1. Introduction

Much has been written already about two aspects of Spinoza’s account of the mind-body relation — namely, about his prohibition on causal relations between minds and bodies, and about 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. 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”. The basic aim of this paper is to clarify how Spinoza understands this intentional aspect of the mind-body relation.

One of Spinoza’s basic theses is that every durationally existing human mind is essentially an idea of some existing body. So understanding the intentional aspect of the mind-body relation will allow us to understand how a human mind comes into durational existence: what is necessary and sufficient for the constitution of 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.

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.


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. (Throughout I use double quotations marks for citations from Spinoza and other primary texts; I reserve single quotes for my own terminology.)


4. In this paper I will not attempt to offer an account of Spinozistic ideas and
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, and thus to a version of materialism about the human mind. Several commentators have drawn precisely this conclusion. This is how Curley, for example, opens a chapter entitled “Spinoza’s Materialism”:

it is the essence of the human mind to be 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.

Likewise, Bennett notes that what Spinoza endorses is not a “mere parallelism, a matching of facts about the body with facts about the mind.

intentionality in general, but restrict myself to what is essential to a human mind.

5. By ‘explain’ I will mean throughout ‘provide 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 on 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; Koistinen 2009:68–9, 182; Malinowski-Charles 2010:126; 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 2000:33–6.


Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations

What Spinoza says ... is asymmetrical, with the body having primacy. 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.

Finally, here is Koistinen:

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.

So understood, Spinoza fundamentally disagrees with Descartes that we can conceive of ourselves as thinking things without also, and indeed more fundamentally, conceiving of something extended. 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 quite straightforward textual support. One may of course also have independent reasons for cheering on Spinoza’s apparent recognition that there can be no human mind without a brain. Nonetheless, what I want to show in what follows is that once

10. Nadler 2008:597, italics in the original. Nadler is discussing E2P313s and E5P39s but interprets the dependence expressed therein as grounded in “parallelism” (586). However, both passages describe the mind’s intentional relation to a body (in E2P14, which groups E539s via E4P338, it is a question of what the mind ‘perceives’).
we take a more comprehensive view of Spinoza’s philosophy, Materialist Readings begin to lose their plausibility. This is because they violate several fundamental commitments of Spinoza’s metaphysics and epistemology. In particular, such readings 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* can explain — give cognition of — one another, such that only ideas can explain ideas, only bodies can explain bodies, etc. By suggesting that human minds depend for their existence and explanation on bodies, Materialist Readings violate both of these commitments.

As this suggests, what is at stake in investigating the essential intentionality of human minds is thus not merely the details of Spinoza’s understanding of mind-body relations, but also the internal consistency of his philosophical system: arguably the most natural and prevalent interpretation of his account of the essential constitution of the human mind sits uneasily with his larger philosophical commitments. This is despite the fact that “cognition of the human mind” is a stated goal of Spinoza’s entire undertaking in the *Ethics* (E2pref).

Let me say a few words about how this paper is organized. I begin with a brief review of the most relevant background commitments of Spinoza’s philosophy of mind (§2). Next, I examine arguments in favor of Materialist Readings of Spinoza’s position (§3). I conclude that, despite their prima facie plausibility, such readings must ultimately be rejected, on the grounds of their incompatibility with Spinoza’s basic epistemological and metaphysical commitments (§4). I then briefly survey two plausible but ultimately inadequate alternatives to Materialist Readings (§5). I conclude by putting forward my own interpretation (§6).

To anticipate, here is my positive proposal in a nutshell. There is no denying that Spinoza appeals to physical properties in explaining the essential constitution of the human mind. But what I want to suggest

13. Throughout I translate *cognitio* as “cognition” rather than as “knowledge”, given the normative associations of the latter (Spinozistic *cognitio* can be false [E2p41]).

14. Throughout I will use ‘mental’ as synonymous with ‘thinking’.

15. For alternatives to the standard reading of the relevant doctrines, see e.g. Koistinen 1996; Morrison 2013; Marshall 2009; Hübner-MS.


For criticisms of *Reduction* see e.g. Barker 1938; Leibniz 1989:277; D. Steinberg 2000:34; Taylor 1937:148ff; Wilson 1999:126ff.
the “idea that constitutes the formal being of the human Mind” in particular “is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas” (E2p15).

The second doctrine relevant to our inquiry is the following key premise of Spinoza’s epistemology:

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

This is how most interpreters today understand Spinoza’s claim that “Cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause” (E1ax4, transl. alt.): if $x$ is conceived or cognized through $y$, then $x$ is also caused by $y$.17

The third doctrine to which I want to draw our attention is the aforementioned claim that that only like things can explain one another: only ideas can explain other ideas, and only bodies others bodies. Given the centrality of this doctrine to what follows, I will, exceptionally in this section, delve into the details of the doctrine, to allow us to get a more precise picture of Spinoza’s position.

