitles Spinoza to trans-attribute conclusions of the sort found in E2p13s insofar as the numerical identity of minds and minds entails a necessary co-variation of all their “structural” (or “attribute-neutral”) properties. (For example, numerically identical minds and bodies will also have the same number of effects and, indeed, the same degree of reality.)⁵³

At first blush, the proposal is quite compelling. *Identity* can indeed explain not only why a human mind's degree of reality would necessarily reflect a body's degree of reality, but also a number of other passages that were grist for the Materialist mill. Namely, it can explain why Spinoza says that minds exist only if bodies do (E3p11s, E5p23d), as well as why minds cannot imagine or recollect “except while the body endures” (E5p21d). (This is because, if the relevant body does not exist, neither does the mind identical to it; a fortiori, this mind cannot exercise its cognitive powers.)

So appealing to *Identity* does remove some of the textual motivation for Materialist Readings. But it does not explain all the claims that generate such readings, nor all the ways in which, on Spinoza's account, human minds seem to depend on bodies. Spinoza's claim, recall, is that it is the essence of a human mind to represent some existing body, such that this representational content renders this mind distinct from all other minds. But the fact that a certain mind is *numerically identical* to some body cannot explain why it has a certain representational content, and so a certain essence. For why

51 Thanks to John Morrison for discussion of this interpretation.

52 Jarrett 1982:173-4; Della Rocca 1996:20-1.

Della Rocca's appeals to both *Identity* asserted in E2p7s and to the isomorphism of things and ideas established in E2p7. In the context of our inquiry the proposition and the scholium do not offer sufficiently different resources to justify treating them as distinct. Although E2p7d explicitly introduces an intentional relation into the mix, both E2p7 and its scholium ultimately license only entirely symmetrical trans-attribute claims about non-thought-specific properties.

53 Della Rocca 1996:21.

should a mind identical with a certain body also, in virtue of this identity, be *of* that body?⁵⁴ That is, why should the mind “affirm”, “express” and “involve” a body – or indeed anything at all – in virtue of an identity relation?⁵⁵

Here is another way to see the shortcoming of appeals to *Identity*. On that proposal, what is supposed to allow Spinoza to move between different attributes are certain attribute-neutral properties. But one of the problematic, dependence-suggesting claims we are trying to explain in non-Materialist fashion is the claim that human minds are essentially *of* bodies. What *attribute-neutral* property can explain what a mind is *of*, what it affirms or “expresses”? Presumably attribute-neutral properties are by definition incapable of explaining such thought-specific properties as representing or intending.

Furthermore, the Jarrett-Della Rocca seems itself outright inconsistent with other claims Spinoza makes about minds and bodies. On that proposal, the trans-attribute claims to which Spinoza would be entitled will be symmetrical: given *Identity*, we can infer not just a mind's degree of reality from a body's degree of reality, as Spinoza does in E2p13s, but equally a body's degree of reality from a mind's. But this sort of symmetry of allowable trans-attribute explanations seems inconsistent with Spinoza's insistence in his account of the human mind on the explanatory *priority* of physical properties in relation to the human mind, and on the explanatory priority of represented objects in relation to ideas generally (E2p13s). This insistence on the explanatory priority of bodies suggests that it is not *Identity* that explains the oddity of Spinoza's account of the human mind.

Another reason the Jarrett-Della Rocca-style proposal seems textually implausible is that the passages that invite Materialist Readings stress, as we have seen, the intentional relation between minds and bodies, not their identity (or the identity of their properties).

Finally, we may worry whether an appeal to *Identity* really restores conformity with *Barrier*, one of the chief desiderata of an alternative to Materialist Readings. For, arguably, on a strong reading of *Barrier*,⁵⁶ the doctrine demands not merely that we not

54 Allison expresses a related worry (1987:90). Pace Curley, who finds the relation between *Identity* and *Intentionality* intuitive (1988:62).

