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Philosophy 25B

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Spinoza's Views on Particular Minds and Particular Bodies

What are particular bodies and particular minds, according to Spinoza?

According to Spinoza, particular minds and bodies are all modes of a single and infinite substance – God (Spinoza, Ethics, Part I, Prop. 11, 25). However, particular minds are distinct from particular bodies in that particular minds are affections of God's attribute of thought, while particular bodies are affections of God's attribute of extension (Spinoza, Ethics, Part II, Prop. 1, 2).

How, in Spinoza's view, is your particular mind related to your particular body?

A particular mind and a particular body are related through their parallel expression under God's attributes of thought and extension. Part II, Prop. 7 describes how “the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas.” Since both a mind and a body are affections of different attributes of the same substance, they carry the same identity. In the Scholium, Spinoza provides an example: “a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle – which is also in God – are one and the same thing, explicated through different attributes.” Spinoza also argues that the causal order of a mind and the causal order of a body are the same. For example, my idea of a unicorn is predicated or caused by my mind, which in turn is predicated or caused by God's attribute of thought. Similarly, a drawing of a unicorn on a chalkboard is predicated or caused by the piece of chalk, which is predicated or caused by God's attribute of extension. However, the causal orders of affections under one attribute never interact with or influence

the causal order of affections under another attribute, but act synchronously as one substance.

How does Spinoza's answer differ from the answer that Descartes would give, and how might it be thought to improve on it?

While Spinoza believes that a particular mind and a particular body are related through parallel orders of expression and causation under the attributes thought and extension, he makes it explicitly clear that a particular mind cannot create, cause or affect any change in a particular body. Since each attribute is conceived independently through itself (Spinoza, Ethics, Part I, Prop. 10), the modes of any attribute “have God as their cause only in so far as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not in so far as he is considered under any other attribute” (Spinoza, Ethics, Part II, Prop. 6, Proof). My mind’s idea of my body picking up a book does not cause my body to physically pick up a book. Instead, my mind’s idea of my body interacts with the idea of a book to cause *the idea* of me picking up a book. Since thought and extension share identity as attributes of the same substance, the causal connection that occurs in my mind is paralleled by causal connections under all of God’s infinite attributes, including extension. Therefore, as my mind’s idea of my body interacts with my mind’s idea of a book, my physical body interacts with the physical book to cause the book to be picked up. However, none of God’s infinite attributes affect or impact one another. As long as things “are considered as modes of thought, we must explicate... the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone; and in so far as things are considered as modes of Extension, the order... must be explicated thought the attribute of Extension only” (Spinoza, Ethics, Part II, Prop. 7 Scholium). Spinoza adheres to a strict belief that everything is represented in some form under all of God’s attributes, but causality only occurs within and not between attributes.

In contrast, Descartes argues that particular minds and particular bodies are separate substances that interact causally with one another. In Meditation Six, Descartes discusses how,

insofar as he has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and insofar as he has “a distinct idea of a body… as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing,” he is certain that his mind is separate from his body, and “can exist without it” (Descartes, *Meditations*, Med. Six, 78). Later, he claims that the mind is immediately affected by the brain, “or perhaps even by just one small part of the brain” (Descartes, *Meditations*, Med. Six, 86). This argument stands in direct opposition to Spinoza’s view that particular minds and particular bodies are affections of the attributes thought and extension that never interact causally with one another.

Spinoza’s argument is an improvement on Descartes’ in that it doesn’t run into the problem of having to explain how the mind and body causally interact while simultaneously retaining their separation as two distinct substances. As a corpuscularian believer in Natural Institutionalism, Descartes believed that the body contains nerves that, when agitated, send signals “through the marrow of the spine to the inner reaches of the brain, where [they give] the mind the sign to sense something” and provoke the mind to move the body. However, Descartes is unable to describe exactly how the nerves transform into the separate substance of thought, rendering his argument somewhat incomprehensible. At an even more basic level, if Descartes sees mind and body as two distinct and independent substances that share no attributes, then they can’t be compared, caused or understood through one another. Therefore, Descartes contradicts himself by believing in a causal relationship between mind and body, which requires some amount of interdependence. Spinoza sidesteps this contradiction by claiming that everything is one substance, and since mind and body are affections of different attributes of the same identity, they share no causal connection.

Explain what you think is the most serious objection, or if you like, what are the most serious objections, that might be raised against Spinoza’s view of the relation between the human mind and

the human body.

Spinoza's theory on particular minds and particular bodies leaves one important question: what are the logical consequences of understanding our spatial/temporal existence (body), and consciousness of self (mind) as modes of the attributes extension and thought? Spinoza sees extension, thought and all other attributes of God's infinitely singular identity as chains of causal connection that never affect or interact with one another but instead act synchronously as one self-caused substance (Spinoza, Ethics, Part I, Definitions). However, if this is taken to be true, any and all objects must be considered under any and all attributes of god. For example, a piece of chalk would have a mind, and the idea of peace would have a body. However, if the mind is defined as anything remotely similar to self-consciousness, modern science and common sense would affirm that a piece of chalk does not have a mind and the idea of peace does not have a physical body. If we accept that inanimate objects don't have self-conscious modes of thought or that ideas don't carry physical extension, we then call into doubt Spinoza's general theory that all perceivable things are expressed as parallel affections under all God's infinite attributes.

Spinoza might counter-argue that things share comparable complexity (the mind of a piece of chalk is as complex as its extended form), or that the mind of a piece of chalk is just as unknowable as the mind of another person. However, if the minds of inanimate objects were as complex as their extended forms, extremely complicated objects like computers or spaceships would show independent and self-reflective cognitive activity. Secondly, arguing that the mind of an inanimate object is unknowable by no means proves its existence, but only demonstrates our shortcomings in cognitive observation.

Works Cited

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