

# Chapter 13

## Spinoza on Activity in Sense Perception

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### 13.1 Introduction

In Spinoza's rationalist framework, sense perception yields the lowest kind of cognition. In his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza talks about four kinds of perception, sense perception being characterized as follows:

There is the Perception we have from random experience, that is, from experience that is not determined by the intellect. But it has this name only because it comes to us by chance, and we have no other experiment that opposes it. So it remains with us unshaken. (*TdIE* § 19.)

The description we find in the *Ethics* runs similarly:

From what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:

I. from singular things which have been represented to us 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[.] (2p40s2.)<sup>1</sup>

According to Spinoza, this kind of imaginative cognition is inadequate in its mutilation, confusion and disorderliness (2p41). As is well known, the aim is to gain adequate knowledge, ultimately of the highest kind, or what Spinoza calls intuitive knowledge:

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<sup>1</sup> I use the following method in referring to the *Ethics*: a=axiom, c=corollary, d=definition (when not after a proposition number), d=demonstration (when after a proposition number), p=proposition, s=scholium. For instance, 1p8s2 refers to the second scholium of the eighth proposition in the first part of the *Ethics*. It should be noted that sense perception thus forms the first aspect of what Spinoza calls opinion or imagination. The other aspect is that of perceiving things "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)" (2p40s2).

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In addition to these two kinds of knowledge,<sup>2</sup> there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things. (2p40s2.)

The precise nature of this rather ambitious-sounding type of knowledge raises some traditionally thorny interpretative issues; but obviously, we are dealing with a kind of intellectual grasp of the eternal God-or-Nature and of finite things as its modifications. This is one of the places in which Spinoza's strong intellectualist tendencies come to the fore. A passage in his correspondence indicates that the fundamental philosophical truths can be apprehended by the intellect only: "[T]here are many things that can in no way be apprehended by the imagination but only by the intellect, such as Substance, Eternity, and other things". (*Ep*12.) This kind of adequate cognition of things is perception in a very different sense than that which we acquire through our senses; but it is not without experiential character of its own, and one that is at least comparable to that of sense perception:

For the Mind feels those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in the memory. For the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves. (5p23s.)

There is, in turn, a strong linkage between adequate knowledge and activity. As some of the final propositions of Spinoza's masterpiece state, the more we understand things adequately, the more perfect and active we are:

The more the Mind understands things by the second and third kind of knowledge, the less it is acted on by affects which are evil, and the less it fears death. (5p38.)

The more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on; and conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is. (5p40.)

For the eternal part of the Mind (by p23 and p29) is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act (by 3p3). But what we have shown to perish is the imagination (by p21), through which alone we are said to be acted on (by 3p3 and the gen. def. aff.). So (by p40), the intellect, however extensive it is, is more perfect than the imagination, q.e.d. (5p40c.)

Moreover, there can be little disagreement about whether ideas of sense perception are, for Spinoza, to be classed as passions or actions—the former is obviously the correct answer. All this, however, does not mean that sense perception would be, for Spinoza, *completely* passive. In what follows, I argue that there is in the *Ethics* an elaborate—and to my knowledge previously unacknowledged—line of reasoning according to which sense perception of finite things never fails to contain a definite active component. This *argument for activity in sense perception* consists of two main parts: first, that ideas we form through sense perception have something adequate in them; second, that the adequate component is actively brought about. Dis-

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from the first type of knowledge (imagination) and the third type of knowledge (intuitive knowledge), there is also the second type of knowledge (reason), which derives "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see p38c, p39, p39c, and p40)".

cerning this line of thought connects to—and sheds some new light on—Spinoza’s general way of understanding ideas as entities involving activity.

### 13.2 Sense Perception and Epistemic Adequacy

We can begin tracking down the argument for activity in sense perception by considering a *prima facie* surprising claim concerning our epistemic capacities:

The human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence. (2p47.)

The proof of the proposition reads:

The human Mind has ideas (by p22) from which it perceives (by p23) itself, (by p19) its own Body, and (by p16c1 and p17) external bodies as actually existing. And so (by p45 and p46) it has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence, q.e.d. (2p47d.)

