SPINOZA ON THE IMAGINATION

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Introductory

In the philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677),\(^1\) imaginatio develops from a predominantly negative notion in the theory of knowledge – roughly a faculty of the mind that is defined as ‘not the intellect’\(^2\) – to an essential element of his mature thought on human affective life. As such, the imagination constitutes an integral part of the general project of his Ethica (published in the Opera posthuma, 1677) and of the psychology that conditions revealed religion, as expounded in the Tractatus theologico-politicus (1670).\(^3\)

Because Spinoza labels imagination or opinion as the lowest kind of cognition and the sole source of inadequate ideas, commentators have inferred that he despised it and was interested almost exclusively in the higher levels of cognition.\(^4\) In view of the importance Spinoza attaches to the imagination, however, this interpretation is hardly tenable. Even within the

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\(^1\) Apart from the Tractatus theologico-politicus (TTP), for which a better edition is now available, Spinoza’s works will be quoted from Gebhardt’s edition (G): Spinoza, Opera, in the format G II, 32.9 = ed. Gebhardt, vol. II, p. 32, l. 9. Sigla for the Ethica: E1, E2 (etc.) = Ethica, part 1, part 2 (etc.); ax = axiom; ad = affectuum definitio; app = appendix; c = corollarium; d = definitio; dem = demonstratio; e = explicatio; l = lemma; p = propositio; post = postulatum; praef = praefatio; s = scholiwm. Section numbers in references to the Tractatus de intellectus emendatione (TIE) are those introduced by Bruder. The TTP is cited from Akkerman’s edition (A, followed by page and line numbers; section numbers as given in A): Spinoza, TTP (Akkerman, Lagrée and Moreau). I quote Descartes from Adam and Tannery’s edition (AT), specifying volume, page and line numbers.

\(^2\) See in particular TIE § 84 (G II, 32.9-11): Vel si placet, hic per imaginationem, quicquid velis, cape, modò sit quid diversum ab intellectu, & unde anima habeat rationem patientis.

\(^3\) Spinoza had already written a considerable part of the Ethica, including the parts now designated as parts 2 and 3 (see Spinoza’s Letter 28, to J. Bouwmeester, 1665; G IV, 163.19-21), when he decided to interrupt this work in order to write the TTP. Thus the latter work, although published before the Ethica, certainly reflects his mature view on the subject.

\(^4\) See, for instance, Blair, ‘Spinoza’s account’.

theory of knowledge, the imagination cannot be reduced to its negative function as the source of inadequate ideas. One contemporary interpreter even asserts:

La philosophie de Spinoza, s’il fallait lui attribuer un thème privilégié, serait d’abord une philosophie de l’imagination, cette dernière constituant l’activité principale, et on peut dire aussi l’activité dominante de l’âme humaine en tant que celle-ci est idée d’un corps. Il faut aller plus loin encore … : on ne doit pas philosopher contre l’imagination, mais avec elle …

Spinoza’s own theory of the imagination emerged against the backdrop of Descartes’s epistemology, as set forth mainly in the *Meditationes*, and it owes much to the terminological framework provided by Descartes. Yet his mature doctrine is original and cannot be reduced to its Cartesian context. In the present paper, I shall focus on the development of the notion of *imagination* in the *Ethica*. As will become apparent, the imagination is an essential feature of the way to human freedom and salvation as envisioned by Spinoza.

**Body and mind**

Part 2 of the *Ethics* deals with the human mind, but in order to expound his theory of the powers and limits of the mind and its relation to the body, Spinoza inserts an excursion ‘on the nature of bodies’ between propositions 13 and 14. Significantly, his doctrine of the imagination is introduced almost immediately after that excursion: for Spinoza, the mental faculty of imagining should be viewed in connexion with the body. This is explicitly stated further on in the same part: *Verborum namque, & imaginum essentia à solis motibus corporeis constituitur, qui cogitationis conceptum minimè involvent.*

Images and imagining are discussed explicitly only in the

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5 A study devoted entirely to a reappraisal of *imaginatio* in Spinoza’s epistemology is De Deugd, *The significance*. But beyond the sphere of the theory of knowledge, too, Spinoza’s thoughts on the imagination have received attention. Some important titles (see also the bibliography in Bostrenghi): Gueroult, *Spinoza*, esp. chaps. VI-VIII and appendix N° 10; Zac, ‘Le Spinoza’; Mignini, *Ars imaginandi*; Bartuschat, *Spinozas Theorie*, pp. 151-158, 310-325; Bostrenghi, *Forme*.


7 The development of Spinoza’s thought on the imagination from its Cartesian sources, through his own elaboration in the early treatises, up to its final form in the *Ethica* (though not in the *TTP*) has been outlined by Mignini in chapter II of his *Ars imaginandi*, pp. 83-114.

8 E2p49s (G II, 132.19-21). Transl.: ‘For the essence of words and of images is con-
scholium to proposition 17, to which Spinoza will subsequently refer as the locus for the definition of the imagination. Yet this scholium does not formally define imagination as such. Instead, Spinoza somewhat reluctantly (or so it would seem) adopts the common way of designating as ‘images’ those affections of the body whose ideas represent external bodies as though they are present to us. It is to be noted that he qualifies this terminology as not entirely appropriate, since these so-called images have nothing to do with pictorial shapes of things (tametsi rerum figuras non referunt) – a reservation that appears to be part of his rejection of the view that ideas generally are mute pictures of things in the brain. The word is accepted only because it is conventional (at verba usitata retineamus). In spite of this terminological caveat, the cluster imago – imaginatio – imaginari henceforth acquires a systematic function.

