

NO MUTE PICTURE
*Rationalism in Spinoza's
Account of Ideas and Images*

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Abstract

In the scholium to proposition 49 of Part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza addresses a number of prejudices that tend to obscure the essentially judgmental nature of ideas. One warning is issued against those who do not distinguish accurately between ideas and images, and, for this exact reason, fail to see that every idea, insofar as it is an idea, always involves an affirmation that something is the case. This paper shows that in order to properly understand Spinoza's remarks in this passage, we must redirect attention to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and more particularly to the objections raised against them by Hobbes. Specifically, I argue for the identification of Hobbes and other likeminded "imagists" as Spinoza's main targets, and not, as is often assumed, Descartes himself or Cartesians in general. My identification not only resolves interpretative confusion surrounding this passage, but it also confirms Spinoza's commitment to a key rationalist assumption: the existence of a mind that can grasp or exhibit natures by clear and distinct perceptions. While both adequate and inadequate ideas are necessitated beliefs or judgments in which we assent to something, virtue consists in being propelled by the intellect.

Keywords: Spinoza, Descartes, Hobbes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ideas, belief formation

In the final proposition of Part Two of the *Ethics*—EIIp49, with its long scholium¹—Spinoza elaborates his view that all our ideas are determinate modes of thought that come with intrinsic belief. The Cartesian concept of the will as extending more widely than the intellect, or as

being a power to freely affirm, deny, or suspend judgment on something is discredited; beliefs are intrinsic features of ideas that adhere to the same necessity akin to all modes of thinking. In the Scholium, Spinoza remarks that in order “to explain the preceding Proposition more fully, there remain certain things I must warn you of.” One particular caution is directed against those who do not distinguish accurately between ideas and images and, for this exact reason, fail to see that every idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation. These thinkers see ideas as “mute pictures on a panel” and therefore “have been completely ignorant concerning this doctrine of the will.” A conceptual error in need of remediation, Spinoza adds, “both for the sake of speculation and in order to arrange one’s life wisely” (EIIp49s[II.]).

Commentators have drawn attention to Spinoza’s choice of words in EIIp49s[II.]. If Descartes himself or Cartesians in general are Spinoza’s main targets—a reading that comes naturally given the clear Anti-Cartesian context of EIIp49—then it remains unclear as to why Spinoza would connect their particular misunderstanding of his ‘doctrine concerning the will’ with a failure to not distinguish properly between ideas and images; a distinction central to Cartesian epistemology.² This paper shows that Spinoza, far from misrepresenting the Cartesian position, merely is recalling and reaffirming Descartes’ own struggles in convincing his correspondents of the true nature of ideas, and hence of the proper distinction between ideas and images. While Spinoza accuses Descartes of having “never grasped the true cause of error,” and of having falsely assumed that “the human will is free and more extensive the intellect” (Ep. 2, p. 763), he never accuses Descartes of reducing ideas to mere images of things. Such an accusation, in fact, recalls the stance taken against Descartes by Hobbes in his *Objections to the Meditations*. This paper argues that Spinoza in EIIp49s[II.] sides with Descartes against Hobbes and those who deny the existence of ideas proper to pure intellect.

This paper proceeds as following. After having canvassed the main approaches to EIIp49s[II.] (section 1), I offer a careful, yet straightforward, reconstruction of the passage under discussion. Specifically, I argue that Spinoza is merely restating Hobbes’ Fifth Objection to the Cartesian notion of ideas as presented in the third set of objections to the *Mediations* (section 2). Spinoza, by doing so, warns his readers of certain foundational assumptions, expounded already in the *Meditations*—scrutinized by its critics—yet to be followed also in the *Ethics*. Section 3 argues that Spinoza not only criticizes his ‘imagist’ readers for disregarding the mental activity involved in all idea-formation, but also for not properly appreciating the mind’s capacity to exhibit natures or

essences by clear and distinct perceptions; the exercise of true thought, that is to say, virtue itself (EVp42.dem).

1. SPINOZA ON EIIp49s[II.]

While discussing the freedom of the human will, Spinoza in EIIp49s[II.] turns to the distinction between ideas, images, and words. In order to “remove uneasiness,” Spinoza indicates some important advantages of his doctrine:

I begin, therefore, by warning my readers, first, to distinguish accurately between an idea, or concept, of the mind, and the images of things which we imagine. And then it is necessary to distinguish between ideas and the words by which we signify things. For because many people either completely confuse these three—ideas, images, and words—or do not distinguish them accurately enough, or carefully enough, they have been completely ignorant of this doctrine concerning the will. But it is quite necessary to know it, both for the sake of speculation and in order to arrange one’s life wisely. (EIIp49s[II.])