According to Spinoza, all basic, qualitative kinds of being (what he calls “attributes”), such as mentality and physicality (or, in his terminology, thought and extension), are explanatorily closed or self-sufficient. The doctrine is often referred to nowadays as Spinoza’s “attribute barrier”:

(3) Barrier: Nothing mental can be explained by anything physical, and vice versa.18

Spinoza puts his commitment to this principle as follows: “Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself [per se concepi debet]” (E1p10). That is, “cognizing”, or “form[ing] a concept” of, a given attribute cannot “require [indigere]” the cognition or the concept of a different attribute (E1def3, E1p2, E1p8s2 [II/50]).19 Spinoza draws this conclusion because, on his account, an “attribute” designates what we apprehend as the qualitative essence of a “substance”, i.e. the qualitative essence of the ontologically fundamental entity that is essentially explanatorily self-sufficient [E1p10d, E1def3.1]. In short, by Barrier, cognition of the fundamental nature of physical reality (i.e., in Spinoza’s terminology, cognition of the substantial attribute of extension) cannot be necessary for cognition of the attribute of thought. And vice versa. Like Descartes, Spinoza treats <thought> and <extension> as irreducible and incommensurate.20

This principle of the explanatory closure of mental and physical realms, grounded in the explanatory self-sufficiency of substance, derivatively bears also on all “modes”, i.e. on the essentially dependent, non-substantial entities that come into being as modifications of substance. This is the ontological category that, for Spinoza, includes all minds and bodies:

- each attribute is conceived through itself without any other (by 1p10). So the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one [Quare unicuiusque attributi modi conceptum sui attributi involvunt non autem alterius] …. (E2p6d)

According to this passage, entities of each attribute-kind “involve”, or imply,21 only the concept of their own attribute. The concept of any mind, for example, will thus “involve” <thought> as the most general qualitative concept it presupposes for intelligibility.22 In contrast,
entities that involve or presuppose distinct attribute-concepts will have nothing “in common [commune cum se invicem habere]” and cannot “be understood through [intelligere per] one another” (E1ax5). In this sense, for example, <paper> and <scissors>, both concepts of dependent extended things, have something “in common” in the relevant sense (namely, <extension> as their fundamental explanans), and so can also be “understood through” one another (insofar as they must be understood ultimately as modifications and limitations of extended substance [cf. E1def2]). In contrast, the concepts of any mental act of affirmation, and of any bodily movement, as concepts of modes of two different attributes and so of radically different kinds of things, have “no common measure [ratio]” (E5pref; II/280). There is no shared attribute-concept that functions as their common explanans.

Since, for Spinoza, only what is intelligible is also metaphysically possible (E1ax2, E1p11altd2), causal relations are also 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). This unintelligibility of causal relations between minds and bodies is precisely what dooms Descartes’s interactionist account of the mind-body “union” in Spinoza’s view:

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. [...] He 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. [...] If 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)

As we shall see in what follows, Spinoza’s account of the human mind’s essential intentional relation to an existing body will turn out to also be an alternative, non-Cartesian, account of the mind-body “union”.

Now, Spinoza’s commitment to Barrier is likely to prompt 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). Most scholars hold that what Spinoza has in mind here is best approximated by the notion of a numerical identity of token minds and bodies, and I will assume this interpretation in what follows. This then is the fourth doctrine relevant to our investigation:

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

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 doctrine:

(5) **Intentionality**: Every human mind essentially has an intentional (“of” or “about”) relation to some existing body.24

---


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 1996:118f; Jarrett 1991.

24. For denials that Spinoza holds Intentionality, see Allison 1987:88–9; Matson 1971:577; Pollock 1880:132.

More precisely, the human mind is essentially ideas of bodily changes (E2a4).
Given the centrality of this doctrine to our inquiry, it’s worth once again to pause over the details.

In the first place, here are the key passages expressing Spinoza’s commitment to Intentionality:

The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind [Primum quod actu et 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 constituit] is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else. (E2p13)\(^{25}\)

... 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 a 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.\(^{26}\) An idea or “cognition” (E4p37d) of such a body is the essence of a human mind, i.e., roughly, what is necessary and sufficient for a human mind to exist (cf. E2def2).

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, for Spinoza the mind-body relation thus turns out to be an instance of an idea-intentional object

\(^{25}\) 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.

\(^{26}\) Cf. Della Rocca 1996:37. Spinoza also acknowledges another sense of “actuality”; see E5p29s.

That is, for Spinoza the mind itself is intentional (rather than merely having intentional states).\(^{28}\) This conclusion is less odd once we take into account Spinoza’s reduction of minds to ideas: if there is no difference in kind between minds and ideas, any property of ideas, such as intentionality, can presumably be a candidate for property of a mind. So Spinoza’s commitment to Reduction (the thesis that, ontologically, there is nothing more to a mind than ideas) helps motivate his commitment to Intentionality. Conversely, Intentionality helps to flesh out Reduction: to the latter’s claim that, ontologically, there is nothing more to a 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. And it is precisely in this intentional relation between human minds and bodies that, Spinoza proposes, the true mind-body “union” consists, not in any sort of causal interaction: \(^{29}\)

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 [2p12 and 13]) (E2p21d). Although in what follows I will treat the human mind primarily as a kind, Spinoza’s thesis is presumably meant to hold both at the level of concrete particulars (my mind is essentially of my body) and at the level of kinds (human minds in general essentially bear intentional relations to existing bodies).\(^{30}\)

Now, presumably not just any idea essentially of an actually existing body will count as a human mind for Spinoza. This qualification has two senses. First of all, we should keep in mind Spinoza’s


\(^{30}\) I’ve argued elsewhere (Hübner 2015) that we should read Spinoza as, roughly, a conceptualist about kinds such as “human”. On this view, general ideas of kinds can be more or less well-grounded in actual similarities among particulars and refer to such particulars distributively. For other interpretations of kinds in Spinoza’s philosophy see e.g. Carriero 2005:128–9, Newlands 2015.
panpsychism;³¹ in his view, having a mind is not associated uniquely
with having a human body specifically (nor indeed with having a body
at all).³² On his account, there are all sorts of other, non-human, kinds
of minds (feline minds and fern minds, for example) that are also, pre-
sumably, essentially of actually existing bodies, but which nonetheless
we would not want to call “human” minds. So, to be a candidate for
constituting the essential intentional object of a human mind specifi-
cally, the body being represented must presumably have the right sort
of complexity and powers (E2p13s, E4p45s, E5p39s). Ideas that are es-
sentially “of” bodies of lesser power and complexity will not count as
human minds.