Though the imagination is only dealt with explicitly in the scholium, propositions 16 and 17 with their attachments (three corollaries and one scholium) manifestly form part of one single, coherent argument for Spinoza. Thus, his theory of the imagination is based directly on the two propositions establishing the complex and composite character of the mind in relation to the body, immediately after the excursion on bodies: the mind (itself denoted in Spinoza’s unconventional parlance as the idea of a certain body) is not simple but composed of many different ideas, which in turn reflect the variety of modes in which the body can be affected. As the postulates of part 3 specify, these affections of the body are to be viewed as impressions or traces of external objects that impinge upon it. Moreover, the

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9 See E4p9dem (G II, 216.14), E5p21dem (294.33-295.1), E5p34dem (301.19); and cf. E3post2 (140.2).
10 E2p17s (G II, 106.6-11): Porrò, ut verba usitata retineamus, Corporis humani affectiones, quarum ideae Corpora externa, velut nobis praesentia repraesentant, rerum imagines vocabimus, tametsi rerum figuras non referunt. Et cùm Mens hac ratione contemplatur corpora, eandem imaginari dicemus.
11 E2p43s (G II, 124.10), E2p48s (130.9-10), E2p49s (131.30-132.12). The identification of imago with rei corporeae figura is Cartesian: Meditatio II (AT VII, 28.4-5).
12 E.g. in the demonstrations of E3p14 (G II, 151.20), E3p18 (154.20), E3p25 (159.10-11), E3p27 (160.10-11), E4p9 (216.9-14), E5p34 (301.18-21).
13 E2p14 (G II, 103.7-8): Mens humana apta est ad plurima percipiendum, & eo aptior, quò ejus Corpus pluribus modis disponi potest. E2p15 (103.18-19): Idea, quæ esse formale humanae Mentis constituit, non est simplex, sed ex plurimis ideis composita.
14 E3post1 (G II, 139.21): Corpus humanum potest multis affici modis; E3post2 (G II, 139.27-140.2): Corpus humanum multas pati potest mutationes, & nihilominus
introduction of the notion of imagination serves as a springboard for Spinoza’s original theory of the mental realm.

Spinoza already employs the terms *imaginatio* and *imaginari* before he presents his doctrine of the imagination. In the long scholium to proposition 15 of part 1, he replies to possible objections against the view that substance can be both extended and indivisible. Towards the end he discusses the familiar distinction between *imaginatio* and *(solus) intellectus*. Here the pair is apparently taken in the received Cartesian sense of different faculties or functions of thinking.15 As in Descartes’s twelfth *Regula* and second and sixth *Meditationes*, the pure intellect is superior, but for reasons that would have puzzled Descartes: as against the imagination, it is capable of viewing extended substance as infinite, unique and indivisible. The same opposition between *imaginatio/imaginari* and *(solus)* *intellectus/intelligere* recurs in the appendix of part 1, in Spinoza’s account of the origin of human prejudice as expressed in notions designating values such as good and evil, order and confusion, hot and cold, beauty and ugliness. Here imagination is equated with ignorance, and the intellect with insight into the nature of things:

Et quia ii, qui rerum naturam non intelligunt, nihil de rebus affirmant, sed res tantummodo imaginantur, & imaginationem pro intellectu capiunt, ideo ordinem in rebus esse firmiter credunt, rerum, suaque naturae ignari. 17

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15 Spinoza’s official position, of course, is that there are no absolute faculties of thought. He explicitly states so in E2p48dem, regarding the alleged faculty of the will (G II, 129.13-16: *Mens ... absolutam facultatem volendi, & nolendi habere non potest*), and in the scholium (129.20-24) he expands his critique, rejecting all conceivable mental faculties. De Deugd therefore rightly emphasises that Spinoza ‘flatly denies the existence of anything like an imaginative faculty’ (*The significance*, p. 35; his italics). Yet Spinoza’s terminology is not always so strict; he does, in fact, speak somewhat loosely of *imaginandi facultas* (G II, 106.18-20) or *vis* (121.15) or *potentia* (106.17; 149.24-25) and *TPP* cap. II, A 112.3, 112.13; cap. XIII, A 448.2). But even though he occasionally adopts this convenient term, the notion of a distinct faculty of imagining is clearly incompatible with and absent from Spinoza’s own mature system.

16 Descartes opposes *imaginatio* to *(solus or purus) intellectus* in, e.g., *Meditatio II* (AT VII, 34.2-3), *Principia philosophiae I* § 32 (AT VIII, 17) and *Regula XII* (e.g. AT X, 416.7); to *pura intellectio* in *Meditatio VI* (e.g. AT VII, 73.14-15). In the *Ethica* (and also in the *TPP*: cap. II, A 112.10-15; cap. VI, A 268.2-3; cap. VII, A 308.16). Spinoza characteristically opposes *imaginatio* to *(solus or purus or unqualified) intellectus*; the same goes for the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, but there we also occasionally find *intellectio* as counterpart (§§ 87, 90, 91n: G II, 33.2; 33.27; 33.35).

17 Elapp, G II 81.36-82.2, modified. (Gebhardt transposed *nihil de rebus affirmant*
Since order does not exist outside the imagination, there is no such thing as order in the universe. God did not organise the universe orderly with a view to the human need for imagining things. The appendix aims precisely at undermining such anthropomorphic notions of God or Nature. To this end, it brings various strategies to bear. One of these is to show that many (or even virtually all) notions are nothing but *imaginandi modi*, different ways in which our imagination is affected. Since these modes will vary according to the constitution or disposition of individual brains, they give rise to endless confusion and disagreement. Once such notions have emerged, however, people label them with names and henceforth treat them as real entities. Spinoza calls such reified or hypostasised imaginary notions *entia imaginationis* (varying the scholastic term of *ens rationis*).