Spinoza begins by targeting those who do not properly account for the first distinction, between ideas or concepts of the mind, and images:

those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us from encounters with [NS: external] bodies, are convinced that those ideas of things [NS: which can make no trace in our brains, or] of which we can form no similar image [NS: in our brain] are not ideas, but only fictions which we feign from a free choice of the will. They look on ideas, therefore, as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice, do not see that an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation. (EIIp49s[II.]; henceforward “passage”)³

Ideas are not like “mute pictures on a panel.” Ideas are “concept[s] of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing” (EIIdef.3); they always involve an act of affirmation or negation. To have an idea is to engage in “the very [act of] understanding” (EIIp43s), that is, to actively affirm or negate something about something.

Scholars generally maintain that Spinoza, in the long scholium following EIIp49, is targeting Descartes’ conception of the will and its relation to human understanding.⁴ In Meditation 4, Descartes writes: “all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas (without affirming or denying anything) which are subject for possible judgments” (CSM II:39). For Descartes, belief-formation involves two separate faculties of the mind: the understanding (or intellect) and the will. The understanding presents propositional content to the mind, content which we by using the will affirm, deny, or suspend judgement on (Nadler, *Spinoza’s Eth-*

ics, 187; Koistinen, “Spinoza on Action,” 171). Descartes considers the understanding to be mostly a passive faculty. All it does is receive and consider ideas. The intellect merely provides the mind with ideas, that is, with mental representations of things. In order for an idea to turn into a belief, the will—the active faculty of the mind—must intervene (Della Rocca, “Judgement and Will,” 146; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 123–4).⁵

By distinguishing between cognitive and volitional acts of mind, Descartes establishes the power and freedom of the human will in forming and reviewing beliefs. For Descartes, the will, by its very essence or nature, is freedom (CSM II:117). The will’s ability to choose, that is, to give or withhold assent or abstain from judgment, is “the supreme perfection of man” (CSM I: 205). It is through “the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions” that we appear “like God by making us masters of ourselves” (CSM I:384). Unlike God, however, human beings have finite intellects. For Descartes, it is exactly the combination of an infinite will with a finite, limited intellect that underlies false belief. Human beings fall into error when they do not limit their will and lend judgment only those things which they clearly and distinctly understand. Each time we give assent to non-clear and distinct ideas, we improperly use our faculty of willing (CSM II: 41; CSM I:106).

When we return to “passage,” it seems that many aspects of Spinoza’s treatment are particularly directed against Cartesian doctrine. Descartes differentiates between two principal kinds of mental states: ideas (i.e., representations of things) and volitions (i.e., additional acts of will that elevate our representations of things into actual beliefs). Spinoza, however, incorporates the act of affirmation or negation within the content of the idea itself. To have an idea about something is to simultaneously express a volitional attitude towards that thing, that is, to affirm or deny something about something as true or false. From a Spinozistic point of view, ideas are not “mute pictures on a panel” (EIIp49s[II.]).

The implications of Spinoza’s position are two-fold. First, to conceive of a separate faculty of the will is to conceive of a fiction. Volitions are nothing “beyond the very ideas of things.” Or to put this claim differently: there is no “other affirmation or negation in the mind except that which the idea involves, insofar as it is an idea” (EIIp48s). Furthermore, since “volitions” are nothing beyond ideas (they are identical to ideas), they adhere to the same causal determinism to which all ideas are subject: “The mind . . . cannot have an absolute faculty of willing and not willing. Rather, it must be determined to willing this or that (by IP28) by a cause which is also determined by another, and this cause again by another, and so on” (EIIp48). Second, for Spinoza there is no separate act

of judgment. Ideas, by definition, always include affirmation or negation. And since ideas are caused by other ideas in the mind, these volitional attitudes themselves are causally determined. Human beings, therefore, do not acquire beliefs at will (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 160; Koistinen, "Spinoza on Action," 171). Given the clear anti-Cartesian implications of Spinoza's overall position, it seems natural to interpret "passage" as an anti-Cartesian position.