55 It doesn't seem that we would fare better if we interpreted the “sameness and oneness” of minds and bodies and their properties not as numerical identity but as “real identity” (Schmidt 2009) or as a “co-constitution” (Marshall 2009). Neither of these relations seems capable of explaining why a mind has for its essence a certain representational content. The one exception would be a thoroughly reductive, idealist reading that takes bodies to be only what human minds essentially represent. On such a reading, a mind essentially *of* a certain body is also identical with it in the trivial sense in which any idea is numerically identical with its own content. This interpretation avoids dependence on a different attribute while remaining consistent with *Barrier* and *Causal Cognition* (since all appeals to a body are to mind's own content), but it does all this at the high price of eliminating extension as a genuine attribute. Cf. Husserl's suggestion that for Spinoza the order of “things” is correlative with the order of “ideas” [E2p7] because to be a “thing” is just to be the intentional object of an idea [1906-7, 52n].)

56 Arguably implicit for example in E2p5&d.

appeal to any physical properties in explaining a human mind (a criterion satisfied by appealing to attribute-neutral properties), but more positively that we appeal only to specifically mental (and not merely neutral) properties.

5.2. In short, appealing to *Identity* does not, it seems, offer a much better alternative to Materialist Readings. We could try to circumvent such readings in another way, by taking as our clue Spinoza's remark that investigating the properties of bodies in order to understand minds is "necessary for us [*necesse nobis est*]" (E2p13s). The phrase might suggest that those parts of Spinoza's account of the mind that look like evidence of minds' dependence on bodies are merely a concession on Spinoza's part to our epistemological limitations. *We* might have to think about bodies in order to understand minds, but a genuine philosophical explanation of the mind, even if difficult to achieve and for this reason very rare, would refer to thinking things alone, in line with *Barrier* and *Causal Cognition*. Again, Della Rocca serves as an example of this sort of approach: he argues that Spinoza's trans-attribute inferences in E2p13s are consistent with *Barrier* because they are not genuine "explanations" but merely ways "we come to appreciate a certain fact".⁵⁷

Now, Spinoza certainly thinks that we are cognitively limited in various ways (for example, in how far down the causal chain we can see [TIE[100]], and he takes account of such limitations (for example, by arguing dialectically from false premises⁵⁸). Nonetheless, there are also problems with this second proposal. First, the textual case for it is quite weak: it turns on a single, ambiguous phrase – "necessary for us". What is the extension of "us"? Is it "limited human knowers", as the proposal assumes, or is it for example those who observe the "right order of philosophizing" (E1p10cs), or those being guided by Spinoza "as if by the hand" (E2pref)? Indeed, *earlier* in the very same passage Spinoza writes that "no one [*nemo*]" can understand the intentional mind-body "union" unless the body is understood first. The extension of *nemo* is also ambiguous, but can we exclude the possibility that it includes *any* thinking thing? Furthermore, as we know, the preface to Part 2 describes cognition of the human mind as a goal of Spinoza's entire enterprise in the *Ethics*. Such cognition presumably requires genuine explanation of the mind. Are we to take Spinoza to retreat from his stated aim only a dozen propositions later? This too seems implausible.

Here are two further, non-textual, problems with the proposal that we read Spinoza's account of the human mind as a concession to our epistemological limitations. First, the proposal seems to underestimate the significance that *Barrier* has for Spinoza epistemology. Obeying *Barrier* is not merely a requirement of a certain kind of

57 Della Rocca 1996:21-2, 177n9.

An anonymous reviewer suggests that concern with the goal of "blessedness" (E2pref) could explain Spinoza's apparent explanatory concessions. But since blessedness requires genuine understanding ("our greatest happiness, or blessedness, consists...in the knowledge of God alone" [E2p49s]) it's not clear why it would require such concessions.

58 E.g. E1app[I] [II/78]; E1p17s[II] [II/63]; E3p2s.

explanation, but a condition of intelligibility – of “understanding” (E1ax5) – as such. As Spinoza says in reference to Descartes's causal account of the union, to appeal to bodies in explaining minds is to pretend to have a concept of a relation where no concept can be had, since the relata have “no common measure” (E5pref). So a failure to obey *Barrier* in giving an account of the mind would be a failure of understanding, and it is unclear how we could come to better “appreciate a fact” by being presented with something unintelligible.

