REPRESENTATION, MISREPRESENTATION, AND ERROR
IN SPINOZA’S PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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Axiom 6 of Part I of Spinoza’s Ethics, in the most widely used English translation, reads: “a true idea must agree with its object.” Spinoza also claims in Part II of the Ethics that every idea has an object with which it is parallel in an “order and connection” of causes (E2p7, E2p11, E2p13)—and, indeed, with which it is identical or “one and same” (E2p7s, E2p21s). Jonathan Bennett has maintained that, because the parallelism and identity of idea and object entails their agreement, every idea must therefore be true for Spinoza—and, indeed, Spinoza explicitly states that all ideas, at least “insofar as they are related to God,” are true (E2p32). Yet one of the primary purposes of the Ethics is to overcome the prevalence of error—a state that seems, at least for him, to involve assent to ideas that misrepresent how things are and so are not true but false. Is Spinoza in error about the possibility of error in his own philosophy of mind?

In what follows, I will first examine Spinoza’s explicit statements about error and conclude that they approach but do not fully answer the question of how false ideas—that is, misrepresentations—are possible. In pursuit of a fuller Spinozistic answer to this

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1 Melamed, Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Substance and Thought, offers a detailed account of this identity, and of its relation to the specific identity of modes of extension with modes of thought. Marshall, “The Mind and the Body,” argues that the relation of being “one and the same” should not be understood as numerical identity. Nothing in the present paper turns on whether Marshall’s thesis is correct or not, with the exception mentioned in note 5.

2 Learning from Six Philosophers, pp. 189-90.
question, I will then briefly explain his general theory of imaginative representation, and I will observe that it raises a complementary issue most forcefully formulated by Margaret Wilson\(^3\): just as it seems that no idea can represent what is not the case, so too it seems that every idea of imagination will represent an implausibly vast amount of what is or has been the case. In considering Spinoza’s possible responses to this latter charge, I will detail first the roles of confusion and causation in imaginative representation and then some of the various ways in which, on his account, we can imagine things and imagine them as being particular ways. These considerations, in turn, will suggest a promising way in which Spinoza could use his distinctive conatus doctrine—that is, the doctrine that “each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being” (E3p6)—both to delimit the otherwise vast extent of the imaginative representation of what is and to explain how imaginative misrepresentation (the representation of what is not) is possible. Thus armed with a Spinozistic account of misrepresentation and error—if not quite an account Spinoza himself spells out—I will return to the paradox of parallelism, identity, agreement, and truth with which we began.

1. Spinoza’s Account of Error

Spinoza recognizes two kinds of ideas: those of the intellect and those of the imagination. The imagination includes, but is not limited to, sensation. Error arises, he holds, when an idea of imagination occurs in the absence of certain other relevant ideas:

> And here, in order to begin to indicate what error is, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the Mind, considered in themselves contain no error, or that the Mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is

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\(^3\) “Objects, Ideas, and Minds.”
considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it. For if the Mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice—especially if this faculty of imagining depended only on its own nature, i.e. (by E1d7), if the Mind's faculty of imagining were free. (E2p17s)

Because Spinoza holds that “all ideas, as they are related to God, are true” (E2p32), it is important to him that error or falsity not consist in some positive feature of ideas considered in themselves (E2p33). Yet error also cannot be total ignorance or utter lack of ideas, for as he notes, bodies themselves (as distinguished from minds) cannot be in error, even though they can properly be said to lack knowledge. Hence, error must instead be “the privation of knowledge that inadequate knowledge of things, or inadequate and confused ideas, involves” (E2p35d). Spinoza offers two illustrations:

Error consists in the privation of knowledge. But to explain the matter more fully, I shall give [NS4: one or two examples]: men are deceived in that they think themselves free [NS: i.e., they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing or forbear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom—that they do not know any cause of their actions…. 

