

Spinoza's argument for a bodily imagination¹

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ABSTRACT

Imagination is characterized by Spinoza as the first kind of knowledge, and, as such, imagination is a mode of thought. However, in a further mapping of the concept in the *Ethics*, we see that it is an activity that involves both the mind and the extended body. The standard and idealist interpretation of imagination does not account for its corporeal or extended dimension, leaving aside an important aspect of the activity. Based on the thesis of causal independency of attributes, I will argue against the traditional interpretation and demonstrate that there is an imagination of the body in Spinoza.

Keywords: Spinoza, imagination, body, attributes, Balling.

Imagination is characterized by Spinoza as the first kind of knowledge (E2p40sch)³ and it is defined as a way in which the mind regards bodies [*contemplandi modum*] and their affections (E2p17). As such, imagination is a mode of thought. However, a further mapping of the usage of the concepts *imago-imaginari-imaginamus* in the *Ethics* indicates that imagination is a complex activity involving various kinds of events such as image-making, hallucinations, dreaming, and construction of universals and general notions. Some of these events, such as delirium and visual imagery, arise from the constitution of the body and not from the mind. This distinction between a corporeal and a mental imagination is explicitly stated in Epistle 17 to Pieter Balling, where Spinoza claims that effects of the imagination arise from the constitution of either the body or of mind⁴. Also, in E1app,

³ Throughout the paper, when referencing the *Ethics*, the following citation format is used: E stands for *Ethics*, followed by the part of the book in Arabic numerals, then p for the proposition, followed by its number. The citation ends with additional information such as 'sch' for *scholium*, 'l' for *lemma*, 'post' for *postulate*, etc.

⁴ Spinoza claims, in the controversial Epistle 17 to Pieter Balling, that "the effects of the imagination [*effectus imaginationis*] arise from the constitution either of the body or of mind [*vel corporis, vel mentis*]. [...] We find by experience that fevers and other corporeal changes are the cause of delirium, and that those whose blood is thick [*tenacem sanguinem*] imagine nothing but quarrels, troubles, murders and things of that sort. We also see that the imagination can be determined simply by the constitution of the soul [*ab animae constitutione determinari*], since, as we find, it follows in the wake of the intellect in all things, linking together and interconnecting its images and words just as the intellect does its demonstrations, so that there is almost nothing we can understand without the imagination instantly forming an image" (Ep 17) (*Collected Works*, Volume I, p. 803). In this letter, Spinoza is explicitly characterizing imagination as having both corporeal and mental causes. One could argue that the arguments in the epistle are problematic due to its context of enunciation (a reply to a friend on the occasion of his son's passing) and cannot therefore be considered as strong evidence. So, in order to avoid this criticism, I will show how the problem also appears in the context of the *Ethics* if we take traditionally accepted interpretations of Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology into account. I will not, therefore, limit my argument to the controversial letter 17.

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imagination is characterized as the result of an affection of the body or a function of the disposition of the brain.

Although scholars have pointed out that imagination has a multifarious meaning⁵ in Spinoza, no one seems to recognize the claim that there is a bodily imagination⁶. The standard interpretation of Spinoza's theory of imagination where imagination is merely understood as a kind of knowledge may lead to the wrong conclusion that imagination is a mental event caused by the interaction of an individual with external bodies. This is so because imagination is a kind of mental event that occurs due to an affect or the interaction with other bodies. The problem is that given the thesis of causal independence of attributes, an external body cannot cause the mind to imagine or to perform any other activity. So, either imagination is an activity of the mind that violates the causal regime of attributes or we should reconsider the interpretation of imagination that ignores the extended share of imagination or takes its existence as merely subsidiary in the explanation of the nature of imagination.

By standard interpretation, I understand any interpretation that recognizes that imagination is a mental event (since it is the first kind of knowledge) but that fails to recognize its extended counterpart. It is important to note that we will rarely find an interpretation that fails to recognize the presence of the attribute of extension as a concomitant expression of the attribute of thought, given the nature of modes as expressions of the attributes of thought and extension. An interpretation that denies the presence of extension as concomitant to any event in thought would not be a "standard" interpretation, just an obviously wrong one. My point in this paper is that I think Spinoza is making a stronger case for a bodily imagination that is not merely a counterpart of the mental imagination, but it is a kind of imagination in itself. This bodily imagination, following trivially from the nature of modes, has a mental counterpart, but, more importantly, it has its own causal connections and explanations.