Second, it is also difficult to justify the “necessity” of the purported concession. It is true that for Spinoza a human being is in the first instance – temporally – a knower of bodies (and more precisely of bodily changes) (E2ax4). But clearly for Spinoza this does not mean that we never come to cognize non-physical things: we have ideas of ideas (e.g. E2p21-22), and even, in a weak sense, of things that are neither physical nor thinking (E1def6, Ep. 66). The ideas of bodies that we do have are not more adequate than ideas of other sorts of things (E2p24ff), so that cannot be a reason why we would have to refer to bodies in thinking about the mind. An advocate of this sort of proposal should be able to tell us what is it specifically about the nature of human minds that forces Spinoza to abandon the rigour of true explanation when giving an account of human mind, although no such concession was necessary to give an account of other instances of thought. What epistemological limitation is it that does not stand in the way of our grasping the nature of ideas generally (E1def3), of causal and dependence relations among them (E2ax3, E2p5-6), and of substance's infinite idea of all things (E2p3-4), but bedevils an account of the essence of human minds, although such minds are after all just “parts” (E2p11c) of this single infinite idea? To this sort of question at least Materialist Readings have a ready reply: the reason why we must appeal to bodies in explaining human minds, although this was not necessary for discussion of any other kind of idea, is that having the body as intentional object is precisely what distinguishes human minds from all other ideas, what makes them human minds. On Materialist Readings, for *any* intellect, and not just for the finite human understanding, it is impossible to give an account of human minds, as distinct from other kinds of ideas, unless we also factor in what they – uniquely and essentially – are ideas of.

Finally, the concessionary reading of Spinoza's account of the mind assumes that there is, or could be, something like a proper “explanation” of the human mind – an explanation that, unlike the account Spinoza actually gives in the *Ethics*, is articulated solely in terms of thought of itself. But how does one explain an idea that is *essentially of a body* in terms of thought alone? The proposal, at least as it stands, does not say.

6. Ontological pluralism to the rescue

Thus far in the paper I have been making a largely negative case against extant readings of Spinoza's account of the essential constitution of the human mind. In this concluding section, I would like to offer a positive proposal, an a way of interpreting Spinoza's account that, arguably, does not suffer from the weaknesses of Materialist Readings or of the two alternative interpretations just surveyed. To be clear, my claim is not that this is

the *only* workable solution to the problem at hand,⁵⁹ but I do think it is one worth considering. Those unconvinced by my positive proposal will, I hope, have been convinced at least by my demonstration of the difficulties plaguing the three alternatives canvassed earlier.

In what follows, I will first sketch my proposal, then show how it works in relation to specific passages, and finally address possible objections.

6.1. My proposal takes as its starting point a well-known feature of Spinoza's theory of ideas, namely the fact that, like Descartes, Spinoza explains representation with the help of a distinction between two *modes of being*:⁶⁰ “formal reality” (which refers to the being of something qua existent in nature), and “objective reality” (which refers to the being of a thing qua represented, the kind of being that consists in making something present to a mind). On this model, to have a true idea of a thing is for this very thing to exist in thought, with the kind of reality or being that is proper to mental or intentional entities. Descartes famously offers the following illustration:

the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect—not...formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect [*eo modo quo objecta in intellectu esse solent*] (First Replies, AT 7.102-3, cf. 7.40-2, 161-6)

I will refer to this theory of representation as 'ontologically-pluralistic', since it assumes the existence of multiple kinds or modes of being.

Spinoza's reliance on this theory of representation is clear from many passages throughout his writings; he writes, for instance

a true idea must agree with its object (by [1]ax6), i.e. (as is known through itself), what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily be in nature [*id quod in intellectu objective continetur, debet necessario in natura dari*] (E1p30d)

God's [NS: actual] power of thinking is equal to his actual power of acting. I.e., whatever follows formally from God's infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection. (E2p7c)

As for order, to unite and order all our perceptions, it is required, and reason

59 For an alternative that tackles the other horn of the dilemma, namely the standard readings of Spinoza's epistemology, see Hübner-MS.