The contention is thus that any idea of any finite thing, e.g. of a material body, yields us adequate knowledge of the very essence of God.<sup>3</sup> As the demonstration signals, this should be evident by 2p45 and p46. Let us take the former first:

Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God. (2p45.)

Surely, this is the key contention. But why should it hold? Spinoza argues:

The idea of a singular thing which actually exists necessarily involves both the essence of the thing and its existence (by p8c). But singular things (by 1p15) cannot be conceived without God—on the contrary, because (by p6) they have God for a cause insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which the things are modes, their ideas must involve the concept of their attribute (by 1a4), i.e. (by 1d6), must involve an eternal and infinite essence of God, q.e.d. (2p45d.)

Staying true to the style of his preference, Spinoza keeps the argument relatively brief; but it cannot be denied that, in fact, the demonstration connects to a considerable number of central Spinozistic tenets.

The demonstration begins by stating that ideas of actually existing things involve the essence and existence of the things ideated—a contention interpretable as a rather unstartling point of departure: we know that there exist finite things and have at least some grasp of their nature. The reference to 1p15, the proposition that

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper, Martin Lin (2009, p. 266) articulates the surprising nature of this contention in the following way:

So every mind contains a spark of rationality insofar as it is endowed with an adequate idea of God’s eternal and infinite essence. This is a surprising thesis. According to a widespread picture, no one, not even the wisest or most virtuous, can have any idea of God’s essence in this life. Only after death is such knowledge possible. But according to Spinoza, not only the wise and virtuous possess this idea, but so do the fool and the knave. Indeed, so do rocks and insects!

For Lin’s way of making Spinoza’s position more understandable, see note 9 below.

proclaims immanent monism, moves us to deeper waters. Here Spinoza reminds us of the central feature of his philosophy: finite things are entities both ontologically and epistemically dependent on the only substance, God-or-Nature. This, however, is only a basic contention; in moving from it to the desired conclusion, Spinoza relies on a number of more fine-grained features of his system, some of which are left implicit in the demonstration.

In Spinoza's ontology of substances, attributes, and modes, finite things belong to the last category. Attributes, in turn, constitute the essence of substance and are causally efficacious, capable of producing their own modes. 2p6 connects to these contentions, and Spinoza invokes it to argue that each and every mode—falling under a certain attribute as it does—is produced by its attribute (and not by any other attribute). Because effects are conceived through their causes (1a4), it follows that a mode must be conceived through the attribute by which it is brought about; and because attributes, as already noted, constitute the substance's essence, it follows that by having an idea of a mode we cannot avoid having an idea of God's essence, or of an attribute that constitutes that essence.<sup>4</sup>

Given Spinoza's framework, the argument seems valid. But it may not be found immediately convincing, and I would suggest that we articulate Spinoza's line of thought in the following way to make it appear more plausible and less complex. In Spinoza's basic metaphysics, any finite entity (for instance, a material body such as a tree) is a way in which an essential attribute (for instance, extension) of the only substance is modified. Now it is in fact quite understandable that no modification can be conceived without having a conception of the attribute it modifies, because for example a particular tree is, in the Spinozistic scheme of thing, the attribute of extension modified "treely", or in a specific way that results in a tree. As every singular thing is a modification of substance under a certain attribute, no idea of a finite thing can be formed without forming, at the same time, an idea of a certain (essence-constituting) attribute.<sup>5</sup> Thus, each idea of a singular thing involves God's essence. While this account does not rely on the causal relationship obtaining between attributes and modes,<sup>6</sup> it shows, I think, that the proposition to be proven is, given Spinoza's scheme of things, quite understandable and well secured.

