

“A Thing Like Us”: Human Minds and Deceitful Behaviour in Spinoza

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Spinoza provides a theory, consistent with his panpsychism, to account for our ability to recognize human mentality in others. It first focuses on cases that imply a failure of recognition—such as when Spinoza claims that sceptics must be regarded as “lacking a mind” (TIE.48), or when he mentions suicide victims, children, fools, and madmen as individuals whose minds are impenetrable (E2p49s)—and contends that Spinoza uses “mindlessness” to capture kinds of mentality with which we cannot identify. Then, it demonstrates that our capacity to recognize similar mentality in others originates in the mechanism named “imitation of the affects” (E3p27s1), by which we relate mental states familiar to us to behaviours that look sufficiently similar to ours. Finally, it argues that the dependence of this mechanism—by which we empathize with “things like us” (E3p27)—on observable behavioural expressions can explain Spinoza’s uncompromising position against deceitful behaviour.

Sub-fields

History of philosophy; philosophy of mind; philosophical anthropology

Keywords

Spinoza; panpsychism; human nature; empathy; deceitfulness

1. Introduction

Spinoza’s claim that all individuals “though in different degrees, are (...) animate”, along with the relevant demonstration, is based on “completely general” premises.¹ It follows from

¹ E2p13s/C.I 458/G.II 96. English quotations of Spinoza’s texts are from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1985-2016), abbreviated as C, followed by volume

Spinoza's thought-extension parallelism, according to which "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things", and from the identification that he makes between ideas of things and minds of things.² On these grounds, he concludes, first, that the human mind is the idea of the human body and, second, that "For each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as It is of the idea of the human body".³ These theses commit Spinoza to a panpsychist account of nature: for each existing body there is a corresponding mind, capable of mirroring in thought everything that passes into that body, according to the same order and connection of causes and effects.

However, there are passages in Spinoza's corpus that sit uneasily within this framework. For instance, in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza suggests treating humans who embrace radical scepticism as "automata, completely lacking a mind".⁴ Further, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he equates automata and beasts, asserting that, when parrots imitate human language, they speak as automata—i.e., "without a mind".⁵ To make sense of these claims—and reconcile Spinoza's panpsychism with his occasional equations between mindlessness, automata and beasts—I argue that we must focus on Spinoza's depiction of radical sceptics as systematic liars. Hence, the guiding questions that I will address in this paper are the following: on what basis, for Spinoza, do sceptics of this sort, who "speak contrary to their own consciousness", deserve the same treatment that we would give to inanimate objects?⁶ And, more importantly, what does it mean to treat someone or

number. I retain Curley's use of the italics to indicate when "or" translates the Latin *sive* or *seu*, which usually denote an equivalence rather than an alternative. When referring to God, I use the neutral pronoun "It" (capitalized). References to Latin versions of Spinoza's works are to *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Carl Winter, 1925), abbreviated as G, followed by volume number. Other abbreviations used are: E=*Ethics* (followed by part number and one or more of these: Ad=definition of an affect; App=Appendix; c=corollary; d=definition [after the part number] or demonstration [after a proposition number]; exp=explanation; p=proposition; post=postulate; Pref=Preface; s=scholium); Ep=*Letter* (followed by letter number); PPC=*Descartes's "Principles of Philosophy"* (followed by part number and abbreviations also used for the *Ethics*); TIE=*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (followed by section number, according to the division used by Curley); TTP=*Theological-Political Treatise* (followed by chapter and section numbers, according to the division used by Curley).

² E2p7/C.I 451/G.II 89; E2p11-12/C.I 456-57/G.II 94-95.

³ E2p13/C.I 457/G.II 96; E2p13s/C.I 458/G.II 96.

⁴ TIE.48/C.I 22/G.II 18.

⁵ TTP.XX.12/C.II 346/G.III 241; TTP.XIII.17/C.II 261/G.III 170.

⁶ TIE.47/C.I 22/G.II 18.

something as an inanimate object—and to regard it as an “automata, completely lacking a mind”—in a world where, according to Spinoza himself, all things “are nevertheless animate” and endowed with a mind? By providing answers to these questions, I will shed light on a complicated issue tied to Spinoza’s conception of human nature, concerning how to distinguish human mentality and behaviour from non-human mentality and behaviour in Spinoza’s panpsychist universe, and in the absence of any definition of “humans”.

Indeed, universal mindedness having been established on metaphysical grounds, the so-called problem of other minds—that is, the question of how we can recognize the presence of mental capacities in other beings—turns, in Spinoza, into the problem of how to recognize specifically human thoughts and feelings in others, based on the recognition of specifically human behaviour. I will demonstrate that Spinoza’s solution to this problem is to deploy what can be regarded as an original kind of simulation theory of mindreading: an account of human empathy, according to which we ascribe our own thoughts and feelings to others, based on our capacity to imitate their observable behaviour. What is even more interesting, is that this theory of empathic behaviour explains, in Spinoza, not only how humans recognize one another, but also what humans *are*. For Spinoza, attribution of humanity is identical with successful mindreading, and humans themselves are identified as individuals who successfully engage in mutual empathic behaviour.

In order to prove these points, the paper will proceed as follows. I will begin, in section 2, by summarizing the main features of Spinoza’s panpsychist account of nature, and will outline the challenges that this theory presents as regards the possibility of identifying human behaviour with the presence of specific mental capacities. I will then focus on some cases in which Spinoza denies the presence of behavioural features that, according to him, allow for the recognition of human mentality—cases in which he, despite his panpsychism, seems to deny mentality to individuals outright. I will consider Spinoza’s characterization of radical sceptics as mindless automata (section 3), and passages where he equates beasts to automata and opposes them to humans (section 4). I will compare these cases to other instances, found in the *Ethics*, where Spinoza seems to regard some human beings as individuals whose behaviour and mentality are incomprehensible and impenetrable. In section 5, I will explain Spinoza’s theory of the “imitation of the affects”, by which we “judge things to be like us” and ascribe to them affects identical to those that we feel in ourselves.⁷ In section 6, I will analyse Spinoza’s definition of “humanity” as an affect shared by people capable of empathizing with each other,

⁷ E3p22s/C.I 507/G.II 157.

and will consider the reasons that lead human beings to misjudge each other's affective states and thoughts. In section 7, I will suggest how the mechanism of the imitation of affects characterizes specifically human behaviour and mentality, and conclude, in section 8, with a remark on the challenges and risks to which this mechanism is exposed when faced with systematic deceitful behaviour.

2. Spinoza's Panpsychism

Spinoza contends that for each corporeal thing existing in nature there is a corresponding idea, existing as a modification of God's attribute of thought.⁸ This idea, Spinoza argues, acts as the "mind" of the body of which it is the idea: everything that happens in the body must be somehow "perceived" by the corresponding idea, or mind.⁹ These considerations, Spinoza holds, are "completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate".¹⁰

Spinoza's panpsychism has raised eyebrows among scholars. One of the most straightforward and apparently decisive motives to challenge such an all-encompassing account of mindedness is that, intuitively, we would expect the presence of mentality (and, in particular, conscious mentality) to be reflected in specific kinds of behaviour, characterizing a limited set of individuals (namely, humans and possibly a few other species of animals).¹¹ As Margaret Wilson put it, "Having a mind is associated with thinking and being conscious" and

⁸ E2p3/C.I 449/G.II 87.

⁹ E2p12/C.I 456-57/G.II 95.

¹⁰ E2p13s/C.I 458/G.II 96. For a more detailed account of Spinoza's theory of universal animation, see Oberto Marrama, "Animation", in *The Cambridge Spinoza Lexicon*, ed. Karolina Hübner and Justin Steinberg (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 30-32.

¹¹ There is a rich scholarly debate on whether Spinoza's panpsychism entails the ubiquitous presence of consciousness, an outcome famously described as "absurdly excessive" by Jonathan Bennett in *A Study of Spinoza's "Ethics"* (Hackett, 1984), 188. For a survey see Oberto Marrama, "Consciousness, ideas of ideas and animation in Spinoza's Ethics", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2017): 506-25, where I also argue that "Spinoza's theory does not allow for any distinction between human and non-human minds via their consciousness, as it does not distinguish between conscious and unconscious ideas or minds at all" (520). Along the same lines, see Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline", in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith (Springer, 2011), 161-62.