Here is the second sense in which not just any idea of an existing
body can count as a human mind: presumably Spinoza also wants to
block the conclusion that (for example) my idea of my sister’s (exist-
ing and sufficiently complex) body constitutes either my mind or her
mind. Here we cannot appeal to differences in powers complexity in-
dexed to distinct kinds or species. Instead, Spinoza appeals here to
phenomenology: my body is the one whose affections or changes I
“feel” [sentire]; and the idea that essentially constitutes my mind is this
idea or “feeling” of such changes.³³ In contrast, I may perceive my sis-
ter stubbing her toe, and so have an idea of an existent sufficiently
complex body, but I don’t feel the pain that accompanies the stubbing.
Spinoza seems to regard this sort of first-person “feeling” of physical

³¹ The panpsychism follows from divine omniscience, given Spinoza’s
identification of substantial ideas and creaturely “minds” (E2p13s). For
criticism of this argument see especially Wilson 1999.

³² Spinoza allows for the existence of minds that are essentially ideas of modes
in humanly unknowable attributes — ideas of modes endowed with a non-
physical and non-mental reality (Ep. 66, E2ax5). So 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.

³³ Here I disagree with Matheron 1969 and Donagan 1988 who hold that only
substance thinks my mind-constituting idea. Substance has the idea of that
same body not merely through affections but with complete adequacy.

³⁴ See the Sixth Meditation.

Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations
changes as a brute phenomenological given: “We feel that our body is
affected in many ways [Nos corpus quoddam multis modis affici sentimus]”
(E2ax4). For all his criticism of Descartes, Spinoza would do well to ac-
knowledge here his debt to Descartes’s analysis of the ways sensations
uniquely and immediately connect us to a particular body.³⁴

3. The case for Materialism

With this preliminary sketch of how Spinoza understands minds in
place, let us now turn to Materialist Readings — that is, to interpreta-

³⁴ The Seventh Meditation

3.1 As we saw above, one of the pillars of Spinoza’s theory of mind is Inten-
tionality, the doctrine that every human mind is essentially an idea of
some existing body. Quite plausibly, proponents of Materialist Read-
ings take Intentionality to commit Spinoza to an ontological and ex-
planatory dependence of the mental on the physical. This is because
Intentionality seems to imply that a human mind can exist iff a certain
kind of body exists, and that cognition of this body is necessary for
adequate cognition of that mind, insofar as an idea of that body con-
stitutes the essence of that mind. If, according to Spinoza, there is a hu-
man mind if and only if this mind essentially represents some exist-
ing body, it appears to be simply part of the essence of any human mind
that it will exist only if some body exists.

Moreover, at first blush at least, there seems to be plenty of straight-
forward textual support for this Materialist conclusion of ontological
and explanatory dependence of human minds on bodies. For one, Spino-
za’s introduction of the doctrine that the human mind is essen-
tially an idea of a body (in E2p11–13) is followed immediately by his

³⁴ See the Sixth Meditation.
There are also other passages that seem to point in the direction of the human mind’s dependence on the body:

... 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]p8c35) 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 scili- cet mens actualem corporisexistentiam 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 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

35. This seems to be the relevant part of E2p8c: “[W]hen 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.”
which involves more or less reality than before. (E3Gen-DefAff; 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).36

Passages like these give Materialist Readings an aura of plausibility, suggesting a dependence of human minds on bodies in the following, interrelated, respects:

(i) existence (E2p11, E3p11s): a human mind exists durationally iff a body durationally exists;

(ii) essence (E3p11s, E3GenDefAff): the essence of a human mind consists in an idea of a certain kind of body;

(iii) individuation and unity (E2p11, E2p13s): to remain in existence as a particular human mind, this mind must continue to represent a particular body, and this representation renders this mind distinct from all other minds;37

(iv) causal power (E3GenDefAff, E2p13s; E2p49s[III.A.(iii)]): the degree to which a mind is causally self-sufficient and productive of further ideas depends on how powerful the body it essentially represents is (i.e.

37. Furthermore, although Spinoza does not say as much, the simpler ideas constitutive of a human mind are also presumably united into one mind-bundle by virtue of being ideas of parts of one body.

Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations

on how many different actions this body’s parts can bring about on their own at any time);

(v) representational content (E2p11, E2p13s, E3p11s, E3GenDefAff, E5p21d): a human mind is not only essentially an idea of a particular body, this body’s existence also makes possible further, “imaginative” and non-essential, ideas.

Collectively, these five commitments describe a general ontological and explanatory dependence of human minds on bodies, a dependence that, to all appearances, follows from the mind’s intentional relation to a body. To wit, Spinozistic human minds seem to depend on bodies ontologically insofar as they seem to depend on existing, sufficiently complex bodies for their existence; individuation; unity as composite ideas; for having a certain essence, certain essential and nonessential representational content and, consequently, for having certain causal powers. Likewise, Spinozistic human minds seem to depend on human bodies explanatorily insofar as we must, it seems, refer to bodily properties (such as the existence of a body and its degree of causal power) to explain a mind’s essence, its existence, identity over time, essential representational content, and at least some of the non-essential ideas it is capable of forming.38 Acquiring cognition of a human mind seems, in short, to require us to make an irreducible and non-reciprocal reference to an 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 for a mind’s intentional ‘aboutness’ by appealing to physical properties),39 nonetheless, such references appear to be necessary at least for understanding the mental properties listed above.

39. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.
It is worth stressing here that Spinoza never similarly infers claims about physical properties from claims about mental properties.\textsuperscript{40} 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. Of course, such asymmetry in exposition certainly does not prove the existence of bona fide dependence. But, the Materialist will insist, it is plausibly explained by it. Further, the asymmetry is also consistent with the hypothesis that the dependence in question is a consequence of an intentional relation (insofar as intentionality is a property that only ideas, but not bodies, can have).

In short, to all appearances, it is the intentionality of human minds — the intentionality that, given Reduction, is proper to them simply qua ideas — that renders Spinozistic human minds dependent on bodies.

3.2. There is one further, systematic, consideration in favor of Materialist Readings. This is that Spinoza’s account of the human mind, read as an account of ontological and explanatory dependence, fits well with how Spinoza handles dependence in other contexts, in particular that of substance-mode relations. Arguably, his model there is the ontological priority of Aristotelian substances.\textsuperscript{41} Very roughly, in an Aristotelian framework, an account of dependent entities such as accidents will make reference to substance as 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.\textsuperscript{42} 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. 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 (E2p1ocs, Ep1, E2p1id) also 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 (Ep15, Ep1id6), at least some properties of human minds (e.g. their existence and essential representational content) must be, on such readings, conceived through bodies. And, just as we must explain substance’s nature before we explain anything else, since all things depend on substance,

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Bennett 1984:§37.1–2; Curley 1988:78; Della Rocca 1996:22.

\textsuperscript{41} 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 a purely modal analysis of dependence in Spinoza’s framework, see Garrett 1991. For other accounts of Spinozistic dependence, see e.g. Koistinen 2016; Morrison 2013; Newlands 2010.

\textsuperscript{42} See Met. 1003a35 ff; cf. Corkum 2013:79, 83.
on Materialist Readings we must explain the nature of bodies before we can explain the nature of human minds.  

4. The trouble with Materialism

In the preceding section, we saw that there is a non-negligible amount of evidence in favor of Materialist Readings of Spinoza’s account of the human mind. Such readings represent not only an extremely natural interpretation of the text, but also one that fits well with Spinoza’s more systematic commitments about the nature of dependence. Nonetheless, I think that Materialist Readings should be rejected, on the grounds of their inconsistency with Spinoza’s other fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments, in particular commitments bearing on what is required for the cognition of any thing. This is what I want to show in this section.

Here are some worries one may have about the coherence of Materialist Readings with the rest of Spinoza’s picture:

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 (and not merely, for example, a permissible or useful way of thinking about the mind-body relation that carries no ontological commitments), can minds genuinely depend on bodies if they are also numerically identical to them?

Here is a second worry. Any reading of Spinoza that treats something mental, such as a human mind, as explainatorily dependent on a bit of physical reality, as Materialist Readings do, seems to violate Spinoza’s commitment to Barrier, i.e. to the explanatory closure of the

43. Of course there are also disanalogies between the dependence relation in the substance-mode case and the body-mind case: Spinoza cashes out the substance-mode relation as a cause-effect relation (Ep1p6c1) and, arguably (though see Curley 1969a), also as a thing-property relation (Ep1p6d1). 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.

44. On Materialist Readings, cognition of human minds requires irreducible reference to and cognition of an entity of a different attribute-kind, in violation of Barrier. As we saw in §2, Barrier demands that, as a thinking thing, a human mind be explained by reference to other thinking things alone (to affirmations and negations, other minds, the divine “infinite intellect”, and ultimately to substance as a res cogitans). Given Barrier, one might have expected Spinoza to characterize the essence of the human mind as, for example, a certain complex pattern of affirmations or negations, just as he characterizes the essence of a composite physical “Individual” in purely physical terms, as a certain “proportion of motion and rest” (E2def; II/99–100). But, as we know, this is not what Spinoza does: he does not restrict himself to talk of “affirmation” simpliciter, in line with Barrier, but instead makes an affirmation of a body essential to a human mind.  

I want to be clear here about the gravity of this violation. For Spinoza, obeying Barrier is not a requirement of certain kinds of explanations. It is instead nothing less than a condition of the possibility of genuinely “understanding” something through something else (E1ax5, Ep2p). As Spinoza says when lambasting Descartes’s causal account of the mind-body “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 we have a second reason to reject Materialist Readings. Here is a third, related, worry. The sort of explanatory dependence of the mental on the physical that is at the heart of Materialist Readings also goes against another doctrine almost universally ascribed to Spinoza, Causal Cognition. As we saw in §2, Causal Cognition states that all cognition of a thing is cognition of its causes. As we also saw in §2, minds and bodies cannot enter into causal relations with one another. (This is because such causal relations would be — again, by Barrier — unintelligible, given that minds and bodies are entities of incommensurate

attribute-kinds.) But if bodies cannot stand to minds as causes stand to effects, then, by *Causal Cognition*, bodies also cannot serve to explain minds, contrary to what is alleged by Materialist Readings.

We could summarize the last two worries by saying that, in Spinoza’s epistemological framework, bodies are simply not the right sort of thing to give us cognition of minds, and that this is so for two, closely related, reasons: first, because minds and bodies are radically different kinds of things (while, according to Spinoza, only like can explain like); second, because, as entities radically different in kind, minds and bodies cannot stand in causal relations (while, according to Spinoza, all cognition is of causes). In other words, an explanatory dependence of minds on bodies is simply incompatible with the standard interpretation of Spinozistic cognition: on Materialist Readings, cognition of human 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).

