

Agreement or Contrariety? A Dialogue¹

Daniel Bella*

Abstract

In one of his blog posts, Martin Lenz refers to Wittgenstein's *Rabbit-duck*: a picture puzzle that can be interpreted as depicting a rabbit or a duck. The point of this analogy is that what we are perceiving corresponds to our personal experiences, which can be shaped in discussions with others even though we remain unable to grasp both pictures at once. The starting point of the following dialogue is exactly such a Rabbit-duck illusion. Reading Lenz's chapter on Spinoza again and again, I remained unsure whether *contrariety* or *agreement* is the fundamental relation which warrants his claim that minds are intrinsically social. The aim of this text is to enter into dialogue on this subject and examine the problems and advantages of both readings. Must it necessarily be the case that contrariety and agreement are mutually exclusive like the two parts of the Rabbit-duck?

Keywords: Spinoza, Martin Lenz, agreement, contrariety, *conatus*

Homologiasphilia: Yesterday, we discussed Lenz's chapter on Spinoza with delight. Would you mind pursuing our conversation since there are some points that I still do not understand?

Enantiouphilia: I am glad we are on the same page. As far as I can remember, we both consent that the notions of agreement and contrariety are key to Lenz's project. However, we have not been dealing with their relation so far. To start with, let me propose one passage that might help us in this regard. Lenz summarizes his position as follows: "On my reading, Spinoza's crucial tenet is that ideas of different minds are related through contrariety or agreement."²

H: Why do you think this quote could be a good starting point?

- 1 I would like to thank all the participants of the workshop for their helpful comments. I am especially indebted to Martin Lenz for sharing and discussing his ideas with us and to Andrea Blättler and Ivo Eichhorn, who not only organized this wonderful event but also offered feedback on an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 Martin Lenz, *Socializing Minds: Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 31.

* Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main: Daniel.Bella@stud.uni-frankfurt.de; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7114-3581>

E: This formulation invites us to reflect upon the question ‘what are the driving forces behind the sociality of ideas: contrariety, agreement, or both?’ More technically, I wonder how we are supposed to understand the *or*. As you know, there are two options. First, we might interpret it as an inclusive *or*, which means that the disjunction is only false if both disjuncts are false. Second, we might understand it as an exclusive disjunction which in addition is false if both disjuncts are true. In the inclusive case, the sentence would imply that mind m_1 and mind m_2 are not related iff they enjoy neither agreement nor contrariety. According to the exclusive interpretation, there can only exist one relation between m_1 and m_2 , which means that they are *either* associated by contrariety *or* by agreement.

H: I wonder whether I can follow what you are saying. As far as I understand, you are unsure whether Lenz’s interpretation allows for minds to be related by contrariety *and* agreement at the same time. However, I simply cannot see how this question might help us to come to grips with Lenz’s project. So, before focusing on your question, let us recapitulate the points we have agreed on already.

E: If I remember correctly, we share the impression that Lenz’s interpretation shifts the focus from ideas in general to a special kind of ideas: minds. This becomes clear if we compare his approach to other engagements with Spinoza’s theory of ideas which often tend to revolve around the question how one and the same idea can exist as an adequate idea in God and as an inadequate idea in finite minds at the same time. Lenz, in contrast, is primarily concerned with the problem how, given mind m is the idea of body b , m can have ideas that are contrary to the nature of b .

H: That’s right. But remember that we also noted that if one adheres to the thesis that the content of ideas is determined in relation to other ideas, there remains only a perspectival difference between these two approaches. Put simply, the problem Lenz deals with comes down to the question how mind m can possess inadequate ideas of its body b .

E: This is, I contend, still a matter of dispute because Lenz seems less interested in the question of where the content of an idea comes from...

H: ...Indeed, but the reason for this is that Lenz is in accord with interpretations which argue that every idea is a belief for Spinoza. The term ‘idea’ does not therefore denote a neutral content which *can* voluntarily be affirmed or denied. Rather, ideas are intrinsically related to affirmations or negations.

E: However, as we examined yesterday, this raises the following question: in virtue of what are ideas affirmed or denied if not by the will of the person holding them? To my mind, our dispute is precisely rooted in this question.

H: I am not so sure. I think there are still further points we agree on. For instance, I reckon we might both concur that, according to Lenz, ideas are affirmed or negated in relation to other ideas already adopted by a mind and that this relation can be characterized in terms of contrariety.

E: I agree. But only because you have described Lenz’s approach in a quite fuzzy way. Things get more interesting as soon as we try to flesh out how exactly this relation is supposed to work and what it means to say that a mind adopts, possesses, or has an idea.