“mentality is recognizable from behavior of a certain sort, and the absence of mentality from ‘behavior’ of other sorts”.¹²

Spinoza, however, seems to deny the assumption upon which objections of this sort are based: namely, that we can distinguish different kinds of behaviour on account of the presence or absence of mentality and consciousness. While he argues for a strict, necessary correlation between mental and bodily states, Spinoza rejects at once the existence of free will and the possibility of any mind-body causal interaction. There is nothing that a mind can do to change the train of its thoughts, which follow one another according to immutable laws of nature, let alone to change the course of events that occur between bodies in the physical domain.¹³ Even though “the order of actions and passions of our body is, by nature, at one with the order of actions and passions of the mind”, for Spinoza “The body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest or to anything else”.¹⁴

Based on these premises, it follows that anything we might infer about the expected behaviour of an individual by analysing their states of mind (if this is possible), must correspond to the same predictions that we would draw by limiting our analysis to an in-depth survey of their bodily functions and the way in which they mechanically (i.e., deterministically) interact with the external environment. In Spinoza’s words,

so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of nature, *or* the connection of causes, through the attribute of thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of extension, the

¹² Margaret D. Wilson, “Objects, Ideas and ‘Minds’: Comments on Spinoza’s Theory of Mind”, in *Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 130. For a recent effort to resist reading Spinoza as a panpsychist, see Ursula Renz, *The Explainability of Experience: Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza’s Theory of the Human Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 168-74.

¹³ E2p48d/C.I 483/G.II 129. A reviewer suggested that my claim may conflict with Spinoza’s account of the human capacity to order bodily affections according to the order of the intellect (E5p10/C.I 601/G.II 287). In Oberto Marrama, “‘The Habit of Virtue’: Spinoza on Reason and Memory”, *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 13, no. 2 (2024): 63-84, I show that Spinoza’s explanation is not only compatible with his necessitarianism and mind-body parallelism, but in fact depends on them.

¹⁴ E3p2s/C.I 494/G.II 141.

order of the whole of nature must be explained through the attribute of extension alone.¹⁵

Whether or not I conceive of it as provided with a conscious mind, a body in extension—including human bodies—will always and necessarily act in the same way, solely according to the laws of physics. Hence, from a Spinozistic standpoint, we have no need to distinguish between conscious and non-conscious entities—let alone minded and non-minded—in order to distinguish in nature “behavior of a certain sort (...) from ‘behavior’ of other sorts”, since none of the peculiarities which characterize specific human behaviour—and which we are used to associating with some specific human mental phenomena—are consequences of the presence of consciousness, or, more generally, the presence of mentality.¹⁶

Yet, this answer suggests another way in which Wilson’s objection can be re-elaborated, in order to further challenge Spinoza’s panpsychist views vis-à-vis their ability to capture what we intuitively assume to be the unicity of human life as we experience it and observe it. For although Spinoza’s thought-extension parallelism prevents us from concluding that the mere presence of mentality can determine any specific behaviour in nature, it nevertheless requires us to admit that different kinds of corporeal behaviour must necessarily be mirrored by the parallel existence of different corresponding kinds of thought activity. Thus, if there is a specific kind of bodily behaviour that we can call “human”, it must correspond to the presence of a specific kind of mental life which is also definable as peculiarly “human”. Vice versa, the presence of a kind of mentality which we can define as typically “human” must express itself in a kind of behaviour that we shall also recognize as peculiarly “human”.

Unfortunately, Spinoza does not seem to provide conclusive definitions of human behaviour and mentality.¹⁷ And although he describes cognitive capacities that characterize humans—such as memory, imagination, reason, and consciousness—there are no clear elements in his system that allow us to conclude that these capacities are limited to humans

¹⁵ E2p7s/C.I 452/G.II 90.

¹⁶ See also Margaret D. Wilson, “‘For They Do Not Agree in Nature with Us’: Spinoza on the Lower Animals”, in *Ideas and Mechanism*, 178.

¹⁷ The absence of such definitions prompted numerous studies, including Julien Busse, *Le problème de l'essence de l'homme chez Spinoza* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009); Karolina Hübner, “Spinoza on Being Human and Human Perfection”, in *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, ed. Matthew J. Kisner and Andrew Youpa (Oxford University Press, 2014), 124-42; Alexandre Matheron, “L’anthropologie spinoziste?”, in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l'âge classique* (ENS Éditions, 2011), 15-24.

only. So, we are left wondering what criteria we can rely on to identify humans *as humans*, beyond a survey of their exterior appearances.

However, as I will demonstrate, in lieu of defining human nature, Spinoza provides the description of a sophisticated mechanism by which we, from a subjective point of view, ascribe human mentality to others by recognizing something “similar to us” in nature. And although this description is laid down in Spinoza’s *Ethics* as a theory of empathy, it has a unique role in explaining how we identify others as fellow humans.¹⁸ This clearly emerges when we analyse it against cases in which, conversely, Spinoza denies the presence of observable features that denote recognizable human mentality—instances which demand an investigation since in them, despite his panpsychism, Spinoza denies the presence of mentality altogether, just as Wilson would have it. Understanding what the notion of “mindlessness” stands for in these circumstances, and why, will be key to understanding Spinoza’s idiosyncratic description of humanity not as a species, but as an affect. I will therefore move on to examine these cases.

3. Mindless Automata in the TIE

In the TIE, Spinoza claims that, under certain circumstances, some individuals “must be regarded as automata, completely lacking a mind”.¹⁹ Spinoza’s targets are some supposed sceptics, who are willing to deny that one may know any truth whatsoever:

¹⁸ I refer to “empathy” instead of “sympathy” for two reasons. On the one hand, “sympathy” is never used with reference to fellow feelings by Spinoza. In PPC2p8s he uses “sympathy” to refer to types of occult causation (C.I 274/G.I 197). Otherwise, in E3p15s, “sympathy” and “antipathy” indicate feelings of love or hate for which we have no apparent explanation (C.I 503/G.II 152); a similar use is put forth in Ep.19, to reject the applicability of these psychological categories to God (C.I 359/G.IV 90). On the other hand, “empathy” is the term most used nowadays to designate cognitive abilities that imply mindreading, the capacity to attribute mental states to others. On Spinoza’s “sympathy”, see Karolina Hübner, “Spinoza’s Parallelism Doctrine and Metaphysical Sympathy”, in *Sympathy: A History*, ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford University Press, 2015), 146-70. On mindreading and empathy, see respectively Shen-yi Liao and Tamar Gendler, “Imagination”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (hereafter abbreviated as *SEP*), Summer 2020 Edition, §3.1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/imagination/#Mind>; Karsten Stueber, “Empathy”, in *SEP*, Fall 2019 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/empathy/>.

¹⁹ TIE.48/C.I 22/G.II 18. An earlier version of this section—also hinting at the relevance of Spinoza’s characterization of sceptics in the TIE for understanding his view of deceitfulness—appeared as a blog entry in the *Groningen Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Thought (GCMEMT) Blog*: Oberto Marrama, “If a Robot Lied to Us”, January 12, 2018, <https://www.rug.nl/filosofie/organization/departments/history/gcmemt/blog/if-a-robot-lied-to-us>.

perhaps (...) some sceptic would still doubt both the first truth itself and everything we shall deduce according to the standard of the first truth. If so, then either he will speak contrary to his own consciousness [*contra conscientiam loquetur*], or we shall confess that there are men whose minds also are completely blinded, either from birth, or from prejudices, i.e., because of some external chance. For they are not even aware of themselves [*neque seipsos sentiunt*].²⁰

There is a distinctive way of behaving that characterizes these stubborn sceptics: Spinoza is prepared to conclude that they may lack any form of self-awareness based on a series of observations concerning what they say, or do not say.

If they affirm or doubt something, they do not know that they affirm or doubt. They say that they know nothing, and that they do not even know that they know nothing. And even this they do not say absolutely. For they are afraid to confess that they exist, so long as they know nothing. In the end, they must be speechless, lest by chance they assume something that might smell of truth.²¹

Spinoza considers two possibilities. On the one hand, it can be the case that the sceptics' words simply do not depict the truth: their assertions systematically fail to describe any of their actual beliefs, or anything they take themselves to know, or not to know about themselves and the world. In this scenario, these radical sceptics are still regarded as well-functioning human beings—endowed with a human mind, that is, and conscious access to at least some of their mental states. However, they are committed to lying whenever asked about what they know or seem to know. In Spinoza's words, they "speak against their consciousness".²² On the other

²⁰ TIE.47/C.I 22/G.II 18.

²¹ TIE.47/C.I 22/G.II 18.