In fourth place, consider the more specific problem of how a proponent of Materialist Readings would go about explaining the *existence* of any human mind. On such readings, this explanation is to be found in an entity (an existing body) with which a mind cannot enter into a causal relation.46 But, in line with *Causal Cognition*, Spinoza is explicit that all existential explanations are causal: the “reason [ratio]” for any thing’s existence (or nonexistence) is a “cause” (E1p11alt1d).47 So a proponent of Materialist Readings has to allow, it seems, for a sui generis, non-causal relation of existential dependence between human minds and bodies in addition to a causal relation of existential dependence, posited in E1p11altd.48 Materialist Readings thus seem to be committed to the claim that the existence of any human mind depends in two different ways on two different variables. This dual dependence is not obviously incoherent,49 but it remains unclear how exactly it is supposed to work: How do the two sorts of dependency relate? And, given Spinoza’s commitment to universal intelligibility, why must there be two?50

Here is a fifth problem for Materialist Readings. Recall Spinoza’s assertion that understanding the mind-body “union” requires that we “first know adequately the nature of our Body” (E2p13s). As noted above, the “union” in question consists in an intentional relation between a mind and a body.51 As Materialists read the passage just cited, this union is supposed to depend explanatorily on only one of its relata, the body. The reading is, admittedly, very natural, but the explanatory asymmetry seems not just arbitrary (why should a relation be explained by only one of its relata?) but asymmetrical in the wrong way: given that the union in question consists in an intentional relation, shouldn’t our understanding of it depend explanatorily on the relatum capable of intentionality, i.e. on the mind? Further, the Materialist rendering of the union also seems to make Spinoza’s version of the union appear equally vulnerable to the criticism he had directed at Descartes’s conception of it: “What clear and distinct concept does he have of a thought so closely united to some little portion of quantity?” (E5pref).

46. “[B]y 2p6 ... the cause of the Mind’s affirming the Body’s existence is not that the Body has begun to exist” (E3p11s).
48. Koistinen, for example, characterizes this dependence as “constituent” dependence (2009:169, 2016n3); other scholars gloss it in terms of “functions” (Allison 1987:95; Matson 1971:577).
49. I agree with Garrett that 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).
50. 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.
51. The criticism of Materialism that follows also goes through if instead we understand the union as *Identity*.
One final worry about Materialist Readings is this: all the problems just described easily generalize beyond human minds to all Spinozistic ideas of non-ideas (i.e. all ideas of non-mental things).\(^5\) For if the problematic dependence on physical things is indeed simply a consequence of the *intentional* relation that human minds essentially bear to certain bodies, then not merely the idea that constitutes the essence of a human mind, but, equally, all the ideas that human minds acquire through sense-experience in the course of their existence will likewise depend on bodies, again in violation of both *Barrier* and *Causal Cognition*.\(^5\) Insofar as such adventitious ideas become non-essential parts of a human mind, that mind will depend not just on the body it essentially represents, but also on the indefinitely many external bodies with which it interacts.

We are faced with the possibility that Spinoza has no coherent account of ideas of non-ideas generally.

5. Alternatives to Materialism

In the previous section we saw that Materialist Readings of Spinoza’s account of the essential constitution 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 interactionist account of the mind-body “union”. Indeed, one may doubt that Spinoza has a coherent account of ideas of any non-mental things, period.

So the interpretative dilemma we are faced with is this: *Either* Materialist Readings are correct in their interpretation of Spinoza’s account of the human mind as an idea essentially of a body, but that account (and Spinoza’s account of ideas of non-ideas more generally) is inconsistent with Spinoza’s other epistemological and metaphysical commitments, or Spinoza’s various commitments are in fact consistent with one another, but we must be able to give an alternative — non-Materialist — interpretation of Spinoza’s account of the human mind, generalizable to all ideas of non-ideas. There is, in short, significant pressure to find such an alternative. That will be my task in the last two sections of the paper.

In this section, I will consider two alternative interpretations of Spinoza’s account of the mind that appeal, respectively, to mind-body identity and to our limitations as knowers but that, I will argue, we should reject. In §6, I will make a case for my preferred non-Materialist interpretation.

5.1

The alternative that springs to mind most readily perhaps is the one that explains all references to bodily properties in Spinoza’s account of the human mind by his commitment to *Identity*. On this reading, what Bennett, Curley, Koistinen, Nadler *et al* see as evidence of a dependence of the mental on the physical, is treated instead as a consequence of minds and bodies being “one and the same thing” (E2p7s). This is how Jarrett and Della Rocca, for example, justify Spinoza’s prima facie *Barrier*-violating assertion that we can infer a mind’s degree of reality from a body’s (E2p13s).\(^5\) The suggestion is that *Identity* entitles Spinoza to certain trans-attribute conclusions insofar as the numerical identity of minds and bodies entails a necessary co-variation of all their “structural” (or “attribute-neutral”) properties, such as degree of reality, length of duration, number of effects, and so on.\(^5\)

At first blush, this proposal is quite compelling. *Identity* can indeed explain not only why a human mind’s degree of reality would

---


53. Such ideas would depend on the various external bodies that have causally contributed to the bodily modifications or “images” that such ideas represent (E2p16).


