Spinoza on the Mind-Body Problem -- William Meehan

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[This draft that will be cut down to under 10 minutes. Reading this version (2.500 words) should make the talk easier to follow.]

Spinoza, I would argue, was the most profound of the thinkers who took up the mind-body problem in the early modern period; but, though many of his insights anticipate contemporary neuroscience, he was not very interested in anything resembling what we would consider anatomy, or even biology. In the work most relevant to our discussion, *The Ethics*, he made only one observation that could be construed as related to physiology – in Postulate 5 of Book II, he says that the human body is composed of hard, soft and fluid parts, and that the fluid parts can transmit a stable impression of external objects to the soft parts.

It is doubtful that the extreme generality of this statement is due to ignorance of his contemporaries' more detailed anatomical and theoretical work. For one thing, we know he was in communication, through Oldenberg, with members of the Royal Academy (Nadler, 2001). For another, as the *Ethics* is to a large extent a modification and refutation of Descartes, it is hard not to read Postulate 5 as a minimalist version of Cartesian pneumatic theory. But Spinoza had theoretical reasons for rejecting the empirical approach being taken by the British natural philosophers and he was well aware that, even *Passions of the soul*

for all its anatomical detail, fails to account for interaction between the mutually exclusive mental and physical substances that Descartes posits.

Spinoza's main project was to naturalize ethics by treating the whole of human existence, mental and physical, as part of an all-encompassing natural universe (*E*3pref.). He understood nature to constitute a totality in which each particular thing and person is bound to all other parts, as well as to the whole, by an absolute law of causality, which holds that nothing can begin to exist except as the effect of external causes (*E*1p28, 35). His concept of nature was that of a network of causes, which can be thought of either as stretching out from, or converging on each particular thing, while binding all into a totality (*E*2p31) outside of which there is nothing (*E*1p14). The sole *apparent* exception to this law of causality is the totality of nature itself, which, because nothing exists apart from it, cannot have an external cause (*E*1d1, 4). It, therefore, must be considered not to have had a beginning and is, thus both eternal and self caused -- *causa sui* (*E*1d1).

Because of the extent to which Spinoza's use of the word "god" has led readers since the time of the German Romantics to mistake him for a Pantheist, it is important to realize that for Spinoza's scholastic predecessors, in both the Maimonidean and Christian traditions, *causa sui* was one of the principle ways of defining God (Aquinas, 1270; Ravven & Goodman, 2002). It is I would argue, primarily for this reason[1] that he refers to the totality interchangeably as God-or-Nature. The Romantics efforts to interpret this identification of God and Nature

[1] The usage may also have been intended to have had rhetorical value. Spinoza may have thought it made the work more accessible to his readers or that it offered him some protection against charges of atheism. It certainly did not have the latter effect, at least not for the first hundred years after publication.

as a kind of pantheism mistakenly imply that Spinoza saw nature as imbued with a divine spirit. In fact, he was arguing that Spirit or Mind is an attribute of nature in exactly the same way as is Body or Extension. For him, Mind is not infused into the physical, nor is it the product or cause of physical processes. Nature is mental as well as physical because the universe makes sense, and that sense is as much a part of nature as the extended objects it orders (*E*2p3, 4) – a notion similar to Wittgenstein's idea that nature has a language-like structure (c.f., Pols, 1982). Mind and Body are simply two different ways of apprehending the same reality. And, in an insight that anticipates some aspects of quantum mechanics and multi-dimensional physics, he asserts that, while Mind and Body are the only two attributes of nature that are knowable by humans, they are only two of an infinity of attributes, the rest [like the fifth through nth dimension] being inaccessible to us.

HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IS EMERGENT

All of this, of course, is more metaphysical than neuroscientific, (or even psychological) but, because individual things, including people, are, for Spinoza, modes of the totality, his understanding of the relation between human minds and bodies, his psychology, rests on this metaphysical doctrine that nature, as a whole and in all of its parts, is simultaneously mental and physical and can be as completely expressed by the one attribute as by the other.

It can be useful to think in terms of a continuum. At one end we can understand Mind (with a capital M) as the 'sense' that extended nature as a whole

'makes'[2]. At the other end of this continuum is the realm of simple particular things, which Spinoza sees as differentiable, one from the other, solely in terms of the speed and direction of their movement (*E*2a*2l1)[3]. Like the totality of nature, such simple particular things have both a physical aspect – the moving extended body – and a mental one – the idea of the moving thing.