²² Note that the Latin expression *contra conscientiam loquetur* can also be translated as "speak against their conscience". The phrase *contra conscientiam* was widely used in medieval moral and theological texts to denote voluntary actions that conflict with what one consciously acknowledges as true (including moral truths) or as the right way to behave. See Ian C. Levy, *With a Pure Conscience: Christian Liberty Before the Reformation* (Fordham University Press, 2025), 28ff. In *Contra Mendacium* V.8, Augustine uses *contra conscientiam* in this sense to characterize specifically the act of lying. See Aurelius Augustinus, *Ad Consentium contra mendacium*, in

hand, Spinoza advances the hypothesis that they might truly lack any awareness of what is going on inside or outside them, their minds being “completely blinded”. At best, they must be incapable of understanding the words that they hear and use when they are asked to declare their views.

However, Spinoza adds that there is evidence suggesting that the supposed sceptics do, in fact, possess a grasp of themselves, their thoughts and desires, and the conventional use of linguistic signs to communicate them. In other situations, he writes, they exhibit familiar human behaviour, strive for the same things that we strive for, cling to certain beliefs, and demonstrate a reasoned use of language directed at fulfilling the needs of their physiological nature:

For as far as the needs of life and society are concerned, necessity forces them to suppose that they exist, and to seek their own advantage, and in taking oaths, to affirm and deny many things.²³

This is the kind of behaviour that we would attribute to, and expect from, any human being under normal circumstances. In such situations, we would not hesitate to regard such individuals as humans and ascribe to them a human mind—a mind capable of the functions, feelings, and thoughts of which our minds are also capable.

We therefore have good reasons to interpret the entire argument as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. When confronted with radical scepticism, we face a dilemma of which we must grasp one horn: namely, accepting that a sceptic of this kind, who refuses to acknowledge “anything that might smell of truth”, can only be a systematic liar who deliberately speaks “contrary to his own consciousness”. The alternative hypothesis—assuming that these sceptics’

Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 41, *Sancti Aureli Augustini*, ed. Joseph Zycha (F. Tempusky, 1900), 480. Spinoza may well be using it in the same fashion in the quoted passage. Still, both translations are acceptable, insofar as they both highlight that the sceptics’ words, if taken seriously, cannot reflect what they genuinely think and feel. See also Syliane Malinowski-Charles, *Affects et conscience chez Spinoza: L’automatisme dans le progrès éthique* (Georg Olms Verlag, 2004), 125.

²³ TIE.48/C.I 22/G.II 18.

minds are so “completely blinded” that they are “not even aware of themselves”—is to be rejected as absurd as it clashes with evidence.²⁴

Yet, for as long as they persist in maintaining their sceptical stance, Spinoza insists, it does not matter how we relate to them, since “there is no speaking of the sciences with them”:

For, if someone proves something to them, they do not know whether the argument is a proof or not. If they deny, grant, or oppose, they do not know that they deny, grant, or oppose. So they must be regarded as automata, completely lacking a mind [*habendi sunt tanquam automata, quae mente omnino carent*].²⁵

Spinoza’s final assertion is striking. It sounds jarring—almost cruel in tone—if taken at face value. Understood as a rhetorical artifice, it feels somewhat misplaced, especially given that we have just demonstrated, by exposing the absurdity of the contrary scenario, that our sceptical interlocutors must be self-conscious—albeit disingenuous—human beings.²⁶ Furthermore, the notion of “mindless automaton” used by Spinoza does not square well with central tenets of his philosophy outlined above. For, in Spinoza’s account, neither does there seem to be anything wrong in portraying humans as “automata”, nor does being an automaton conflict with having a mind. In fact, one of the explicit purposes of the TIE is to conceive of the human mind itself “as acting according to certain laws, like a spiritual automaton”.²⁷ As mentioned, Spinoza’s rejection of free will and his thought-extension parallelism demand that

²⁴ Stephan Schmid identifies the kind of scepticism criticized (and somehow caricatured) by Spinoza with Pyrrhonism. See Stephan Schmid, “Spinoza Against the Sceptics”, in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 277-81.

²⁵ TIE.48/C.I 22/G.II 18.

²⁶ Although he agrees that Spinoza’s characterization of the sceptics as mindless automata is rhetorical, Christopher Noble argues for a more literal interpretation of their psychological “blindness”, attributing it to a complete lack of adequate self-knowledge and a genuine incapacity to grasp any true idea. See Christopher Noble, “Self-Moving Machines and the Soul: Leibniz contra Spinoza on the Spiritual Automaton”, *The Leibniz Review* 27 (2017): 70-71. This reading contrasts with Spinoza’s portrayal of the sceptics’ duplicitous behaviour—as discussed above—and more broadly with his aim to demonstrate that his “method of seeking the truth” (TIE.29/C.I 16/G.II 13), grounded in the “standard of a given true idea” (TIE.38/C.I 19/G.II 16), is immune to sceptical doubt. Since, for Spinoza, certainty requires “no other sign (...) than having a true idea”, and indeed “we have a true idea”, we are equipped with all the “inborn tools” necessary to recognize a true idea and distinguish it from “false, fictitious, and doubtful” ones (TIE.32-50/C.I 17-23/G.II 14-19).

²⁷ TIE.85/C.I 37/G.II 32.

everything that concerns bodies and physical objects be conceived in mechanistic terms, through the laws of physics alone, and be mirrored by some sort of mental activity, which in turn to be conceived deterministically.²⁸ Hence, there is no complex body existing in nature that cannot be conceived of as an automaton, and there is no automaton (or any complex body) that can reasonably be conceived of as “completely blind” or “lacking a mind”.²⁹ Within the philosophical framework drawn by Spinoza, the invitation to consider someone (or even something) as a mindless automaton sounds like an oxymoron, rather than a metaphor. So, what does it mean, in this context, to regard someone as such?

To be sure, Spinoza’s claim is also intended to rhetorically stress the stubbornness of these sceptics: their obstinacy in denying “anything that might smell of truth” prevents any engagement in meaningful discussions with them. Even so, Spinoza’s use of the figure of “mindless automata” achieves this intended effect by suggesting one important thing: if we were to judge by the sceptics’ words alone, we would ultimately have no available criteria to assess whether we are interacting with human individuals or with some sort of complex device or organism that only simulates the outward behaviour and linguistic expressions of a human being, but does not share any of our thoughts and feelings.³⁰ We can infer nothing about the inner mental states of Spinoza’s sceptics based on what they say, for their words do not match any mental representation. For all we know, if they had a mental life at all, and if they were aware of it, it could nevertheless be of a totally different kind from ours—say, a totally different “subjective character of experience”, as incomprehensible and impenetrable to us as it may be that of an alien or a bat.³¹

Thus, Spinoza’s ungraceful—if rhetorical—depiction of radical sceptics as mindless automata underscores that, beyond their human appearances, their observable behaviour—their lies, in particular—gives us no grounds to infer the presence in them of any thought familiar to

²⁸ Even though Spinoza’s parallelism thesis and his rejection of free will are more explicitly formulated and fully developed in the *Ethics*, both claims inform the TIE’s arguments. See Alexandre Matheron, “Pourquoi le *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* est-il resté inachevé?”, in *Études*, 541-51.

²⁹ As Frederick Ablondi and Steve Barbone note, “Spinoza’s monistic naturalism precludes a division of the world into minds and bodies, or persons and machines”. “Individual Identity in Descartes and Spinoza”, in *Studia Spinozana*, vol. 10, *Spinoza and Descartes*, ed. Jean-Marie Beysade, Wim Klever, and Margaret D. Wilson (Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), 77.

³⁰ Put in different terms, Spinoza’s sceptics would not pass an “imitation game”, otherwise known as “Turing test”. See Alan M. Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”, *Mind* 59, no. 236 (1950): 433-60.

³¹ Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-50.

us. And indeed, it makes no difference whether an individual is minded or not, when none of our thoughts are shared with them. This reading is supported by further examples drawn from other texts by Spinoza, which I will turn to analyse in the next section.

4. Beasts and Other Incomprehensible Minds

Spinoza also uses the image of the automaton to point to an apparent absence of mentality in his TTP. In this text, not only does he associate automata with lack of mindedness, but he also equates them with beasts. In TTP.XIII.17, Spinoza contends that those who assert belief in things they can neither see nor understand, and repeat sentences that they have been taught without being able to grasp their meaning, behave no differently from “a parrot or an automaton”, which utters words with no real knowledge of what it says. In Spinoza’s terms, they speak “without a mind and without sense [*sine mente, et sensu loquuntur*]”.³² In this respect, their depiction is on a par with the one that Spinoza gives of radical sceptics in the TIE: although their behavioural expressions (verbal expressions, in these cases) may seem familiar to us, it is impossible for us to relate them to any kind of thought that they may have.