Although Spinoza’s argument in the appendix of part 1 nowhere explicitly develops a theory of the imagination, the second corollary to proposition 16 of part 2 shows that he thought of this appendix as an integral part of such a theory. The proposition itself states: *Idea cujuscunque modi, quo Corpus humanum à corporibus externis afficitur, involvere debet naturam Corporis humani, & simul naturam corporis externi.* From this, Spinoza then goes on to deduce two corollaries. The first is rather obvious: *Hinc sequitur primò Mentem humanam plurimorum corporum naturam unà cum sui corporis natura percipere.* For the second corollary, however, it is not immediately clear how and why this should be implied by the proposition. It runs as follows:

and *sed res tantummodò imaginantur*, but since there is no valid reason for this intervention, I here give the sentence in the order of the *Opera posthuma*. See Akkerman, *Studies in the Posthumous works of Spinoza*, p. 186.) Transl.: ‘And because those who do not understand the nature of things affirm nothing concerning things, but only imagine them, and take the imagination for the intellect, they firmly believe, in their ignorance of things and of their own nature, that there is an order in things’ (Curley, p. 444, adapted accordingly).

18 E1app, G II 82.9-15. 19 E1app, G II 83.11-15. Spinoza gives a more extended treatment of the notion of *ens rationis* in *Cogitata metaphysica* I, cap. 1 (G I, 233-236). 20 E2p16 (G II 103.28-30), Transl.: ‘The idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human Body and at the same time the nature of the external body’ (Curley, p. 463). 21 E2p16c1 (G II 104.10-11), Transl.: ‘From this it follows, first, that the human Mind perceives the nature of a great many bodies together with the nature of its own body’ (Curley, p. 463).
The argument behind this can be formulated thus: what the body perceives directly is not the external thing itself, but the way the human body is affected by it; hence the perception is indicative of the body’s own constitution rather than of the nature of the external thing. Spinoza does not explicitly provide that demonstration. Instead, he merely states it as a consequence of the original proposition, and refers to the appendix of part 1 for ‘many examples’. This shows that he considered his critique of imagination in the appendix as part of the systematic treatment of the subject in the arguments that follow.

The second corollary subsequently serves to clarify the difference between an individual person’s mind and someone else’s idea of that person. In the corollary to proposition 11 Spinoza had developed the notion that the human mind is part of God’s infinite understanding; another way of expressing this is to say that there is an idea in God which constitutes the human mind. Now the object of the idea that constitutes a person’s mind is its own body, and this accounts for the union of mind and body in one person. Speaking of the mind as the idea of the body, however, may be confusing in that it fails to distinguish between on the one hand the idea of, say, Peter which is (or constitutes the essence of) Peter’s mind, and on the other the idea of Peter as it appears in someone else’s mind, for example Paul’s. This problem is tackled in the scholium to proposition 17 (with explicit reference to the second corollary of proposition 16):

\[\text{Illa enim [viz. the first idea: Peter’s mind] essentiam Corporis ipsius Petri directè explicat, nec existentiam involvít, nisi quamdiú Petrus existit; haec autem [that is, Paul’s idea of Peter] magis constitutionem corporis Pauli, quàm Petri naturam indicat … & ideò, durante illâ corporis Pauli constitutione, Mens Pauli, quamvis Petrus non existat, ipsum tamen, ut sibi praesentem contemplabitur.}\]

22 E2p16c2 (G II 104.12-16). Transl.: ‘It follows, second, that the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies. I have explained this by many examples in the Appendix of Part I’ (Curley, p. 463; misprint corrected).

23 For a reconstruction of this argument, see Gueroult, Spinoza II, pp. 196-197.

24 See his use of the phrase \textit{idea humanam mentem constituens} in E2p12 - p13.

25 E2p13 (with its corollary and scholium).

26 E2p17s (G II, 105.34-106.6; editorial insertion omitted). Transl.: ‘For the former directly explains the essence of Peter’s body, and does not involve existence, except
It is precisely this affection of the body (in this case Paul’s) representing an external body (Peter’s) as present, which Spinoza – albeit with some reluctance – calls ‘image’; and the act or instance of representing in this manner is henceforth referred to as imaginatio.

In the scholium to the next proposition, the newly gained notion of imagination serves to account for the mental function of memory:

\[\text{Est enim nihil aliud, quàm quaedam concatenatio idearum, naturam rerum, quae extra Corpus humanum sunt, involventium, quae in Mente fit secundum ordinem, & concatenationem affectionum Corporis humani.}\]

Elsewhere, Spinoza repeatedly treats imagination and memory as equivalents. In order to remember something, we must be able to imagine it, that is to think of it as present to us even if it does not exist any longer. The link we thus establish between ideas is not determined by the things themselves, but reflects the way our body has been affected by earlier experience. A soldier who sees traces of horses will be reminded of riding, a peasant of ploughing. Imagination and memory are firmly rooted in physical experience, and they can express affects of the body as actual only as long as the body exists. They will come to an end when the body ceases to be:

\[\text{Mens nihil imaginari potest, neque rerum praeteritarum recordari, nisi durante Corpore.}\]

so long as Peter exists; but the latter indicates the condition of Paul’s body more than Peter’s nature, and therefore, while that condition of Paul’s body lasts, Paul’s Mind will still regard Peter as present to itself, even though Peter does not exist’ (Curley, p. 465).

27 E2p18s (G II, 106.35-107.4). Transl.: ‘For it is nothing other than a certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human Body – a connection that is in the Mind according to the order and connection of affections of the human Body’ (Curley, p. 465).