However, note that "passage" states that opponents overlook the essentially judgmental nature of ideas precisely because of their failure to properly distinguish between ideas and images. As an informed student of Descartes, Spinoza must have been aware that Cartesians themselves clearly differentiate between mental ideas and physical images (see for instance the opening part of Meditation 6). Indeed, Curley remarks that this "distinction between ideas and images is vital to Descartes' program"; hence that such a distinction "is certainly good Cartesian doctrine" (Curley, "Ethics of Belief," 170). Margaret Wilson agrees. She points out that "the identification of mental ideas and physical pictures is no part of Descartes' position; and the Cartesian voluntarist theory of judgment has nothing to do with 'fashioning fictions.'" Accordingly, Wilson concludes that "some of what Spinoza remarks in this connection seems to me confusing, especially if one supposes that his main target is the Cartesian position" (Wilson, "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," 124). Amelie Rorty acknowledges the tension surrounding passage A, yet too falls back on the larger anti-Cartesian context of EIIp49 to argue away possible interpretative difficulties. She writes:

Before attacking Descartes' account of judgment, Spinoza issues a general warning, a warning that reveals his diagnosis of Descartes' fundamental error. He warns readers—he of course really means Cartesians—that they should not confuse ideas with images or words (IIP49s). It might seem otiose, even downright ridiculous to charge Descartes —of all people—with neglecting the distinction between images and ideas, still less between ideas and words. But Spinoza is not charging Descartes with reducing ideas to perceptions or images . . . His charge is rather that Cartesians accept an inspection theory of thought and verification, that requires the will to scan the contents of the understanding, to determine whether they are well-formed, whether ideas are clearly and distinctly perceived. (Rorty, "The Two Faces of Spinoza," 198)

Rorty's overall conclusion, for reasons mentioned above, is justified. However, her approach fails to explain why Spinoza—if he is not targeting Descartes for not properly distinguishing between ideas and images—nonetheless still finds it necessary to warn his readers of this distinction. The first part of 'passage' is not accounted for.

Guérout (1974)⁶ and Curley (1975) recognize this problem. Acknowledging the above-mentioned tension, they argue for an interpretation that takes into account Spinoza's choice of words in "passage." Both contend, though for different reasons, that Spinoza's is meant to indicate his rejection of Descartes' conception of ideas as "*quasi-imagines*."

Guérout argues that Spinoza's critique in "passage" is solely directed against Descartes' conception of the corporeal imagination. That is, Spinoza finds Descartes' portrayal of the ideas we have of images inconsistent with the degree of activity attributed to innate ideas. Whereas innate ideas fully express the mind's spontaneity, that is, its freedom from external causes, ideas of images are characterized mainly as passive effects of corporeal mechanical processes (Guérout, *Spinoza*, 509–10). Spinoza's intention in EIIp49 and its long scholium must be to reveal that *all* our ideas—whether adequate or inadequate—come with intrinsic belief. However, while I share this overall conclusion, it remains debatable whether passage A itself does any real work in establishing this. We cannot reach this conclusion based on "passage" alone. The argumentative heavy-lifting itself is done in the remainder of the scholium, and (as Guérout himself realizes), in the crucial definition 3 of part 2 of the *Ethics*. While Guérout nicely captures Spinoza's core critique against Descartes, it is unclear how "passage" substantially contributes to it.

Curley too associates Spinoza's discussion in "passage" with an inconsistency in Descartes' conception of ideas.⁷ According to Curley, Descartes describes ideas as *quasi* images in order to highlight the representational nature of Cartesian ideas ("Ethics of Belief," 171).⁸ Spinoza, however, concludes from this that if "an idea is supposed to be a representative entity which can be affirmed or denied" (173); ideas cannot be but propositionally structured (171). According to Curley's interpretation, Spinoza conceives ideas as propositions (and not as *quasi-imagines*); a claim "passage" is meant to highlight.

Curley's thesis that for Spinoza ideas are propositional is controversial. Donagan has pressed two powerful objections against it. First, Spinoza nowhere provides explicit arguments for this bold claim:

he does not say that ideas are propositionally and nobody is likely to embrace the doctrine that they are in a fit of absence of mind. If Spinoza had embraced it, and especially if he was led to differ for Descartes because he did, why did he not explicitly say so? No answer to this question is plausible. (Donagan, "Homo Cogitat," 103)

Second, Donagan reminds us that propositional theorists typically depict language as a tool that allows human beings to overcome the problematic relation of ideas to the world; that is, ideas are seen as lin-

guistically expressible activities that allow us to properly connect the realm of thought to the external world. To attribute such a view to Spinoza, however, is implausible. Indeed, Donagan points out that Spinoza's discussion in EIIp49s[II.]—in particular Spinoza's account of the difference between ideas and words—is meant to show the opposite: “the relation of words . . . to the world cannot elucidate the concept of thought at all” (104). Spinoza does not consider the relation of language to the world to be unproblematic. On the contrary. For these reasons and other, Donagan questions the plausibility of Curley's approach to EIIp49s[III.] (109). In sum, Curley's interpretation of “passage”—presented as an argument to the best explanation—presupposes a number of claims on behalf of Spinoza which are highly debatable.

