

From Thinking as Property to Thinking in Common: A Note on the Vocabulary of Appropriation in Martin Lenz's *Socializing Minds*

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Abstract

That we think our own thoughts and that in thinking these thoughts we are with ourselves, independent of others, is a persistent belief. Martin Lenz unsettles this belief in his volume *Socializing Minds* by showing how Spinoza, Locke, and Hume already envisioned, and to a certain extent conceptualized, more relational or intersubjective ways of how we think. His reconstruction of Spinoza's theory of the mind as a "metaphysical model" goes especially far in laying the ground for a strong relational account of mental activities. This short commentary is guided by the assumption that a critical reading of certain terms can help to strengthen such an endeavor. It examines the notion of appropriation and its connection to property in the construction of the subject to be found in the margins of Lenz's chapter on Spinoza as a Lockean trace, which risks precluding the philosophical and political alternative Spinoza's anti-dualism has to offer. Finally, one such alternative tendency in Spinoza's philosophy is envisaged, which could strengthen Lenz's account.

Keywords: Martin Lenz, Spinoza, Locke, property, appropriation, Balibar, Zourabichvili

1 Problem

Like all those who claim that we do not think so autonomously and completely individually, Martin Lenz must be able to explain why we nevertheless spontaneously or at least predominantly assume precisely that. That our ideas exist foremost in relation, Lenz argues, gives the appearance that we cannot formulate a real "sense of ownership" regarding our mental life. This is why he confronts this picture with some systematic questions, already formulated in the introduction to his volume:

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“Where is my mind?”¹ “How does the illusion of independence arise?”² and finally “Is Interaction always enslaving?”³ Not only do these questions build on each other, already in the imaginary world invoked by Lenz’s phrasing the status of the owner is connected with domination. If it is difficult to conceive of our ideas as our “own,” our “property,” are we then, Lenz asks with Spinoza, not rather slaves or servants than masters in our own house or in our mental life? Can we even speak of the mind as our “own”? Without mental property, dependence and a form of mental servitude seem to arise. The phrasing of these questions could indicate that Lenz’s attempt does not merely involve terminologies which would have social or political implications, as it were, in a second step. Rather, it could form a symptom that such implications were and are *always already* involved in the respective answering or reformulation of these questions. One only needs to remind oneself of the moral question of responsibility for our own deeds and the thoughts that go with it. A legal, and thus a punitive dimension, follows quickly: If our thoughts and the activities associated with them do not belong to us, can we be prosecuted, held responsible, or punished for them? I call up the legal framework and its moral connections with caution. For what is at stake here is a certain construction of the subject, not certain deeds, but an ascribed relationship between the mind and these deeds. Thus, in the determination of guilt in court, in the last instance, it is not about a physical relationship, but about whether the accused is deemed mentally present, whether they acted “consciously”. The attribution of consciousness is decisive in this context, linked closely to the idea that our thoughts belong to us, not because they must have been produced by us, but because we made them our own, or in other words we have *appropriated* them. In contrast, anyone who is denied complete ownership of their own thoughts by means of consciousness, whether “in the heat of the moment” or in principle (here, practices of psychological, medical assessment govern the procedure, i.e., they draw the boundaries between normal and pathological, healthy and sick, mature and immature), will be confronted with a different treatment and punishment.

The legal and punitive procedures are perhaps only the most obvious example of how the attribution of consciousness and associated assumptions of appropriation form social existence. What can Lenz’s account of Spinoza’s metaphysical model tell us about these procedures? He is careful not to speak of consciousness in presenting this model.⁴ Consciousness, after all, is something Spinoza conceives of, if we trace the uses of the term *conscientia* in the *Ethics*, quite differently from what prevails today. But Lenz’s answer to the invoked questions in his treatment of Spinoza’s metaphysical model employs a terminology of appropriation. In answering the notorious question about the status of one’s own mind, i.e., about a self, Lenz struggles with the well-known difficulty in Spinoza concerning the transition from inadequate to adequate ideas. For the latter are declared to be activities by Spinoza and thus to follow from the essence of the particular thing or individual under consideration. It is precisely here that Lenz speaks of appropriation:

1 Martin Lenz, *Socializing Minds: Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 80.

2 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 85.