60 E.g. Allison 1987:89; Aquila 1978; Ayers 1998:1077; Carriero 2011:77, 2016; Donagan 1988:37ff, 1990:105; Garrett 2008, 2013; Gueroult 1974:70, 76-7; Jarrett 1982:168; Malinowski-Charles 2011; Nadler 2006: 124-5; Radner 1971.

I don't mean to suggest Descartes's interpretation of the view is self-evident, nor that Spinoza and Descartes agree on all particulars of the view. For example, Spinoza disagrees (E2p7c) with Descartes's conclusion that objective reality is a “less perfect” mode of being (AT7.103).

demands, that we ask, as soon as possible, whether there is a certain being, and at the same time, what sort of being it is, which is the cause of all things, so that its objective essence [*essentia obiectiva*] may also be the cause of all our ideas, and then our mind will (as we have said) reproduce Nature as much as possible [*maxime*]. For it will have Nature's essence, order, and unity objectively. (TIE[99])⁶¹

Adopting this kind of epistemological and ontological framework is of course bound to raise many questions (and perhaps equally many objections), and I will return to some of those towards the end of the paper. For now, however, I want to focus on how this sort of framework affects how we understand Spinoza's account of the essential constitution of the human mind. Namely, if Spinoza explains the power of ideas to represent things by the distinction between formal and objective reality, then for him to say that the human mind is essentially an idea of an existing body, is to say that *what is essential for the existence of a human mind is the existence of a certain objectively-real body*. That is, for a human mind to exist is essentially for a certain body to exist with the reality proper to a mental object. To put this still differently, what a human mind essentially is for Spinoza, is a certain kind of representational content: an idea of a certain kind of body, or what is the same, a certain objectively-real body.

Thinking of Spinoza's account of the human mind along these lines puts us in a position to explain how an idea that is essentially "of a body" can nevertheless be explained in terms of properties of thought alone. For, so understood, the claim that a human mind is essentially an idea of a body turns out to describe the essential and intrinsic properties of a certain kind of idea.⁶² On this reading, Spinoza's account of the human mind is thus precisely what we should expect given Spinoza's larger commitments to *Barrier*, *Causal Cognition* and *Identity*: the existence of a human mind is due to the causal powers and properties of thought alone. For it is a matter of a causal process fully internal to thought, and ultimately due to substance as an infinite *res cogitans*, that a certain collection of ideas comes to be *of* one thing or another. I.e. it is a matter of thought alone that a certain objective reality – a certain mental object – comes to be. For a certain bundle of ideas to count as a "human mind" this bundle must collectively represent a sufficiently complex body and it must represent it as actually existing.

Contrary to what is alleged by Materialist Readings, the existence of a human mind is thus not a matter of thought entering into a relation (whether of causality or *sui generis* dependence) with an entity in a different attribute, a formally-real body out there in the world, so to speak. A human mind is a human mind not because it depends explanatorily or ontologically on some formally-real body, but because it relates causally to certain other ideas, which bring into existence a certain objective reality, or a specific representational content – an idea of an existing body. So understood, *Intentionality* – the claim that every human mind is essentially *of* a body – turns out to describe not a relation between two formally-real entities but a thing's relation to its own essence. There is

61 Cf. Ep. 32, TIE[34, 99], KVapp2[3-4, 6-7, 9, 15].

62 Cf. Aquila 1978:281.

indeed a dependence relation here, but only the sort of dependence that a thing (a human mind) has on its own essence (a certain representational content).

The error of Materialist Readings lies thus in their misidentification of the mind's essential intentional object, and a misidentification of the attribute to which the mind's essential intentional object belongs. Proponents of such readings take Spinoza's references to physical properties in his account of the human mind as references to formally-real bodies (that is, as references to modes of the attribute of extension). I suggest that we read them instead as references to the body as objectively-real (that is, as references to the essential representational content of the human mind).⁶³