The scope of this paper is, however, more narrow and modest. On it, I will argue that the standard interpretation is problematic because it fails to explain the extended causes of imagination. This is the case because for the standard interpretation to work, it has to presuppose an idealist version of the

thesis of causal independence of attributes and idealism itself prevents an account of extension. So, I will also show that the thesis of causal independence of attributes necessitates an account of the extended causes of imagination by arguing against the idealist objection to the bodily imagination. If I show that the idealist objection does not hold, then we will have to consider the need to further investigate the extended causes of imagination and the nature of the bodily imagination.

The thesis of causal independence of attributes and the standard interpretation of imagination

The thesis of causal independence of attributes is the metaphysical ground from which every human activity is explained in Spinoza, and with imagination it is not different. This thesis of the causal independence of attributes is derived from the monism of substance. The general argument showing the relationship between the attributes and their stand with respect to the substance is the following: because the substance exists by the necessity of its nature and is determined to act by itself alone, it is the only being which acts with absolute freedom (E1d7). This unique substance is a being which is absolutely infinite and consisting of an infinity of attributes, each one expressing an eternal and infinite essence (E1d6). But whereas the infinitude of the substance is absolute (*ens absolute infinitum*, E1d6), the infinitude of attributes is such that each attribute is limited to being infinite in its own kind (E1d6exp). To say that an attribute is infinite in its kind (*suo genera infinita*, in E1d6exp) means that the attribute causes everything that can be conceived under that kind (*genus*). So, there is no modification in one attribute that is caused through another, all modification of a kind belongs to the infinite attribute in question. Since each attribute is infinite in its own kind and expresses a determined essence of the substance, each attribute must be conceived through itself (E1p10), which means that one attribute cannot be produced by or generate an effect in another⁷. Now, relating this

⁵ Garrett (2008), for example, claims that Spinoza's "use of the term 'imagination' is broad enough to include sensation as well as mental imagery and to include modalities of bodily representation that do not represent shape. He goes on to identify *imagination* as the first and lowest of the three kinds of knowledge or cognition [*cognitio*], with the intellect (constituted by distinct and adequate ideas) providing the higher (second and third) kinds of knowledge" (Garrett, 2008, p. 2). Garrett also does not make the distinction that I am proposing between an imagination of the body and an imagination of the mind.

⁶ Although there is no mention of the concept of a bodily imagination in the literature, there are scholars who are rethinking Spinoza's account of imagination. For example, Steenbakkers (2004) claims that imagination is essential to human freedom, because there is something from experience that is constituent of the content of an adequate idea, and imagination is firmly rooted in experience (ideas of images and ideas of affects). Also, Vinciguerra (2005) defends that all ideas are conceived through a construction coming from elements of experience. Vinciguerra and Steenbakkers both describe the mechanisms of the affections of the body and how it can have an impression and retain traces, but they do not address the problem of the corporeal causes of imagination and do not go as far as claiming that there is actually an argument for a bodily imagination in Spinoza.

⁷ Spinoza is rejecting the scholastic conception of god where god cannot be thought of as corporeal. I take his claim that god is also corporeal as one of the metaphysical foundations that motivates this current investigation and as a strong evidence for the existence of corporeal causes of imagination.

argument with the specific case of imagination, we have the following problem.

The standard interpretation considers that imagination is only a mental event. However, this event of imagination in the mind always depends upon the constitution of the body (E5p21) and, in some cases, Spinoza is claiming that imagination can be exclusively explained by its corporeal causes (E1app, E2p49sch, E17). If imagination can be explained by its corporeal causes, then the mental account of imagination of the standard interpretation is problematic. This is the case because the constitution of the body cannot cause or explain an event in the mind and vice-versa. If imagination is characterized as a two-sided event that is expressed in both attributes, then my understanding is that we have to separately and independently consider the imagination of the body and the imagination of the mind. This is the case because if one attribute is causally independent from another and each attribute is self-caused (because they are attributes of the single substance and the substance is *causa-sui*), then we cannot know the nature or order of causes in one attribute by appealing to another. This follows because Spinoza conceives knowledge as knowledge of the cause (E1ax4). So, if the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute and not of another (E2p6dem), then we should be able to explain imagination according to each attribute without involving the concept of another. Hence, the standard interpretation of imagination, by reducing the event to the mental causes, fails to capture the full extent of imagination. The standard interpretation of imagination does not account for the extended causes of imagination because of the metaphysical presuppositions in which it is grounded: an idealist understanding of Spinoza's theory of attributes⁸. If idealism is true, then extension and its causal regime are inaccessible and cannot be known; and, consequently, my argument for the existence of a bodily imagination fails. So, I will try to show that the idealist view is a misinterpretation and that the so-called explanatory gap does not characterize a gap.