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship of substances and attributes and the nature of "constitution" involved raise some very difficult questions. However, I think it can be said, roughly, that the concept of attribute and that of substance are so tightly intertwined that there is, at most, what is traditionally called a distinction of reason between the two; for more on this, see Koistinen (1991, pp. 18–24); Viljanen (2009).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, I believe this is one of the major reasons for saying that finite things are precisely *modes*, not some other type of properties. For an informative account of the ontological status of modes in the thought of such predecessors of Spinoza as Suárez and Descartes, see Glauser (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Also Eugene Marshall (2008, p. 67) explicates the argument of the demonstration in non-causal terms:

Whenever one forms an idea of any thing or event, one must form that idea under a certain attribute. In other words, the idea of Thought in general is involved in one's idea of something mental, while the idea of Extension is involved in one's idea of something bodily; one cannot consider a particular body without assuming the general idea of Extension.

All this, however, does not explain why an idea of an attribute (e.g. of extension) involved in our perception of finite things (e.g. of bodies) must be an *adequate* one. The subsequent proposition states that “[t]he knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence which each idea involves is adequate and perfect” (2p46), and its demonstration argues:

The demonstration of the preceding Proposition is Universal, and whether the thing is considered as a part or as a whole, its idea, whether of the whole or a part (by p45), will involve God’s eternal and infinite essence. So what gives knowledge of an eternal and infinite essence of God is common to all, and is equally in the part and in the whole. And so (by p38) this knowledge will be adequate, q.e.d. (2p46d.)

The argument thus relies on 2p38, which reads:

Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately. (2p38.)

Let A be something which is common to all bodies, and which is equally in the part of each body and in the whole. I say that A can only be conceived adequately. For its idea (by p7c) will necessarily be adequate in God, both insofar as he has the idea of the human Body and insofar as he has ideas of its affections, which (by p16, p25, and p27) involve in part both the nature of the human Body and that of external bodies. That is (by p12 and p13), this idea will necessarily be adequate in God insofar as he constitutes the human Mind, or insofar as he has ideas that are in the human Mind. The Mind therefore (by p11c) necessarily perceives A adequately, and does so both insofar as it perceives itself and insofar as it perceives its own or any external body. Nor can A be conceived in another way, q.e.d. (2p38d.)

Hence, the claim is that a feature common to all things of a given domain can only be perceived adequately; and as for instance extension and thought are, of course, something shared by all of their respective modes, we cannot conceive them inadequately. But it is perhaps not immediately clear why should this hold. How could the reasoning behind this be elucidated? I would suggest that it turns on the idea that certain features common to all things are uniform and not composed of parts—this is why they can be called “common” to begin with—and so any idea of them is as accurate and correct as the next one. I believe that Descartes very informatively explicates this in the twelfth rule of his early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*:

[S]ince we are concerned here with things only in so far as they are perceived by the intellect, we term “simple” only those things which we know so clearly and distinctly that they cannot be divided by the mind into others which are more distinctly known. Shape, extension and motion, etc. are of this sort; all the rest we conceive to be in a sense composed out of these. (CSM I, 44, emphasis added.)

[T]hese simple natures are all self-evident and never contain any falsity. [...] For it can happen that we think we are ignorant of things we really know, as for example when we suspect that they contain something else which eludes us, something beyond what we intuit or reach in our thinking, even though we are mistaken in thinking this. For this reason, it is evident that we are mistaken if we ever judge that we lack complete knowledge of any one of these simple natures. For if we have even the slightest grasp of it in our mind—which we surely must have, on the assumption that we are making a judgement about it—it must follow that we have complete knowledge of it. Otherwise it could not be said to be simple, but a composite made up of that which we perceive in it and that of which we judge we are ignorant. (CSM I, 45, emphasis added.)

