

Remote Learning Module for 25 March 2020

Lecture Notes on Part II of Spinoza's *Ethics*

Last class we concluded our reflections on Part I of *Ethica*. In the course of that review, we found that the key to understanding the overall purport of this opening gambit is *Naturalism*. We find this especially in Spinoza's dictum, *Deus sive Natura* (which is best glossed as saying that the terms "God" and "Nature" are strictly synonymous; also note that we may find it more to the point to equate "God" with "The Universe," since we often think of "Nature" as referring to what happens on planet Earth, whereas Spinoza is thinking of the whole of reality, or all there is. More specifically, let's recall, that the key to Spinoza's naturalism is E1Pr14: God is the only substance; all other referring expressions have as their objects either (a) one of the attributes of substance, each expressing one of the essential characteristics of substance, or (b) one of the modes (inessential qualities) of substance, which may be finite (like you or me) or infinite (like time). Today, we'll turn our attention to Part II: on the relation between the attributes of Thought and Extension. Part I promised two necessary features of this relation: Property Dualism and Parallelism. Part II provides the satisfaction of those promises.

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(1) Property Dualism. While the hermeneutical key to unlocking Part I is E1Pr14, the key to Part II is E2Pr21s (the *scholium* to Proposition 21, which says: "the mind and the body are one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension." Remember here that Spinoza, like Descartes before him, and Newton after him, understands a material body as a region of space (extension in three dimensions) with various properties.

(2) Nominalism. Because only the whole of space can be considered, strictly speaking, as a thing, when we name any given quadrant of space a body, we do so by convention—that is to say, each "body" in our discourse is a thing in name only. Writing to Henry Oldenburg (First Secretary to the Royal Society), in this regard, Spinoza asks Oldenburg to imagine "... a little worm, living in the blood, able to distinguish by sight the particles of blood, lymph, &c., and to reflect on the manner in which each particle, on meeting with another particle, either is repulsed, or communicates a portion of its own motion. This little worm would live in the blood, in the same way as we live in a part of the universe, and would consider each particle of blood, not as a part, but as a whole" (Letter XV, formerly XXXII). If you are now wondering whether an instance of coronavirus is might be just such a worm, you are quite correct.

(3) Parallelism. E2P21s follows from the following series of propositions: E2Pr7, E2Pr7s, E2Pr11, and E2Pr13. Tomorrow we'll take up the *Lemmas on Bodies* that follow E2PR13. These Lemmas introduce Spinoza's physics—well, just enough physics for him to accomplish the business of defending parallelism, that is: how the human mind is mirrored in the human body.

E2Pr7: Here we find the general thesis: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” You may find it helpful here to think of the relation between what we call the “genetic code” for protein synthesis in living things (as well as viruses, for that matter) and the genetic macromolecules that appear in each particular sequence we think of as a “codon.” If we think of the code as information, and the molecules as what the information is about, then we have a decent analogy for understanding what Spinoza means when saying that the order and connection of ideas (information) is the one and the same as the order and connection of things (what the information is about). A better analogy, however, can be found in neuroscience: each and every element in our mindscapes, the province of our thoughts and emotions is, strictly speaking, no more than a range of neuronal circuits active in our brains at a given time. On either analogy, though, the important thing to remember is that we are not looking at two different things (idea/circuit or gene/codon), but rather looking at one and the same thing from different perspectives.

E2Pr7s: The scholium that follows Proposition 7 serves to elucidate the general idea (scholia, by the way, are added to propositions for this purpose--elucidation; they are not deductions. So, we can now see that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.

E2Pr11: In this proposition Spinoza concludes that “That which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is nothing else but the idea of an actually existing thing.” From this Proposition 13 follows directly.

E2Pr13: The *object* of the idea constituting the mind is the body. Here you might think again of our genetic analogy: the *object* of the idea of a gene, a unit of inheritance—the thing to which we are referring when we use the word “gene”—is a material string of macromolecules.

E2Pr21s: And so we come to the preeminent proposition of Part II: *Mind and Body are the same individual*. This is Spinoza’s response to Descartes’ discovery of the substantial union of mind and body (which appears in both Meditation VI and the *Passions of the Soul*). Recall that the substantial union was supposed to refute Platonic Dualism, and to show that the mind cannot be understood on the analogy of a pilot or steersman (*kibernetes*) on a ship. Both Spinoza and Descartes agree: our minds are not at all like pilots on ships. But Descartes finds himself in rough waters (forgive me the metaphor) all the same, in wanting to hold both the *substantial union* and the *real distinction* (minds and bodies have different essences and are therefore, in each instance, different things). In order to hold to dualism in the face of the substantial union, Descartes has to appeal to the pineal gland as the seat of the soul; but then, as Elizabeth of Bohemia was particularly astute to say, it’s not clear how to avoid the pilot—how to preserve the union. Spinoza, however, has no such problem; substance monism replaces Cartesian dualism, and in so doing preserves the substantial union free of contradiction.

(4) Materialism. The significance of E2Pr21s lies in its consequences. To appreciate these consequences, let’s review. E2Pr11 shows that the first thing which constitutes the *actual* being of the human mind is the idea of something which *actually exists*. In context, this is a surprising implication: it says that the essence of the human mind is a **relation** to something else—

something which actually exists. This assertion represents a significant departure from Cartesian ideas. Remember that, for Descartes, following the scholastics, the objective reality of an idea carries no ontological freight; in other words, we can have ideas that lack referents (unicorns, for example). But, for Spinoza, the idea which first constitutes the actual being of your or my mind must be the idea of something that *actually exists*. Now, let's add E2Pr11 to E2Pr13 (the object of the idea constituting a given human mind is a given human body), and we must conclude that *mind and body are inseparable*; moreover, one conceives oneself inadequately if one thinks otherwise. In short: Spinoza is a materialist.

(5) Physics. So, materialism is the first payoff Spinoza leverages from E2Pr13. Note that it is just here that he introduces the Lemmas on Bodies. As regards the *ordine geometrico demonstrata* (method of rigorous proof) which Spinoza is following throughout *Ethica*, we are to understand a lemma is a “helping proposition,” that is, an assertion that does not follow strictly from earlier propositions, but which will help us to understand what's going on in the propositions that *do* follow logically. These lemmas, as I noted to you earlier, introduce Spinoza's physics; in so doing, he's presenting us with the second payoff we can derive from E2Pr13, namely, that if we are to understand the nature of mind, of any mind, then we must understand the nature of the object to which that mind is necessarily related.

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Tomorrow, we'll continue our tour of E2 with a discussion of the Lemmas on Bodies. Be well everyone, and remember: social distancing saves lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently.

Also note that we've set Monday, the 30th as the due date for submitting your abstracts of E1Ap (the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*). If you need more time, just let me know; these are extraordinary times.