The idealist objection against the bodily imagination

The idealist objection is the following: a demonstration of the corporeal causes of imagination in extension should begin by any singular body that is experienced, however this or that particular body that I experience is perceived by me as an idea (imaginative idea) in my mind⁹. This claim can find some support in the conjunction of E2p11 and E2p13: the actual being of the human mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists (E2p11), and the object of that singular idea that exists in actuality is the body (E2p13). So, if the mind is the idea of its body, then every bodily experience is perceived by the mind as an idea in the mind. Hence, since ideas of bodies are modes of thought, we can only perceive things in the mind and, consequently, through the attribute of thought. Therefore, it is impossible to offer a demonstration of extended events through the laws of extension because our access to extended events is through our ideas of these events¹⁰.

This objection is flawed because it is based on a reduction of the existence of the external object to a single attribute. The external object, according to the deductions of the first part of the *Ethics*, is a singular object that is a modification of the substance. This means that every object is both a mode of extension and a mode of thought. The individual that experiences the object is also a complex singular being that is both a mode of thought and a mode of extension. Hence, when the individual experiences a singular object, this experience occurs in extension and in thought simultaneously. Our access to the object then happens through these two modes of the attributes: while the mind forms an idea of the object, the body acts over and is acted upon by an object (which can be an external object or not). This is the case because the object itself, as a mode of substance, is composed of two attributes. The idealist objection is then grounded in a reduction of the perception of the modifications of the substance to one of its

⁸ The standard interpretation of imagination does not account for the extended causes of imagination because of the metaphysical presuppositions on which it is grounded. There are a few characteristics of Spinoza's text that justify the idealist interpretation. First, Spinoza's descriptions of bodily events are fragmentary and scattered through the *Ethics*, making the imagination of the body a non-obvious concept in his system; second, whenever the corporeal causes of imagination are mentioned (such as, for example, in E1app, E2p17, E2p18, and in E5p21), Spinoza defers an extended account and appeals to demonstrations of the event as it occurs in thought. This appeal to the causes in thought is, in some cases, done to the detriment of an explanation of extended causes. Finally, in characterizing imagination, Spinoza oscillates between a language that is descriptive of extension and one that describes operations of the mind. It is not immediately clear how these various descriptions connect and relate to each other, and how they work consistently with Spinoza's general metaphysics.

⁹ This objection was raised by Gueroult in what he calls a set of Cartesian and idealist objections to Spinoza that appear when comparing E2p1 and E2p2 (Gueroult, 1997b, p. 40-43).

¹⁰ The corollary of this objection is the claim that there is a priority of thought over extension. The most recent defender of this claim is Melamed (2013), who considers that thought is not on a par with other attributes and it actually has priority over them. I will not address Melamed's argument here, but it is interesting to note that he tries to make the rejection of idealism compatible with the priority claim. I do not think that there is a priority of thought over extension in Spinoza's metaphysics, but it is undeniable that the whole project of the *Ethics* is to demonstrate how, through an adequate usage of the intellect, we can construct our freedom. However, it is fundamental to attend to the fact that an adequate usage of the intellect is one in which the power and place of extension is taken into account. Spinoza is not constructing a philosophy of pure reason, but one in which the power of the intellect is directed to knowing the emotions and its own union with the whole of nature.

attributes. But, according to E1d4 and E2a4¹¹, an individual is able to perceive the modifications of the substance both through thought and extension. Spinoza is expressly claiming that we feel our own bodies and its modifications by external ones. So, any interpretation that excludes extension from the picture is not true to Spinoza's views. It is important to rule out this objection because if it is impossible to experience objects in extension and elaborate on these objects through the ideas that we form about them in the mind, then our project of investigating and reconstructing the bodily imagination would be undermined. But if imagination can be conceived through its bodily causes and through its mental causes (Ep 17), then there is no reason why we should not investigate and reconstruct the bodily causes of imagination.

Another problem that the idealist objection gives rise to is the conceptual or explanatory barrier between thought and extension¹². As Spinoza states in E2p7sch¹³, the modes of each attribute should be explained by the attribute that the mode belongs to and not by any other. This extreme explanatory independence happens because Spinoza treats causal and conceptual relations as coextensive. And since the conceptual claims are equivalent to the explanatory ones, then causal claims count as explanatory claims. So, given that the attributes are causally independent from one another, they must be independently explained as well. But then, if explanations are the result of an activity that the mind does because it is a thinking thing, then what is it that we do when explaining extension? Since the mind (a mode of the attribute of thought) cannot explain objects in extension, no mental event can explain any physical event and vice versa.