Spinoza mentions automata alongside beasts again, in TTP.XX.12. He writes:

The end of the republic (...) is not to change men from being rational into beasts or automata, but to enable their minds and bodies to perform their functions safely, to enable them to use their reason freely, and not to clash with one another in hatred, anger or deception, or deal inequitably with one another.³³

Here the emphasis is not directly put on the absence of thought that would characterize beasts or automata, but on the lack of humanity that tyranny brings about. The aim of the state, Spinoza contends, is to “enable humans to use their reason freely”. And to act according to one’s own reason is, for Spinoza, nothing else but to act according to the laws of one’s own nature, in order to seek one’s own advantage and self-preservation.³⁴ Hence, Spinoza evokes

³² TTP.XIII.17/C.II 261/G.III 170 (translation modified).

³³ TTP.XX.12/C.II 346/G.III 241 (translation modified).

³⁴ E4p18s/C.I 555/G.II 222; E4p24d/C.I 558/G.II 226. A separate analysis would be required to expound Spinoza’s account of human reason. For a book-length study, see Michael LeBuffe, *Spinoza on Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2017); for a recent article, see Marrama, “Spinoza on Reason and Memory”. Simply understood as expressing the capacity to produce effects that follow from one’s own nature, reason does not appear to denote a superior cognitive faculty to which humans have privileged access, nor does its presence seem to define human

beasts and automata to stress the violence and absurdity of a political system that would compel humans to act against their own nature and needs, expecting them to change into something they are not, as it were: something that does not share human thoughts, feelings, and desires.³⁵

Excerpts like those I quoted from the TTP, where Spinoza equates automata and animals to oppose them to human beings, may falsely suggest an affinity between Spinoza's and Descartes's views over the nature of animals—which the latter conceived of as corporeal machines devoid of mind and thinking capabilities.³⁶ That this cannot be the case, however, emerges from other passages found in the *Ethics*. For instance, in E3p57s Spinoza writes:

the affects of the animals which are called irrational (for after we know the origin of the mind, we cannot in any way doubt that the lower animals feel things) differ from men's affects as much as their nature differs from human nature. Both the horse and the man are driven by a lust to procreate; but the one is driven by an equine lust, the other by a human lust. So also the lusts and appetites of insects, fish, and birds must vary.³⁷

Spinoza does attribute mentality and sensations to animals “which are called irrational”.³⁸ This conclusion, he claims, can be drawn by the same means by which he also demonstrated the

nature as opposed to that of other animals. The same applies to Spinoza's description of reason as a “kind of knowledge”, which relies on the presence of adequate ideas in one's mind—ideas of properties common to several things, or even to all things (E2p38-40s2/C.I 474-78/G.II 118-22). Hence, I agree with Wilson, who, in “Spinoza on the Lower Animals” (184-87), argues that Spinoza offers no basis or clear indication for denying reason to non-human individuals. By contrast, Curley interprets the passage from TTP.XX.12 as suggesting that Spinoza does deny reason to animals, and that the presence of reason therefore marks an essential difference between humans and animals (see Wilson, “Spinoza on the Lower Animals”, 192-93 n20). He translates the Latin *homines ex rationalibus bestias facere* (G.III 241) as implying that humans are changed “from *rational beings* into beasts” (C.II 346, my italics). See also TTP.Pref.15/C.II 70/G.III 8. On Spinoza's rejection of the definition of “man” as a “rational animal [*animal rationale*]” see E2p40s1/C.I 477/G.II 121.

³⁵ On the inconceivability that humans could truly be turned into beasts, see TIE.62/C.I 28/G.II 24.

³⁶ In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes mentions “magpies and parrots [*les pies et les perroquets*]” as animals able to imitate human speech. On his account, their inability to use language in a creative and meaningful way marks them as purely corporeal machines, lacking any thinking capacity. See *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. 6, *Discours de la Méthode et Essais* (Léopold Cerf, 1902), 56-59.

³⁷ E3p57s/C.I 528/G.II 187.

³⁸ Again, it should be noted that Spinoza does not explicitly deny rationality to animals. They “are said [*dicuntur*]” to be irrational; whether this characterization actually holds for Spinoza is not inferable from this scholium.

origin of the human mind.³⁹ That animals can “feel things” and think⁴⁰ follows from that set of propositions and demonstrations that occupy the first section of the Second Part of the *Ethics* (up to E2p13s), which Spinoza characterizes as “completely general” and which “do not pertain more to man than to other individuals”.⁴¹

However, in E3p57—which introduces the scholium quoted above—Spinoza also maintains that “Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other”.⁴² So, he concludes:

though each individual lives content with his own nature, by which he is constituted, and is glad of it, nevertheless that life with which each one is content, and that gladness, are nothing but the idea, *or* soul [*idea seu anima*], of the individual. And so the gladness of the one differs in nature from the gladness of the other as much as the essence of the one differs from the essence of the other.⁴³

As we can see again, Spinoza does not deny that “each individual”—including animals—has a mind, capable of feelings, appetites and affects. In fact, he asserts that “we cannot in any way doubt” it. For an individual’s mind and affects are nothing but the “idea, *or* soul” of the individual, and of each thing God “can form the idea” that “constitutes the mind” of that thing.⁴⁴

The equation between beasts and automata, which we found twice in the TTP, is not therefore meant to exclude—as Descartes would have it—that parrots or other animals may

³⁹ See also Wilson, “Spinoza on the Lower Animals”, 182.

⁴⁰ For Spinoza, “feeling” [*sentire*] and “perceiving” [*percipere*] denote modes of thinking, and the terms can be regarded as synonymous. See, for instance, E2p49s/C.I 487-88/G.II 133. In TIE.78/C.I 34/G.II 29, Spinoza defines an “idea” as “nothing but a sensation [*sensatio*]”.

⁴¹ E2p13s/C.I 458/G.II 96. Spinoza also regards the applicability of his demonstration of the existence of “ideas of ideas”—which allow an individual to perceive and know their own mind and ideas—as “universal” (E2p43d/C.I 479/G.II 123). Hence, all individuals not only have a mind and perceptions of their bodily affections, but can also be “conscious”, in Spinoza’s terms (E3p9d/C.I 499-500/G.II 147), of their mind and perceptions, and know them *qua* modes of thought. See Marrama, “Consciousness”, 510-14.

⁴² E3p57/C.I 528/G.II 186.

⁴³ E3p57s/C.I 528/G.II 187.

⁴⁴ E2p3d/C.I 449/G.II 87; E2p12d/C.I 457/G.II 95. The reasoning, Spinoza claims, applies to “any singular thing, however composite it is conceived to be, and however capable of doing many things”—even to a stone set into motion (Ep.58/C.II 428/G.IV 266).

have minds, affects, and even be conscious of their inner states. Rather, beasts and automata are evoked by Spinoza to stress the incompatibility between the mentality that characterizes humans and the minds of other things, whose nature is different from ours. For each one's mind and affects must "differ in nature" as the essences of the individuals themselves differ from one another. The mark of this "difference in nature", on Spinoza's account, is the incapability of comprehending one another's thoughts: what passes into the minds of automata, animals, and even radical sceptics (if we were to judge by their words, that is to say), is impossible to understand from our own point of view. Hence, not only can they all be called "non-human", from our own standpoint, but they can also be treated as mindless, as they share none of our thoughts.

What is all the more interesting is that, building on the same grounds, Spinoza concludes that even the minds and affects of human beings can differ in nature from one another. At the end of the same scholium, he notes:

from E3p57 it follows that there is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a philosopher possesses. I wished to mention this in passing.⁴⁵

Just as human minds and affects differ in nature from the minds and affects of other beings, so too can the minds and affects of distinct human beings differ from one another, reflecting differences in their respective essences. The consequence is that what enters the minds of other seemingly human beings may also appear impenetrable to us, to the point that it becomes impossible to discern whether we are engaging with fellow humans—that is, individuals who share our nature and mentality—or non-humans.