28 E3p2s, towards the end (G II, 144.25), E5p34s (G II, 302.1). In E5p39s (G II, 305.32) the conjunction is vel instead of sive, but the context shows that vel here expresses equivalence rather than disjunction. It may be noted in passing that in yoking imagination and memory, Spinoza finds himself in a long tradition (see Wolfson, The philosophy of Spinoza, vol. II, pp. 80-90). The originality resides not in the link as such, but in his view of the imagination as a concatenation of corporeal affections.

29 E2p18s (G II, 107.23-28).

30 E5p21 (G II, 294.26-27). Transl.: ‘The Mind can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the Body endures’ (Curley, p. 607). In the ensuing demonstration, E2p17s and p18s are explicitly appealed to as definitions of the imagination and memory respectively.
processes, it will necessarily perish with the body; hence it has no part to play in Spinoza’s final discussion of the part of the mind that will remain, through participation in knowledge of a non-imaginative kind.\textsuperscript{31}

Knowledge, truth and error

The rest of part 2 is devoted mainly to an elaboration of the mental realm, more particularly the nature of adequate and inadequate knowledge. The opposition between imaginatio and intellectus would seem to invite a simple distinction between imaginary, fictitious, confused, and false ideas of the imagination on the one hand, and real, clear, distinct and true ideas of the understanding on the other. Spinoza, however, rejects such a dichotomy. Imaginations do not of themselves contain anything erroneous:

\textit{Atque hic, ut, quid sit error, indicare incipiam, notetis velim, Mentis imaginationes in se spectatas, nihil erroris continere, sive Mentem ex eo, quid imaginatur, non errare; sed tantum, quatenus consideratur, carere ideâ, quae existentiam illarum rerum, quas sibi praesentes imaginatur, secludat.}\textsuperscript{32}

The scholium concludes by stating that the mind does not err, if it is aware that the things it imagines do not exist. The power of the imagination then would have to be considered an asset rather than a vice, especially if it would be a free faculty. (Note that Spinoza expresses himself hypothetically: he does not present the notion of a free faculty of imagining as his own point of view.)

In fact Spinoza’s treatment of the value of the imagination is remarkably charitable. Commenting on the scholium to proposition 17 of part 2, Martial Gueroult provides an extended exposition of the importance of the imagination as a virtue.\textsuperscript{33} The imagination is a power (and hence a virtue) in itself, since it is an expression of God’s power. Without the imagination, the mind would be deprived of all knowledge of its body and of external things. This knowledge is essential for interacting with the world around us and

\textsuperscript{31} E5p38 (G II, 304.8-10). The second half of part 5 (E5p20s up to and including p40s; G II, 294.23-306.20) deals with the mind without relation to the body, that is: the mind \textit{sub aeternitatis specie}.

\textsuperscript{32} E2p17s (G II, 106. 11-15). Transl.: ‘And here, in order to begin to indicate what error is, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the Mind, considered in themselves contain no error, \textit{or} that the Mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it’ (Curley, p. 465; \textit{or} in italics translates \textit{sive/sea}).

thus forms part of our essential striving to maintain our existence. It allows
us to use words and images and thus enables us to do geometry and science.
The power to imagine is proportional to the degree of complexity of the in-
dividual body: quò Corpus aliquod reliquis aptius est ad plura simul agen-
dum, vel patiendum, eò ejus Mens reliquis aptior est ad plura simul percipi-
endum. The superiority of human minds in general (and, within the human
species, of specific individuals in particular) is determined by a greater
physical complexity and a correspondingly greater power of imagining. One
of the precepts for a rational life, therefore, is to render the body capable of
being affected by more external bodies.

The relation between imagining as an affection of the body and error is
complicated. Spinoza clarifies it with a traditional example in the scholium
to proposition 35 of part 2. If we look at the sun and we imagine that it is
about 200 feet away from us, that imagination is erroneous only if we take
this to be the real distance, without being aware of the cause of this illusion.
For if we learn subsequently that the sun is actually at a distance of more
than 600 times the earth’s diameter, we still continue to see it as closer by:

non enim solem adeò propinquam imaginamur, propterea quòd veram ejus dis-
tantiam ignoramus, sed propterea, quòd affectio nostri corporis essentiam solis
involvit, quatenus ipsum corpus ab eodem afficitur.

The point will be elaborated, with the same example (and reference to the
earlier discussion of it), in the scholium to the first proposition of part 4.
Spinoza there adds an interesting ethical dimension to the argument – ‘ethi-
cal’ in the sense of the project of the Ethica: it shows how human beings
can be freed from the bondage of passive affects by increasing their power
to act. This power of the mind over the passions is defined solely by knowl-
dge. But though knowledge as such does away with error, it does not

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34 E2p13s (G II, 97.8-10). Transl.: ‘in proportion as a Body is more capable than
others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its
Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once’ (Curley, p.
458).
35 E4p38 (G II, 239).
36 Spinoza here relies on Descartes, Principia philosophiae III, § 5 (AT VIII, 82.9),
where the distance is said to equal 600 or 700 times the earth’s diameter.
37 E2p35s (G II, 117.27-30). Transl.: ‘For we imagine the sun so near not because
we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the
essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun’ (Curley, p. 473).
38 See E5p20s (G II, 293.25-28): At Mentis potentia sola cognitione definitur; impot-
entia autem, seu passio a sola cognitionis privatione, hoc est, ab eo, per quod ideae
dicuntur inadequatae, a estimatur ....
cancel the physical phenomenon of the imagination, which follows with necessity from its natural causes. Knowing that the sun is at a certain distance does not change the way we perceive it; recognising that the reflection of the sun in water does not reveal to us its real place does not make the reflection vanish.39 Likewise, all the imaginations the mind is subject to are not at odds with the truth, nor are they dispelled by the appearance of the truth. The ethical perspective here is that imaginations that make us suffer cannot be cured simply by confronting the real state of affairs: they require something that excludes their presence in the mind. This may well be another imagination. Spinoza puts it like this:

