Spinoza’s Reason and the Reality of Affects

Comment on Michael Della Rocca: “Rationalism Run Amok: Representation and the Reality of Emotions in Spinoza”, NYU conference on “Reason and the Emotions in Modern Philosophy” November 4/6, 2005

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1. Michael Della Rocca has presented a fascinating, original and challenging account of the rationality of emotions according to Spinoza. Spinoza’s own view of affects and their relation to reason is not easy to grasp or unproblematic, but in Michael’s presentation it is worse, for in the end, as it turns out, there is nothing to grasp. This is puzzling for he starts out by claiming that Spinoza holds “extremely rationalist versions of the view that emotions are inherently rational” instantiating the two highest of Della Rocca’s three grades of rational involvement of emotions. How could something that really is not, be in any way or to any degree rational?

If the claim were that what Spinoza calls active affects are inherently rational, there would be no problem. But that cannot be what Della Rocca means, since he also claims that in addition to being inherently rational to the highest degree emotions are somehow inferior to reason. So the affects that are extremely rational must include passive affects. And this makes sense. Spinoza’s passive affects are as close as one can get in the early modern period to the Stoic’s passions – pathe--, namely corrupt states of reason itself, consisting in false beliefs clouding reason and coming with strong impulses to act in ways that are contrary to it. As close as but of course not identical with, because, through his other commitments, not least to what Della Rocca calls the “Principle of Sufficient Reasons” (PSR), there are other aspects of the Stoic theory that Spinoza has no use for and that he ridicules, like the idea that assenting to presentations would be “up to us”, independent from those presentations themselves.

In Della Rocca’s analysis it is Spinoza’s uses and abuses of the PSR that lead to the conclusion about the unreality of affects: it is, as we heard, the effect of what the “PSR giveth, and of what it taketh away”.¹ Most of the paper is an impressive interpretive tour through Spinozean metaphysics showing where this principle leads Spinoza. Not very much, in the end, is said about Spinoza’s own positive account of emotions. But some of what is said about it strikes me as contentious, and that is what I would like to focus on here. I have problems with some of the metaphysical theses attributed to Spinoza too, not least the claim about the effects of the actions of modes being in the modes causing them (the table in the carpenter), but I cannot dwell on them here. I am puzzled finally by

¹ See last page of Della Rocca’s paper. This Leibnizian principle would suit Spinoza better as the “Principle of Adequate Causal Explanation” (PACE), since there are no possible alternative ways things could be in Spinoza’s universe, nor any reasons for their being beyond that of following with necessity from their adequate cause.
Michael’s finding Spinoza’s view congenial. Is it the view that affects are unreal that is congenial to him? If so, one would like to hear some reason for this. If it is something else, that could be clarified.

I’m not so bold as to deny that Spinoza’s rationalism – his commitment to the PSR—, is extreme. But I do not think that it is either mad or crazy – it is just a bit extreme. So I want to take Della Rocca’s Spinoza back to the human world where – pace the Principle of Adequate Causal Explanation – the affects we are discussing belong. It may be that from the point of view of eternity and Nature as a whole, the aches, pains and pleasures of the changeable sets of interrelated modes constituting the human body are ephemeral and illusory. But the conatus-principle and the infinity of finite modes composing the individuals moved by their strivings are real enough. So as long as there is a living human body there is an individual mind composed of the sets of ideas expressing its changing states under the attribute of thought. To the extent that the latter are real the former are real too.

So what are Affects? Representational is Della Rocca’s answer. I agree. But are they only representational? Are they states of the mind, or of the body, or both?

Of the mind says Michael Della Rocca.

Of both, answers Jean-Marie Beyssade, who shows, quite convincingly, that affectus is one of the terms that Spinoza uses of mind as well as of body. I side with Beyssade here.