Similarly, when we look at the sun, we imagine it as about 200 feet away from us, an error that does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it in this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagining. For even if we later come to know that it is more than 600 diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near. For we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but

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4 ‘NS’ indicates material included in translation from the *Nagelate Schriften*, the Dutch version of Spinoza’s *Opera posthuma*. 
because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our
body is affected by the sun. (E2p35s)

Yet how does an imaginative idea together with a mere lack of knowledge of the fact
that $p$ become the belief that not-$p$ or some other belief incompatible with $p$? In
approaching this question, it is useful to note that Spinoza, unlike Descartes, holds that an
idea we form is naturally an affirmation of its content (E2p49). But while this can help to
explain how an imaginative idea becomes a belief, it cannot by itself explain how that
believed imaginative idea became a misrepresentation—a representation, contrary to fact,
that (or entailing that) not-$p$.

Consider Spinoza’s example of the sun—an example based on Descartes’s claim that
200 feet is the limit at which binocular vision can facilitate distance perception. Although
it is true that we are initially ignorant that the sun of which we form an image is more than
600 diameters of the earth away from us, we are of course equally “ignorant” (that is,
lacking knowledge) of its being 200 feet away. So why, on some particular occasion, do
we imagine it as 200 feet away rather than as more than 600 diameters of the earth away?
Indeed, given that we cannot tell the difference visually between things at these two
distances, why wouldn’t it be equally true to say that we imagine other objects that really
are 200 feet distant as being more than 600 diameters of the earth away? Perhaps better,
why should we not say that seen objects more than 200 feet distant are imagined as being
at least 200 feet away but not as being at any more specific distance? Similarly, to take
Spinoza’s other example, although human beings may often be ignorant of the actual
causes of their actions, they are equally “ignorant” of their actions’ lacking causes (which,
according to Spinoza, they in fact do not lack). So why say that they “imagine” their
actions as uncaused, rather than as caused, or neither as caused nor uncaused? These are the kinds of questions that Spinoza must answer if his theory of error is to be complete.
2. Intentionality and Imaginative Representation

In order to answer these questions, we must first understand Spinoza’s theory of intentionality and its application to imaginative representation; and in order to do that, it is helpful to contrast it with Descartes’s. Like many scholastics, Descartes distinguishes between two ways in which a thing can have reality or being. It may have formal reality, corresponding to what we would ordinarily think of as its real existence as a thing in its own right, but it can also have objective reality that is present and contained in an idea of the thing. Intentionality is possible, on this account, because a thing can exist quite literally in two different ways in two different places. For Descartes, an idea that does this containing—that is, the idea having the thing as its “object”—has formal reality in its own right; in consequence, when that idea is in turn made a subject of thought, it will have objective reality that is contained in another idea. Although the identity between the thing existing formally and the thing existing objectively is meant to explain why thought can be about things, how exactly an idea is able to contain the objective reality of another thing is left largely unexplained in terms of anything else by Descartes: that is simply the kind of wonderful thing that ideas, as modes of thinking substances, can do.

Spinoza, in contrast, offers a simple, original, and radical explanation of how an idea can encompass the objective reality of a thing: it does so simply by being that objective reality itself, and hence by being one and the same thing as that whose objective reality it contains. The idea of each thing is thus not a separate container of its objective reality; rather it is just a twin aspect—the objective rather than the formal—of the thing itself. In reducing this kind of intentionality to an aspect of identity, he offers a kind of
naturalization of intentionality within the context of his multiple-attribute substance monism.\(^5\)

Spinoza applies his account of intentionality-through-identity-with-ideas not only to ideas of eternal things but also to the minds of individual singular things.\(^6\) For example, the human mind is the idea (the “awareness,” we might also say) of the human body, which is its object (E2p13): that is, the human mind is one and the same thing as the human body and thereby encompasses, by constituting, its objective reality. Similarly, an idea in the human mind is fundamentally an idea of the state of the body with which it is identical and which is its object. Moreover, “whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human Mind must be perceived by the human Mind, or there will necessarily be an idea of that thing in the Mind” (E2p12). Thus, the human mind perceives every affection (that is, modification, state, or event) of its body. But in this respect, Spinoza remarks, human beings do not differ in kind from other things in nature, for all things are “animate” in “different degrees” (E2p13s) and have minds that are the ideas of them (E3p1d).\(^7\)

That every singular thing in nature—even trees and rocks—perceives everything that happens in its body is of course an initially shocking claim. Spinoza can mitigate the shock in at least two complementary ways. First, he can mitigate the scope of the phrase

\(^5\) This is a fuller and more satisfying naturalization, I think, if being “one and the same as” is indeed understood as numerical identity—see note 1.