The thesis thus is that either one grasps something so simple and uniform as the attribute of extension in its entirety, i.e. adequately, or one does not grasp it at all. I think this is what underpins Spinoza argument for 2p38,<sup>7</sup> and so he feels himself entitled to claim that common things are adequately conceived both insofar as God conceives a singular human body *and* insofar as he conceives the states of that body that are partly brought about by other bodies.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of the argument for activity in sense perception is thereby complete, and the claim that we have “adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence” (2p47) can be said to be on firm Spinozistic grounds. In fact, the discussion above has shown, I think, that it is not as striking a statement as one might at first blush be tempted to think.<sup>9</sup>

Before moving on in reconstructing the rest of the argument, it is instructive to take a quick look at the role and significance some notable commentators have considered 2p47 (and the propositions leading to it) to have in Spinoza’s system. In a recent paper, Diane Steinberg writes as follows:

The ideas of the attributes and what follows from them make up what Spinoza refers to as the “common notions” (2p38c, 2p40s, 5p12d, 5p28d). Spinoza also proves that we have adequate knowledge of God’s essence (2p45–p47); but because the attributes constitute God’s essence, this knowledge does not appear to involve anything beyond what is contained in the most basic of the common notions. What is added by 2p45–p47 is that the most basic knowledge of what is common to all finite things is also knowledge of the divine essence. (This is a consequence of God’s immanent causality.)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I would thus agree with Marshall (2008, p. 70) who, without invoking invoke the Cartesian line of thought, argues:

Now, if something is conceptually simple, one cannot grasp it only in part, for it is not so composed. Instead, one must grasp it completely, that is, adequately, or not at all. For example, self-evident notions often are said to display this characteristic of simplicity. And this seems to be exactly how Spinoza takes the idea of the attributes—self-evident truths of the highest simplicity.

<sup>8</sup> In the demonstration, Spinoza refers to 2p7c, which states that “God’s power of thinking is equal to his actual power of acting. I.e., whatever follows formally from God’s infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection”. However, I find this almost puzzlingly uninformative, because from this it obviously follows that God conceives adequately *everything* pertaining to finite things, be it common or not. Thus, 2p7c seems to be of little help in understanding why precisely *common* things can be only adequately conceived. I think that in 2p38d, Spinoza is relying on the line of thought concerning simplicity, as explicated above. It might be helpful to note that Spinoza’s common notions are quite unlike Lockean general ideas: according to Spinoza, common notions are concretely in the things themselves, and there is no process of abstraction involved in acquiring them; for Locke’s position, see especially *EHU* III.3.

<sup>9</sup> Largely based on a line of interpretation concerning Spinoza’s theory of consciousness presented by Don Garrett (2008), Lin (2009, p. 266) gives the following alternative reason for thinking that 2p47 is not, in the end, as surprising as it might first seem:

But Spinoza believes that in most minds, the power of this idea is very slight and, to the extent that it possesses any power at all, it is overwhelmed by the contrary force of various passions. So, although an adequate idea of the essence of God is possessed by all, most are only dimly conscious of it and it does little to determine their thought and action.

<sup>10</sup> Steinberg (2009, p. 150).

Now Steinberg is right to point out that Spinoza's argument for 2p47 relies on his understanding of God's causality; but I would see 2p45–p47 as more important than she seems to do. 2p38 says that features common to all things (of a given attribute) can only be adequately cognized. But 2p47 does not tell us only this but also, and much more significantly, it informs us of how we can form adequate ideas of common features, and even of something as fundamental as the essence of God. This, in turn, is the basis of nothing less than the third kind of knowledge, as Spinoza himself tells us:

From this we see that God's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all. And since all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately, and so can form that third kind of knowledge of which we spoke in p40s2 and of whose excellence and utility we shall speak in Part V. (2p47s.)

It is by no means easy to see the nature of this deduction;<sup>11</sup> but at least he has given grounds for us having a basis from which it could emerge—which is not a minor detail and obviously the reason why Spinoza presents the argument of 2p45–p47 in the first place.

### 13.3 From Adequacy to Activity

The second part of the argument consists of showing that from the thesis that sense perception always contains an adequate idea of an attribute it follows that while perceiving things we are inevitably active. Spinoza defines activity as follows:

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by d1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. (3d2.)

In other words, we are causally active when we are the complete, or total, or entire cause of an effect—in such a case, the effect can be conceived through our own nature alone (recall that, according to 1a4, effects are conceived through their causes). Now Spinoza holds that when we have an adequate (i.e. clear and distinct) idea of something, we must be the active cause of the idea:

Our Mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, viz. insofar as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily does certain things, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes other things. (3p1.)