... & sic reliquae imaginationes, quibus Mens fallitur, sive eae naturalem Corporis constitutionem, sive, quod ejusdem agendi potentiam augerit, vel minuit indicant, vero non sunt contrariae, nec ejusdem praesentia evanescunt. Fit quidem, cium falsa aliquod malum timemus, ut timor evanescat, audito vero nuntio; sed contrâ etiam fit, cium malum, quod certè venturum est, timemus, ut timor etiam evanescat, audito falso nuntio; atque adeo imaginationes non praesentia veri, quatenus verum, evanescunt; sed quia aliae occurrunt, ipsis fortiores, quae rerum, quas imaginamus, praesentem existentiam secludunt, ut Prop. 17. p. 2. ostendimus.40

Let us return to the exposition of error in part 2. What, then, is error? Spinoza offers his own explanation in proposition 35: Falsitas consistit in cognitionis privatione, quam ideae inadaequatae, sive mutilatae, & confusae involvunt.41 Error is not something positive in ideas, so it must be a form of privation. But privation of knowledge as such does not yet sufficiently define error; ignorance, too, is privation. Error is therefore defined as a specific lack of knowledge, viz. one which has its origins in inadequate or mutilated ideas. In the following propositions the nature of adequate knowl-

39 E4p1s (G II, 211.25-31).  
40 E4p1s (G II, 211.31-212.8). Transl.: ‘And so it is with the other imaginations by which the Mind is deceived, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the Body, or that its power to act is increased or diminished: they are not contrary to the true, and do not disappear on its presence. It happens, of course, when we wrongly fear some evil, that the fear disappears on our hearing news of the truth. But on the other hand, it also happens, when we fear an evil that is certain to come, that the fear vanishes on our hearing false news. So imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine; as we showed in IIP17’ (Curley, p. 548).  
41 E2p35 (G II, 116.28-29). Transl.: ‘Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve’ (Curley, p. 472).
edge is explored: *Illa, quae omnibus communia, quaeque aequè in parte, ac in toto sunt, non possunt concepi, nisi adaequatè.* It does not constitute the particular essence of any individual thing (proposition 37), and its idea will be adequate in God insofar as he constitutes the human mind or has ideas that are in the human mind, involving both the body itself and the nature of external bodies (demonstration of proposition 38). Thus, the adequacy of ideas is found to be related to the *notiones communes*, the common notions that are the foundations of our reasoning (second scholium to proposition 40).

**The levels of knowledge**

In the two scholia to proposition 40 of the second part, Spinoza adumbrates a theory of general notions. Sense experience and the imagination produce a variety of universal notions (set forth in the first scholium) by abstracting them from singular things. Reason, however, does not start from singular things but from common notions, which are adequate ideas of the properties of things. In addition, there is another type of adequate cognition which does not start from general notions at all. Instead, it proceeds from the adequate idea of the formal essence of one of God’s attributes to adequate knowledge of the essence of things. Thus, Spinoza arrives at a threefold division of the kinds of knowledge: (1) opinion or imagination, (2) reason, and (3) intuitive science:


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42 E2p38 (G II, 118.20-21). Transl.: ‘Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately’ (Curley, p. 474).

43 E2p40s2 (G II, 122.2-16). Transl.: ‘From what has been said above, it is clear that
In this scholium, then, *imaginatio* is ranked among the ‘three kinds of knowledge’ as Spinoza usually calls them (here also designated as the ‘modes of contemplating things’). It may be noted in passing that the three-fold division Spinoza offers confusingly cuts across the tripartite enumeration in this passage: items I and II together comprise the first kind, whereas item III makes up the second kind. The third kind has nothing to do with the enumeration (which deals with the origin of universal notions): it is added afterwards. In the following four propositions and their attachments, Spinoza is mainly concerned with the differences between the first and second kinds. The third kind receives preliminary treatment in propositions 45-47, but rises to prominence only in the fifth part, from proposition 25 onward, culminating in the pinnacle of Spinoza’s system: *amor Dei intellectualis*. Imagination belongs to the first and lowest level, which is denoted as ‘opinion or imagination’. The conjunction used here is *vel*, which Spinoza usually reserves for disjunctive pairs, in which the terms are not equivalent or interchangeable (as they are when he joins them with the conjunction *sive*). Opinion, then, would seem to fit the description given under the first heading (‘from singular things which have been represented through the senses’), imagination that under the second heading (‘from signs, e.g., from the fact that … we recollect things’), where the verb *imaginari* is used and a reference is given to the exposition of memory in terms of the imagination in the scholium to proposition 18. Still it remains unclear whether Spinoza intended to introduce a systematic distinction between *opinio* and *imaginatio*.

we perceive many things and form universal notions: I. from singular things which have been represented through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience; II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination. III. Finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, and P40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge. In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third one, which we shall call intuitive knowledge’ (Curley, pp. 477-478; editorial insertion omitted).

tio here. If he did, it is a distinction that is not turned to advantage in the rest of the Ethica.