\(^6\) “Singular thing” and “individual” are largely overlapping categories. However, the “simplest bodies” are singular things but not individuals, while the “infinite individual” is not a singular thing. See Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness,” for a full discussion.

\(^7\) Spinoza’s reference in E3p1d to E2p11c makes it clear that the “other things” said to have minds include anything that can be perceived by the human mind. It is worth noting that, by E2p19, the human mind perceives only the affections of the human body, and not the human body itself—of which it is, of course, nevertheless the idea. That is, while the human mind is the awareness of the human body, what stands in the perceived-by relation to it is limited to what is in that body, in Spinoza’s sense of that term.
‘everything that happens in’ by emphasizing that it concerns not the ‘in’ of spatial containment, but the ‘in’ of inherence, the relation whereby states or events inhere in a subject. Thus, an individual thing need not perceive an event that occurs within its outer boundaries unless the event also constitutes a change to the self-preservatory mechanism—the distinctive “fixed pattern of motion and rest” (definition and lemmas 4-7 following E2p13s)—that constitutes its being as a individual. Second, he can mitigate the force of the term ‘perceives’. On his view, all ideas are conscious ones to at least some very minimal extent, but an idea’s degree of consciousness is equivalent or identical to the degree of its *power of thinking* [*cogitandi potentia*]—that is, the force with which it is poised to contribute to the character and force of the striving for self-preservation, or *conatus*, of that thing whose idea it is. Many animals have sophisticated sensory systems that can capture, retain, and employ detailed images of external things, and the ideas of these images may, at least on those occasions when they are poised to guide self-preservatory behavior, be at a high level of consciousness. Their perceptions of other states of their bodies, in contrast, may be of very low consciousness. More rudimentary things, such as rocks and trees, have very little consciousness for any of their ideas. This is in keeping with what I have elsewhere called Spinoza’s *incremental naturalism*, according to which important features of mentality—such as consciousness, desire, and belief—do not suddenly appear at a particular level of complexity in nature but instead are present in rudimentary forms throughout nature.

The kind of intentionality described thus far is based on the identity between an idea and its object. However, Spinoza also recognizes a further, more merely representational,

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8 Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness.”
kind of mental content in connection with the imagination. Now, he clearly regards the
perception of “whatever happens” within each thing’s body as imagination rather than
intellection. As such, however, it always constitutes for him not merely perception of the
internal state that is its object but also representation of an external cause. For in E2p16,
Spinoza writes that “the idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by
external Bodies must involve the nature of the human Body and at the same time the
nature of the external body”; and in E2p17, he adds that “if the human Body is affected
with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the
same external body as present.” But in E2p17s, he defines this very condition of having
“affections of the body whose ideas … present external bodies as present to us” as
imagination.

This schematic account offers at least a partial explanation of how imagination can
represent the actual external causes of internal states—namely, through carrying or
encoding information about the natures of those causes, on which the characters of the
internal states themselves partly depend. However, we do not yet have any explanation of
how imagination can misrepresent, or carry misinformation about, those causes.
Moreover, the account so far raises a further problem, emphasized by Wilson. For any
given internal state of the body has a very wide variety of external causes, both at any
given time and through time. Consider, to adapt an example from the Ethics, the idea that

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Spinoza uses the term ‘repraesentare’. For present purposes, nothing turns on whether this is understood
as presentation or representation, so long as the distinction between it and the intentionality by which ideas
are “of” the objects with which they are identical is maintained. Bennett, Learning from Six Philosophers,
calls the latter “direct representation” and the former “indirect representation.”
Paul has in his mind of Peter’s body. As we have seen, this idea will involve the nature of Paul’s own body and the natures of the external causes of the corresponding internal affection of Paul. But these external causes will presumably include not only Peter’s body but also the bodies constituting the intervening medium between Peter’s body and Paul’s sense organs; and not only these, but also, in the other temporal direction, the bodies of Peter’s parents, and their parents, and of various bodies that have interacted with those bodies, infinitely far into the past. Thus, for Spinoza, Paul’s mind includes representations of all of the causes, from the most proximate to the most remote, of his internal states. This seems, on the face of it, to be yet another highly implausible doctrine.