What’s the big deal one might ask – are not, given Spinoza’s parallelism, ideas of the body, so necessarily, if there is an idea in the mind, then is it not of some corresponding state in or of the body? Della Rocca admits as much [[and refers to 3def.aff1exp, which by the way is of particular relevance here since it deals expressly with (passive) affects, although the term that is used here is the wider one, affectio. ]] But is parallelism enough? Affects are affections impinging directly on the striving which is the essence of human being, its conatus or power to persist. It is also called appetite or desire when we are conscious of it, and will when related to the mind alone ((E3p9sch). If the essence of the human being – of this body defined by its certain ratio of motion and rest-- is its striving to persist, it is also axiomatically true that it is the striving of a thinking being. (Ep2ax2)

2. It all hangs on how the “parallelism” or “identity” (of the mental and bodily affects) is spelled out here. As Michael notes, in being affected we represent other things than states

3 “...by ‘any affecktion of the human essence’, Spinoza there explains, we understand ‘any condition (constitutionem) of the said essence’, whether it be innate, whether it be conceived solely through the attribute of thought or solely through the attribute of extension, or whether it be related to both attributes together.” 3 def.aff.1exp.
of our body, namely, external things causing these states. Effects are always represented in terms of their causes, so in representing this increase in the power of acting of my body I represent some external thing, say the amount of spinach I ate or the gatorade I drank or the good news I received (winning at a lottery) as causing it. Compare the anger and despair you might feel in losing your possessions or family because of a storm or a bad government--or any other affects which in lowering your spirits take away your body’s power of activity and with it your mind’s power to think.

Any idea in your mind is an idea in God’s mind too. But the contents of these ideas differ, as we heard. What God represents adequately and distinctly you have only confused and incomplete perceptions of. Then how can the same idea be in your mind and in God’s mind – if its content is different?

This mind-relativity of content is what in Della Rocca’s reading entails the startling conclusions that emotions are not fully real. [[I am not quite sure what to make of mind-relativity here. Is the sameness of the idea in your mind and in God’s due to the fact that your mind represents incorrectly and partially the same chain of causes of which the affect one suffers is the effect, that God’s mind at once sees adequately, according to the order of reason?] Is the presumed identity here one of what is represented or of the representing, or of both? Is my confused and inadequate representing of the causes of my affective states not also part of God’s adequate representing in so far as God not only comprises the minds or ideas of all other things but also constitutes the nature of my human mind? (Compare 3p1dem, 2p11cor abd 2p12)

Consider some examples: My present impression of a draught making me feel uncomfortable is represented by God in terms of the relations of temperature between my body and that of surrounding bodies with the infinite chains of causes conditioning theses states. What I perceive in shivering is an obscure and confused glimpse of what God sees according to the true order of causes through which his power of acting operates or expresses itself? Or consider your love of Henrietta. You may think of her as the cause of your joyful state of loving and the desires that come in its wake. But God sees that your belief that Henrietta has the good qualities you ascribe to her is completely mistaken, for it has all to do with the hormone level in your body or some smell about her or some accidental resemblance she bears to some earlier love of yours (perhaps to your mother...) God sees the true causes of your state, while you yourself harbor the false belief of loving her because she is good for/to you.

The representation of a given chain of events can affect me in two ways: obstruct my power of acting, i.e., cause me pain, or increase it, i.e., cause me pleasure. It is my idea, i.e., what I represent, that causes me pain or pleasure. But it works the other way too. A change of state in my body makes me represent its presumed causes sadly or joyfully, depending on how my body’s power is affected.

It would be misleading to talk of some ‘as it were’ mind-body interaction here. For the representing something gladly or sadly and the corresponding change of state in the body come at once – they are two sides of the same state or event.
I am puzzled by the illustration given of parallelism here. The capacity of one’s body to lift a 20-pound weight, Della Rocca says, is matched by the power of one’s mind to think one has this ability. As the body’s power to lift heavier and heavier loads increases, so does the mind’s power of thinking. If it were the case that I managed to lift 200 pounds, my power of thinking would have increased correspondingly: thinking that I can lift so much expresses more activity in my mind than thinking I can lift 20 pounds or less does.