Epistemic adequacy thus implies causal adequacy. But this surely raises the question, why would our activity be the exclusive source of adequate ideas? Spinoza's answer to this question turns on certain central features of his monism. To begin, we should keep firmly in mind the following basic truth about the relationship between God-or-Nature's mind and finite human minds:

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<sup>11</sup> See, however, Gueroult (1974, pp. 467–480) and Koistinen ([forthcoming](#)). For an interpretation according to which the third kind of knowledge concerns the relationship obtaining between finite individuals' and God's power, see Wilson (1996, pp. 122–123).

From this it follows that the human Mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God. Therefore, when we say that the human Mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, or insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human Mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human Mind, then we say that the human Mind perceives the thing only partially, or inadequately. (2p11c.)

Here Spinoza teaches us that any human mind partakes in (and even, as 5p40s says, constitutes) God's infinite intellect,<sup>12</sup> and that whenever we are engaged in a perceptual process, what happens is that it is actually God who (*qua* us) perceives something. Moreover, all of God's ideas are adequate; when an idea we have is not that (but inadequate), God's idea is a compound of our idea and of another thing's idea; when our idea is adequate, God's idea is formed through our mind only.

Knowing this background helps in analyzing Spinoza's somewhat complicated argument for 3p1, which reads:

In each human Mind some ideas are adequate, but others are mutilated and confused (by 2p40s). But ideas that are adequate in someone's Mind are adequate in God insofar as he constitutes the essence of that Mind [only] (by 2p11c). And those that are inadequate in the Mind are also adequate in God (by the same cor.), not insofar as he contains only the essence of that Mind, but insofar as he also contains in himself, at the same time, the Minds of other things. Next, from any given idea some effect must necessarily follow (1p36), of which effect God is the adequate cause (see d1), not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by that given idea (see 2p9). But *if God, insofar as he is affected by an idea that is adequate in someone's Mind, is the cause of an effect, that same Mind is the effect's adequate cause (by 2p11c). Therefore, our Mind (by d2), insofar as it has adequate ideas, necessarily does certain things [acts].* (3p1d, emphasis added.)

The first half of the argument cites 2p11c and presents the line of thought we just encountered. The final part of the demonstration reveals Spinoza's reasons for holding that epistemic adequacy implies causal adequacy, i.e. activity: whenever we have an adequate idea of something, there is an adequate idea in God's intellect that is formed through our mind alone; this, in turn, means that the idea in question is produced solely by us, i.e. that we are the complete or entire—in Spinoza's idiom, adequate—cause of that idea. And to be the adequate cause of something is to be active.

So, to recapitulate, Spinoza takes the following route from (epistemic) adequacy to activity. First, when we have an adequate idea, God has that idea through our mind alone—no other minds are involved. Second, effects are conceived through their causes. And so, third, when there is an idea to be conceived through a certain finite mind alone, it is an effect of that mind alone—which means that the mind in question is the adequate cause of the idea and thus active. Whenever we have an adequate idea, we cannot help being active; were this not the case, God's idea would not be formed through a single mind alone but through several minds, which would make the idea in question inadequate in those minds.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Koistinen (2009).



The second part of the argument for the adequacy in sense perception is now complete. When connected to the first part, we can see the argument to be, to put it briefly, that in every idea formed through sense perception there is ingrained an adequate idea of an attribute, which idea cannot but result from the perceiver's activity. There is thus a specific active component in each and every sense perception; not even the most mutilated and confused sense perception can fail to carry something lucid and unconfused within it. All this is nicely in keeping with—and, evidently, reveals some of the reasons underpinning—Spinoza's way of defining ideas as being formed through mental activity:<sup>13</sup>

By idea I understand a concept [*conceptum*] of the Mind that the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing.

Exp.: I say concept rather than perception, because the word perception seems to indicate that the Mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems to express an action of the Mind. (2d3.)