How can Spinoza respond to this second charge of implausibility? First, he can restrict to some extent both the number of things and the aspects of things that an idea of imagination need represent. An idea of imagination need not specifically represent all of the things to which its object is related by some backward-leading chain of causation. Only if a distant cause has affected a more proximate cause in such a way as to make a difference to the character of the internal affections of the object, so as to leave some specific trace of information about itself in the object, need he regard it as specifically represented in imagination. Many individuals that affect the proximate causes of an internal affection of a body will do so only by influencing features of the proximate cause that themselves have no influence on that internal affection. For example, imagination need not represent an external object that has dented only the unseen back surface of an object that is later seen. Even a direct but remote cause of existence—such as a far-distant ancestor—might leave no specific trace of its nature that endures through succeeding

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10 This example is adapted from E2p17s, where Spinoza distinguishes between the idea of Peter’s body that is Peter’s mind (and so has Peter’s body as its object) and the idea of Peter’s body that is in Paul’s mind (which has an affection of Paul’s body, partly caused by Peter’s body, as its object).
generations. In such cases, it seems, the most that might be represented would be that there was, at some distant point in time, some remote cause or other.

Second, however, Spinoza can insist that even a fairly vast scope for imaginative representation, when understood in the context of incremental naturalism about representation, is not as implausible as it might seem. Axiom 4 of Part I of the Ethics states that “knowledge [cognitio] of the effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.” (The technical sense of ‘involve’ employed here is roughly that of ‘implicate’, as in “he is implicated in the crime.”) There is no question that, for Spinoza, the intellect’s understanding of an eternal infinite mode requires a conception of what he regards as its causes. Understanding a particular law of nature as an infinite mode, for example, requires some knowledge both of the more fundamental laws from which it follows, and which he regards as its proximate causes, and (more remotely) of the nature of God under the relevant divine attribute, extension or thought. And there is no reason in principle why the imaginative cognition of finite durational things should be any different in this respect.

The appearance of a difference, Spinoza may say, results from the fact that imaginative cognition, unlike intellection, is always confused—blurring different things together in such a way that they cannot be fully distinguished from one another. Thus, as Michael Della Rocca has argued, imagination is confused at least partly because in it the mind typically cannot distinguish the contributions made by the nature of the body that is affected, the nature of the parts of the human body that is affected, and the nature of the external bodies that affect it. As I have argued elsewhere, imagination is also confused

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11 For a discussion of both laws of nature and formal essences as infinite modes, see Garrett, “The Essence of the Body.”
12 Representation.
13 Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness.”
because in it the mind typically cannot distinguish among various potential causes of the affection of the body in question. For example, an auditory sensation is confused because we cannot distinguish whether it has been caused by a live human voice or a recording.\textsuperscript{14} But intricate and detailed human sensory perceptions must rank among the very \textit{least} confused imaginative ideas; ideas of internal affections that are not produced through sophisticated and intricate sensory systems will almost certainly be \textit{extremely} confused among a wide variety of potential external causes. It would not be surprising if such highly confused ideas—especially when nearly unconscious as well—should not appear to represent anything at all.

\textbf{3. Manners of Representation}

Nevertheless, it must be granted that Spinoza himself does not write of human beings or other singular things as representing in imagination \textit{any} of the more remote causes of their current internal affections.\textsuperscript{15} What can explain this absence? Is it simply that an appropriate occasion to mention such objects of representation never arose? In response to these questions, it will be helpful to consider briefly some of the manners of representation that Spinoza \textit{does} recognize in the course of the \textit{Ethics}.