In the following section I show that “passage” is best explained by taking into account Hobbes' critique of Descartes' *Meditations*. My interpretation (i) fully takes into account Spinoza's use of words in “passage,” and (ii) does not require us to attribute to Spinoza doctrines he does not hold. I argue that Spinoza in “passage” reiterates Hobbes' critique of the Cartesian notion of ideas as presented in the third set of objections to the *Meditations*.

2. RECONSTRUCTING “PASSAGE”

In order to adequately understand what Spinoza is saying in “passage,” we should consider Descartes' threefold classification of ideas: innate ideas, adventitious ideas, and what are usually called factitious ideas (see, for instance, CSM II, 26 and CSM III, 183). For Descartes, this division is grounded in the differences ideas have with respect to the origin of their content. Adventitious ideas are caused by things external to the mind (e.g., sensory impressions). Factitious ideas are constructions of the mind itself (e.g., ideas of sirens or hippocgriffs). And innate ideas (e.g., the idea of God) “derive simply from . . . [our] own nature” (CSM II, 26).⁹

Adventitious ideas enclose visible images of sensory objects. For Descartes, images are purely physical entities formed in the corporeal imagination or “fantasy.” They arise when external objects via the sense organs impart impressions to the brain and its animal spirits.¹⁰ Deborah Boyle points out that in earlier works like the *Treatise on Man* and the *Rules for Direction Of the Mind*, Descartes repeatedly characterizes these corporeal entities as “ideas” (Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*, 9). Take *Traité de l'homme*: “I wish to apply the term “idea” generally to all the impressions which the spirits can receive as they leave gland H [viz. the locus of the imagination]” (CSM I, 106). Descartes here uses the notion “idea” to describe physical states of the brain. Descartes, in other words, uses “idea” to characterize also modes of *corporeal* substance. Although

Descartes by the time of the *Meditations* clearly restricted his notion of “ideas” to a purely mental phenomenon—that is, to modes of *incorporeal* substance—many of his contemporary readers still considered the Cartesian “idea” to extend to physical images as well (Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*, 10). In their objections to the *Meditations*, both Hobbes and Gassendi took Cartesian ideas to be coequal with images (see CSM II 126–7 and CSM II 253).

In a letter to Mersenne (July 1641), Descartes is again confronted with the issue. Mersenne had provided Descartes with “two little sheets of objections” written by an anonymous author.¹¹ Being asked by this commentator to clarify his conception of ideas, Descartes writes: “it will be easy, then, for him to understand what I mean . . . if he takes the word “idea” in the way in which I said explicitly that I took it, and is not confused by those who restrict it to the images of material things formed in the imagination” (CSM III, 185). To further clarify the matter, Descartes refers the correspondent to his definition of “idea” presented in the *Second Set of Replies*:

Idea. I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me more aware of the thought . . . Thus it is not only the images depicted in the imagination which I call “ideas.” Indeed, in so far as these images are in the corporeal imagination, that is, are depicted in some part of the brain, I do not call them “ideas” at all; I call them “ideas” only in so far as they give form to the mind itself, when it is directed towards that part of the brain. (CSM II, 113)

Consistent with the above passage, Descartes says in other places that an idea is “the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought” (113). In his answer to Hobbes’ set of objections to the *Meditations*, Descartes writes that an idea is “whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (CSM II: 127). Gassendi, in turn, was told that the notion of “idea” is extended “to cover any object of thought” (CSM II: 253). Similarly, in the already mentioned letter to Mersenne, Descartes explains that “idea” denotes “in general everything which is in our mind when we conceive something, no matter how we conceive it” (CSM III: 185).

Descartes’ identification of “idea” with “form” has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. What matters here is that for Descartes, corporeal images in the brain associated with sense perception are not ideas in the strict sense. A succinct yet insightful description of this principle can be found in another letter to Mersenne (April 21, 1641). Descartes writes that “the forms or corporeal impressions which must be in the brain for us to imagine anything are not thoughts; but when

the mind imagines or turns toward those impressions, its operation is a thought" (CSM III: 180). In order for a corporeal image to acquire, as it were, the status of an idea, the intellect must actively comprehend the form in the body. To simplify: the mature Descartes connects the notion of idea primarily with this mental act of comprehending by the intellect; corporeal images in the brain are not ideas in the strict sense.

However, whereas all kinds of (genuine) *ideas*— viz. innate, adventitious, and factitious ones—exemplify such mental activity, the act of comprehending itself differs in case of adventitious and factitious ideas. Indeed, "it is the manner of conceiving them which makes the difference" (CSM III: 186). Whereas adventitious and factitious ideas are accompanied by (or causally related to) a corporeal image in the brain, innate ideas are always conceived without an image.¹² The idea of God, for instance, cannot be represented by our imagination (see, e.g., CSM III: 185).

