

Spinoza and the Self-Overcoming of Solipsism

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ABSTRACT

Spinoza, as a monist and a rationalist, seems unlikely to have occasion to confront any form of the solipsism problem. However, a close examination of his epistemology reveals that he does in fact confront a very radical form of this problem, and offers an equally radical solution to it, derived from the very epistemological premises that make it a potential problem for him. In particular, we find that the conception of the mind as the “idea of the body,” premised on the strict identity of mental modes (“ideas”) and extended modes (“bodies”) forecloses any possibility of awareness extending “beyond” the confines of the finite body, or of any idea being able to be about anything other than its own bodily mode: ideas can only be ideas “of” the body of which they are the idea, and hence the mind, as the idea of the body, cannot have any ideas “of” anything outside of the body. The solution comes from the “Common Notions” which establish the existence of the world outside the body not by “reaching” that world, but merely by establishing immanently the nature of the finite body qua finite body. This manner of instantiating an infinite externality of the body within the body itself, though highly exceptional in European intellectual history, bears interesting similarities to the solutions to distinct but parallel problems concerning the relation of the finite to the infinite found in Chinese thought, in particular in the Zhuangzi and in the Huayan and Tiantai schools of Buddhism.

Keywords

Spinoza, solipsism, mind-body problem, epistemology, Chinese thought

Spinoza and solipsism: this may seem a very strange topic. In the popular imagination, solipsism might seem to be premised on some sense of discontinuity,

isolation, impassability, incommensurability, a perceived problem about how to connect an “in here” with an “out there.” More strictly, solipsism entails an utter and complete denial of the existence of any “out here.” But on either conception, Spinoza, as a presumed monist of some kind, would seem to be committed to claiming an interconnection and continuity between all beings, all of which are modes of a single substance that necessarily entails an infinity of infinities, transcending the boundaries of any finite existence, extending boundlessly in all possible directions, all of which are views that would seem to exclude from the get-go any worries at all about solipsism. And we know also that Spinoza, though undeniably a kind of monist, does not seem to be a monist of any straightforwardly idealist stripe, that is, one who reduces all existence to perception or to mind, of the kind we later find in Berkeley or some strains of Buddhism, which might be thought to lend itself easily to the question of solipsism. Nor does he accept another possible premise of solipsism: a mind/matter dualism, which contrasts an inner sensorium of pure mental events against an outside world of physical reality, with the latter somehow “represented” in the former. Spinoza does not take perception to be a mysterious union of two essential incommensurate substances, mind and matter, between which some complicated guarantee of a connection would subsequently have to be discovered. Spinoza, moreover, is generally considered an arch-rationalist, claiming a priori knowledge of universal truths: how could the doubt of the veracity of perceived reality of external things possibly trouble him, as it might a strict empiricist who had only his own sense impressions as a source of primary knowledge?

And yet I want to claim that Spinoza does confront a version of what might be called the solipsism problem, and that he resolves this problem in a novel way with enormous philosophical significance. Briefly, Spinoza presents us with what might be called *the self-overcoming of solipsism*. That is, he fully accepts the version of the solipsistic problem endemic to his epistemology, and overcomes it not by dismissing it but rather by radicalizing it, thinking it through to its furthest conclusion. That is my thesis.

So I must claim first that, though it is rarely noticed, Spinoza’s theory of knowledge is profoundly solipsistic in certain ways. To illustrate in what sense this is true, we have to briefly review Spinoza’s epistemological framework. Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of knowledge (Spinoza, E2p40s2; Shirley, 90).¹ The first kind of knowledge, for Spinoza, is “imagination,” which includes both the modern sense of the term, including such things as pure fantasy and dreams, but also *all*

1. I will cite Spinoza’s *Ethics* in this standard way henceforth. This refers to *Ethics*, Part II, proposition 40, scholium 2.

perception. It refers strictly to all mental events that involve “images” or pictures—which for Spinoza would be circumscribed and definite patches of the infinite attribute of thought, expressing thought modally in some determinate way. These patches of the infinite attribute of thought are themselves also patches of the infinite attribute of extension, the same mode of substance conceived with respect to these two of its infinite attributes. This knowledge is “fragmentary” or “mutilated,” dealing with effects isolated from and disconnected from their causes, whatever is contingently encountered or brought to mind through adventitious associations. Whatever we see, hear, taste, remember or imagine falls into this category. In a related way, what are usually called universals—“man,” “animal,” “chair” and so on, general terms that purport to identify the shared essence or species character of a particular class of actual beings—and the meanings of words also fall into this category. For these are, in Spinoza’s view, the function of the imagination in the sense they are nothing more than reflections of the limitations of our imagination, which produces these supposedly universal concepts as simplified images as a result of its inability to hold in mind every particular image which it lumps together under a single name. Both perceptions and universal concepts are images, effects disconnected from their causes in a fragmentary and mutilated way.