Spinoza clearly recognizes imaginative representations that are specifically of particular things—for example, “the idea of Peter’s body that is in Paul’s mind” already noted. For Paul to have such an idea specifically \textit{of Peter}, there is no requirement that he

\textsuperscript{14} As the example suggests, the term ‘potential causes’ refers in this context to things that, under the general laws of nature, are able to produce the effect under some circumstances. A plurality of “potential causes” in this sense is compatible with Spinoza’s strict necessitarianism.

\textsuperscript{15} Morrison, “Restricting Spinoza’s Causal Axiom,” makes this point forcefully. His solution to the problem involves a limitation of the scope of E1a4 to immanent causation (that is, a things causation of its own modes) and a consequent limitation of the representational scope of imaginative representation. The discussion of this solution is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.
be able to distinguish Peter from every other individual who might resemble Peter, such as an identical twin of Peter who is unknown to Paul. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that Spinoza regards the direct causal relation between Peter and Paul’s idea as sufficient in this case to secure the reference of the idea specifically to Peter to the exclusion of other similar individuals.

On the other hand, Spinoza also explicitly recognizes that things can be imagined as present, as past, and as future (E4p10, E4p12, E4p13, E4p16), and this cannot always be a matter of causally-secured reference to a specific individual. He suggests, at E2p44c1s, that the imagination of things as being at past or future times is accomplished through associative sequences of images either terminating or beginning, respectively, with the content of a present sensation. A past body that is imagined as past may, of course, easily be a direct cause of the affection of the body corresponding to and identical with the idea of that affection. But to say that we can imagine things as existing in the future—particularly, as Spinoza says, things in the “far distant” future, whose existence can be the object of hope or fear—strongly suggests that we can also just imagine generally, or generically, that an object of a given kind will exist in the future, without specific causally-secured reference to any particular individual of the kind. One can imagine meeting Peter next week; but one can also imagine meeting just some as-yet-unknown person ten years hence.

Presumably, Spinoza’s explanation for this capacity for general or generic imaginative representation lies in the confusion that characterizes the Spinozistic imagination generally. When an individual thing produces an internal affection in another thing in

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16 It should be noted that the explanation of imagined time at E2p44c1s does involve a present individual, seen in the past, imagined as still existing in the future. Spinoza often describes hope and fear, in contrast, in terms of imagined objects and outcomes that have not yet come to exist.
such a way that the mind cannot distinguish, from the information present, the actual
cause from other potential causes, one may properly say that the idea of that affection
represents the cause confusedly; but one might also say with equal propriety that the idea
represents merely that feature of the actual cause—perhaps even a highly disjunctive
feature—that it shares with the other possible causes that cannot be distinguished from it.
For example, what is, considered in one way, an imaginative representation of a particular
live human voice is, considered in another way, a representation of sound-producing
qualities that this voice shares with some other voices and with some recordings. In many
cases, the confusion of an image is partly the consequence of its retaining traces of
multiple similar external causes; this kind of confused retention results in the “universal
images” or “universal notions” described in E2p40s1. In the case of these ideas, Spinoza
remarks, the mind has been “affected most forcibly by what is common” to all the
different instances; and the clear implication is that these ideas represent not merely the
actual instances previously experienced but all things that resemble them. Such a general
representation, associated with a particular time, could well serve to represent the
existence of an object of that kind in the future.

Just as Spinoza writes of imagining things as past, present, or future, so too he writes
of imagining them as necessary, as contingent, and as possible (E4p11, E4p12, E4p13,
E4p17). As he explains it, to imagine something as necessary (as opposed to conceiving it
intellectually as necessary) is evidently to imagine the thing, as the result of a frequent
and uniform past experience, in a way that is tightly associated with the imagination of
something else now present (as suggested by E2p44c1s). To imagine something as
contingent but presently non-existent, in contrast, is to conceive the thing itself neither as
necessary nor impossible from its own essence, while at the same time imagining something else as existing and incompatible with its present existence (E4p13d). To imagine something as possible is to imagine something as capable of producing the thing’s existence (E4d4, E4p12d) without being certain whether it will do so or not. Any of these imagined producers or excluders, as well as the contingent and possible things themselves, it seems, can again be conceived either generally or specifically—and thus, either with or without any causally mediated reference to a particular thing that has caused the imagination in question.