This brief sketch of Descartes' conception of ideas should suffice to reconstruct Spinoza's meaning in "passage." Spinoza, as we have seen, holds that:

those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us from encounters with [NS: external] bodies, are convinced that [b] those ideas of things [NS: which can make no trace in our brains, or] of which we can form no similar image [NS: in our brain] are not ideas, but only [c] fictions which we feign from a free choice of the will. (EIIp49s[II].)

Our previous discussion suggests the following reconstruction.

First, Descartes explicitly distances himself from those who restrict the notion of ideas "to the images of material things formed in the imagination" (CSM III, 185). Many of his correspondents, however, associated this notion of ideas with Cartesian doctrine itself. While such a *modus operandi* can be attributed to a number of Descartes' readers, Hobbes in particular springs to mind. After all, his suggestive identification of Cartesian ideas with physical images in the replies to the *Meditations*—and the various debates that followed clearly mark a crucial departure from Cartesian doctrine (which considers ideas as purely mental phenomena). Hobbes vehemently rejects the existence of innate ideas. Because, whatsoever "we conceive, has been perceived first by sense, either all at once, or by parts; a man can have no thought, representing anything, not subject to sense" (*Leviathan*, 15).¹³ Consequently, in his objections to the *Meditations*, Hobbes offers alternative accounts of how Cartesian innate ideas—such as, the idea of God—can be constructed from material provided by the senses. When Spinoza in [a] refers to "those who think that ideas consist in images which are formed in us from encounters with [NS: external] bodies" he must have

in mind those philosophers who take ideas to be part or mainly modes of corporeal substance.

Second, Spinoza in [b] refers “those ideas of things [NS: which can make no trace in our brains, or] of which we can form no similar image [NS: in our brain]” (EIIp49s[II.]). Given that innate ideas for Descartes cannot be represented by corporeal images in the brain, Spinoza in [b] is referring to innate ideas.

Third, Spinoza in [c] refers to “fictions of the mind.” In all likelihood, he has in mind the Cartesian *factitious* idea. The idea of a unicorn, for example, is such a factitious construction of the mind. While non-existent in nature, for Descartes the idea of a unicorn itself is a composite of parts taken from reality (e.g., the experience of a horse and a horn). Though Wilson (“Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” 124) has good reasons to remark that the Cartesian doctrine has nothing to do with “fashioning fictions” (factitious ideas are formed when the mind puts together adventitious ideas) it is not difficult to see why readers of Descartes could regard factitious ideas as *fictions*. After all, a unicorn, is nothing but a chimera.

Putting all these elements together, the first part of “passage” reads as following: [a] those philosophers who identify ideas with images of material things formed in the imagination are convinced that even [b] innate ideas are only [c] factitious ideas “which we feign from a free choice of the will.” Understood in this way, “passage” no longer falls prey to the confusion commonly associated with it. Indeed, in what follows we will see that Spinoza is merely reiterating Hobbes’ critique of the Cartesian notion of ideas as presented in the third set of objections to the *Mediations*.¹⁴

Let us briefly examine Hobbes’ objections to the Cartesian innate idea of God. In his Fifth Objection to the *Meditations*, he argued in favor of the inconceivability of a non-extended subject. The heart of the argument centers on the notion that all our ideas of things are necessarily grounded in sense perception. That is, Hobbes, willfully or not, assimilates Cartesian ideas to his own theory of corporeal images: to have an idea of something is to have an image of it. Because all our images are the images of some extended body, it follows that we cannot have an idea of some non-extended subject. Consequently, “it seems, then, that there is no idea of God in us” (CSM II: 117). Importantly, in the Fifth Objection, Hobbes does not deny on this account that God exists. He does, however, claim that we do not understand the nature of God. Although we can form no image of immaterial things, we can still think about God in a manner that does not involve the idea of God. Hobbes parallels such a conception of God to the thoughts of fire conceived by

men who are born blind (CSM II: 127). He explains that the blind man, through everyday experience, has an idea of heat. However, since he does not know what shape and color fire has, he does not have an idea of fire itself. The blind man nonetheless is aware that his idea of heat is always accompanied by the idea of an object which causes that heat. Confronted with the fact that others consistently identify this cause of heat with “fire,” he concludes that “fire” is the cause of heat and thus that “fire” exist. For Hobbes, a similar line of thought applies to the way we conceive of God. Although we cannot form an image of God, we still have the ability to confirm his existence. Indeed, we can prove God’s existence by reasoning back from the experienced corporeal effects to their ultimate source (CSM II: 127). However, since our conception of God is composed of the ideas of visible things (a factitious idea formed by putting together various adventitious ideas in Cartesian terminology), it does not show us what God is actually like.