H: I acknowledge that you are always eager to sow the seed of discord. But I beg you not to forget that discord presupposes some kind of basic agreement. By the same token, Lenz makes it unmistakably clear that contrariety presupposes agreement since two ideas are only contrary if they concern the same body. Now, as Lenz emphasizes, agreement and contrariety are explicated with

reference to the *conatus* of an idea. We thus get a picture where every idea possesses an affirmative power unless it encounters an incompatible idea related to the same body.

E: For the record, are you stating that the contrariety of an idea is derivative of its agreement with a body?

H: What do you mean by that?

E: Taken in itself, every idea implies affirmation. Contrariety is thus the result of an idea being related to another idea which possesses at least one non-agreeing property. Consequently, contrariety is an extrinsic property because an idea is only contrary in comparison to other ideas.

H: I subscribe to your description, but I cannot see what your problem with this interpretation is. Indeed, it seems to square nicely with Spinoza's conception of activity: we are active if our *conatus* is not impeded by other forces.

E: If I remember correctly, we already touched upon this issue yesterday, albeit without developing it further. With your agreement, let us examine what Lenz means when he states that an idea has a *conatus*. As you can imagine, I have my own stance on this issue. However, I am inclined to hear your position first. In virtue of what, according to your reading, do ideas possess a *conatus*?

H: I am basically in line with Michael Della Rocca here and think that Lenz defends the same claim. For Della Rocca, ideas are actions. Since actions stem from the *conatus* of an individual and this *conatus* is the 'essence' of this very individual, any action of an individual must be compatible with its existence or it "is not an action of that individual" at all.³ However, this does not imply that individuals are always doing what is good for them, as it is possible that their affirmative ideas are "prevented by other, stronger ideas."⁴ In these cases, our actions are driven by ideas that are not our own since our own ideas are overpowered and are thus inadequate.

E: I doubt that this interpretation holds water. As I see it, a central problem of this approach is that it cannot explain the *social* element of Lenz's theory. If a mind always affirms the existence of its body, the *social* relations to other ideas are only external obstacles. I think that your interpretation bargains away the innovative potential of Lenz's approach, which becomes most evident when he claims "that Spinoza holds an interactive account of ideas in that their affirmative force is explained in virtue of contrariety."⁵

H: Do you think I am unable to see that your insistence on contrariety poses the same problem? If ideas are only interactive or social in virtue of contrariety, interaction and sociality are nothing more than simple impediments.⁶ Indeed, there is a long tradition within Spinoza scholarship that understands the *conatus* as an affirmative force that is identical with the actual essence of an individual.⁷ Against this backdrop, Andrea Sangiacomo recently proposed distinguishing between the *conatus* and the *potentia* of an individual.⁸ While the *conatus* denotes the internal power of an individual, its *potentia* results from the interaction of the *conatus* with external forces. If you set

3 Michael Della Rocca, "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of Pure Will," *NOÛS* 37, no. 2 (2003): 208.

4 *Ibid.*, 211.

5 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 45.

6 I owe this point to Andrea Blättler.

7 Cf. for instance Chantal Jaquet, *Affects, Actions and Passions in Spinoza: The Unity of Body and Mind*, trans. Tatiana Reznichenko (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 103.

8 Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 150.

yourself the task to show that Lenz proposes a different conception of the *conatus*, the burden of proof for this claim is on you. However, I am convinced that the dispute between us, if there is any, can be easily solved. So, grant me that the force of an idea is not a sufficient, but only a necessary, condition, since an idea is only affirmed if no contrary idea with a greater force exists.

E: I am deeply aware of the fact that it is part of your nature to seek agreement whenever possible. However, this time I must disappoint you. I think that our dissent is rooted in the fact that we are defending two incompatible conceptions of what it means for the *conatus* of an idea to be actual. As far as I understand, you are saying that ideas are necessarily affirmations as long as they are not overpowered by contrary ideas. My point, in contrast, is that affirmation presupposes that an idea is challenged by a contrary idea. Ideas as such are inert and hence intrinsically social. As Lenz has it: “it is not any single *conatus* but the interaction of ideas, set off by contrariety, that governs the striving and determines which beliefs are held.”⁹

H: If the disagreement among us is as considerable as you described it, it might be suitable to go back from where we started and examine where this rupture stems from. So, let me ask you: Do you agree that Lenz accepts what he calls *doxastic involuntarism*, which means that every idea is affirmed unless it is overpowered by contrary ideas?

E: Of course. How could you expect me to state the contrary?

H: At the same time, you are saying that it is only possible to affirm an idea if a contrary idea exists?