What is the moral to be drawn from these examples? For Spinoza, it appears that the very same kind of image can in some circumstances be best understood as being specifically “of” some one particular external cause, while in other circumstances it can be best understood as being more generally “of” any one or more things of a given kind. What determines which is the best or most proper interpretation in a particular case? One very natural proposal is that the difference lies in the functional role that the image is playing. Although Spinoza does not explicitly offer this explanation, he is particularly well-positioned theoretically to endorse and deploy it. Wilson has objected that his philosophy of mind in effect replaces the relation of representation with the simpler relation of being an effect of, but Spinoza’s distinctive philosophical commitments in fact allow him to hold a much more attractive theory of representation. On this theory, the idea of an internal affection of a body represents the external cause of the affection to the extent that something carrying information about the cause is also able to play a role in

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17 “Objects, Ideas, and Minds.”
18 This theory is discussed at greater length in Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness.”
determining the self-preserving behavior of that thing.\textsuperscript{19} Spinoza’s doctrine of the pervasiveness of mental representation throughout nature can then be understood to result not from the conflation of representation with causation, but rather from the addition of three further Spinozistic doctrines: (i) the \textit{conatus} doctrine that each thing strives, to the extent that it can, to preserve itself in being (E3p6); (ii) that even at the level of very rudimentary things, each genuine affection of a thing has the capacity to play some role in the thing’s self-preservatory behavior (E1p36, E3p8d); and (iii) that every affection involves and to some extent carries information about the nature of the external causes of that state (E2p16).

4. \textit{Conatus and Content}

Given this understanding of the character of Spinozistic imaginative representation, it is reasonable to say that any idea of an internal bodily affection “involves” and so in principle represents many or all of its external causes, at least confusedly. It is likewise reasonable to say that any idea of an internal bodily affection involves and so in principle represents, at least confusedly, the perhaps highly disjunctive qualities required to produce that affection—and thereby, at least indirectly, represents confusedly all of the bearers of those qualities as well. We may therefore describe \textit{all} of these represented causes as elements of an idea’s \textit{minimal representational content}. But it is also reasonable to say that some ideas of internal affections—particularly those that constitute the relatively distinct and conscious products of sophisticated sensory systems—have in addition what

\textsuperscript{19} It should be noted that the self-preservatory activity of human beings has both a physical (“extended”) aspect and a mental (“thinking”) aspect, and that for Spinoza effects within an attribute—extension or thought—are produced only by causes within that same attribute. The primary representational content of an idea itself is thus determined strictly by the functional role of the idea within the attribute of thought, although the object of the idea—which, as already noted, is “one and the same thing as” the idea—plays a parallel functional role within the attribute of extension.
we might call primary representational content. This primary content for the idea may be selected or determined from among the many elements of its minimal content by the manner in which the idea directs or influences self-preservatory activity. Suppose, for example, that an image derived from Peter’s body largely guides and regulates Paul’s activity relative to a person resembling that image only when Peter regards the person as having caused the image—so that similar men discovered by Paul not to be causally related to the production of his image would subsequently be ignored. Then Paul’s idea will be primarily “of” Peter. If, on the other hand, the image largely guides and regulates Paul’s behavior relative to anyone resembling Peter—so that any discovered evidence of lack of previous causal relation to Paul would itself be ignored—then Paul’s idea will be primarily “of” Peter-like individuals generally.