I argue that when Spinoza “passage” refers to those philosophers who identify ideas with images of material things and, for this reason, even consider innate ideas to be “factitious” or a posteriori constructed, he has Hobbes’ Fifth Objection to Descartes in mind. While for Descartes innate ideas by definition cannot be factitious, Hobbes interpreted them so.

When we apply this insight, we get the following result: [a] those philosophers who identify ideas with images of material things formed in the imagination, are convinced that even [b] innate ideas are only [c] factitious ideas “which we feign from a free choice of the will.” When understood in this way, “passage” no longer causes confusion.

3. SPINOZA ON THE NATURE OF IDEAS

This section concludes my reconstruction of EIIp49s[II.]. I argue that Spinoza in “passage” charges imagists with taking ideas to be “mute pictures on a panel” due to their disregard for the formal being (*esse formale*) of ideas. The targets of Spinoza identified do not understand what it means for ideas to exist as finite modes under the attribute of thought. Specifically, I argue that Spinoza not only criticizes these readers for (i) disregarding the mental activity involved in all idea-formation but also (ii) for not properly appreciating the mind’s capacity to exhibit natures or essences by clear and distinct perceptions.

Spinoza writes that [a] those philosophers who identify ideas with images of material things formed in the imagination, are convinced that even [b] innate ideas are only [c] factitious ideas “which we feign from a free choice of the will. They look on ideas, *therefore* [*igitur*], as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice, do not see that

an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation” (“passage”; emphasis mine).

Our reconstruction shows that for Spinoza, Hobbes and like-minded others failed to see that an idea, by definition, involves affirmation or negation. Spinoza’s formulation in “passage,” however, suggests that this deficiency is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of Cartesian ideas itself. Indeed, it is interpretably significant that Spinoza merely restates the crucial point of discussion between Descartes and his opponents. He appears to be suggesting that Descartes’ answer to their objections is sufficient to explain the latter’s misunderstanding of the nature of ideas.

Earlier we saw that Descartes—confronted with the fact that many of his so-called materialist readers, wilfully or not, assimilated Cartesian ideas to their theory of corporeal images—redirects attention to his definition of ideas in the *Second Set of Replies*. He reminds Hobbes that since he himself “in several places throughout the book” clearly distinguishes between ideas as images and ideas as “purely mental conceptions,” he does not fall prey to the objection (CSM II: 127). Descartes accepts that certain ideas have corporeal counterparts, but he denies that these images in the imagination are ideas in the strict sense. These images are ideas only to the extent that they “give form to the mind itself, when it is directed towards that part of the brain” (CSM II:113). According to Descartes, Hobbes confusion thus results from a misunderstanding of what it means for ideas to have formal existence (*esse formale*).

Much ink has been spilled over the Scholastic distinction between “formal” and “objective” reality.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that for Descartes, an idea is taken “formally” when we refer to ideas as “operations of the intellect” (CSM II:7). The formal being of an idea refers to its actual being in the understanding, to the existence of ideas as modes of the mind. When an idea is taken “objectively,” on the other hand, it is seen as “the thing represented by that operation” (CSM II:7). It is generally agreed that Spinoza adopts Descartes’ analyses of ideas as having a “double esse.” Donagan writes that “Spinoza accepted this Cartesian division as sound, and was willing to make express use of it” (Donagan, “Homo Cogitat,” 105; Geroult, *Spinoza: LAme*, 26–8).

“Passage” suggests that men like Hobbes look on ideas as “mute pictures on a panel” as a consequence of their disregard for the formal being of ideas. Spinoza, a few lines below “passage” and clearly referring to it, confirms what appears to be a simple truth. He writes that the “prejudice” under discussion “can easily put aside by anyone who attends to the nature of thought, which does not at all involve the concept of extension” (EIIp49s[II.]). Our reconstruction of “passage” thus naturally

leads back to Spinoza's definition of idea mentioned at the start of this paper. Spinoza defines an idea as "an action of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing." He explains that using the term "conception" rather than "perception" indicates that ideas, above all, "express an action of the mind" (EIIId3). In his discussion of EIIp48 & EIIp49, Spinoza builds on this idea by claiming that every idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation. Spinoza thus identifies mental action with volition itself; indeed, the activity of the mind is nothing but the very act of affirming or negating (Della Rocca, "The Power of an Idea," 206). As we have seen, this amounts to saying that for Spinoza, each idea—whether adequate or not—is a necessitated belief or judgment in which we assent to something. To have an adequate idea of, for example, a triangle, is to affirm that its three angles equal two right ones (EIIp49d). Similarly, to imagine a winged horse is to affirm wings of a horse (EIIp49s3).¹⁶ Thus, for Spinoza, the act of affirmation or negating cannot be separated from the formal being of ideas.