Whatever we may think about Spinoza's terminological intuitions, the message is unequivocal: production of ideas involves a basic form activity. Moreover, nothing here suggests that this would not hold with regard to ideas of sense perception.

### 13.4 Sources of Adequacy

We have seen that Spinoza can argue *that* there is an active ingredient in any idea of sense perception. But the argument does not tell us *how* that ingredient gets there—it does not reveal the fundamental source of our activity, and how it is possible that from that source stem certain specific aspects of our ideas. I believe that Spinoza's answers to these questions can be roughly outlined as follows.

Many of the propositions cited above contain references to what operate as the centers of causal efficacy in Spinoza's world. Recall especially the emphasized parts in the following passages:

[W]hen we say that the human Mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, [...] *insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind*, [...] has this or that idea[.] (2p11c, emphasis added.)

I say that we act [...] when something in us or outside us *follows from our nature*, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. (3d2, emphasis added.)

But ideas that are adequate in someone's Mind are adequate in God *insofar as he constitutes the essence of that Mind* [only] (by 2p11c). And those that are inadequate in the Mind are also adequate in God (by the same cor.), not insofar as he contains only the essence of that Mind, but insofar as he also contains in himself, at the same time, the Minds of other things. (3p1d, emphasis added.)

<sup>13</sup> See also 2p49s, where Spinoza famously states that ideas are not to be regarded "as mute pictures on a panel". For notable recent discussions that emphasize the active character of ideas, see Della Rocca (2003); Steinberg (2005).

In the emphasized passages, Spinoza designates that precisely essences (or natures) play a crucial role in God having his adequate ideas. Especially when Spinoza talks about the cases in which we have adequate ideas, God both *constitutes* the essence of that mind and *is explained through* it. One summarizing articulation of this position runs as follows:

[W]hen we say that an idea in the human Mind follows from ideas that are adequate in it, we are saying nothing but that (by p11c) in the Divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause, not insofar as he is infinite, nor insofar as he is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things, but insofar as he constitutes only the essence of the human Mind. (2p40d.)

Moreover, 3d2 states that when we are active, it is our essences that are efficacious: then something “follows from our nature”.<sup>14</sup> This is unsurprising given the claim of general nature that there is nothing “from whose nature some effect does not follow” (1p36). Spinoza can thus be said to champion what I have dubbed the essentialist model of causation;<sup>15</sup> according to it, the causal efficacy we find in things is due to their essences. Moreover, also the passages from which I have reconstructed the argument for activity in sense perception have given us indications about the ultimate source of this essential causal activity: finite things take part in God’s infinite power.<sup>16</sup> It can be said more precisely, I think, that God’s causal power comes to be modified according to finite things’ essences,<sup>17</sup> which also explains why Spinoza so frequently mentions essences (or natures) when he designates the factors involved in the formation of ideas, be those ideas—in finite minds—adequate or not. The contention concerning the activity involved in sense perception is thus nicely in keeping with Spinoza’s overall view of finite things as intrinsically dynamic centers of causal activity, and explains an expression as the one we can find in the early *Metaphysical Thoughts*: “[I]t [the will] is a thought, i.e., a power of doing each one, of affirming and of denying”. (CM II.12.)

Unfortunately, the fact that like all really existing things, ideas have power as their basis—that of affirming—informs us little about the particular nature, and the results, of the dynamism involved—that there is a specific actively produced element in the *content* of our sense perception. Now the discussion above has shown that our essential mental power results precisely in *adequate ideas of attributes*. Clearly, this requires that there are certain concepts—recall here the appearance of the notion of concept in the definition of idea (2d3)—that are “of our own making”, concepts the forming of which depends on our mind alone but which nevertheless are of such a nature that they truly apply to all the things of a given domain (e.g.

<sup>14</sup> The first half of 3d2 focuses on activity, the latter half on passivity—and, interestingly, makes clear that essences are also involved in cases of passivity: “I say that we are acted on [*pati*] when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause”. For more on this, see Viljanen (2011, Chap. 6).

<sup>15</sup> See Viljanen (2008).