One advantage of this two-level approach to imaginative representation is that it can further mitigate the implausibility of Spinoza’s doctrine that internal affections represent a vast number of even quite remote external causes, while also explaining why Spinoza does not give any examples of ideas of imagination representing such remote causes. For while any idea of an internal affection will, in principle, minimally represent a vast number of its external causes—as well as shared qualities and even potential causes having those shared qualities—its primary self-preservatory function, if it has one at all, will much more likely be (at least in creatures like humans) to guide behavior relative to things that are more proximate causes. Yet these “target” primary causes need not be, and typically will not be, the most proximate causes—such as the bodies in the intervening medium between the perceiver and the distal stimulus. In romantic love, for example, the lover thinks primarily of the beloved, while thinking a great deal less about the air and the
light rays that were between them, and thinking a great deal less, too, about the beloved’s remote ancestors.

Most importantly for present purposes, however, the approach allows Spinoza to give a plausible answer to our original unanswered question of what must be added to ignorance of $p$ in order to get error about $p$. Thus, if one imagines the sun to be 200 feet distant rather than 600 diameters of the earth, this will be because the image will guide one to act as though it were 200 feet distant—meaning by this roughly that the image will guide the performance of the kinds of actions that would, ceteris paribus, be most conducive to self-preservation if the sun were 200 feet distant, rather than those that would be most conducive to self-preservation if it were 600 diameters of the earth distant. Suppose, for example, that one desires to alter the sun in some respect. Then under the influence of the image of it, one will be guided to look for materials to build a 200-foot ladder rather than a 600-earth-diameters-ladder, or to build a cannon with a 200-foot range rather than a 600-earth-diameter range. Similarly, to take Spinoza’s other example, if we imagine our actions to be uncaused rather than caused, this will be because we are guided by images of those actions to behave, for each particular potential cause of the action, in ways that would be, ceteris paribus, more conducive to self-preservation if that occurrence were not the cause. At least at the level of primary representation, it is potentially faulty guidance that must be added to ignorance in order for an idea to misrepresent and so to be affirmed in error. In addition, however, at the level of minimal representation, every imaginative idea can be said to be minimally false at least insofar as it represents without distinction causes and potential causes that are in fact different from one another.
Of course, the interpretation of the primary representational content of imaginative ideas will necessarily prove to be a holistic affair on this approach; what actions one will try to perform under the guidance of an image will be partly a function of what other beliefs and desires one has at the same time. But at least one constraint on the interpretation of primary content is not contingent: an individual must be understood as at least an imperfect striver for self-preservation.

We have now seen an explanation open to Spinoza—and prima facie the only explanation open to Spinoza—of how one can misrepresent the distance of the sun. The explanation exploits his fundamental doctrine of conatus and is fully compatible with his main doctrines about representation and imagination. What has not been explained is specifically why human beings misrepresent the distance of the sun. But there is good reason for that. The explanation for the human tendency to act towards certain seen distant objects as if they were 200 feet away (rather than some other distance) is to be found, for Spinoza, only deep within the specific physiological (and corresponding psychological) structure of human beings as self-preservationary mechanisms. Other creatures with the same basic visual resources for distinguishing distances might nevertheless have been so constructed that they tended to act towards all objects 200 feet or more distant as if they were exactly 300 feet distant, or 900 feet distant, or 17 miles distant. The ultimate source of primary imaginative error lies in the imperfection of each finite thing considered as a self-preservationary mechanism; but the particular kinds of errors to which a thing will be most prone is a function of where its own imperfections as a self-preservationary mechanism actually lie. Given the potential depth and persistence of such structural imperfections, sensory illusions may continue to prime faulty actions and so continue to misrepresent,
despite the fact that sensory images cannot be *intrinsically* erroneous for Spinoza and
even when the illusion comes to be well-understood and so, overall, ceases to deceive. In
such a case, new and more accurate ideas countermand the tendency to faulty actions
without entirely removing it.