The division into the three kinds of cognition underpins Spinoza’s doctrine of error: Cognitio primi generis unica est falsitatis causa, secundi autem, & tertii est necessariò vera.\(^{45}\) This is not to say that the first kind is useless; quite the contrary: as we have already seen, the power of a body to act is proportional to its complexity, and for human beings this means that reason’s capacity of knowledge and action increases in proportion to the power of imagination. Yet to the extent that ideas are inadequate, they must necessarily belong to the first kind of cognition. Spinoza speaks of experimentia vaga, ‘random experience’, because it results from fortuitous encounters with external things (ex rerum fortuito occurrunt).\(^{46}\) This need not be vague knowledge: it can even be quite precise.\(^{47}\) The first kind of knowledge presents things to us as contingent;\(^{48}\) reason on the other hand will think of them as they are in themselves, that is, as necessary, not contingent (proposition 44 and its demonstration). This is because the imagination starts from singular things,\(^{49}\) and reason from common notions. Moreover, the imagination will perceive things as situated in time, whereas reason, which explains them by means of common notions, will think of them without any relation to time. Spinoza qualifies this way of conceiving as sub quàdam aeternitatis specie (under some aspect of eternity).\(^{50}\) In the long concluding scholium of part 2 (appended to proposition 49), Spinoza returns once more to the problematic character of images. He notes that many people fail to distinguish sufficiently between ideas, images and words. Since they confuse ideas with images, they think that ideas of things which

\(^{45}\) E2p41 (G II, 122.31-32). Transl.: ‘Knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and of the third kind is necessarily true’ (transl. Curley, p. 478).

\(^{46}\) See E2p29s (G II, 114.19-23).


\(^{48}\) E2p44c1 (G II, 125.13-14): Hinc sequitur, à solâ imaginacione pendère, quòd res tam respectu praeteriti, quàm futuri, ut contingentes contemptemur.

\(^{49}\) Cf. TIE § 82 (G II, 31.11-12): imaginatio enim tantum à singularibus affectur.

\(^{50}\) E2p44c2 and dem. (G II, 126.20-33). This is the only occurrence of this tag in the Ethica with the indefinite pronoun. Later on (from E5p22 onward), Spinoza simply speaks of sub specie aeternitatis or sub aeternitatis specie. The formula with quàdam does occur in the TIE (§ 108; G II, 39.16-17) and in the TTP (VI, § 8; A, 250.29). The differences – if any – between the two forms need not concern us here. For perceptive discussions, see: Jaquet, *Sub specie aeternitatis*, pp. 118-123; Moreau, *L’Expérience*, part 3: ‘Aeternitas’, pp. 487-549; and Gueroult, *Spinoza I*, pp. 408-410, with appendix N° 17 (pp. 609-615).
cannot represent to us in the form of images or mute pictures are not genuine ideas, but only fictions that we conjure up out of our own free will. In an earlier scholium, Spinoza had already given a telling example of the prejudicial effect of this preoccupation with pictures: since human beings find it unbearable that they cannot picture God in the way they imagine the external bodies to which they are continuously exposed, they will link the noun ‘God’ to images of things they commonly see, thus creating an anthropomorphic misrepresentation of God. This prevents them from arriving at an adequate knowledge of the eternal, infinite essence of God, which, however, as Spinoza boldly asserts, the human mind is capable of (proposition 47), and which forms the basis of the highest kind of knowledge.

Imagery and affects

The notion of imagination as developed in Spinoza’s philosophy is firmly rooted in the constitution of the body: Prout cogitationes, rerumque ideae ordinantur, & concatenantur in Mente, ita corporis affectiones, seu rerum imagines ad amussim ordinantur, & concatenantur in Corpore. It is a necessary prerequisite for any cognitive process, but at the same time the source of inadequate ideas. All these elements turn out to be crucial for Spinoza’s elaborate treatment of the dynamics of human affective life in parts 3 and 4. Imaginari and its cognates imaginatio and imago (and also, occasionally, imaginarius) have more than 300 occurrences (232 in part 3, 74 in part 4).

Spinoza acknowledges three primary affects, viz. joy, sadness and desire; all the others are derived from these elementary ones:

Videmus itaque Mentem magnas posse pati mutationes, & jam ad majorem, jam autem ad minorem perfectionem transire, quae quidem passiones nobis explicat affectus Laetitiae & Tristitiae. Per Laetitiam itaque in sequentibus intelligam passionem, quâ Mens ad majorem perfectionem transit. Per Tristitiam autem passionem, quâ ipsa ad minorem transit perfectionem … Quid deinde Cupiditas sit, in Scholio Propositionis 9. hujus Partis explicui, & praeter hos

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51 E2p49s (G II, 131.30-132.12).
52 E2p47s (G II, 128.19-23).
53 E5p1 (G II, 281.10-12). Transl.: ‘In just the same way as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the Mind, so the affections of the body, or images of things are ordered and connected in the body’ (Curely, p. 597). Spinoza offers an interesting personal treatment of the corporeal and mental aspects of the imagination, by means of examples, in a moving letter to Pieter Balling of 20 July 1664 (Ep. 17; G IV, 76-78).
The essence of a thing is its striving to persevere in its being: *Conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam.* This goes for all modes of being. In human beings, the *conatus* appears primarily as * cupiditas*, desire, one of the three basic affects: *Cupiditas est ipsa hominis essentia (per I. Affect. Defi.), hoc est (per Prop. 7. p. 3.), conatus, quo homo in suo esse perseverare conatur.* This essential striving works upon the imagination, thus creating the important polymorphous affects of love and hate. The mind will try to imagine things which increase the body’s power to act, and it will try to avoid imagining things which diminish that power. Love and hate are then defined respectively as joy (the transition to a greater perfection) and sadness (the transition to a lesser perfection) with the accompanying idea of an external cause. In the long catalogue of the affects, many reveal themselves to be varieties of love and hate.