What Spinoza "mentions in passing" in E3p57s is not an isolated case. Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, he refers to situations in which the natures of other individuals' minds might seem, on his account, utterly incomprehensible and alien. In E2p49s, he writes:

I grant entirely that a man placed in such an equilibrium (viz. who perceives nothing but thirst and hunger, and such food and drink as are equally distant from him) will perish of hunger and thirst. If they ask me whether such a man should not be thought an ass, rather than a man, I say that I do not know—just

⁴⁵ E3p57s/C.I 528/G.II 187.

as I also do not know how highly we should esteem [*quanti aestimandi sint*] one who hangs himself, or children, fools, and madmen, etc.⁴⁶

Spinoza is here discussing the case of the so-called “Buridan’s ass”: an individual placed in front of two identical and equidistant sources of nourishment will die of starvation because it cannot arbitrarily choose where to get food, all things being equal. Spinoza is willing to accept this paradoxical consequence ensuing from his rejection of free will. Yet, he adds that he would not dare to define that individual as human, if asked. Why does Spinoza feel the urge to make this clarification, since the claim that “a man placed in such an equilibrium (...) will perish of hunger and thirst” seems perfectly acceptable for him, and consistent with his overall philosophy? And on which grounds does he link this case with those of other seemingly human individuals, such as suicide victims, children, fools, and madmen?

We can understand Spinoza’s reluctance to express an opinion about the nature of someone put in a real Buridan’s ass scenario if we consider that the total inactivity characterizing such an individual would prevent us from inferring anything about what is going on in their mind from their behaviour—for we would be able to observe no behavioural response at all.⁴⁷ Whether that individual has the exterior shape of a human being or a donkey, its external behaviour would in any case not be different from that of a statue, or what we would regard as a perfect, yet “mindless”, replica, and we would ultimately have no criterion to distinguish between them.⁴⁸ Along the same lines, we can assume that Spinoza is also stressing that he cannot at all figure what crosses the minds of suicide victims, children, fools, and madmen, based on how they act.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ E2p49s/C.I 490/G.II 135.

⁴⁷ If so, this use of the Buridan’s ass thought experiment raises concerns akin to those evoked by the “passive thinker” paradox, posed as a counterexample to Edgar Singer’s identification of consciousness and behaviour: how can we identify whether there is conscious activity of the highest level in the mind of a thinker, if the thinker is utterly immobile while absorbed in their thoughts? See Edgar A. Singer Jr., “On Mind as an Observable Object”, *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 9, no. 8 (1912): 207ff.

⁴⁸ Moreover, whether it be that of a human, a donkey, or a statue, an inactive body would, for Spinoza, simply have an idle, empty mind (E3p2s/C.I 495/G.II 142). Thus, all may rightly be regarded as identical, at least in terms of their equal lack of motion and mental activity.

⁴⁹ As suggested by a reviewer, it may be worth noting that, for Spinoza, the minds of those who die by uncompelled suicide seem impenetrable even to themselves—at least with respect to the causes that drive such an act. These causes, Spinoza writes, can only be “hidden external causes (...which) so affect (one’s) body, that it takes on another nature (...) of which there cannot be an idea in the mind” (E4p20s/C.I 557/G.II 224). In other words,

If this is the case, then we have reason to take it that, according to Spinoza, even though mentality can be universally ascribed to all existing things, the attribution of a specifically human mental life depends on a process that builds on the observation and understanding of external behaviour. In the next section, I will focus on this process, by which we recognize “things like us” and ascribe human mentality to them.

5. Human Beings as “Things Like Us”: The “Imitation of the Affects”

The expression “a thing like us” first appears in the Third Part of the *Ethics*. In E3p27, Spinoza asserts that “If we imagine a thing like us [*rem nobis similem*], toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect”.⁵⁰ As Pierre-François Moreau observes, the introduction of a reference to “things like us” comes as a surprise for the reader:

suddenly, we notice that in all the past propositions there has been no explicit reference to man. The objects of our passions (...) are referred to in a general way as “things” (*res*), and without any mention of their human quality. (...) Any of these could naturally have been humans as well, but this quality was never a relevant factor. Here, though, it is the central issue. And Spinoza, who never provides a definition of man, assumes that we shall spontaneously recognize what this “thing like us” is.⁵¹

The absence of references to human beings, in Spinoza’s preceding discussions of human affects, can be explained if we consider that the mechanism by which we are affected with affects that we imagine as also present in “things like us”—a mechanism which he calls “imitation of the affects [*affectum imitatio*]”—is the very mechanism by which we also get to

Spinoza argues that the body of a suicide victim in effect becomes someone else’s, since self-destruction must be ruled out as metaphysically impossible (E3p4/C.I 498/G.II 145). For further analyses, see Keith Green, “Spinoza on Self-Hatred”, *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (2016): 82-90.

⁵⁰ E3p27/C.I 508/G.II 160.

⁵¹ Pierre-François Moreau, “Imitation of the Affects and Interhuman Relations”, in *Spinoza’s “Ethics”: A Collective Commentary*, ed. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf (Brill, 2011), 168-69.

“judge” something “to be like us [*nobis similem judicemus*]”.⁵² How does it come about, then, that we “judge” something “to be like us”—that we judge something, that is, to be a human being, endowed with a mind like ours and similar affects?⁵³ The answer is provided in the demonstration of E3p27:

The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us, i.e., whose ideas involve the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body. So if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body like the affection of the external body. Consequently, if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect. And so, from the fact that we imagine a thing like us to be affected with an affect, we are affected with a like affect.⁵⁴

This demonstration relies on the capacity of the human body to be “disposed in a great many ways”, by being able to be “affected by external bodies in very many ways” and “move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways”.⁵⁵ The complexity and plasticity of the human body enable it to interact with the external environment in numerous ways: it can be modified by external objects in several different manners and, at the same time, it can perform a great variety of actions based on these interactions. In particular, the human body can retain what Spinoza calls “images” of external objects: physical “impressions”, or “traces [*impressiones seu vestigia*]”, which are produced in us following contacts and interactions with external bodies.⁵⁶ The ideas that we have of these images, Spinoza contends, “represent external bodies as present to us” and “when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it

⁵² E3p27s/C.I 509/G.II 160; E3p22s/C.I 507/G.II 157. Before E3p27, Spinoza refers to “things like us” in E3p22s and E3p23s (C.I 507/G.II 157-58). In both cases, however, he points out that this expression will only be clarified in E3p27.

⁵³ That by “things like us” we are to understand other human beings follows from Spinoza’s reference to “men [*homines*]” in E3p29 and the relevant note (C.I 510/G.II 162).

⁵⁴ E3p27d/C.I 508-9/G.II 160.

⁵⁵ E2p14/C.I 462/G.II 103; E2post3/C.I 462/G.II 102; E2post6/C.I 462/G.II 103.

⁵⁶ E2p17s/C.I 465/G.II 106; E3post2/C.I 493/G.II 139.

imagines”.⁵⁷ When we imagine something, therefore, we conceive of external bodies through ideas of the impressions that they left in us—that is, through ideas of modifications of our own body. This is the reason why Spinoza introduces the demonstration of E3p27, quoted above, by stressing that “The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us”.

Now, according to Spinoza, when we imagine external bodies, we can conceive them as moving in space, interacting with and being modified by other bodies—more in general, we imagine them as being affected in some ways. Since, as we have seen, we imagine things through ideas of affections of our body, to imagine the affections of external bodies is to have affections, in our own body, that represent the movements and actions of the external bodies. What Spinoza seems to imply in his demonstration is that, if an external body that we currently imagine is sufficiently similar to our own, its movements and affections can be of a kind of which our body is also capable. So that when we imagine a body like ours moving or being affected in some way, we imagine it through affections in us which are identical, or similar, to those that we have when we perform the same movements or undergo the same affections. In other words, when we imagine the affections of a body like ours, we cannot help but simulate them: their ideas match those of equal affections of our body, and we identify the affections of the external body with ours.⁵⁸ Therefore, Spinoza contends that “if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body like the affection of the external body”.

Spinoza further claims that among the affections by which a human body is affected, some can be the cause of affects of joy, whereas others can be the cause of affects of sadness—depending on whether these affections respectively increase or decrease the body’s power of

⁵⁷ E2p17s/C.I 465/G.II 106 (translation modified).