Spinoza's argument in "passage," however, has additional implications. He warns his readers that a proper understanding of the formal being of ideas is needed to fully understand what is going on in the preceding proposition. It is interesting to see that commentators have marked down EIIp49 and its demonstration as badly fallacious.¹⁷ In this passage, Spinoza considers the affirmation that "the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles." This affirmation, he writes, "can neither be nor be conceived, without the idea of the triangle." Spinoza next discusses the converse, claiming that "this idea of the triangle also can neither be nor be conceived without this affirmation" (EIIp49dem). This claim, some have argued, appears to be false: "for it seems we may form an idea of a triangle without thereby affirming that its three angles equal two right angles" (Marshall, "Spinoza's cognitive affects," 8). At any rate, Spinoza provides no argument for this claim. An additional problem results from Spinoza's use of the quite particular case of the triangle in support of the claim that *all* ideas, whether adequate or not, necessarily involve an act of affirmation or negating; a claim for which Spinoza again offers no argument.¹⁸

Even though it may not resolve all potential tensions associated with this passage, my interpretative proposal can take away at least some of the ambiguities surrounding this proposition. The triangle example is in fact quite useful as it draws attention to what has been called the "vertical" line of causation put forward across his writings.¹⁹ While all ideas involve affirmation or judgment, we must nonetheless distinguish between the act of affirmation involved in contemplating adequate ideas, and the act of affirmation involved in forming imaginative or inadequate ideas. To see this, we must take into account Spinoza's distinction between two ways

of conceiving finite modes; a distinction that reappears in several places in the *Ethics* (Marshall, “Adequacy and Innateness,” 74). Take EVp29s:

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God. (as we have shown in IIP45 and P45S)

Spinoza explains that we can conceive of finite modes in two ways: in the eternal attributes, and insofar as they exist in duration. What is crucial here is that when we conceive modes through the so-called “common order of nature,” we explain a mode in terms of its external causality. That is, when we conceive of finite modes as existing in duration, we also conceive of another finite mode as its cause—the kind of mechanistic “horizontal” causality put forward by Spinoza in EIIp48, and we must add, the kind of mechanistic causality someone like Hobbes is likely to accept. However, when we conceive of finite modes under a species of eternity, we conceive of their *formal* essences contained in, or following from, the relevant divine attribute (EIIp8).²⁰

This distinction is relevant for a proper understanding of the difference between adequate and inadequate ideas, and the particular kinds of affirmation involved. Adequate and inadequate ideas express a different power of thinking,²¹ a difference explained precisely in terms of the particular causality at work:

I say expressly that the mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused [NS: and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of Nature, that is, so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions. For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly. (EIIp29s)

In short, as Spinoza again confirms in EIIp49s.[III.], we must “deny absolutely that we require an equal power of thinking to affirm what is true is true, as to affirm that what is false is true. For if you consider the mind, they are related to one another as being to not-being.” While all ideas express activity of mind, the act of affirmation involved in grasping essences differs from the one involved in forming inadequate ideas. Indeed, adequate or clear and distinct ideas “originate from pure mind and not from fortuitous motions of the body” (TIE, §91, 25).

To conclude. EIIp49 and its scholium express more than merely a powerful critique of certain aspects of Cartesian thought. While Spinoza distances himself from the Cartesian account of belief-formation and freedom of will, EIIp49s[II.] contains an equally forceful warning directed at Hobbes and other likeminded “imagists.” The “doctrine concerning the will” presented in Part 2 of the *Ethics* not only prepares us “concerning matters of fortune,” it also “teaches that we share in the divine nature, and that we do this the more, the more perfect our actions are, and the more and more we understand God.” (EIIp49s[IV.]). Despite the manifold differences between him and Descartes, Spinoza ends up defending a quintessential Cartesian assumption²²: the existence of a mind that can grasp or exhibit natures by clear and distinct perceptions; the very claim Hobbes contested in his replies to the *Meditations*.

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NOTES

1. All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* are from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, edited and translated by Edwin Curley. References to the *Ethics* (E) will be by part (I-V), proposition (p), demonstration (dem.), scholium (s), appendix (app.). References to Gebhardt's edition of Spinoza's works (G) include volume and page numbers. References to Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE), *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (PPC), *Appendix containing Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) and *The Letters* (Ep.) are to page number as found in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, translated by Samuel Shirley and edited by Michael L. Morgan. For Descartes' writings as well as Hobbes' reply to the *Meditations*, I have used the Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch translation, *The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes* (3 volumes), abbreviated as CSM and followed by the appropriate volume and page numbers.