<sup>16</sup> See especially 4p4, 4p4d.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed argument for and discussion of this, see Viljanen (2011, Chap. 3).

thought or extension).<sup>18</sup> Here Spinoza seems to be in agreement with Descartes of the Fifth Meditation, who argues that

I distinctly imagine the extension of the quantity (or rather of the thing which is quantified) in length, breadth and depth. [...] Not only are all these things very well known and transparent to me when regarded in this general way, but in addition there are countless particular features regarding shape, number, motion and so on, which I perceive when I give them my attention. And the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature, that *on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before.* (CSM II, 44, emphasis added.)

Thus, we are endogenously endowed with the concept of extension, whether or not we realize this when we perceive bodies. I believe it can be said that, for Descartes, sense perception awakens the innate concepts and prompts them into operation. This, in turn, as Raffaella De Rosa has recently argued, structures our sense experience of external objects.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, even though sensory perception is on the whole passive, there still seems to be a role to play for an active intellectual element. While discussing Descartes's example of the piece of wax, De Rosa contends: "I take Descartes to be saying here that the distinct (and intellectual) perception of the wax *as a body having certain categorial features* is latently contained (and actively employed) in the confused sensory perception of the piece of wax".<sup>20</sup> Spinoza seems to agree about this basic point in his doctrine of the formation of certain

<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Marshall (2008, p. 83) holds:

Say I see a hockey puck before me. In forming the sensory idea of this puck, I necessarily form certain common notions of extension. For example, implicit in my idea of the puck is the idea that it must be either at motion or at rest. Further, in order to form such ideas, I must presuppose the idea of extension itself. These ideas, Spinoza says, are adequate ideas, and my mind is their adequate cause. Therefore, though these common notions come to my mind when I see the puck, they are not caused by the puck and I *do not learn them from the sensation*. Instead, they are a result of my mental activity, wholly caused by the mind, though triggered by the sensory experience. These common notions are present in my mind, which acts to form them whenever I have a sensation of a body.

<sup>19</sup> De Rosa (2010, esp. pp. 125, 127, 129, 131).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 128. Later, when discussing Meditation Six, De Rosa (2010, p. 132 n. 35) notes that "the overall passive character of sensory perception may not rule out an active role of the mind". Nicolas Malebranche's doctrine of "vision in God" offers another interesting, albeit very different, Cartesian point of comparison. Malebranche endorses the Cartesian view that extension is intellectual in nature—something forming the concept of which does not require any input from the senses. In its eternity, immutability, necessity, infinity, and universality, this intellectual idea of extension cannot reside in finite minds but in God. So despite the fact that Malebranche's "supernaturalism" so decisively differs from Spinoza's naturalist monism, there is a close linkage between extension and God for Malebranche as well. Moreover, in his later works Malebranche discusses causality pertaining to this idea, understanding it in a way opposite to Spinoza: for the latter, the human mind is of its own capable of producing the idea of extension, whereas for the former we seem to be completely causally inefficacious receivers of the intellectual idea of extension. For a very instructive account of Malebranche's doctrine, see Schmaltz (2000, esp. pp. 74, 77, 79–81). For Malebranche's reductive account of the faculty of understanding, see Schmid (forthcoming).

basic concepts: there is an adequate idea—the active source of which we ourselves are—of the attribute of extension in every sense perception. I would suggest more precisely that, for Spinoza, we can always, by our own power, affirm the idea of extension (nothing external is needed to prompt us to do this); but we are determined to different specific ways of doing this. When I think about how a circle rotating around its diameter creates a sphere,<sup>21</sup> I am having a thoroughly adequate idea (i.e. an idea that is adequate not with regard to extension only but also with regard to the way in which extension is modified); but when I see a table, I am having an inadequate idea, not of extension itself, but of the way in which it is modified.