3 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 87.

4 See Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 36.

To cut a long story short, we might say that the internal-external boundary is dynamic: that is, ideas “in” our mind might actually be contrary to it and in this sense external. Thus, the sense of ownership or rather belonging is subject to change. The more we understand, that is, the more adequate our ideas become, the more we can *appropriate* facts that we initially deem external as internal. [...] Conventionally understood, swallowing bitter medicine appears as something external and detestable to you. Yet, once you understand its beneficial effect on your preservation, it will become *your* internal reason for action. Seen thus, the medicine is not forced onto you; rather it follows from your *conatus*, and can thus happily affirmed as an increase of your power of acting. In this sense I can also internalize ideas that are entailed by my essence.⁵

In an accompanying footnote “appropriation” is identified as the “upshot of what lies behind Spinoza’s therapeutic recommendations”, i.e., it is considered to be at the heart of Spinoza’s ethical project.⁶ Here Lenz draws on a thesis he developed in an earlier paper: “Spinoza’s conatus doctrine entails an *appropriation thesis*”, which makes it possible to reconcile human freedom and natural necessity in Spinoza’s philosophy.⁷

Such a notion of appropriation seems unproblematic for a relational approach to minds at first, since ideas do not cease to circulate by being appropriated: They are not monopolized by being internalized. At the same time, appropriation gives us a criterion for reformulating the transition from inadequate to adequate ideas in terms of the subject. How a striving idea becomes consistent with the striving(s) of a bundle of other ideas is conceptualized as appropriation. Certainly, the appropriating “subject” also changes in the process; the self thus assumed is dynamic. When the individual appropriates more adequate ideas, the individual changes and can live better as a result. At the same time, however, inadequate ideas must also be considered part of an individual. This also seems suggested by the uses of *conscientia* in the *Ethics* that Lenz reformulates, which are to be found especially in the appendix of the first book. Here, to put it in shorthand, consciousness is ignorance. Its first products are the illusion of free will and thereby of independence (E1app). In the case of the ignorant (*ignarus*), a figure Spinoza employs throughout the whole *Ethics*, the gap between the conscious appetite—or following the definition given later, desire (*cupiditas*) (E3p9s/G II 242)—and its cause is immediately filled with an *imagined* freedom as a first form of consciousness. It is a form that can be roughly articulated with the questions posed by Lenz: They are egocentric and formulated in the perspective of independence, free will, and an accompanying moral worldview. Because we have desires and not merely appetites, Spinoza’s ethical project as the path from the world of imagination inhabited by us, insofar we are ignorant, to intuitive science or the third genre of knowledge figures not as a process of becoming conscious, but as a transition from one form of consciousness to another.⁸ The ethical project aims at a form of consciousness, which Spinoza depicts

5 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 84.

6 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 84.

7 Martin Lenz, “Whose Freedom? The Idea of Appropriation in Spinoza’s Compatibilism,” *Zeitschrift Für Philosophische Forschung* 71, n. 3 (2017): 344.

8 See Etienne Balibar, *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 2013), 137–8.

in the figure of the sage, who is “conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” (E5p42s). How this transition from ignorant to sage shall be conceived proves to be one of the central difficulties which Spinoza’s *Ethics* demands from its readers. It seems to me that we should not—or only rather cautiously—associate this process of transition with the notion of appropriation, *pace* Lenz. I fear that the terminology of appropriation is burdened with associations that prove inseparable from more dominant ways of conceiving of consciousness, thereby precluding the philosophical and political alternative Spinoza’s anti-dualism has to offer.