2. E.g., Wilson, “Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge”; Rorty, “The Two Faces of Spinoza,” 198. See below, Section 1.

3. The Latin reads:

Quippe, qui putant ideas consistere in imaginibus, quae in nobis ex corporum occurso formantur, sibi persuadent ideas illas rerum, <die geen speur in onze harssenen konnen maken, of> quarum simile nullam imaginem formare possumus, non esse ideas, sed tantum figmenta, quae ex libero voluntatis arbitrio fingimus; ideas igitur veluti picturas in tabula mutas aspiciunt, et, hoc praeiudicio praeoccupati, non vident ideam, quatenus idea est, affirmationem aut negationem involvere.

(GII/88).

4. E.g., Curley, “Ethics of Belief,” 167–171; Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 69; Wilson, “Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” 123–125; Della Rocca, “The Power of an Idea,” 200; Steinberg, “Knowledge in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 160–1.

5. Della Rocca stresses that for Descartes, volitions always involve something over and above mere representation: the will “involves mental power which is not just a matter of representation. The power in volitions is thus not itself representational, though it is brought to bear on representational states that are separate from this power” (Della Rocca, “Judgement and Will,” 146).

6. Guérout is aware of the wide range of potential targets in EIIp49s[II.]; he too identifies Descartes and Hobbes as Spinoza’s most obvious interlocutors: “Quant à ceux qui confondent l’idée soit avec le mot, soit avec l’image, ils son tune multitude (multi homines) . . . Cependant, deux philosophes sont ici particulièrement visés, bien que leurs noms ne soient pas prononcés, c’est à savoir Hobbes et Descartes” (Guérout, *Spinoza: L’Ame*, 509).

7. Curley writes that “Spinoza is right to find Descartes’ conception of ideas incoherent and right also to connect this with a confusion about words and images (“Ethics of Belief” 170).

8. Descartes repeatedly says that ideas are “as it were” [tanquam] images (e.g., CSM I 81–2; CSM I:165; CSM I: 216–7). Ideas are said to represent their physical object without necessarily resembling them.

9. There is considerable scholarly discussion regarding the specific nature of innate ideas in the Cartesian corpus. For a comprehensive account, see Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*. For our purposes, it suffices to rely on Descartes own description of innate ideas found in *Meditations* III.

10. It should be noted that for Descartes images not always are connected with external objects via the senses. See, for instance, Curley (1975, 187). For the sake of clarity, I here primarily focus on ordinary sensation.

11. We have good reason to assume Hobbes’ authorship of this letter. See especially Mori, “Hobbes, Descartes, and Ideas.”

12. CSM III: 186: “whatever we conceive without an image is an idea of the pure mind, and whatever we conceive with an image is an idea of the imagination.”

13. Gassendi, in the third set of objections to the *Meditations*, takes a similar approach: “as for the forms which you say are innate, there do not seem to be any: whatever ideas are said to belong to this category also appear to have an external origin” (CSM II:195).

14. Spinoza owned a copy of the 1650 edition of Descartes’s *Opera Philosophica* as well as of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* which included the Objections and Replies. He also owned a copy of Hobbes’ *De Cive*, and we know that a Latin edition of *Leviathan* was available to him from 1668. For the catalogue of Spinoza’s library, see Aler, *Catalogus*.

15. E.g., Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*, 147–164.

16. Spinoza underlines the necessity involved in the formation of both our adequate *and* confused ideas: "Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as the adequate, or clear and distinct ideas." (EIIp36).

17. E.g., Curley, "Ethics of Belief," 169; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 167; Donagan, "Homo Cogitat," 110; Wilson, "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," 124–126; Marshall, "Spinoza's cognitive affects," 8.

18. Spinoza writes: "And what we have said concerning this volition (since we have selected this at random), must also be said concerning any volition" (EIIp49dem.).

19. Spinoza repeatedly compares the contemplative activity of the geometer who has a clear and distinct idea of a triangle with the certainty of the philosopher who adequately reflects upon God's essence or attributes (which constitute that essence). E.g., TIE, §79, 22; PPC, 125–127; PPC, 133; CM, 202.

20. For the distinction between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' causation, see Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 157. See also Schliesser, "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science," 170–71.

21. Adequate and inadequate ideas do not have the same intrinsic reality or perfection (Deleuze, "L'affect et l'idée," 2).

22. This conclusion regarding Spinoza's Cartesianism is reached independently by Schneider in "Spinoza's Epistemological Methodism."

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