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54 E3p11s (G II, 148.31-149.4; 149.9-12). Transl.: ‘We see, then, that the Mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, indeed, explain to us the affects of Joy and Sadness. By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection. And by Sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection … Next, I have explained in P9S what Desire is, and apart from these three I do not acknowledge any other primary affect. For I shall show in what follows that the rest arise from these three’ (Curley, pp. 500-501). Cf. E3ad4e (192.6-8): *Tres igitur (ut in Schol. Prop. 11. hujus mo- nui) tantùm affectûs primitivos, seu primarios agnosco; nempe Laetitiae, Tristitiae & Cupiditatis.*

55 E3p7 (G II, 146.20-21). Transl.: ‘The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing’ (Curley, p. 499).

56 E4p18dem (G II, 221.30-222.1). Transl.: ‘Desire is the very essence of man (by Def. Aff. I), i.e. (by IIIP7), a striving by which a man strives to persevere in his being’ (Curley, p. 555). Other shapes of the *conatus* in human beings include *voluntas* and *appetitus* (see E3p9s; G II, 147.27-148.8).

57 E3p12 (G II, 150.2-3): *Mens, quantum potest, ea imaginari conatur, quae Corporis agendi potentiam augent, vel juvunt.*


59 E3p13s (G II, 151.5-11): *Ex his clarè intelligimus, quid Amor, quidque Odium sit. Nempe Amor nihil aliud est, quam laetitia, concomitante ideâ causae externae, & Odium nihil aliud, quam Tristitia, concomitante ideâ causae externae.* Videmus deinde, quòd ille, qui amat, necessariò conatur rem, quam amat, praesentem habere, & conservare; et contrà, qui odio, rem, quam odio habet, amovere, & de-
Part 3 of the *Ethica* offers an elaborate account of the dynamics of human affective life from a rigorously naturalistic point of view: human beings do not form an *imperium in imperio* (an independent realm within the realm of nature), but are ineluctably subjected to the general order of nature. Spinoza therefore treats the affects scientifically, which in the paradigm of the period means ‘geometrically’, that is, as though it were a matter of lines, planes and bodies.\(^6^1\) This allows him to develop a systematic deduction of the affects that determine human behaviour, on the basis of his account of adequate and inadequate ideas in part 2. Affects are states of the body and the mind, more accurately those ‘affectations of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affectations.’\(^6^2\) They are either active or passive. The passive affects, or passions, which constitute the vast majority of the emotions and occupy the largest part of this section of the *Ethica*, arise from inadequate ideas. The active affects, issuing from adequate ideas, that is from the understanding, appear under the generic heading of *Fortitudo*, ‘strength’. The various forms of this mental strength are dealt with in the propositions 48 and 49. The deduction of the affects (active and passive) in part 3 is systematic – though not exhaustive – in that it shows how they proceed from the general laws of nature and the specific constitution of the human mind. Spinoza’s account is not empirical: he does not start from the affects that are familiar to us from experience. The link with the emotions as we know them is given in the second instance, viz. in the scholia. The propositions of part 3 constitute a deduction of particular affects, and in the accompanying scholia Spinoza then labels these affects with familiar names. As a result, however, several affects appear under a sobriquet that is at odds with common usage. In order to arrive at a coherent catalogue of the affects, Spinoza summarises the definitions (48 in all) once more at the end of this part.

Spinoza’s treatment of *admiratio* (wonder) exemplifies both his unconventional style of labelling and the importance of the unity of mind and body. His approach is unusual in that he denies *admiratio* to be an affect at all. Wonder arises when we are confronted with something new, something

\(^{60}\) See E3ad10, 19, 20, 21, 22e, 23, 24, 28e, 46-48, where Spinoza explicitly deals with affects that he considers as varieties of love and hate. His inventory is far from exhaustive, as Spinoza himself emphasises (see E3p59s, G II, 189.7-15; cf. E3p52, 180.27-30; E3ad48e, 203.16-20).

\(^{61}\) E3praef (G II, 137-138).

\(^{62}\) E3d3 (G II, 139.13-16): *Per Affectum intelligo Corporis affectiones, quibus ipsius Corporis agendi potentia augetur, vel minuitur, juvatur, vel coërcetur, & simul ha-rum affectionum ideas.*
we cannot connect with things we are familiar with. Affects involve a sequence of ideas which follow the concatenation of images in the body, and wonder interrupts that chain. *Admiratio* is an imagination, but a sterile one, that fails to develop into an affect: *Admiratio est rei alicujus imaginatio, in qua Mens defixa propter a manet, quia haec singularis imaginatio nullam cum reliquis habet connexionem*.63 Since wonder remains a mental state, without effects on the body, Spinoza does not consider it an affect proper.

The dynamics of the affects

The emphasis on inadequate ideas in the formation of the passions accounts for the pivotal role played by *imaginatio* in the theory of affective life. Affects always operate through the medium of the imagination; indeed the notions are so closely related that Spinoza incidentally calls an affect an imagination, and the other way around.64 One’s power to act is determined by the imagination: *Cum Mens se ipsam, suamque agendi potentiam contemplatur, laetatur, & eò magis, quò se, suamque agendi potentiam distinctiùs imaginatur*.65 This means also that if people imagine they are incapable of doing something, this imagination will so dispose them that they really cannot do it.66 Since the imagination is an active process that flows necessarily from nature’s laws and cannot simply be dispelled by insight into the true state of affairs, it is pointless to ignore or deny it. The only way to control an imagination is by directing it by means of other, stronger imaginations.67 Hence the *conatus* will operate in such a way that the mind ‘strives