⁵⁸ Consideration of this imaginative mechanism—grounded in the isomorphism between affections produced by one’s own movements and those by similar external things—can support the connection that Anna Boukouvala envisages between Spinoza’s theory and neuropsychological accounts of mirror neurons, in “Imitation of Affects and Mirror Neurons: Exploring Empathy in Spinoza’s Theory and Contemporary Neuroscience”, *Philosophia* 45, no. 3 (2017): 1007-17. Mirror neurons fire both when we observe actions performed by others and when we reproduce those actions ourselves. They have been regarded as responsible for our capacities to learn by imitation, to develop and display empathic behaviour, and to ascribe mental states to others. For an introductory overview, see Vittorio Gallese and Alvin Goldman, “Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mind-reading”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2, no. 12 (1998): 493-501; for a book-length study, see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*, trans. Frances Anderson (Oxford University Press, 2008).

acting and, in parallel, the mind's.⁵⁹ Hence, by having affections that mimic those of an imagined similar external body, we can be affected by relevant affects of joy or sadness.⁶⁰ Moreover, since in these cases we identify our affections with those of the external body, we will also imagine the external body to be “someone like us”, being affected with identical affects of joy or sadness. In Spinoza's words, “if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect”. Here Spinoza is pointing at this process of identification: when I am imagining a “thing like me” to be affected with an affect, my imagination is actually the idea of an affection of my body whose perceived affect is assumed to be in an external body.⁶¹ On these grounds, Spinoza concludes his demonstration by claiming that “from the fact that we imagine a thing like us to be affected with an affect, we are affected with a like affect”.

It must be stressed, here, that the affects that we imagine in “things like us” are really and uniquely the affects that originate in us and that we feel in ourselves, by having affections that simulate those of the external objects.⁶² Thus, when the behaviours of some external objects seem reproducible by us, the mechanism of the imitation of the affects allows us to

⁵⁹ E3p11s/C.I 500-1/G.II 148-49.

⁶⁰ On this basis, in E3p32s Spinoza sketches the beginnings of a theory of developmental psychology: children become familiar with behavioural patterns and corresponding feelings by imitating them, since their bodies tend to mirror the movements of external objects that affect them. “Because”, Spinoza writes, “the images of things are the very affections of the human body, *or* modes by which the human body is affected by external causes, and disposed to do this or that” (E3p32s/C.I 513/G.II 165). For other examples of spontaneous simulation—due, in my interpretation, to the identity or similarity between the affections of our own motions and those representing the movements observed in others—see E3Ad33exp/C.I 539/G.II 200.

⁶¹ Note that I read the notion “to express” (*exprimere*) here along the lines suggested by Antonio Salgado Borge, namely as signifying the connection that exists, due to Spinoza's parallelism, between bodies and their ideas. See his “Spinozistic expression as signification”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 41-43. Accordingly, Spinoza's claim may be rephrased as: “if we have the idea of someone like us being affected with some affect, it will be the idea of an affection of our body like this affect”.

⁶² This stands in opposition to readings that take Spinoza's account of the imitation of the affects to imply perceiving another's affects; see, for a recent example, Chantal Jaquet, “Imitation of Affects”, in Hübner and Steinberg, *Spinoza Lexicon*, 260. An interpretation of E3p27d that comes close to the one I offer is provided by Matheron in *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, new ed. (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988), 154-55. Michael Della Rocca, instead, explains the imitation of the affects as the effect of memory associations: since I can recall how my behaviour related to certain affects, observing the same behaviour in others revives the associated affects in me. See his “Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 247-51.

recognize them as “things like us”, by ascribing to them those affects and thoughts that we feel and experience when we imitate (even imaginatively) their actions and interactions.⁶³ We will therefore interpret certain behaviours of external bodies as expressing the presence, in them, of mental states and feelings with which we are acquainted and that we directly know through our own subjective experience of them; and on this interpretation we will build our understanding of “things like us”: things capable of equal thoughts and feelings when they act in ways which are familiar to us.⁶⁴

In sum, when I empathize with other people and regard them as “things like me”, I know what it feels like to be them—or at least I *believe* that I know what it feels like to be them.⁶⁵

⁶³ The same mechanism, for Spinoza, also explains how we ascribe thoughts to others based on linguistic signs: we attribute to a speaker those thoughts that, in us, match the words that they utter (TTP.I.15/C.II 81/G.III 18).

⁶⁴ Justin Steinberg, in “Imitation, Representation, and Humanity in Spinoza’s *Ethics*”, *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 51, no. 3 (2013): 383-407, asks how it is possible to misrepresent or misattribute others’ affects (384), as he argues for a “direct transmission of affects” from one body to another (393-96). He claims that “one cannot fail to imitate the affective state of beings with similar structures” (398) and that, therefore, “the failure to imitate betrays a real ontological difference” (405). Space constraints prevent me from engaging fully with Steinberg’s brilliant article, but I wish to emphasize how a point of disagreement led me to frame the problem differently. I read E3p27d as implying that the affects that we ascribe to “things like us” are always and only those aroused in us by our own affections—regardless of whether a similar affect is actually occurring in the external body imagined as present, or even whether the imagined body exists at all. For it is of the nature of imagination to let us regard as present bodies that “neither exist nor are present” outside us (E2p17c/C.I 464/G.II 105). See also Boukouvala, “Imitation of Affects”, 1014-15. Hence, on my interpretation, a failure to imitate others’ affects simply constitutes an instance of inadequate/incomplete knowledge (imagination, indeed, as per E2p40s2 and E2p41): rather than entailing an ontological difference, it depends on features constitutive of human bodies, although, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, failures of this sort may prevent two individuals from recognizing each other as “human”. It follows from my reading that, for Spinoza, “being human” does not mark an ontological category but a relational one. Despite these divergences, Steinberg and I agree on the general point that “to be human is to be sociable” (“Imitation, Representation, and Humanity”, 384).

⁶⁵ From this it follows that when we “judge something to be like us” by imitating its affects, we adopt not only an “intentional stance” toward that thing, but also a “phenomenal stance”. That is, not only do we expect individuals whose behaviour resembles ours to have similarly predictable intentions, but we also assume them to feel what we feel and to experience the world as we do. See Daniel C. Dennett, “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works”, in *The Intentional Stance* (The MIT Press, 1987); Philip Robbins and Anthony I. Jack, “The Phenomenal Stance”, *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006): 59-85.

6. “Humanity” as a Shared Affect

For Spinoza, our capacity to empathize with “things like us” is the source of an affect that he names “humanity [*humanitas*]”.⁶⁶ He also dubs it “courtesy [*humanitas seu modestia*]” and defines it as “a desire to do what pleases men and not do what displeases them”.⁶⁷

Spinoza argues that it is of the nature of each one’s appetite that “We strive to further the existence of whatever we imagine that leads to joy, and to remove or destroy whatever we imagine is contrary to it, *or* that leads to sadness”.⁶⁸ Hence, it follows from our own desire to promote our affects of joy—and, accordingly, restrain and remove our sadness—that “We shall strive to do (...) whatever we imagine men to look on with joy, and (...) be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to”.⁶⁹ For the affects of joy and sadness that we ascribe to others, as we have seen above, are truly affects of joy and sadness that we feel in ourselves. More specifically, Spinoza calls “pity [*commiseratio*]” the sadness by which we are affected when we imagine a thing like us being sad.⁷⁰ Consequently, Spinoza concludes that “As far as we can, we strive to free a thing we pity from its suffering”, when we detect sadness and suffering in something, “provided that we judge it to be like us”.⁷¹

However, our ability to properly recognize and understand others’ thoughts and feelings is inevitably exposed to error and failure, as long as it relies on an imaginative mechanism by which we project the affects that we ourselves experience onto external entities, based on observation and simulation of their behaviour. For the capacity of the human body to affect and be affected by external bodies in a great many ways, and to be variously moulded by different experiences and interactions with the external environment, causes different subjects to react differently to apparently similar situations. Moreover, it entails that even our own way of being affected by the same things can change over time:

⁶⁶ E3p29s/C.I 510/G.II 162 (translation modified).

⁶⁷ E3Ad43/C.I 541/G.II 202.

⁶⁸ E3p28/C.I 509/G.II 161 (translation modified).

⁶⁹ E3p29/C.I 510/G.II 162.

⁷⁰ E3p27s/C.I 509/G.II 160.

⁷¹ E3p27c3/C.I 509/G.II 161; E3p22s/C.I 507/G.II 157.