55. Thanks to John Morrison for discussion of this interpretation.

necessarily reflect a body’s degree of reality, but also a number of other passages that are evident for the Materialist mill. In particular, 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). Surely, if a given 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 is not a panacea. First of all, the textual case for such a reading is weak. For one, the passages examined in §3, which encourage Materialist conclusions, are explicitly concerned with the intentional relation between minds and bodies, not with their identity. That is, if we simply consider the relevant passages, Identity seems to play no role in generating the claims that encourage Materialist conclusions; hence it also seems at least textually unsound to propose that Identity is the true ground of Spinoza’s apparent materialism. Here is a second textual consideration: a commitment to Identity should entitle Spinoza to symmetrical inferential. That is, given Identity, he should be able to infer not only a mind’s identity from a body’s degree of reality, as he does in E2p13s, but, equally, a body’s degree of reality from a mind’s. Yet, as already noted, Spinoza never draws inferences in that second direction. Of course, again, on its own this doesn’t prove much. But, in E2p13s, Spinoza is explicit about the explanatory priority of bodies in relation to minds, and of represented “objects” in relation to ideas representing them more generally. And such asymmetrical explanatory priority sits uneasily with the proposal that it is Identity that grounds trans-attribute claims.

Here is a non-textual difficulty with appeals to Identity. The problematic claim that had set our entire inquiry going was Spinoza’s thesis that a human mind’s essence is to represent some existing body. The problem with appealing to Identity is that the fact that a certain mind is numerically identical to some body — the fact that they are “one and the same thing” — cannot explain why this mind has a certain representational content. For why should a mind identical with a certain body also be, in virtue of this identity, of that body? Why should a mind “affirm” what it is identical with? On the Jarrett-Della Rocca version of appeals to Identity, prima facie problematic trans-attribute claims are supposed to be justified by “attribute-neutral” properties. But, again, 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. But if commitment to Identity cannot explain why human minds have the essential representational content they do, then it seems that appeals to Identity also cannot block the Materialist conclusion that this content — what is necessary and sufficient for human minds to come into durational existence — is proof of an explanatory and ontological dependence of human minds on bodies.57

5.2

Given the failure of appeals to Identity to block Materialist Readings we could try instead to take as our clue Spinoza’s remark that investigating the properties of bodies in order to understand minds is


Here is a possible, idealist, response to the question about the relation of Identity and Intentionality: if for Spinoza a human body just is the intentional object of a human mind (that is, if bodies are reducible to minds’ representational contents), then Identity obtains trivially given Intentionality, in virtue of the mind’s numerical identity with its own representational content. 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 the mind’s own contents), but it does all this at the high price of eliminating extension as a genuine attribute, a self-sufficient realm of physical things.

57. One may also worry whether an appeal to Identity really restores conformity with Barrier, one of the chief desiderata of an alternative to Materialist Readings. For, arguably (cf. E2p5d), Barrier demands not merely that we not appeal to any physical properties in explaining minds (a criterion satisfied by appealing to attribute-neutral properties), but that we appeal only to specifically mental (and not merely attribute-neutral) properties.
“necessary for us [necesse nobis est]” (E2p13s). For this phrase might be taken to suggest that those parts of Spinoza’s account of the human mind that look like problematic evidence of minds’ dependence on bodies are not a positive philosophical thesis about genuine epistemic and conceptual necessity, but merely a concession, on Spinoza’s part, to our epistemological limitations as finite thinkers. We might have to think about bodies in order to understand minds, but a genuine philosophical explanation of the mind 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”.

Now, it is true that, despite his conviction that what is, is in principle intelligible, Spinoza also clearly believes that we are cognitively limited in many ways, and writes the Ethics in a way that takes account of such limitations (for example, targeting our most stubborn “prejudices” [Etapp; II/77–78]). Nonetheless, this kind of concessionary reading of Spinoza’s account of the human mind is also not very compelling as an alternative to Materialism. First, the textual case for it is, once again, quite weak. It turns on a single, ambiguous phrase — “necessary for us”. (What exactly, we may wonder, is the intended extension of “us”? Is it imperfect finite knowers, as the proposal assumes, or is it those who observe the “right order of philosophizing” [E1p10cs]? Or those being guided by Spinoza “as if by the hand” [E2pref]? Earlier in the very same passage in which “necessary for us” appears 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, even an infinite, or unlimited, intellect?)

59. To be clear, Della Rocca’s proposal, sketched in only a couple of lines, is bound to be incompletely developed.

Conversely, there are several textual considerations that cut against the concession reading. Recall, first, that cognition of the human mind is a stated goal of the Ethics (E2pref). Such cognition, presumably, would count as, or require, genuine “explanation” of the mind. So are we to take Spinoza, implausibly, to give up on the aim of his treatise only a dozen propositions after announcing it? But if he does not give up, where in the Ethics do we find this promised account of the human mind, if not in the passages we’ve been looking at, but which characterize the mind by reference to physical properties? Second, judging by Spinoza’s account of ideas in E2p13s, it seems that an appeal to physical properties in the case of the human mind should not be viewed as any kind of concession. This is because this appeal is not an exception to how Spinoza deals with ideas, but, rather, a programmatic application of his general rule that every idea is individuated by its essential intentional object. The principle that it is impossible to give an account of an idea as distinct from other ideas, without saying what it is essentially of, in E2p13s seem to hold for Spinoza any intellect, not just for a finite or human understanding.