Materialist Readings seem to overlook the inevitable ambiguity that a *prima facie* extension-specific term like “body” (or “sun”) will have on an ontologically-pluralistic theory of ideas of the sort that Spinoza adopts. The word “body” on its own leaves underdetermined the mode of being of the thing to which we are referring: if we speak of the “sun”, for example, we may be referring to a star with a certain mass and circumference, or to this same very thing but as a purely mental object, a thing existing in an intellect. To put this point more generally, it seems to me that for Spinoza a *word* like “body” can “signify” (E2p49s; II/131) two different *concepts* which themselves are ultimately concepts of one and the same thing: namely, “body” can signify the <body as formally-real>, a physical entity whose ultimate explanans is <extension>; or it can signify the <body as objectively-real>, a purely mental object whose ultimate explanans is <thought>. But, again, both concepts are also in another sense concepts of one and the same *res*, the body that is capable of existing with formal reality as well as objective reality. Perhaps this under-determination of language is one reason for Spinoza's well-known distrust of language (e.g. E2p49s): linguistic distinctions do not reliably map onto metaphysical ones.

6.2. Having sketched the basic idea behind my proposal, let me now show more concretely how my interpretation works when applied to passages which had invited Materialist Readings in the first place.

Consider first Spinoza's central claim that the “first thing that constitutes the essence of the Mind is...the idea of an actually existing Body” (E2p13). On Materialist Readings, as we have seen, this proposition announces the human mind's dependence on an actually extended thing, a mode of another attribute. On the reading now being proposed, Spinoza's point here is instead that what is essential to a human mind is the existence of a certain representational content: an objectively-real body.

On Materialist Readings, Spinoza's assertion that a mind endures “insofar as it expresses the actual existence of the Body” (E5p23d) confirms the existential dependence of human minds on formally-real bodies. On the current reading, the demonstration merely reiterates that there is a human mind only as long as there is an idea with a specific representational content, i.e. an idea with a particular objective reality.

The same reasoning can be applied to Spinoza's statement that “the present existence of our Mind depends only on this, that the Mind involves the actual existence of

⁶³ Cf. Barker 1938:164-7.

the Body”, such that a mind's existence and powers “are taken away as soon as the Mind ceases to affirm the present existence of the Body” (E3p11s). Once again, we can read this scholium as Materialists do, namely as evidence of the human mind's essential existential dependence on a formally-real mode of extension. *Or* we can read it as a claim about the human mind's intrinsic and immanent representational content, that is as the claim that there is a human mind only as long as a bundle of ideas is representing a sufficiently complex body as existing. To put this differently, we can read the passage as describing a human mind's existential dependence not on a formally-real body, but on its own essence – on a certain bit of objective reality that is essential to this idea being the idea it is. It is worth noting here that Spinoza's definition of “essence” uses the very same language that the above scholium does: the essence of any thing is precisely that which, “being taken away [*tollere*], the thing is necessarily taken away” (E2def2).

Likewise, Spinoza's insistence that to know how a human mind differs from other minds we must “first kno[w] adequately the nature of our Body” (E2p13s), can be read either, in the Materialist vein, as evidence of the human mind's explanatory dependence on extension, or as the claim that what distinguishes ideas from another is their essential representational content, where such content is to be understood as an intrinsic property of an idea, and not a reference to anything extra-mental.

Spinoza's assertion that “ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do” (E2p13s) makes the same point more generally: whereas proponents of Materialist Readings take the term “object” to pick out a thing outside thought, I suggest that we instead take it to mean the immanent, purely mental, intentional object.

Similarly, for Spinoza to say that a human mind acquires a different degree of “perfection when...it affirms of its body...something which involves more or less reality than before” (E3GenDefAff) is not to make a human mind depend ontologically for its degree of reality on something extra-mental, as Materialists want it, but instead to make the rather intuitive claim that a mind's degree of power (i.e., its ability to self-sufficiently produce different ideas [E2p13s, E5p39s]) depends on what this mind represents: the richer or more complex its objective reality, the more different kinds of properties it represents, the more concepts it involves, the more fertile this idea is as a ground of further inferences, compositions, abstractions, and so on.