But is this helpful? Is it not rather that any increase in one’s power of thinking expresses an increased power of acting of one’s body and vice versa, whether or not that power be measurable quantitatively. This seems clear if you think of variations in power of acting as Spinoza does in terms of variations in degrees of perfection. (See 3 def.aff.2 quoted by MDR p. 4) A greater perfection in the mind just expresses a greater perfection in the body. But the mind is not perfected by an increase of mere physical strength. That may be one condition but certainly not a sufficient one. A physically weak body may harbor an impressive mind; if so its power of activity is far superior to that of Mr. Muscle who won the health contest and keeps thinking of all the loads that he can lift.

3. I am puzzled also by the claim that affects are only of mind. Della Rocca recognizes that the transition of the mind to a greater perfection – joy or pleasure – is paralleled by a corresponding transition of the body to greater activity, but notes that Spinoza also “speaks of joy and sadness in specifically mental terms”, and “is thus often willing to see joy as specifically a mental phenomenon despite the fact that there will be a parallel extended phenomenon”. So he follows Spinoza “in emphasizing the mental aspect of joy, sadness and affects in general” (p. 4). Considered mentally, he concludes, joy and sadness are “fundamentally representational”, and desire in its mental aspect is nothing but the mind’s striving to go from one idea or representation to another.

Not only are affects, for Della Rocca’s Spinoza, representational but they are propositional, and support for this is found in the general definition of affects, where Spinoza states that they are confused ideas affirming something of the body, namely its “greater or less force of existence”.

But I am not convinced that affirmat here should be read exclusively in terms of asserting or accepting propositions. Suppose I rejoice just because I see you cheerful and doing well. There is no proposition affirming an increase of my own (body’s) wellbeing or activity at the time – there just is my pleasure marking an increase of my power in my noticing your joy and wellbeing. There may be propositions involved but they are not about my own bodily state. Not only can

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4 Since he is here interested in the connection between affects, emotions, and reason, and because reason is clearly a mental phenomenon.

5 Is this a gloss on 3p9 which states that the mind, whether it has confused or clear and distinct ideas endeavors to persist in its own being and is conscious of this conatus?

6 An affect which is called a passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the mind to think of this rather than that. (3gen.def.aff.)
affects, for Spinoza, be reflected from one person to another by direct imitation (E3p27d and sch.), it can also happen that you rejoice for no clear reason at all – just because you are rested and healthy, the sun shines, or your blood-pressure is normal again, without your paying attention to any of these: you may be absorbed in a crossword puzzle or an argument with someone you profoundly dislike. Even in such a case your general feeling of being on the top of things is in itself an affirmation, i.e., an expression of the greater perfection of your body as compared to how you felt before. Della Rocca might disagree, because this could smack of qualia to him and that is no good. I share his dislike of qualia, but unlike Michael, I think there are more than two options, of qualia and propositional representations, to take into account here.

4. Affects are not only representational for Della Rocca, they are merely representational. The argument for this is that there is no third alternative. For what else could they be – qualia perhaps, but that as we saw is no good. But let’s forget about qualia and go back to 17th century and Spinoza’s own terms. He speaks neither of propositional attitudes nor of qualia but of thoughts, ideas, and perceptions and often uses idea in a broad sense covering concepts and phantasms (imaginings) as well as sense perceptions. Ideas, like it or not seem to be on some kind of continuum of greater and lesser degrees of awareness and distinctness: from adequate conception to partial confused images (imaginative ideas or obscure dream-images: the scabby brazilian in the closet) to passing sensory noticings asserting themselves with more or less force, or, if you prefer, with greater or less persistence.

Della Rocca’s problem, it seems to me, arises in the way the idea vs bodily affection parallelism is spelled out: affects “considered mentally” are strictly parallel to affects considered physically. Physically, affects are transitional states from greater to less or lesser to greater power of activity. Mentally they are transitions from representations of greater to representations of less activity in the body or from less to greater. Joy, we read, “is simply a passage from one representation to another representation”. Of course, on this view, there is no room for feelings. Affectivity is just the transition from one proposition to another, from “My stomach is empty” to “My stomach is full”, or from “I love Henrietta” (the thought of Henrietta gives me joy) to “Henrietta is lovable”) or from “I miss Henrietta” to “Has Henrietta betrayed me?”