But textual difficulties are not the only difficulties plaguing the concession reading, at least in its extant version. The concession reading does not tell us how exactly we can come to better “appreciate” the nature of the human mind in virtue of being presented with something that is impossible to “understand” (since, as noted above, obeying Barrier is, for Spinoza, a condition of the possibility of understanding as such). It is also difficult to justify the “necessity” of the purported concession. Why should it be “necessary for us” to think of human minds...
in physical terms? Let’s assume that by “us” Spinoza means human knowers. Does the necessity of the concession lie in the nature of the thinking subject, or in the nature of the object being thought, or in the fact that, in this particular case, the two are one and the same? An advocate of a concession reading should be able to tell us what exactly forces Spinoza to abandon the rigor of true explanation when it came time to discuss human minds, although no such concession was necessary when discussing the nature of ideas generally (E1def3), causal relations among them (E2ax3, E2p5–6), nor substance’s “infinite idea” (E2p3–4), of which human minds are, after all, just “parts” (E2p11c). A proponent of the concession reading cannot explain the necessity of the concession by appealing to Spinoza’s thesis that a human mind is essentially an idea of a body, since, on her own reading, we are not allowed to regard that claim as offering a genuine “explanation” of the human mind. So also, presumably, that claim cannot genuinely explain why certain concessions would be necessary. And even if we granted bona fide explanatory power to Spinoza’s characterization of the human mind as an idea of a body, the fact that any human mind essentially thinks bodies does not mean that such a mind cannot form ideas — including adequate ideas — of non-physical things.

Finally, the concession reading presents the necessity of talking about bodies as an exceptional necessity “for us”, on the implicit assumption that it should in principle be possible, within a Spinozistic framework, to offer a proper “explanation” of the human mind, that is one articulated solely in terms of thought. But we are never told how one could explain an idea that is essentially of a body solely in terms of mental properties. What I want to suggest in the next and final section of the paper is that the concession reading is wrong to assume that the account of the human mind that Spinoza does give in Part 2 is not already precisely an explanation in terms of thought alone.

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, 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. 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 ways or modes of having being:

63. “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

62. Since our ideas of bodies in duration are inadequate (E2p24ff), we also cannot explain the alleged “necessity” of Spinoza’s concession by any kind of desire, on his part, for a greater adequacy of his account of the human mind — not to mention that violating one’s own epistemological principles would seem to be a very poor way of improving the adequacy of one’s account.


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).
Rather, 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 adequately thinks all that it brings into being. This results in the coexistence of two kinds of reality: the formal reality all things have qua effects produced by substance, and the objective reality they all have qua represented, or thought of, by this same 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” (E1def8, E2p1). Presumably, the ultimate reason why thought works in this way must be sought in the self-explanatory nature of substance itself (E1def3).

Spinoza’s picture is bound to raise many questions (and, likely, objections); I will address some of those below. For now, I want to bring his theory of ideas to bear on the central problem of this paper, namely Spinoza’s account of the essential constitution of the human mind. Namely, I want to propose that, given Spinoza’s particular theory of ideas, to hold, as Spinoza does, that the human mind is essentially an idea of an existing body is tantamount to holding that what is essential for the existence of a human mind is the existence of a certain objectively-real body. As we know, for Spinoza, the essence of a human mind consists in a certain kind of representational content: an idea of a certain kind of existing, sufficiently complex, and felt body. Given Spinoza’s ontologically-pluralistic theory of ideas, this means that what is essential to a human mind is the existence of a certain kind of objectively-real body. To put this still differently, what is necessary and sufficient for a human mind to exist is that a certain body exist with the reality proper to a purely mental object.

This ontological-pluralism about representation is not a minor Spinozistic doctrine, nor an ad hoc solution to some discrete problem.

65. This may seem like little more than an assertion of a brute fact about thought than a genuine explanation of why thought functions this way. But in this respect Spinoza’s ontological pluralism about ideas is, arguably, no worse off than many other Spinozistic doctrines (such as the alleged necessity of the existence of finite modes).

64. Cf. Ep. 32, TIE[34, 99], KVapp[3–4, 6–7, 9, 15].

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]. (E1p3od)

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 [quicquid ex infinita Dei natura sequitur formaliter, id omne ex Dei idea eodem ordine eademque connexione sequitur in Deo objective]. (E2p7c)

As for order, to unite and order all our perceptions, it is required, and reason 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 objectiva] may also be the cause of all our ideas, and then our mind will (as we have said) reproduce Nature as much as possible. For it will have Nature’s essence, order, and unity objectively. (TIE[99])

This ontological-pluralism about representation is not a minor Spinozistic doctrine, nor an ad hoc solution to some discrete problem.

64. Cf. Ep. 32, TIE[34, 99], KVapp[3–4, 6–7, 9, 15].
Thinking of Spinoza’s account of the essential constitution of the human mind along these lines thus 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. Spinoza’s central thesis — that a human mind is essentially an idea of a body — rather paradoxically turns out to be a claim about what has only objective, or purely mental, reality, rather than introducing a problematic dependence on extra-mental reality.66 On this reading, Spinoza’s account of the human mind is thus precisely what we should expect given Spinoza’s commitments to Barrier and Causal Cognition: the existence of a human mind is due to the causal powers and properties of thought alone, not explained by reference to anything extra-mental. For it is a matter of a causal process fully internal to thought, and ultimately due to substance as infinite res cogitans, that a certain collection of ideas comes to be of one thing or another, and thus that a certain kind of objective reality — a certain purely mental object — comes to be. Contrary to what is alleged by Materialist Readings, the existence of a human mind is not a matter of thought entering into a relation of 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 an idea with a certain objective reality, or a specific representational content. 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 things (between an act of thought, and a formally-real bit of extension) but a thing’s — an idea’s — relation to its own essence.

In short, the error of Materialist Readings lies in their misidentification of the mind’s essential intentional object, and, more precisely, a misidentification of the kind of reality with which that object is endowed. Proponents of such readings take Spinoza’s references to physical properties in his account of the essential constitution of the human mind for references to formally-real bodies. I suggest that, instead, we read them as references to the body as objectively-real — that is, as references to the essential representational content of the human mind.67 Materialist Readings seem to overlook the ambiguity that, inevitably, will plague a prima facie extension-specific term like “body” (or “sun”) on an ontologically-pluralistic theory of ideas of the sort that Spinoza adopts. On their own, such words leave underdetermined the mode of being of the thing to which they refer: 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, existing in an intellect. 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
With this basic sketch of my proposal now in hand, I want to return to the passages that had invited Materialist Readings in the first place. I want to show that my interpretation can make sense of these passages, and so is textually well-grounded, yet without contravening, unlike Materialist Readings, Spinoza’s larger metaphysical and epistemological commitments.