Although causal action across attributes is strictly not allowed, this causal independence does not imply a causal or metaphysical barrier between the attributes. The explanatory barrier would only be a real problem if there were a dualism of substances, but it is not a problem in the context of a theory of infinite attributes. When Spinoza claims in E2p6dem that each attribute is conceived through itself and that their causal regimes should be kept independent from one another, this claim is being made from within a background in which the substance (or god) is the actor or the actual cause of these causal regimes. So, the extreme explanatory independence then faces a challenge. For the thesis to work, there should be absolutely nothing in common between the attributes and we should consider the attributes as if they were separate substances. If thought is independent and dissociated from extension, then there would be a metaphysical gap preventing the mind from grasping external objects. However, thought and extension are attributes

or ways of considering the same event; so, while the mind is grasping the idea of the object, the body is experiencing the object in extension. It is through an individual's bodily experience of other bodies that the existence of the external body is acknowledged. The mind of the individual is able to form an idea of the external body because it is interacting with the mode of thought of that external body.

An external body, like any individual body, is a mode of substance consisting in a singular object that expresses itself through two attributes simultaneously. Hence, if we accept the metaphysics of attributes as aspects of the same event of a mode of substance, then the idealist objection does not follow. The attributes are actually identical to one another and they share the same cause: "The modes of each attribute have god for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute" (E2p6). Spinoza here is stating that god is the cause of both attributes, but each thing should be considered and explained under the very attribute that it belongs to. Here we should remember the goal of these demonstrations. Spinoza is arguing against the Cartesian conception according to which the body can cause the mind to think. The goal here is to reject the causal interaction between attributes, and not to deny their common causal origin. So, the extreme causal independence does not imply the impossibility of accessing extension, but it necessitates an explanation that is specific to this causal regime.

The causal independence does not imply the impossibility of accessing or knowing extension, because there is an identity between the attributes since they are ways of considering the same thing. According to E2p7sch:

We must recall here what we showed [NS: in the First Part], namely, that whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting an essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently that the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.

It is true that there is a radical causal independence of attributes, but there is also a radical underlying identity (and unity) between them that should not be ignored. So, since they are attributes of the same substance, there is no barrier

¹¹ Definition of attributes and the axiom on perception of one's own body.

¹² This problem was raised by Della Rocca (1996), who interprets that the causal independence of attributes gives rise to a radical conceptual or explanatory barrier between thought and extension, a gulf between the attributes (Della Rocca, 1996, p. 9-17). This gulf is such that no physical fact can be explained by any mental fact and vice versa.

¹³ "So long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of extension, the order of the whole of Nature must be explained through the attribute of extension alone".

or gulf between thought and extension because they are intrinsically tied to that of which they are essences. So, although there is an explanatory independence of the attributes, it is not true to claim that they have nothing in common and, therefore, extension is not accessible. It is because they have something in common, i.e. god as a common cause, that we can understand the same event either through thought or through extension. It is because there is no gulf or gap that an event can be assimilated both by our thought and our physical experiences at the same time. This assimilation, however, if it is to be explained, should be considered under each attribute separately. That is, the extended aspect of an event should be explained according to the extended causes and the mental aspect should be explained according to the order of thought.

This conclusion gives us good reasons to investigate the extended causes of imagination because it poses the necessity of a separate explanation that captures the order of corporeal events. For if Spinoza (in Ep17) conceives of an imagination that can have its causes explained by the body, this means that there is a physical event of imagination that is conceptually independent from the mental event of imagination even though they are metaphysically identical. In this paper, I tried to rule out the idealist position by showing that it is based on a false reduction of experience to the attribute of thought, and that the explanatory barrier is grounded on an interpretation of the attributes as if they were substances. Since the attributes are not substances, the explanatory barrier is merely apparent and does not follow from the substantial monism and its relation with the attributes. With my objections, I showed that it is not only possible to conceive of the causes of events in extension, but that an investigation on the bodily aspects of imagination is necessary. So, recapitulating from Ep17: bodily imagination is the activity that happens due to the constitution of the body, generating certain effects. The bodily imagination, since it is caused by extension, should be explained in separation from the mental imagination which finds its

causes in thought. The imagination of the body consists of the effects, in that body, of modifications that can be caused either by itself or by another body. This reconstruction of the bodily causes of imagination still must be further explained, for what are these modifications and how do they happen? In this paper, I tried to demonstrate that Spinoza argues for the existence of a bodily imagination that has its own causal regime and I end with the suggestion that this aspect of imagination should be further studied.

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