Different men can be affected differently by one and the same object; and one and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object.⁷²

The number of external causes that concur in shaping the nature of one's affections—and that, consequently, determine one's appetite and responses to external stimuli—vastly surpasses our power of understanding.⁷³ Depending on circumstances, things and actions that we have grown used to associating with certain affects of joy or sadness may produce very different reactions, in others as well as in ourselves. As a result, not only do we commonly struggle to comprehend the exact nature of others' affects, but we also have an entirely inadequate grasp of the origin and nature of our own affects—those very affects that we naively ascribe to “things like us” based on behavioural similarities—when they are determined by a combination of external factors. Spinoza terms “passions” all affects that depend on external causes outside of our reach, and warns that “Men can disagree in nature [*natura discrepare*] insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions; and to that extent also one and the same man is changeable and inconstant”.⁷⁴

This disagreement of natures highlights that the affects of an individual differ from those of another just as their appetite is differently affected by apparently identical things. For, as we have seen, Spinoza maintains that “Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other”, and he identifies “the very essence, *or* nature [*essentia seu natura*]” of an individual with their appetite and desires.⁷⁵ However, as we just noted, each individual's appetite is differently shaped by the unique quality of the interactions that they sustain with external things. Thus, Spinoza writes:

The nature, *or* essence, of the affects cannot be explained through our essence, *or* nature, alone, but must be defined by the power, i.e., by the nature of external causes compared with our own. That is why there are as many species of each

⁷² E3p51/C.I 522/G.II 178.

⁷³ E4p4/C.I 548/G.II 212. Spinoza repeatedly notes that all humans “are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something” (E4Pref/C.I 545/G.II 207; see also E1App/C.I 440/G.II 78; E2p35s/C.I 473/G.II 117; E3p2s/C.I 496-97/G.II 143; Ep.58/C.II 428/G.IV 266).

⁷⁴ E3d2-3/C.I 493/G.II 139; E4p33/C.I 561/G.II 231.

⁷⁵ E3p57/C.I 528/G.II 186; E3p56d/C.I 527/G.II 185. See also E3p9s/C.I 500/G.II 147-48 and E3Ad1exp/C.I 531/G.II 190.

affect as there are species of objects by which we are affected; that is why men are affected differently by one and the same object, and to that extent, disagree in nature. And finally, that is also why one and the same man is affected differently toward the same object, and to that extent is changeable, etc.⁷⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that the behaviour that we observe in other apparently similar beings may not match the kinds of affects, thoughts, and mental states that we would imagine and expect, based on our own limited experience and understanding. This can be the cause of incomprehension, mutual misunderstandings, and can lead humans to be “contrary to one another”.⁷⁷

There is only one case, according to Spinoza, in which the attribution of equal mental states to “things like us” never fails: namely, when humans “live according to the guidance of reason”. Only insofar as humans think and act according to reason, Spinoza writes, “must they always agree in nature”, and to that extent their respective affects must also be identical.⁷⁸ Indeed, according to Spinoza, to reason is nothing else but to think and act on the basis of adequate ideas—ideas of common properties of things, which are identical in us as in other beings, and which are therefore common to all of those who share them.⁷⁹ Hence, if by reasoning we think and act based on ideas that are “common to all men”, then the thoughts that we have, the actions that we perform, and the corresponding affects that we may feel, cannot be different from the thoughts, actions, and affects that other human beings would also think, do, and feel when they reason.⁸⁰

Actions guided by reason—and the underlying reasoning processes on which those actions rest—appear therefore to be completely transparent to all humans who are capable of

⁷⁶ E4p33d/C.I 562/G.II 231.

⁷⁷ E4p34/C.I 562/G.II 231. Referring to Adam’s fall, Spinoza also mentions the possibility of believing animals “to be like us” and imitating their affects, which entails acting on the thoughts and feelings that we (mis)attribute to them by simulating their behaviour (E4p68s/C.I 585/G.II 262). The outcomes are disastrous: Adam neglects that he had “found a wife who agreed completely with his nature” and thus begins to “lose his freedom”—that is, as I will soon explain, the possibility of reasoning and harmonizing thoughts and actions with fellow humans (see E4p35d/C.I 563/G.II 233). See also Warren Montag, “Imitating the Affects of Beasts: Interest and Inhumanity in Spinoza”, *Differences* 20, nos. 2-3 (2009): 65-71; Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 201-209.

⁷⁸ E4p35/C.I 563/G.II 232.

⁷⁹ See E2p38-39c/C.I 474-75/G.II 118-20; E2p40s2/C.I 478/G.II 122; E4p23/C.I 558/G.II 225.

⁸⁰ E2p38c/C.I 474/G.II 119.

reasoning alike, in Spinoza's view. Even more importantly, the sort of affects aroused by reason must be the same in everyone.⁸¹ Hence, when humans live “according to the guidance of reason”, the kind of good that they seek for themselves is necessarily a good that “is common to all men, and can be possessed equally by all men insofar as they are of the same nature”.⁸² So, the good and the joy that a human seeks when she acts according to reason, for Spinoza, she will also desire for all other humans.⁸³

Spinoza calls “morality [*pietas*]” the “desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason”, and defines it as a kind of “courtesy [*modestia*]”, as he did also with the affect of “humanity”.⁸⁴ Thus, affects of “courtesy” encompass, for Spinoza, our desires to please and assist those whom we recognize as humans. These desires can stem either from imagining the possible mental states of others—prompting us to act toward them with “humanity”, and out of “pity”—or from reasoning and wanting for others the same good we desire for ourselves. Yet, in both cases, the possibility of developing such affects rests on the same foundation: namely, our ability to judge someone as being like us, thereby attributing to them a mind capable of the same feelings and thoughts we experience. Consequently, in E4p50s, Spinoza concludes by claiming:

one who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is rightly called inhuman. For (by E3p27) he seems to be unlike a man [*homini dissimilis esse videtur*].⁸⁵

⁸¹ Spinoza adds that affects arising from reason are never related to sadness, since reason is nothing other than the mind's power of acting, whereas sadness arises only when that power is restrained or diminished (E3p59d/C.I 529/G.II 188).

⁸² E4p36d/C.I 564/G.II 234.

⁸³ E4p37/C.I 564-65/G.II 235. Spinoza argues that “the good which everyone who lives according to (...) reason wants for himself is understanding” (E4p37d/C.I 565/G.II 235)—that is, the activity of reasoning itself—and “the greatest good (...) is to know God” (E4p36d/C.I 564/G.II 234). Hence, to cultivate their joy, a person guided by reason will strive to lead others to reason and to know things together with them (for “The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God”; E5p24/C.I 608/G.II 296). Spinoza terms “nobility [*generositas*]” the desire by which humans form bonds to foster one another's capacity to reason: in his words, the “desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship” (E3p59s/C.I 529/G.II 188).

⁸⁴ E4p37s1/C.I 565/G.II 236; E4App25/C.I 592/G.II 272.

⁸⁵ E4p50s/C.I 574/G.II 247.

By enabling in us social behaviours motivated by “pity”, as well as behaviours guided by “moral” reasoning, the capacity to recognize other beings as “things like us”—and to let them in turn recognize us as “things like them”—denotes us as properly “human” and determines the limits of applicability of the very notion of “humanity”. In other words, it is only to the extent that we partake in this process of mutual recognition that we are human, and only to that extent can we understand what humanity consists in.

7. Human Recognition and Its Limits

The analyses carried out so far allow us to provide an answer to the question that was raised in section 2, which emerged from a reinterpretation of Wilson’s critical remarks on the explanatory deficiencies of Spinoza’s panpsychism. The question concerned what distinguishes specifically human behaviour and mentality in a universe where all things are “animate” and possess a mind. As previously noted, this universe presents a scenario in which the mere presence of mentality does not account for any difference between species. Given these unconventional premises, the answer cannot but be unconventional too.

There is no specifically human behaviour. Or, better still, the boundaries and characteristics that define human behaviour are traced by the very capacity that humans have to imitate each other’s behaviours, and collectively act in order to promote one another’s wellbeing. The existence of “humanity” as a species, in this sense, is a result that follows from the existence and development of some intraspecific social behaviour—and not vice versa.

In parallel, in the mental domain, specifically human mentality can be identified with the existence of intraspecific, relational affects—affects which, for Spinoza, define the very notion of “humanity”, and through which several individuals think and feel things based on what they assume other individuals’ thoughts and feelings are. What makes a human being properly “human”, in the eyes of another, is their noticeable capacity to have thoughts and affects equal to those of the observer and, more generally, to experience the world in the same way. According to Spinoza, it is this kind of appreciation of another mind’s nature that enables us to act toward others in a properly “human” way. For it is this sort of outlook on somebody else that stirs in us the will to take care of them and treat them as moral subjects—prompted by our desire to dispel others’ sadness and foster their joy.