The second kind of knowledge is rationality, which involves relatively more adequate ideas, incorporating the necessity of connection between cause and effect. This knowledge is adequate, in the sense that the grasp of a true definition or essence of a thing, for Spinoza, must include its efficient cause. But it must be noted that this kind of knowledge can *never* apply to perceived particulars or to universals that simply name their shared essence. For Spinoza’s conception of causality is extremely circumscribed: he admits no idea of causal efficacy except that which we would today be more likely to call logical entailment. That is, the Humean problem of inference does not arise at all for Spinoza, for whom the causal linking of perceived particulars or even universals is simply not coherent; indeed, both of these are by definition modes of knowledge lacking true causal connection. Rather, causation is really “following-from” in the logical sense. An effect is related to a cause as a conclusion is related to a premise. It tells us what follows from the nature of a certain essence, as it follows from the essence of a triangle that its three angles will equal 180 degrees, or that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Mathematical knowledge is the model for rationality in this sense. In my view, it is impossible to derive a consistent interpretation of Spinoza’s epistemology unless we take his characteristic use of the phrase “in so far” or “to that extent” extremely seriously: that is, we must admit relative degrees of greater and lesser adequacy, rather than a dichotomy between adequate and inadequate ideas. The second kind of knowledge involves at least *some* adequacy, which means

at least *one* link of genuine necessity between cause and effect. Knowing the necessary link between “straight line” and “shortest distance” is one such necessary connection, which qualifies all valid inferences as adequate ideas.

The third kind of knowledge goes further: it involves Spinoza’s famous monistic concept of Substance, or Nature, or God. It “proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things” (XL, note 2; Shirley, 43). Substance is most simply defined as that whose essence involves existence, meaning anything whose non-existence cannot be conceived, whose non-existence involves a contradiction in terms. The nature of Substance as exemplifying this structure can perhaps be most simply glimpsed if we think of it as meaning existence, in its most common meaning: “Whatever Exists.” For it is a manifest contradiction to say “Whatever Exists” does not exist. Note again in this connection that even “empty space” would be qualified for full membership in the class of “whatever exists.” God, or Substance, or Nature, or Whatever Exists, Spinoza thinks he can prove, is infinite, and infinite in infinite ways. Whatever Exists, or God, can in no way be limited, since even so-called non-existence would have to exist in order to limit it: it is necessarily existent, and necessarily infinite, by definition.

The “ways” in which it is infinite are called by Spinoza “attributes.” They are themselves types of infinity and necessary existence. One of the ways in which it is infinite and necessarily existent is as the attribute of Extension. The easiest way to think of this is to consider Space as such, including both empty and filled space. This is the material universe. The other attribute that we humans know about is Thought, which is also infinite and impossible to conceive as not existing, since this conceiving-as-not-existing that is negating the existence of thought would also be thought (which, I would suggest, is the real philosophical significance for Spinoza of Descartes’s *cogito*). This is the entire world of our awareness, which for Spinoza means all experience of any kind. The modes of Thought—determinate ways in which experiencing is variously expressed—he calls Ideas. An idea is an affirmation that something exists or is such and such in character. An idea qua idea always involves such an affirmation. That is, what is common to all ideas, all experience, is the fact that it is informative, its informativeness. We might therefore call it “information”

Extension and thought, each infinite in its own kind, are two attributes of Substance, which is infinite in an infinity of such ways. The non-existence of each of these is a contradiction in terms. There is shared structure that must be possessed by anything that is to be “conceivable only as existent”: it must be something that is somehow *instantiated even in its putative absence or negation*. The modes of one attribute are simply the modes of any other, viewed in a dif-

ferent way. The connection between modes of thought is itself the connection between modes of extension, though viewed in terms of the characteristic type of infinity that characterizes thought. Every bit of matter is also an idea. Every idea is also a piece of matter. Every patch of extension, that is, has some information about it, the idea of it. This idea *is* that patch of extension as seen in terms of thought. From this comes Spinoza's famous solution to the mind/body problem: the mind *is* the idea of the human body, that is, it is the "idea-version" of the body, as the body is the "extension-version" of the mind. They are, in fact, one thing considered in two distinct ways.