Finally, consider Spinoza's assertion that “no one will be able to understand” the mind-body “union” unless they first consider the body a human mind essentially represents (E2p13s). On Materialist Readings, this intentional “union” links modes in two different attributes, a mind and a (formally-real) body, by means of a trans-attribute intentional relation. On the reading now under consideration, the mind-body “union” for Spinoza consists in the fact that, by virtue of its essential representational content, a human mind is also identical, as a bit of reality, to a certain (formally-real) body.

In sum, the passages in which Spinoza discusses the essential constitution of the human mind admit both of a Materialist Reading and of the ontologically-pluralistic reading. Since, as we saw in the course of this paper, interpreting Spinoza's references to “bodies” as references to formally-real bodies, in the Materialist vein, leads to inconsistency with Spinoza's fundamental metaphysical and especially epistemological

commitments, an interpretation capable of accommodating the references to bodies within the attribute of thought without inviting such inconsistency – an interpretation such as the ontologically-pluralistic reading I've put forward – seems vastly preferable.

6.3. In conclusion let me address two possible objections to my proposal.

The first kind of worry one may have is that my proposal turns on a highly obscure and implausible thesis: an assumption of multiple kinds or modes of reality. That is, one may worry that my account blocks a threat of inconsistency in Spinoza's system by piling up even greater obscurities. What does it mean to say that the very same thing can exist with two different kinds of reality? And in what sense can a bona fide body out there in the world, in a determinate spatio-temporal location, be “one and the same” as a mental object?

There are several things one could say in response to this worry. For one, there is the historical, contextual point. The ontologically-pluralistic aspect of Spinoza's theory of ideas has a historical pedigree going back to the Scholastics.⁶⁴ So if we find it strange and obscure this is arguably primarily a function of our own moment in the history of ideas. Furthermore, the recent resurgence of work on ontological pluralism⁶⁵ will hopefully be seen as an indication that such theories are at the very least not obviously incoherent nor unworthy of 21st-century attention.

More importantly, we should recognize that, within Spinoza's epistemology, his ontological-pluralism about representation is not a minor doctrine nor an ad hoc solution to some discrete problem. It is part of Spinoza's explanation of what it means to think as such. Thinking, for Spinoza, is fundamentally the activity of a substance that necessarily thinks what it brings into being, and this is to be understood as the coexistence of two kinds of reality – the reality things have qua effects of substance, and the reality they have qua thought by this substance (E2p7c). So substance's power to bring about entities that necessarily possess these two kinds of reality is one of its most basic ontological features; conversely, the necessity of things' existence with objective reality is part of what it means for substance to be an infinite, or unlimited, *res cogitans* (E2p1, E1def8). And as is the case with all such fundamental features in Spinoza's framework, the ultimate reason why being and thought work in this way must be sought in the nature of substance itself. Granted, to say that the explanation of why Spinoza endorses an ontological pluralism about ideas is ultimately to be sought in substance's self-explanatory nature as a *res cogitans* is more of a promissory note on explanation than a genuine explanation. But in this the formal/objective reality distinction is no worse off than other basic Spinozistic assumptions.

Finally, as to worries about what kind of identity could obtain between a formally-real body and an objectively-real one, despite their difference in attributes, I

64 Given the limited space of this paper I cannot do justice to the different interpretations that the formal/objective reality have received over centuries, nor situate Spinoza in this historical framework. But see e.g. Ayers 1998; Brentano 1874, Brown 2007; Hoffman 2002; Kaufmann 2000; King 2006; Normore 1986; Tweedale 2006; Wilson 1978.

65 E.g. McDaniel 2010.

grant that the answer is not self-evident. But Spinoza's commitment to the identity of things that differ in attribute – such as the *Identity* asserted in E2p7s – is a familiar difficulty. So I take my proposal not to multiply interpretative problems but to contribute, however fractionally, to the *solution* of this familiar problem, insofar as my interpretation shows that however we interpret the *Identity* of E2p7s, that interpretation must have room *inter alia* for an identity of the reality of a human body and a human mind's essence.