By the principle of causality (*E*1p28, 35), the speed and direction of an extended thing's motion are externally caused (*E*2a*2l3), and no adequate understanding or idea of either can be formed without reference to the ideas of its proximate causes and to the totality of nature of which it is a part. However, there is one aspect of every movement that is attributable to, and intelligible in terms of, the particular thing itself, and that is its continuing in its present state of motion until its speed and direction are changed by some other external cause. This, of course, is the particle's inertia or momentum, "its own power [by which it], strives to persevere in its being" (*E*3p6, 7). Furthermore, this simple non-contingent fact is true whether we are talking about the moving thing (its extended aspect) or about the idea of the moving thing (its mental aspect).

A little further along in his discussion of physics Spinoza introduces the notion of complex particular things, groupings of simple bodies whose "mutual movements . . . preserve among themselves a certain fixed relation" (*E*2a*3d). Here, the principle that, "of their own power" particular things strive to persevere in being " (*E*3p6, 7), prevails. This means that complex bodies, though like simple ones, largely contingent on external things and events, as well as on the totality of

[2] I have scare quotes around the word *sense* because of that word's perceptual connotations and around the word *makes*, because, for Spinoza, neither Mind nor Body is the cause of the other.
[3] There are two sets of axioms in Part II. The first set, designated "a" is at the beginning of the part. The second, designated "a*", is to part of the material inserted between Propositions 13 & 14.

which they are a part, display something equivalent to the momentum or inertia of simple particles: emergent complex properties in the case of dynamical systems (Bickhard, 2010; Freeman, 2000, 2007) and homeostasis in organisms.

The scale of increasing complexity in particular things – from simple particles to inanimate dynamical systems to living organisms, and thence to social animals, like humans – is not, for Spinoza, a mere set of levels without moral consequences. The more complex a thing, he argues, the more it is capable of doing and experiencing at one time (*E*2p13s). More complex things have more power, physical and mental, and, the more power it has the more excellent, which is to say similar to God/Nature (as a whole), it is.

The term mental, in this context, refers to intelligibility, which is not the same thing as consciousness – the phenomenon we are interested in here. One problem with Spinoza's text is that, while he assumes that intelligibility and consciousness are both Mind, he does not argue this point as explicitly as he might have done and, in spite of clues to his thinking scattered throughout the *Ethics,* some scholars have gone so far as to assert that he had no explanation or theory of consciousness at all (c.f., Nadler, 2008). Such a reading, I think, is unwarranted as, at the very least, consciousness could be accounted for in Spinoza's system in terms of second order ideas – ideas of ideas being as much a part of nature as are ideas of bodies. Don Garrett (2008) and Steven Nadler (2008) however, have argued, persuasively that there are two passages in the *Ethics* where Spinoza treats consciousness as an emergent property. In the first of these, *E*2p13s, Spinoza says "as a body is more capable of doing or experiencing many things at once, its mind is more capable of perceiving many things" and in

the second, *E*5p39s, he says, "because human bodies are capable of a great many they are related to minds which have a great knowledge of themselves and of God [Nature]."

In Spinoza's metaphysics, the logic of seeing consciousness as emergent in this way is as follows. As noted above, the only aspect of a simple particular thing that is intelligible in terms of the thing itself is its inertial force, all other aspects of its movement being contingent and not of its essence because they are determined by a web of external causes, both proximal (which is to say other particular things) and distal (the totality of nature itself). The essence of a complex particular thing, however, is its internal dynamics or homeostasis, either of which requires environmental inputs for their maintenance. The environmental inputs themselves cannot be considered part of the thing's own power; they are external causes. But, as a complex particular thing is dependent on environmental factors not only, as in the case of simple things, for accidental aspects of its existence, but for the maintenance of its own intrinsic power, what is essential to complex particular things is a sensitivity to, or awareness of those conditions. At the level of social animals the behavior of conspecifics becomes essential to maintaining what we might call social homeostasis and it is at this point that the ability to interpret the behavior of others begins to both necessitate and give rise to what we think of as "self-consciousness."