2 The Lockean Trace

As Étienne Balibar has pointed out in his study of the invention of consciousness in seventeenth-century European philosophy, which I adhere to in the following, it is John Locke who closely connects appropriation and consciousness in modern European or “Western” Philosophy. For Locke it is clear that thoughts constantly pass through our minds and that these hardly belong to us originally. As Lenz shows in his illuminating chapter on Locke’s linguistic model, Locke conceives of a linguistic community which precedes the interiority of consciousness typically ascribed to him.⁹ Balibar’s reading examines Locke’s answers to the perennial questions of identity in Book II, Chapter 27 of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, focusing on yet another relational operation, namely *appropriation*. Via this movement, the relational in Locke’s account of language, foregrounded by Lenz, becomes commensurable with an understanding of identity and the self.¹⁰ Identity thus becomes a kind of ownership of one’s thoughts, produced by the consciousness that appropriates “passing” thoughts to our self. As Balibar shows, this entails a continuity of past as memory, present as consciousness, and future as responsibility, and thereby judgment in the construction of a subject.¹¹ The self can be considered a retrospective capture, a capturing of the individual’s actions, thereby transforming the individual into an agent who can be considered the sole author of their actions. Following this reading, we are confronted with obvious relations to juridical responsibilities and constructions of the subject, as I hinted at in the beginning. While appropriation is not a term Locke uses systematically in the *Essay*,¹² it is of utmost importance in his considerations on property in the *Second Treatise of Government*. Here, natural right is conceived under the form of a divine prescription: God left the earth to men in common, but gave them the mandate to appropriate it privately.¹³ This prepares the possibility of presenting the state as an essential institution for the protection of property. From labor or effort arises a property claim of the individual to all those

9 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 155.

10 Locke uses the expression in chapter 27 of the second book (§16; §26) and in chapter 2 of the third book (e.g., §8), though here the common use studied by Lenz is the subject of appropriation, no longer the individual consciousness (see John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1975).

11 See Balibar, *Identity and Difference*, 59–61.

12 Cf. Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100.

13 See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 290.

external natural objects that were connected or mixed with precisely their effort or labor.¹⁴ To secure this claim, Locke must assign to property in one's own person a constituent status. The movement of appropriation which Locke presents in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* can accordingly be interpreted as the precondition for appropriating the world by means of individual property.¹⁵

Now, I don't want to argue that Lenz's *appropriation thesis* concerning Spinoza follows such a reading of Locke. I only fear it risks inscribing a *Lockean trace in the reconstruction of the Spinozist model*, by using a notion which leads to giving the "metaphysical model" of Spinoza a more individualistic variant of socialization than necessary. To speak of appropriation could become a track on which the understanding of a subject with its property, and therefore with its labor, responsibility, and guilt, could be reinstalled, even if the process of becoming a subject is thought of as socialized in the mind. This is because also as individual owners—via appropriation—minds can socialize. While Lenz limits appropriation to the transition to adequate ideas and thereby to becoming free and active, such a risk may be present in the fact that the communal conditions he assigns to the production of adequate ideas remain underdetermined. Thus, he writes, "the 'regulative ideal' of adequacy is not individual freedom but the free life in agreement with the community."¹⁶ In this way, he poses a generic community as a condition for obtaining adequate ideas. In fact, in this regard he seems to be following the text of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza writes in his discussion of the free man that he "insofar as he strives to live freely, desires to maintain the principle of common life and common advantage" (E4p73d). This, however, does not even raise the question of *how* social relations and communal conditions must be to enable individuals to attain adequate ideas or common notions. Precisely with respect to such a question, the notion of appropriation could be an epistemological obstacle. Can a community of individual (mental) property owners be a condition for the production of adequate ideas? As Alexandre Matheron has shown, the *Ethics* indicates that the exclusivity of a claim to property is opposed to a reasonable connection of forces.¹⁷ Individual property, including property of oneself, is a passion, which entails an imaginary relation of the mind to "its" ideas and body (E3p2s). Certainly, appropriation is not the same as property or ownership, but the property relation is deeply inscribed in the term. Using the term thus risks false connotations concerning the dynamic between internal and external in the process of how we acquire adequate ideas and thus become active and free following Spinoza.¹⁸

14 See Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 287–8.

15 See Balibar, *Identity and Difference*, 71–2.

16 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 85.