E: Indeed.

H: As a result, you are obliged to hold the view that we only possess ideas that are challenged by contrary ideas?

E: Without any doubt. Indeed, Lenz states precisely this when he writes that

[c]ontrariety explains what sets of ideas against one another such that resisting and thus striving can emerge. At the same time, the contrariety of ideas also bears on the question of identity of ideas. As I pointed out above, the *conatus* of ideas is their essence. How could something sensibly be said to strive, if it were not determinable that there is some possible opposition to this striving? In other words, how could there be sensible talk of affirmation without any possible negation?¹⁰

Consequently, Lenz accords huge importance to contrariety, since it is contrariety that explains why an idea strives and in virtue of what are minds different. An idea only affirms its object if its striving is triggered by a contrary idea. Contrary ideas cannot belong to the same mind. Hence, every idea in mind *m* presupposes contrary ideas which in virtue of being contrary belong to other minds. Consequently, the affirmation of my mind is essentially social. Before we go into the details, let us acknowledge that one of the upshots of this approach is that the *conatus* of an idea is intrinsically related to the striving of contrary ideas. The beauty of this is, of course, that identity presupposes negativity or difference...

⁹ Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

H: I hope you don't mind if I interrupt you here. I think this description leads us too far astray since it first and foremost reveals your own theoretical convictions.

E: Even though I think that Lenz is on my side here, let us leave the consequences for a while. My worry is simply that your interpretation is too weak to defend the claim of the inbuilt sociality of minds, since if agreement comes first, we end up with a picture of ideas as entirely self-sustaining.

H: As you can imagine, I am tempted to argue in the opposite direction that your interpretation is too strong. Just try, for a second, to recollect different ideas in your mind. Are you capable of finding contrary ideas for all of them? Just take the idea that the earth is spherical. Does your affirmation of this idea really rely on the fact that you met a person who states the contrary assumption that the earth is flat?

E: I think we have reached an important point for better understanding what sets us apart. There are two remarks that I want to make. First, it is essential to grasp the difference between our putative knowledge of a contrary idea and its actual existence. As Lenz aptly shows, we are often not aware that an idea or a desire is in fact contrary to the essence of our body. Just remember his example: My desire to drink a beer might be prompted by the fact of me being hungry. Beer indeed reduces my hunger, but of course it is not the healthiest way to do so. As a result, despite its correlation with satisfying my hunger, beer has many negative side effects on my body that I might be unaware of.¹¹ Second, as we have already noted, the very fact that two ideas are contrary presupposes that they refer to the same body.¹² Now, if we go back to your example, we can see that the idea of the earth being flat and the idea of the earth being spherical refer to the same body. However, the body they are referring to is of course the earth (and not my own body). Since the idea of the earth being spherical strives only in virtue of being afflicted with a contrary idea of the same body, my body does not play any role in explaining why the idea of the earth being spherical strives at all, since "contrary ideas have to be about the same body, but cannot be in the same mind."¹³

H: I am quite surprised to hear you put so much emphasis on agreement. Must I assume that you changed sides furtively?

E: Not at all.

H: So, you are not willing to accept that you provided a formidable argument against the position which you still assume to defend?

E: I am unable to understand what you are saying.

H: Do you agree that both a completely red and a completely green apple are equally useful to a human body?

E: Of course.

H: In addition, you could even add that the two arguments you presented are relying on this very distinction...

E: Yes, the beer example was supposed to show that we are often prone to affirm ideas that are in fact contrary to our body because of our ignorance of other causes. The second example suggests that the contrariety is due to the object of an idea. The idea of a red apple and the idea of a green apple are thus contrary in virtue of one and the same apple being red or green.

¹¹ Ibid., 38.

¹² Ibid., 72.

¹³ Ibid.

H: Now, do you further agree that Lenz holds that an idea *i* belongs to the mind *m* if *i* affirms the body *b* whose idea is *m*?

E: Absolutely. I could even add that *i* fosters the *potentia agendi* of this particular body *b*.

H: Fine. Let's go on and see if we still agree. Do you think that the idea of a completely green and the idea of a completely red apple both foster the *potentia agendi* of a – let's say – particular human body?

E: I will restrain myself from developing further complications for now and willingly grant you that both apples are equally fostering the *potentia agendi* of this body.

H: Now, do you grant that the idea of a completely red and the idea of a completely green apple are contrary?

E: How could I state the opposite? Both ideas are contrary to the extent that one and the same apple cannot be at the same time completely red and completely green, while it is still possible that this apple is neither green nor red (it might be brown, for instance).