By contrast, if we fail to access this mutual comprehension of each other’s affects, we cannot naturally be led to act in a recognizably human way toward one another, since we do not feel any sadness or joy that might prompt us to respond to someone else’s perceived sadness or joy. Indeed, when we fail to empathize, we do not acknowledge any sadness or joy in

others—to the point that we might even regard those other things as “mindless”. Far from being contradictory, this outcome is particularly cogent in Spinoza’s panpsychist universe, where the difference between “things like us” and “things unlike us” cannot be drawn on the bare attribution of mentality, or even consciousness (which are common to all individuals), but only on the attribution of a mind, thoughts, and feelings “like ours”. Paradigmatic, in this regard, is Spinoza’s consideration of animal life, concerning which the obviousness (*pace* Descartes) of their capacity to have sensations and feelings ought nevertheless not to restrain us from “killing them”, “using them at our pleasure”, and “treating them as is most convenient for us”, in accordance with “the rational principle of seeking our own advantage”:

For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects (see E3p57s).⁸⁶

In short, when we fail to empathize and recognize other individuals as “things like us”, we treat them as inhuman and we can, in turn, be equally and “rightly called inhuman” by those whose feelings we fail to understand.

Here, just where they appear to be the most important and crucial, the reasons for attributing human or non-human mentality to someone else could not be any more precarious and fragile. For they are based uniquely on an individual’s capacity to recognize, based on their own personal experience and on observable exterior traits of another individual’s behaviour, something that by definition seems to preclude any possibility of direct observation: something like an equal “subjective character of experience”. It seems, for Spinoza, that only to the extent that I can identify myself in the observable acts of another individual, will I also acknowledge that individual as a “thing like me”, endowed with a similar mentality and, more importantly, a similar capacity to feel joy and sadness when I also feel them. One and the same individual will therefore appear less or more human in the eyes of someone else, to the extent that their behaviour will appear less or more familiar and capable of arousing equal affects, feelings and thoughts.

As we have seen, Spinoza argues that by reasoning together we are immune from misattributing one another’s thoughts and affects. Still, it would be mistaken to believe that simply appealing to the human capacity to reason can suffice for sustained recognition of fellow thoughts and feelings in others, and for the development of resilient relational affects.

⁸⁶ E4p37s1/C.I 566/G.II 237.

For, according to Spinoza, it is not within our power to freely choose to reason, and we are constantly subject to passions that can obstruct it.⁸⁷ As he writes, “it is impossible that a man (...) should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause”.⁸⁸ Therefore, “man is necessarily always subject to passions”.⁸⁹ It follows from this that some degree of idiosyncratic behaviour in everyone is unavoidable, and that the possibility of misunderstanding or ignoring altogether what passes into someone else’s mind is, in most circumstances, almost inevitable.

8. Conclusion—On Deceitful Behaviour

Now we are in a good position to also recall the opening questions from which this paper originally departed, and to further clarify Spinoza’s attitude toward radical sceptics in the TIE and, more generally, his uncompromising stance on deceitful behaviour.⁹⁰ Why do Spinoza’s sceptics deserve to be regarded as mindless things? And what does it mean to treat them as such? Is there more, in Spinoza’s words, than just a sardonic remark, aimed at ridiculing the senselessness of their speech and their inconsistency as serious philosophical interlocutors?

We have seen that Spinoza contends that all properly human relationships—through which we mutually help one another and treat each other as moral subjects—originate solely from our capacity to recognize in other individuals the presence of thoughts and feelings like our own, signalled by certain external, observable signs. Lies and deceitful behaviour, by contrast, appear to yield the opposite effect. They deliberately exploit the signs on which we ordinarily rely to communicate and share our thoughts, with the aim of misleading and preventing others from interpreting one’s actual states of mind—such as one’s beliefs, intentions, affects, and desires. As Spinoza writes, when humans act deceptively, they “agree only in words, and are contrary to one another in fact”.⁹¹ As with Spinoza’s radical sceptic, lies and deception can even turn the words that we use to express our ideas into meaningless sounds, like “the words of a parrot or an automaton, which speaks without a mind”. Therefore, as far

⁸⁷ See Marrama, “Spinoza on Reason and Memory”, 67-68, 77ff.

⁸⁸ E4p4/C.I 548/G.II 212.

⁸⁹ E4p4c/C.I 549/G.II 213.

⁹⁰ For instance, in E4p72, Spinoza claims that one who is guided by reason always and unconditionally “acts honestly, not deceptively” (C.I 586/G.II 264). See also Don Garrett, “‘A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively’: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza’s Ethics”, in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions: The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (E. J. Brill, 1990), 221-24.

⁹¹ E4p72d/C.I 586/G.II 264.

as deception obstructs our ability to recognize similarities in our respective ways of thinking and experiencing the world, it hinders and threatens our capacity to empathize with other individuals and establish stable social relationships with them—that is, genuinely human relationships.⁹² As Steven Nadler observes, the problem with acts of deception, for Spinoza, is that “they bring about (...) division between individuals”, since they “put people at odds with one another and generate a difference in their natures”.⁹³

This disagreement between individuals’ natures brought about by deception really captures its most dangerous aspect, since, as we have seen above, it entails that we lose the capacity to share our affects, recognize each other as “humans”, and treat each other accordingly. Not only, therefore, does deceitful behaviour clash with acting in accordance with the guidance of reason—which instead makes our thoughts and feelings transparent to every other human—but it can also undermine our imaginative capacity to feel pity toward others, whenever we seem to detect sadness and suffering in “things like us”. For instance, Spinoza writes:

he who is easily touched by the affect of pity, and moved by another’s suffering or tears, often does something he later repents—both because, from an affect, we do nothing which we certainly know to be good, and because we are easily deceived by false tears.⁹⁴

Suppose now that our compassionate behaviour is consistently frustrated “by false tears”: we may eventually conclude that the external traits by which we recognize sadness and suffering in “something like us” do not in fact mark the presence of those affects in an individual by whom we are systematically deceived. This, in turn, may undermine our reasons to believe that the deceiver possesses the capacity to perceive the same affects that we experience when behaving similarly: for the deceiver, apparently, does not feel sad at all when we, instead, feel sad *for them* and *because of them*. It follows from Spinoza’s theory, therefore, that exposure to

⁹² As noted in the quotation from TTP.XX.12 (cited in section 4), a society that does not allow humans “to use their reason freely” but instead leads them to “clash with one another in hatred, anger or deception, or deal inequitably with one another” is a society that turns humans “into beasts or automata”. In such a state, genuinely “human” relationships and feelings of the kind described above are disrupted and lost.

⁹³ Steven Nadler, “Spinoza on Lying and Suicide”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016): 265-67.

⁹⁴ E4p50s/C.I 574/G.II 247.

systematic deception can lead us to question whether other human beings are of a different nature—rendering them, in effect, unworthy of our care and attention, and incapable of arousing either our “pity” or our “morality”, in Spinoza’s terms. As in the case of animals or other non-human entities with which we “do not agree in nature”, their affects would appear “different in nature from human affects”. More explicitly, systematic deceitful behaviour can be the trigger to a process of “dehumanization”, whereby we fail—or, worse, refuse—to acknowledge other people’s suffering or joy. For a hint of what dehumanization entails on a practical level, look no further than Spinoza’s take on how we should bear ourselves with regard to animals and their feelings.⁹⁵

Hence, insofar as persistent deceitful behaviour can bring about inhuman feelings, it seems that, according to Spinoza, systematic deception is to be treated as outright inhuman behaviour. For this reason, his reaction to the sceptic’s lies could not be more radical, consequential, and inhuman also. For, by inviting us to regard the sceptic as an automaton “completely lacking a mind”, he himself winds up dehumanizing the deceiver.

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⁹⁵ I refrain from referring to actual examples one might find by skimming through a newspaper these days, for they are far too many, obvious, and crude. A troubling aspect of dehumanizing behaviour, which also emerges from Spinoza’s account, is that it provokes symmetrical responses. Those who commit egregious acts of dehumanization end up being regarded as inhuman themselves, deprived of the compassion and pity they deny to others. This has been emphasized by Richard Rorty in “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge University Press 1998), 167-185, where he argues that social feelings of sympathy and trust, more than any ontological categorization of “human nature”, can help illuminate humanity and our moral obligations toward it. If my reading is correct, Spinoza would probably have sided with Rorty on this.

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