17 See Alexandre Matheron, "Spinoza and Property," in *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, ed. by Filippo Del Lucchese, David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón, trans. David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 226–7.

18 Cf. Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 84; Chantal Jaquet, "From the Self to Oneself: Subject and Interiority in Spinoza," trans. Lena Taub Robles, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 17, no. 2 (2017): 63–76.

3 Towards an Alternative

If the notion of appropriation points to a rather individualistic understanding of (mental) socialization, how to conceive differently of the transition from the consciousness of the ignorant to the consciousness of the sage in Spinoza? Could such an alternative specify the communal conditions and social relations entailed in such a transition and thereby strengthen Lenz's account of a relationality of ideas and minds?

To speak simply of transition instead of appropriation, as I do here, begs the question, as long as we do not come to understand how this passage is brought about. In light of the *conatus* doctrine, already to speak of a change or transformation seems difficult, as it conflicts with the idea of a perseverance in being that would be the guide in the envisaged transition, as François Zourabichvili has examined in detail.¹⁹ I am surely not able to offer a terminological and philosophical solution to the tensions and difficulties of this transition. Instead, I can only—following Zourabichvili's reading—point to a direction which seems to me suppressed by speaking of appropriation. In his reading he closely deals with a dense passage near the end of Book V of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza contrasts not only the consciousness of the sage and the ignorant, but by analogy the infant or the child and the adult:

[W]e must note here that we live in continuous change, and that as we change for the better or worse, we are called happy or unhappy. For he who has passed from being an infant or child to being a corpse is called unhappy. On the other hand, if we pass the whole length of our life with a sound mind in a sound body, that is considered happiness. And really, he who, like an infant or child, has a body capable of very few things, and very heavily dependent on external causes, has a mind which considered solely in itself is conscious of almost nothing of itself, or of God, or of things. On the other hand, he who has a body capable of a great many things, has a mind which considered only in itself is very much conscious of itself, and of God, and of things. In this life, then, we strive especially that the infant's body may change (as much as its nature allows and assists) into another [*In hac vita igitur apprime conamur, ut corpus infantiae in aliud, quantum ejus natura patitur eique conducit, mutetur*] capable of a great many things and related to a mind very much conscious of itself, of God, and of things. We strive, that is, that whatever is related to its memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect (E5p39s/G II 586–588)

Here Spinoza uses the verb *mutare*, speaking of a change that is associated in his political writings only with the ruin, not with the endurance, of states, and in the *Ethics* prominently with the notorious difficulty of death as a rupture of memory (E4p39s). Confronted with the continuous variations of life, not only the differences between sage and ignorant and those between adult and child are at stake, but at the same time the difference between life and death. Don't we die, as Spinoza seems to consider, to a certain extent by becoming adults? We certainly do not die in the same way in which we turn into a corpse, but a part of nature and its *conatus* seems to be not existing anymore (E4p39s).

19 François Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

Don't we, in extension, die to a certain degree, rather than appropriate, when we transition from one form of consciousness to another? In Zourabichvili's reading the striving (*conamur*) depicted in the scholium to change the infant's body into another is indeed not the striving of the infant to persevere in its being, but another striving, the striving of the child's educators, which entails a destructive dimension regarding the infant's nature.²⁰ This seems to be consistent with the end of the scholium, where a striving against the memory of the infant is described. Could this signify that the means by which we become active and form adequate ideas, are not only misconceived, when we detest them like the bitter medicine we swallow, but are really destructive like a bad medicine to the ignorance of our minds?