H: But if both ideas are contrary, this entails that one and the same mind can affirm contrary ideas. However, this is pernicious since Lenz's conception of the individuality of minds hinges on the assumption "that a competing idea cannot belong to the same mind (E III p 10)."¹⁴

E: At this point, I beg you not to forget that the idea of a green and the idea of a red apple are only contrary if they are related to one and the same apple. However, if they are related to my body, they are equally useful and thus not contrary to each other.

H: Do you then still hold that ideas always presuppose contrary ideas in order to strive?

E: Of course.

H: But if the idea of a green apple and the idea of a red apple are not contrary regarding my body, in virtue of what are they striving? Don't you have to accept that, *pace* Lenz, there are ideas that do not strive at all?

E: Not at all. Rather, I contend, you have outstripped yourself. In order to get back on the right track it might be helpful if we recall a distinction that Spinoza proposes in E2p17. There, our philosopher makes it clear that some ideas cannot be accounted for by our mind alone as they presuppose that our mind is affected by an external body. Your idea that there is now a completely green apple in front of you cannot be explained with reference to your mind alone. We have already touched upon the reason for this earlier: All other things being equal, a completely green apple and a completely red apple are of identical usage for your own body. There is thus no means to decide, with reference to the ideas in your mind alone, if the present apple should be red or green (as your mind is only the idea of your body). For doing so, external affections are necessary, which of course is never a neutral device.

H: That's right. With the existence of ideas that are (partly) due to our body being affected by an external object we enter the realm of imagination. It is here that ideas in my mind arise which are about 'external' objects. But now I want to ask you the following: do you agree that we are here speaking about two different sorts of ideas, namely ideas that constitute a mind and ideas that are in another mind?

E: Of course. Spinoza himself suggests this distinction. But why do you think this point is important?

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

H: It is important because it shows that contrariety arises first and foremost on the level of ideas that do not constitute the essence of the mind. Every mind is hence a set of ideas that affirms the existence of its body. However, if this body is affected by other bodies and the mind is thus affected by other ideas, contrariety comes into play. But this means that contrariety is restricted to our imagination. In fact, Spinoza proposes to overcome the imagination by a kind of knowledge that concentrates on the properties that are common to “the human body and some external bodies” (E2p39/G II 119).

E: What you are saying is of course not surprising. But please do not ignore the little detail that this second kind of knowledge you are describing does *not* refer to the essences of the things involved.

H: To admit this seems to be a problem only for someone who is so heavily invested in contrariety that she/he might even assume that the essence of everything is due to its incompatible properties. But let us leave this aside for a moment. Rather, I wish to finally come back to the distinction you proposed at the beginning. Do you think we have achieved anything to solve our question?

E: My impression is that we have been dealing with the question of *contrariety* or *agreement*, presupposing that both terms are mutually exclusive. Implicitly we have thus adopted the view that the *or* signifies an exclusive disjunction. Consequently, it is not possible that mind *m*1 and mind *m*2 are related by contrariety *and* by agreement.

H: Both of us have been trying to argue that the concept defended by the other is derivative. Hence, I am trying to tell you that contrariety presupposes agreement, and you are defending the view that affirmation presupposes contrariety. Now, do you think that we agree at least insofar as we both maintain that affirmation and contrariety are opposed to each other. Either affirmation is non-contrariety or contrariety is non-affirmation. If you define one of the two terms you then get the other for free.

E: I think our dispute would be pointless without this assumption.

H: Do you also agree that it might be one of the results of our conversation that there is no such thing as *per se* contrariety, since two ideas are only contrary if they contain incompatible properties and are related to the *same* body. Is the same also true for agreement?

E: How could it be otherwise?

H: From this, I contend, a solution to our question suggests itself. What happens if we adopt the thesis that the relation is indeed inclusive?

E: It would mean that one and the same mind can be related to another mind by contrariety as well as by agreement.

H: To my mind, this sounds promising since it would allow us to assume that both relations presuppose each other mutually.

E: This might be the right solution. Being part of the same attribute, minds must trivially agree on something. However, they are only different minds because they do not agree on everything.

H: I think this succinct summary might be a good starting point for further discussion. For today, I beg you, let us conclude our discussion. It is getting late.

E: You are right. But promise me that we will take up our conversation tomorrow.

H: I agree.

References

- Della Rocca, Michael. "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of Pure Will." *Noûs* 37, no 2 (2003): 200–231.
- Jaquet, Chantal. *Affects, Actions and Passions in Spinoza: The Unity of Body and Mind*, translated by Tatiana Reznichenko. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Lenz, Martin. *Socializing Minds: Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Sangiacomo, Andrea. *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.