Let’s start with Spinoza’s central claim that the “first thing that constitutes the essence of the Mind is … the idea of an actually existing Body” (E2p13). As we have seen, on Materialist Readings, this proposition announces the human mind’s dependence on an actually extended thing. On the reading now being proposed, Spinoza’s point is instead that what is essential to a human mind is the existence of a certain representational content: an objectively-real body. Likewise, 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. Now, a Spinozistic idea “expresses” what it is of. On the alternative reading being proposed, the demonstration merely reiterates that there is a human mind only as long as there is an idea with the specific representational content or objective reality that constitutes a human mind’s essence. 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 the Body”, such that a mind’s existence and powers “are taken away [tolli] 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, keeping in mind that, for Spinoza, “involvement” is a conceptual relation, we can read it as a claim about the human mind’s 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. It is worth emphasizing here that Spinoza’s definition of “essence” uses the very same language as the above scholium: the essence of any thing is precisely that which, “being taken away [tollerre], the thing is necessarily taken away” (E2def2).

Consider next Spinoza’s insistence that to know how a human mind differs from other minds, we must “first know[w] adequately the nature of our Body” (E2p13s). Again, this claim can be read either, in the Materialist vein, as evidence of the human mind’s explanatory dependence on a formally-real body, or, as I propose, as the claim that what distinguishes ideas from one another is their essential representational content, where such content is to be understood as a property of an idea alone, 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 (in the case of ideas of non-ideas) an extra-mental referent, I suggest that instead we understand “object” here as the immanent, purely mental, intentional object or representational content. Similarly, 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, I suggest, not to make a human mind depend ontologically for its degree of reality on something extra-mental, as the Materialists want it, but instead to make the rather intuitive claim that a mind’s degree of causal 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.

In conclusion, let me address two potential worries about my proposal. The first is that my interpretation turns on an obscure and implausible thesis: to wit, the assumption of multiple kinds of reality that is at the heart of the ontologically-pluralistic theory of ideas. That is, one may worry that my interpretation saves Spinoza’s account of the mind from one sort of inconsistency only at the price of making that account even more obscure. For 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 be “one and the same” as a purely mental object?

Here is what one could say in response to this kind of worry. First, there is the historical point: both the idea of kinds of reality, and the ontological-pluralism of Spinoza’s theory of ideas more specifically, have venerable pedigrees going back to Plato and the Scholastics respectively.\(^{69}\) So if we find such ideas strange and obscure, without further argument, this is arguably a function of our own moment in the history of ideas rather than an insight into the intrinsic untenability of the views. The recent resurgence of work on ontological pluralism\(^{70}\) can be seen as a further indication that such theories are, at the very least, not self-evidently incoherent, nor unworthy of the attention of 21st century philosophers.

Here is a second sort of worry one may have about my proposal. Like the first objection, it accuses my interpretation of an exorbitant price-tag. In this second case this is because I seem to be imputing to Spinoza a “veil-of-perception” view, on which a human mind knows only what is objectively-real (the content of its own ideas) but nothing external to thought, and in particular not bodies as they are in their formal reality, out there in the spatio-temporal world.\(^{71}\)

Again, there are several things one could say in response to this second worry. First, contrary to what the objector assumes, I think that in fact we should see Spinoza’s ontological pluralism about ideas as a version of direct realism.\(^{72}\) After all, the idea of the sun just is the sun itself existing in the intellect, as Descartes puts it. That is, the


\(^{70}\) E.g. McDaniel 2010.

\(^{71}\) I’m grateful to Justin Steinberg for pressing this objection.

My talk of spatio-temporal determinations of formally-real bodies should be taken with a grain of salt since, strictly speaking, if understood in terms of uniform units of measure, space and time are abstractions for Spinoza, not intrinsic qualities of extension.

\(^{72}\) Brown 2007 so reads Descartes on this point.

Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations objectively-real body that constitutes the essence of the human mind is not a mere means by which we try to get in touch with the extra-mental world, a mere representation of a body; rather, it is that body.\(^{73}\)

Here is another way to block the second worry. Notoriously, Spinoza identifies “minds” with substance’s ideas of actual existents \((E2p13s)\). The fact that human minds in their essential constitution are ultimately just “parts” of substance’s necessarily veridical “infinite” idea of all things \((E2p11c, E2p32)\) guarantees the “agreement” (or correspondence) of these ideas with what they represent \((E1ax6)\), however partial or inadequate this agreement is when we consider human minds in isolation from this larger network of ideas. In other words, one response to the worry about committing Spinoza to a veil-of-perception position is that the idea of the body in question is guaranteed to agree, however imperfectly, with a formally-real existent, by virtue of Spinoza’s larger metaphysical and epistemological commitments about the nature of substantial thought.\(^{74}\)

Works Cited


73. 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.

74. Carriero argues on textual grounds that, for Spinoza, the formal/objective reality model of representation only applies to true ideas \((2016:142n10)\). But there are textual and systematic reasons 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 [maxime]” \((TIE[99])\). 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.
Spinoza on Intentionality, Materialism, and Mind-Body Relations

—. (MS). Spinoza on Mind.


—, (1898). *Philosophical Essays*, eds. R. Ariew and D. Garber (Hackett).