We are still left with the question, why is the adequate idea of extension with which we are endowed not immediately transparent to us? Here I find helpful the tool analogy of the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* to which R.J. Delahunty draws attention. To adequately conceive of things through their essences or proximate causes (*TdIE* § 19), we must use the intrinsic power of our intellect to make intellectual tools with which we can attain knowledge of the true nature of things, just as the humankind has been able to construct tools with natural human abilities, more refined tools with those tools, and finally is able to accomplish many things with little effort (*TdIE* § 31). As Delahunty notes,<sup>22</sup> this suggests that the primary truths are discovered only with difficult labour. It seems that idea of extension is in all of us to be found, but not without considerable effort and philosophical reflection.<sup>23</sup>

### 13.5 Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to make some remarks concerning causality, passivity, and cognition which may help in clarifying our intuitions concerning activity involved in sense perception. It should be noted that passivity does not equal causal inefficacy: patients do not have to be causally inactive. In accordance with this, causal inefficacy is *not* a traditional mark of patiency in a causal occurrence that involves (at least) two individuals: instead, *being the bearer of the effect*, i.e. the thing in which the produced effect or property inheres, is such a mark. This was so already for Aristotle, and early modern thinkers show considerable sympathy towards this tenet. To take one influential example, Hobbes writes as follows:

A BODY is said to work upon or act, that is to say, do something to another body, when it either generates or destroys some accident in it: and *the body in which an accident is generated or destroyed is said to suffer*, that is, to have something done to it by another body; as when one body by putting forwards another body generates motion in it, it is called the AGENT; and the body in which motion is so generated, is called the PATIENT; so fire that warms the hand is the agent, and the hand, which is warmed, is the patient. *That accident,*

<sup>21</sup> See *TdIE* § 72.

<sup>22</sup> Delahunty (1985, pp. 23–24).

<sup>23</sup> Marshall (2008, p. 67 n. 42) elaborates this type of approach nicely as follows: “This is not to say that we are consciously aware of the idea of Extension when we consider a body, though this idea must be implicit, Spinoza believes. Only through analysis of our concepts and similar cognitive labor are these ideas made explicit”.

which is generated in the patient, is called the EFFECT. (*Dco* II.9.1, emphases added, original emphases omitted.)

In his *Passions of the Soul*,<sup>24</sup> Descartes proceeds along the same lines; and in defining passivity, Spinoza shows signs of following the lead of his predecessors, for he claims that we are passive “when something happens *in us* [...] of which we are only a partial cause” (3d2, emphasis added).<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, it is quite difficult to regard patients as completely causally impotent. This applies especially to any instance of sense perception: how could the perceiver not have at least some effect on what kind of idea results from sense perception? It seems very plausible to hold that we are never entirely inefficacious while perceiving through our senses. It thus seems that the really interesting question to ask is, not whether we are being causally efficacious while being passive, but what is it that we *spontaneously* bring to the table when we are in cognitive contact with the external world. And so we should appreciate the fact that there is in Spinoza’s system a line of thought that not only argues—on the basis of substance monism and other central commitments—that sense perception involves activity, but also designates more precisely what is being actively produced, and how. All of our ideas of sense perception, however mutilated and confused they may be, are endowed with an unconfused concept brought about the very power that makes us, as mental existents, what we are.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> CSM I, 328.

<sup>25</sup> I only say “shows signs”, because “in us” (*in nobis*) also appears in the definition of activity.

<sup>26</sup> I would like to thank especially Olli Koistinen for many helpful discussions on the topic of activity in sense perception, and Eugene Marshall and Stephan Schmid for insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter. I am also grateful to the audiences at the Rationalist Circle in Turku, the History of Philosophy Seminar in Helsinki, the Nordic Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy in Reykjavik, and the Spinoza Reading Group in New York to whom I have presented earlier versions of this chapter—special thanks to Tuomo Aho, Lilli Alanen, Don Garrett, Jani Hakkarainen, Tapio Korte, John Morrison, Juhani Pietarinen, Arto Repo, Markku Roinila, Jani Sinokki, Justin Steinberg, and José Filipe Silva for their comments. Finally, I would like to acknowledge that the work on this chapter has been financially supported by the Academy of Finland (project number 127410) and the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies.

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