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63 E3ad4 (G II, 191.21-24). Transl.: ‘Wonder is an imagination of a thing in which the Mind remains fixed because this singular imagination has no connection with the others’ (Curley, p. 532). See also the explicatio, and E3p52 with its scholium.
64 E3p26s (G II, 159.23-26): *His videmus, facilè contingere, ut homo de se, deque re amatù plus justo, & contrà de re, quam odio, minus justo sentiat, quae quidem imaginatio, quando ipsum hominem respicit, qui de se plus justo sentit, Superbia vocatur*. E4p9dem (216.12-13): *Est igitur affectus (per gen. Aff. Defin.) imaginatio, quatenus corporis constitutionem indicat*. Cf. also E5p34dem, 301.21-23. The identification of *imaginatio* and *affectus* is facilitated by the notion of *imaginiones corporis*: cf. E3p27dem (G II, 160.9-13) and p32s (165.23-26).
65 E3p53 (G II, 181.19-21). Transl.: ‘When the Mind considers itself and its power of acting, it rejoices, and does so the more, the more distinctly it imagines itself and its power of acting’ (Curley, p. 524).
66 E3ad28e (G II, 198.4-6): *Nam quicquid homo imaginatur se non posse, id necessariù imaginatur, & hoc imaginatione ita disponitur, ut id agere reverà non possit, quod se non posse imaginatur.*
67 See the end of E4p1s (G II, 212.6-8), quoted above (at note 40); and E4p7 (G II, 214.22-23): *Affectus nec coerceri, nec tolli potest, nisi per affectum contrarium, & fortiorum affectu coercendo.*
to imagine those things which posit its power of acting. Spinoza therefore concentrates on the dynamics of the affects, on the interaction between them, on their relative strengths. Thus in part 4 (which deals with the ‘powers of the affects’), the causes that determine the intensity of the affects are enumerated and analysed in a series of closely connected propositions, 5 to 18, with their attachments. Elements that Spinoza identifies as relevant are presence (as against absence), proximity in time, necessity and possibility (as against contingency). An affect will be stronger if we imagine its cause to be present than if we imagine it to be absent; the image of a past or future thing is typically weaker than that of a present thing; and an affect will be more intense if we imagine its object to be necessary rather than possible, and again more intense if we imagine its object to be possible rather than contingent. Moreover, though knowledge as such (that is, as revealing the truth) does not do away with an affect, knowledge of good and evil is also an affect of joy or sadness, and as such it functions in the dynamics of the affects.

An extended series of propositions in part 5, viz. 5 to 16, elaborates the technique of directing the affects towards the love of God: *Mens efficere potest, ut omnes Corporis affectiones, seu rerum imaginæ ad Dei ideam referantur.* In keeping with the strong social perspective developed in part 4, this love of God includes other people – the more people, the better. This love of the universe and of our fellow human beings is the most constant of all the affects, and the ultimate remedy for bad ones. Here Spinoza brings into play the dynamics of the affects to establish a therapy. Good affects are to be strengthened by combining them, bad affects are to be expelled by good ones. This can be achieved only through training, and here again the imagination has an important part to play. Mental strength can subdue fear, for example, by frequently imagining how the dangers of life can be overcome by presence of mind.

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68 E3p54 (G II, 182.5-6): *Mens ea tantum imaginari conatur, quae ipsius agendi potentiam ponunt.*
70 E5p14 (G II, 290.9-10). Transl.: ‘The Mind can bring it about that all the Body’s affections, or images of things, are related to the idea of God’ (Curley, p. 603).
71 E5p20 (G II, 292.15-17): *Hic erga Deum Amor, neque Invidiae, neque Zelotypiae affectu inquinari potest; sed eò magis fovetur, quò plures homines eodem Amoris vinculo cum Deo junctos imaginæm.* For the social perspective of Spinoza’s doctrine, see E4p35 - p37s2; E4app9-12; and cf. E3p29 (with its scholium).
72 E5p20 and its scholium (G II, 292-294). A summary of the remedies, based on the internal dynamics of the affects, is given in the scholium (293.4-17).
73 E5p10s (G II, 287.20-289.13); on overcoming fear: 288.16-19.
the suffering caused by the passions involves several techniques. One is to redirect certain affects. Thus hate (or love) towards someone can be balanced by attaching the sadness (or joy) it involves to the idea of another cause. And if we can imagine the cause of an affect to be free rather than necessary, the affect will be correspondingly stronger. This is of paramount importance since God or Nature is the only truly free cause.

In the first half of part 5, Spinoza systematically discusses the remedies, that is, all that the mind can do against the negative aspects of the affects. That we are able to do anything at all against the affects is an asset we owe to the imagination, more particularly to the ability to combine imagination and reason. If we understand things clearly and distinctly, we can more easily connect their images to images of other things. This allows us to understand and love God more, and to relate more images to God. Thus, even though in the final reckoning Spinoza gives an additional account of the powers of the mind without reference to the body, that is without images, the imagination is part and parcel of the way to salvation set forth in the *Ethica.*

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74 Ep34 (G II, 176.25-28).
75 Ep49 (G II, 177.4-6); Ep11 (217.23-25).
76 Ep17c2: *Deus ... sola est causa libera* (G II, 61.21-25).
77 Propositions 1-20; a summary is given in Ep20s (G II, 293.4-294.17). In this half of part 5, which deals with the rational way to freedom, there are twenty-six occurrences of *imaginari, imaginatio, imago,* whereas the second half (p21 to the end), about the mind *sub aeternitatis specie,* has only nine occurrences, specifying the limits, i.e., what the imagination cannot do.
78 Ep12 (G II, 289.24-25).
79 Ep14 and following (G II, 290 sqq.).