To conclude this commentary, I would like to open the discussion of this troubling question. Considering such a destructive dimension in the ethical transition might actually strengthen Lenz's central concept of contrariety between ideas and the physical connotations it carries.²¹ If "[c]ertain ideas are contrary to others, namely those that affirm and deny the existence of the same body,"²² why should adequate ideas be seen as things to be appropriated and not as things which are striving against the nature of the dominated or passionate parts of our minds and bodies? How would such a perspective be reconcilable with a perseverance in being of each *conatus*? Being unable to give a satisfying answer, I can only correlate it with another tendency in the quoted scholium. Zourabichvili points to the paradox in conditioning the destructive dimension of the change into another nature "as much as its nature allows" or suffers (*patitur*) and "assists" or even contributes (*conducit*): "For it is certain that no nature 'allows' transformation; it can be a matter only of one and the same nature, which is nevertheless called on to suffer a radical change, a rupture comparable to a metamorphosis."²³ I propose to read the specification of the striving to change the nature of the infant's body "as much as its nature allows and assists" as pointing to a passive or passionate force on the side of the child or the nature to be changed. If we relate this analogy again to the transition to adequate ideas, to becoming free, then we are liberated by the striving of others, but on condition that we can concur with this striving. Regarding such a condition we are on the flip side of contrariety: agreement.²⁴

The destructive dimension of the ethical transition raised in the analogy to education can be relativized, though not neutralized, by understanding adequate ideas like any singular thing as constituted by multiple causes (E2def7). Seen in this light, the transition toward a consciousness of the sage in Spinoza does not mean an isolated activity of a body and its corresponding mind, but the manifold capacities of our body in interaction with other things that produce a being conscious of itself and its relations to both God and other things. It thus means, as Balibar points out, that we become conscious of the extent to which we are active and passive in the causal fabric that determines our actions, and is consistent with the proposition on which the quoted scholium comments: "He who has a body capable of a great many things has a mind whose greatest part is eternal" (E5p39s/G II 584).²⁵ Parts of the small parts of nature that we are therefore indeed die, or are destroyed, in

20 Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, 20–1.

21 See Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 68.

22 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 66.

23 Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, 19.

24 See Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 75–7.

25 See Balibar, *Identity and Difference*, 144.

our transition toward the sage (E2p24d; E3p21d), but on the condition of being replaced by other small parts that refer to common notions (E2p39c). The decomposition of our body (and our imagination and memory) is immediately juxtaposed here by a recomposition through agreement, i.e., an increase in the power to act (E4p18).²⁶ Common notions do not arise in the appropriating activity of a self, but originate from agreements between parts of our minds. These adequate ideas have their source not in the relation between several subjects, but between parts of them that are not already conscious. Their formation entails a destruction of other ideas “in” our minds. It is precisely those ideas that make us imagine ourselves as the owners of ourselves (our ideas) that are destroyed in the process of generating common notions.

This opens a way to understand the transition from the consciousness of the ignorant, who spontaneously believes in the subjectivity of the world, to the consciousness of the sage, precisely through overcoming exclusive (mental) property. “Sages” can only emerge in practical relations that do not fabricate thought in property relations, thus making it the thought *of* subjects. Such a perspective conceives of rationality as coextensive with the social invention of forms to make ideas by means of which individuals intervene in the striving of other humans (i.e., education or subject-formation) and in the other parts of nature (i.e., labor and technology or production and reproduction)—not individual or private property but common. It will certainly be imagined a bitter medicine by all those—that is us—who are passionately attached to their (mental) property.

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26 For a discussion of Spinoza’s physics and metaphysics or ontology as conceptualizing movements of decomposition and recomposition see Etienne Balibar, “Individuality and Transindividuality in Spinoza,” in *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, trans. Mark G. E. Kelly (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 36–91.

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