5. The Puzzle of Misrepresentation and Error Resolved

We began with a textual puzzle posed by Bennett: How is error possible if (i) true ideas
agree with their objects and (ii) the parallelism-and-identity of all ideas with their objects
entails their agreement with those objects? To resolve the puzzle, we must understand
Spinoza’s account of misrepresentation in the context of his overall theory of
intentionality. But we must also observe that Spinoza uses two different terms, *ideatum*
and *objectum*, that are often translated indifferently as *object*. For while a true idea agrees
with [convenire] its *ideatum* according to E1a6, the human body is never described as the
*ideatum* of the human mind, nor is that with which an idea is said to be “one and the
same” ever described as its *ideatum*. This, I propose, is because (i) the *objectum* of an idea
is simply the thing that it parallels and with which it is “one and the same”—and hence, on
Spinoza’s account, that whose “objective” reality it contains—while (ii) the *ideatum* of an
idea is whatever it is “of” in a sense that is broad enough to include the contents of
imaginative representation. An idea need not, therefore, comprehend the objective reality
of its full *ideatum*.

For Spinoza, what is numerically the very same idea token can exist both in God and
in one or more finite minds. Michael Della Rocca has argued that the representational
mental content of an idea is relative to the mind in which it exists, so that the same idea
can represent differently as it is in a human mind and as it is in God.\textsuperscript{20} In particular, he suggests that in God ideas always represent only their own objects, whereas in finite minds some ideas also serve to represent imaginatively (and hence confusedly and inadequately) external causes as well. As applied to our distinction between objectum and ideatum, this might be taken to suggest that in God an idea’s ideatum and its objectum are necessarily the same; the idea is “of” precisely the thing whose objective reality or being it contains by being identical with it; hence, in God every idea (i) is precisely of something that is the case, (ii) agrees with its ideatum, and (iii) is true. As the imaginative idea of a particular internal affection exists in the human mind, in contrast, it will be separated from God’s adequate ideas of its causes and will acquire additional representational content beyond the intentionality that it possesses by having an objectum. Thus, the ideatum of an imaginative idea in the human mind will consist of more than simply its objectum, and the parallelism and identity of the idea with its objectum would not guarantee its agreement with its full ideatum. Where the additional representational content concerning the ideatum misrepresents reality, agreement will fail and the idea in question will be false.

This is a possible reading of Spinoza. However, the doctrine of E1a4 that cognition of effects always involves cognition of their causes suggests that it is preferable to continue to distinguish the ideatum of an idea from its objectum, even as that idea exists in God.\textsuperscript{21} Even in God, every idea will involve some thought “of” the causes of its objectum. This is

\textsuperscript{20} For example, Della Rocca writes: “Although in the human mind each idea is of its extended counterpart, in a great many cases, each idea is also of the cause of that counterpart. In God’s mind, as we have seen, those very same ideas are only of their extended counterparts” (Representation, p. 46).

\textsuperscript{21} In correspondence, Della Rocca has indicated that he, too, prefers an interpretation along these lines. Hence the previous reading, in which ideatum and objectum are always the same in God, should not be attributed to him.
not, to be sure, because God requires multiple different and distinct ideas of those causes, but rather because the ideas, like the causes and effects themselves, are not entirely distinct from one another: in thinking one, one is thereby also to some extent thinking of the other. On this interpretation, identity is a relation holding specifically between an idea and its objectum, while agreement is a broader relation sometimes holding between an idea and its full ideatum. As an idea exists in God, the full information provided by adequate and unconfused knowledge of all causes constrains the interpretation of the ideatum to precisely what is actually the case about it, rendering the idea true. Indeed, this same happy condition holds of an intellectual idea in the human mind as well: adequate and unconfused knowledge of the causes of its object likewise constrains the interpretation of its ideatum to precisely what is true. In the case of an imaginative idea in the human mind, however, such adequate and unconfused knowledge of causes is absent from that mind, and the idea can therefore misrepresent its ideatum. Error then becomes all too possible—and hence Spinoza’s Ethics can properly seek to offer at least a partial remedy.\footnote{I have benefited greatly from discussions of these topics with Michael Della Rocca, Martin Lin, John Morrison, Colin Marshall, Alvin Plantinga, Lynn Joy, Samuel Newlands, Ted Warfield, Michael Griffin, Howard Robinson, Tom Stoneham, Alison Simmons, Jeffrey McDonough, Michael Rosenthal, Ursula Renz, and audiences at the University of Notre Dame, Central European University, Harvard University, and the University of Washington.}
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