But notice how hard it is as much as to speak of these transitions without importing what should not be there – mention of impressions or sensations or of feelings registering one’s body’s transition from one grade of activity to another. It is the tugging feeling in (or if you prefer: unpleasant awareness of ) my stomach that makes me think ”I am hungry”, and that thought will not go away till that

7 Della Rocca himself uses the expression of “imaginative ideas” for the mental counterpart of bodily affections - why he would say that only a special class of these are called “images” I do not understand. See Della Rocca, Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 59-61.
impression ceases. A nutritionist may tell you are well fed but that does not necessarily put an end to your thought that you are hungry.

I prefer describing this in terms of expression or aspect-duality. The passage from one set of confused representations to another expresses mentally whatever changes a man’s essence, i.e., his conatus or desire, undergoes as an effect of the actions of external things. That these changes are registered by changes in his trains of thoughts does not necessarily mean that they also can be captured in propositional contents.

Della Rocca believes that Spinoza’s commitment to PSR requires that he dumps non-propositional sensations or images because he has no good explanation of what would be common to these various types of mental modes or why the latter would be mental at all as opposed to physical. But the broad category of idea seems to do it for Spinoza. Some ideas are adequate and self-explanatory, others are not but represent whatever they represent partially, sometimes in so tiny bits and pieces that they are barely distinguishable and unable to serve as contents for distinct predlications.

5. For Della Rocca propositionality is a necessary and sufficient condition of representation, and he thinks Spinoza’s account of emotions satisfies the requirement for the third and highest grade of rational involvement: “for Spinoza, to represent something is simply to appreciate the reasons for its existence; it is simply to be able to explain the thing, to understand it in terms of its causes.” (7) But this is at best a characterization of adequate representation. Affects, notoriously, are confused ideas, so do not involve understanding their causes, but Della Rocca justifies his claim with a quote from *De emendatione* (TdIE, 62, p. 7), where Spinoza speaks of “concept, i.e. idea, or connection of subject and predicate” and explains that “if there were any concept, the mind would see together the means and the causes, how and why such a thing was done.” Right: the concept of Henrietta – the true definition of her individual essence, would include everything that went into bringing that essence about. But your confused idea of the object of your love is far from being a fullblown concept.8

Consider what Spinoza has to say about self-cognition in E2p23, where he states that “the mind does not know itself except in so far as it perceives ideas of affections of the body”.9 He is talking of perceiving, which is passive (2pDef3Exp), not conceiving here. The human mind does not know (cognoscit) the human body nor its existence except through ideas of its affections, i.e., the mental counterpart of the (corporeal) impressions made in the fluids of the body by external bodies.10 These impressions are elsewhere

8Della Rocca also finds support for this in E1ax4 which he takes as a “requirement on representation itself, on what it is to have an idea of a thing.” But there too Spinoza talks of adequate cognition, not just any cognitive state, like the confused cognition passive affects gives one of oneself.

9 Cf. E3p9 Dem.

10 the human mind does not cognize the human body itself nor does it know that it exists except through ideas of the affections by which the body is affected. E2p19.
characterized as images, and thinking of or in terms of such images is imagining. *Imaginatio* belongs to what Spinoza calls the lowest level of cognition in contrast to the second level of cognition that he also calls reason and is based on adequate, common notions. Imagination is that level of cognition where the confused ideas of passive affects are processed. The laws of association determines the order in which they present themselves, i.e., the common order of nature as opposed to the order of reason. In the order of reason, represented through complete adequate ideas, effects are derived from their true causes. In the common order of nature there is nothing but the fortuitous course of events, registered at the level of the individual mind in disconnected bits and pieces, from its finite and limited perspective. It is not without reason that Spinoza says about affections that they are like conclusions without premises, and this holds *a fortiori* for the passive affect as well. Having ideas of affections is *perceiving* them and their presumed causes in a confused and mutilated way, not *conceiving* or *explaining* them through their true causes. Della Rocca nonetheless argues that for Spinoza, “to have an affect is simply to have a certain kind of representation which…is simply to engage in a certain kind of explanatory activity” (p. 11.)