CONSCIOUSNESS IS EMBODIED AND AFFECTIVE

If Spinoza's explanation of how consciousness arises is somewhat sparse,

the human psychology he presents in the *Ethics* is richly articulated. The endeavor-to-persevere-in-being translates, in psychological terms, to desire (*E*3p11s). Primarily this is the desire to live; but more than just a desire to remain alive, it is an effort to continue being what one is, to thrive, and includes desires for whatever living and thriving implies – that is, it is the basis for goal directed behavior, which many contemporary researchers see as a, if not the, crucial element of consciousness (e.g., Panksepp, 1998; Freeman, 2000; Ellis and Newton (2010).

Spinoza says that, the desire to maintain or increase one's power to continue being what one is is the essence of human nature (*E*3p7, Definitions of the emotions 1), an essence he sees as both bodily and mental (*E*3d3). Things that increase or decrease the ability to persevere in being are understood as analogous to those that change the direction of a moving particle; they are external causes, and we are only aware of the external environment to the extent that it acts as the cause of changes in our continuing ability to live and thrive. His reasoning here is that particular human minds are, first and foremost, the ideas of particular human bodies (*E*2p11), and therefore our ideas of things in the environment are limited to our awareness of how our bodies interact with them. As a result, all of our specific ideas about the world are essentially affective – a doctrine that directly anticipates both the finding of Antonio Damasio (e.g., 1994 & 2003) and those recounted in Ellis & Newton (2010). In Spinoza's psychology, Joy and Distress are the fundamental emotions registering, respectively, increases and decreases in this power (*E*3p11s). More specific emotions (he accounts for 48 of them) are mixes of either joy or distress with specific other ideas –Hope and Fear

for examples, are mixes of Joy and Distress with ideas about the future (*E*3p18s2).

SOCIALITY IS IMITATIVE AND CONTAGIOUS

Just as Hope and Fear are mixes of Desire with ideas of the future, so Love and Hate are combinations of Desire and the idea of an external cause of either an increase or decrease in the person's ability to persevere in being (*E*3p13). His ethical system recognizes that, while Desire-to-persist-in-being implies desire for external, particular things, and that such particular things are contingent. Desires for contingent things, as opposed to that for the persistence-in-being, itself are Passions; to be in the grip of a Passion is to be at the mercy of contingent things and is a kind of bondage (*E*3d2,). Ethical freedom, for him, is only to be found in the Desire for understanding – the love of reason. This is because only the love of reason expresses the human essence as a rational being has for its object not any particular thing but the rational structure [Mind] of Nature itself: an object which, though unattainable, is not contingent because it is the totality and not a particular thing (*E*3p58).

It is important to note that Spinoza does not say that Reason is an antidote to Passion (*E*4p14). Freedom is to be found in the Love of Reason, not in Reason itself (*E*4p7; 5p3, 25, 26). If what matters is our ability to persevere in being, all knowledge of the external world, in part or in whole, is knowledge of its effect on that ability, which is to say it is affective; and affects, like love of fatty food, status

or the elation of backing a winning team, can only be offset by stronger affects, like love of physical health, or mental equilibrium.

The ultimate ethical freedom comes from understanding that, whether we will or no, "we are part of the Totality of Nature and subject to its laws" (*E*). The pursuit of such understanding, he believes, is the essence of human nature, and as such is always operative, even when distorted by some particular passion. It is what we are always seeking and we love best what is most useful to us in that endeavor. And, he argues, what is most useful to us are things that are most like us, which is to say, other human beings (*E*4p18s, 35c1, 2). We are, thus, predisposed, because of our similarities, to interpersonal love and, absent other influences, to take pleasure in the idea of the other's pleasure, to have our own power to thrive increased by increases in that of others .He also argues, in *E*p31, that (again baring other influences) we are predisposed to love or hate anything we understand to be an object of another's love or hate, and to imitate the other's emotion (*E*3p18s). These observations, as noted by Heidi Ravven (2003) find contemporary echoes in work on both mirror neurons (e.g., Kohler, Keysers, Umiltà, Fogassi, Gallese & Rizzolatti, 2002; Goldman & Sripada, 2005; Rizzolati & Sinigaglia, 2007) and in primate research (e.g., de Waal, 2001; Stevens and Hauser, 2004; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Chapais, 2008)

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