Here is a second sort of objection one may have to my proposal. This is that it comes with another glaring price-tag; namely, I seem to be imputing to Spinoza a “veil-of-perception” view on which the human mind knows only what is objectively-real (its own ideas) but nothing external to thought, and in particular not bodies as they are in themselves.⁶⁶

The force of this second worry should, I hope, be lessened by the following considerations. First, in this paper I have addressed only Spinoza's account of the *essential constitution* of human minds. I did not attempt to offer an account of Spinozistic ideas in general, including the sensory ideas that human minds acquire in the course of their existence. So the only sort of cognition of the body that I have discussed is the cognition that *essentially* makes up a human mind. But Spinoza, notoriously, identifies all “minds” with *substance's* ideas of actual existents (E2p13s).⁶⁷ In the context of veil-of-perception worries, this has two noteworthy consequences.

First, the fact that human minds in their essential constitution are ultimately substance's necessarily veridical (E2p32) ideas guarantees the “agreement” (or correspondence) of these ideas with what they represent (E1ax6).⁶⁸ In the case of human minds, it guarantees that the essential representational content of this idea (an objectively-real body) will correspond to this body as a formally-real mode in extension. This agreement obtains in virtue of what substance is essentially: it is because substance necessarily simultaneously produces things and thinks them (E2p7c), that the body essentially represented by a human mind also actually exists as a formally-real thing in the attribute of extension.

In other words, one part of the response to worries about committing Spinoza to a veil-of-perception position is that the idea of the body in question is guaranteed to be true by Spinoza's larger metaphysical and epistemological commitments about substantial thought. Plausibly, we can also see ontological-pluralism as a version of direct realism.⁶⁹ Namely, if the idea of the sun just is the *sun itself* existing in the intellect, as Descartes puts it, then in knowing a mental object such as the objectively-real sun, even inadequately or partially, one thereby knows a thing identical to its non-mental

66 I'm grateful to Justin Steinberg for this objection.

67 On this problematic identification see especially Wilson 1999.

68 On my reading, Spinoza also uses *objecta* and *ideata* to refer both to the external thing with which a true idea might “agree” (E1ax6) and to the intrinsic content of an idea. Thanks to Justin Steinberg for pressing me on this issue.

But see Barker who concludes that Spinoza is simply inconsistent on the idea-ideatum relation (1938:163).

69 Brown 2007 so reads Descartes on this point.

counterpart. (Spinoza is explicit that there is only a conceptual distinction between the two kinds of reality [E4p8d], between the sun as formally-real and the sun as objectively-real.)

The second consequence of Spinoza's identification of minds with substance's ideas is that it is not clear that his account of the essential constitution of the human mind bears – at least in any direct way – on *human* cognition. That is, his account of the essential constitution of the human mind is not an account of the sorts of ideas of bodies I can *have*, the sort of cognition I can have when I do physics or look at the tree outside my window, but of the idea that, as a mind, I essentially *am*.⁷⁰

Now, if we assume in addition that Spinoza is committed to ontological-pluralism about *all* ideas, and not merely about substance's necessarily true ideas,⁷¹ we can of course worry about the viability of ontological pluralism as a general theory of ideas, and in particular about its capacity to explain sensory, abstract, or false ideas. (To what formally-real existent in nature will the objective reality of a confused or false idea be identical?) This is a worry clearly worth pursuing, but one I can't resolve here. My aim in this paper has been not to examine Spinoza's theory of ideas in its entirety, but only to suggest that we can use it to render his account of the essence of the human mind consistent with the rest of his system.

⁷⁰ For this reading see Donagan 1988, Matheron 1969.

⁷¹ Carriero argues on textual grounds that for Spinoza the formal/objective reality model of representation does not apply to sensory ideas (2016:142n10). But there are some reasons, both textual and systematic, to conclude that Spinoza wants the ontologically-pluralistic theory of representation to hold for *all* ideas. For one, he explicitly applies the formal/objective reality distinction to a case of human cognition in which we understand not adequately but only “as much as possible” (TIE[99]). Second, his naturalistic commitment to uniformity of explanation (E3pref) exerts a systematic pressure toward a uniform model of representation for all ideas.

For accounts of how misrepresentation works in Descartes's version of the view see e.g. Brown 2007, Kaufman 2000:390.

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