He knows of course that passive affects are confused and inadequate ideas and admits that there is a darker side to the story, and gives an account of why ideas are confused. But things get very complicated in the next step of the argument, where the distinction between ideas being *in* a mind and being *of* something is combined with the thesis of the mind-relativity of content. Not only is the way the inherence thesis is used here a bit of a problem but it remains unclear, to me at least, in what respect the ideas in my mind and in God’s are the same, and since much hangs on this I am not ready to accept the conclusions he draws about the unreality of affects. This is in spite of the fact that I have found myself, somewhat reluctantly, pushed to almost similar conclusions in a paper of my own on this topic.

6. After some bracing plunges in the deep and cold waters of Spinozean metaphysics Michael addresses the troubling question of whose affects we are speaking of anyway. He starts by considering passive affects. Affects can be in my mind only to the extent that I am their cause, but passive affects are externally caused, so they must, according to the logic of the paper, be in their causes.

If I love Henrietta, i.e. if Henrietta is the external cause of my love, then my affect must be in Henrietta and not in me. But Henrietta after all is only a partial finite cause of my affect, so it must be in the totality of modes constituting its partial causes i.e. in Nature considered as a whole or in God’s infinite and self-causing being. This I take to be Spinoza’s conclusion but it is not Della Rocca’s. What he concludes instead is that affects are not at all, or are not quite… God is a self-cause so God is fully intelligible but affects are not fully intelligible so affects are not all. Passive, confused ideas cannot be in God but then they cannot be in anything, for there is nothing else for them to be in. Ergo affects are not real, they do not –fully- exist. (p. 18)

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11 The confusion is due to the fact that ideas are caused form outside the mind, and the finite mind does not have a distinct grasp of the cause independently of its effect on its body.

12 “Spinoza on Passions and Self-Knowledge: The Case of Pride”, in progress.
Della Rocca admits that the principle of plenitude in combination with the PSR yields that all possible kinds of existence – degrees of existence – are actualized. So existence is not an all or nothing affair but comes in more and less. But then the conclusion that we with our passive affects exist to a much lesser degree than the eternal and infinite God does not seem very startling. It becomes so only if one, as Della Rocca seems to do, sides with idealist Spinoza commentators in thinking that anything less than full intelligibility, and with it full perfection or being, lacks reality.  

Do we really need to draw such drastic conclusions? More to the point: do we need to draw these drastic conclusions?

Here’s a worry: There is, Della Rocca argues, a sense in which passive affects are real and fully intelligible, namely qua ideas in God’s mind. The very same ideas which are confused in my mind are distinct and adequate in God’s. This is just a manifestation of what he calls the mind-relativity of content (p. 19). Does this mean affects are fully real in God’s mind? Hardly qua affects, since God’s mind contains only adequate ideas. So are they unreal after all? I’m troubled by mind-relativity here and have a hard time seeing how adequate ideas in God’s mind could be the same as the confused one in ours? How could something which is unreal and is nowhere, be fully and adequately everywhere? (There are no ideas of non-existing things as we read in 2p11dem and 2p8 cor)

Suppose we follow the extreme rationalist line and admit that affections are unreal. Would not then the individuality (particularity) of the human mind, with its set of passive affects and inadequate ideas, disappear too or become redundant? Worse: would not “God’s mind” be an impoverished mind if it were not also the nature of this individual human mind, whose very essence is constituted by adequate and inadequate ideas? (E3p9dem)?

I would like to turn the tables. What is reason anyway and where is it – is it at all? A mode of mind, a modus cogitandi? – a mere mode of our individual, finite human minds of limited endurance? What then is the PSR other than a mode of our thinking, an expression of our craving for adequate explanation which is itself a demand for increased being and—affectivity? What can follow about the reality of anything from the ways we apply this principle?