We will come back to this astonishing doctrine when we zero in on the problem of solipsism. But to do so, we need to go back to epistemology for a moment: The Third kind of Knowledge means to see the necessity of a thing as connected all the way back to the nature of Infinite Substance itself—that is, as necessarily existing Substance, of which there is only one—or one of its attributes. To grasp something by the Third kind of Knowledge is to see, as it were, that it necessarily follows from the existence of God, which is itself necessary in that it would self-contradictory for it not to exist. This means that this event or mode is built into the nature of existence, that it too is literally unimaginable and logically self-contradictory for this thing not to exist exactly as it is. Let me give an example. The first type of knowledge includes hearsay, opinion, facts accepted on authority, fantasy, and also ordinary perception. The cup is red, Caesar was a Roman emperor, the circumference of this circle looks bigger than twice its diameter. The second type is knowing, intellectually, why this is so, even being in possession of a formula for calculating it. This can be applied to some of these imaginings, but not others. The circumference of a circle is calculated through the formula pi times diameter, and since pi is greater than two, the circumference has to be bigger than twice the diameter. We can know in principle that a similar necessity applies also to the redness of the cup and the citizenship of Caesar, but we probably cannot know all the links in the chain of causality that embody that necessity. Spinoza says that the third kind of knowledge "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things" (Spinoza, E2p40s2; Shirley, 90). That means, for example, that by understanding what "extension" is, we can understand the principles of geometry. We understand that "a line is the shortest distance between two points" follows from the very nature of space, of extension, of dimensionality, which is entailed in any knowledge of what a point is, what a line is, what a plane is. We see that it is no accident that the diameter is shorter than the half the circumference, because the former is a straight line between two points while the latter is

a curved line between the same two points. It follows *necessarily* from the nature of extension itself, as entailed in the nature of what a line is and what a curve is. Further, since space-extension is an attribute of God, it is absolutely necessary, its non-existence cannot be imagined. The non-existence of the fact that a line is the shortest distance between two points also cannot be imagined, for any non-shortest-distance line would cease to be a line in dimensional space, by definition. To know this as actually another way of thinking the essence of space, and the essence of a point of space, we realize we have said nothing new, and indeed that this is not a “positive” bit of knowledge of what just happens to be so, but something that literally cannot be imagined to be otherwise. Extension “causes” it to be so that a diameter is shorter than half the circumference. All things are “caused” by God in just this way, and in reality there is no other type of causality. To know in this way is the Third kind of Knowledge.

Spinoza calls the third kind of knowledge “intuition,” but this can be misleading. The third kind of knowledge does not negate the logical connections of the second type, as “intuition” might suggest. The third kind builds upon this logical knowledge, is its consummation. The straight line/shortest distance example will naturally bring to mind the Kantian question: Does Spinoza think the Third Kind of Knowledge involves analytic or synthetic judgments? The answer to this is that precisely this distinction is what the Third Kind of Knowledge leaves behind. The question “is the predicate contained in the subject?” presupposes that the subject itself is a single, isolable entity of some kind. Is quantitative “straightness” somehow “contained” in qualitative “shortness”? These are “two different” things—how are they connected? Spinoza’s metaphysics denies that “straightness” can be adequately conceived as an independent entity; that would make it, in effect, a substance unto itself. Rather, like any other determination, the conception “straightness” can only exist “in” something else: in this case, in the attribute of extension. We cannot know what straightness is without having a prior understanding of what extension, dimensionality as such, is. Straightness is a *mode* of extension. It is not a thing, nor a fact, nor a quality that can stand alone: isolated from extension, it is unintelligible, a contradiction in terms. It is a ripple in extension, and cannot be truly conceived in isolation from extension. So when we ask whether the predicate “shortness” can be found “in” “straightness,” we have to understand that “straightness” is itself not just straightness: it involves the entire nature of extension as such, from which it is inseparable. The various modes of extension are not separate things; a relation of absolute sameness or difference cannot pertain to them. They are *modes*. What this means is that they necessarily have something in common: what Spinoza calls “common notions,” which are the qualities of extension that are by definition equally present in all of

its parts qua extension, that is, without which they would not be extension at all. So the Third Kind of Knowledge is more something like a short circuit, where a synthetic proposition is suddenly seen to be analytic. Or more precisely: it is to see that it is inherent in being an analytic proposition that it is also synthetic. For Spinoza, then, there is no analytic proposition that is not also synthetic, nor any adequate synthetic proposition that is not analytic. This does not mean that all propositions are simply analytic, nor that all are simply synthetic. A circumference of any circle is necessarily bigger than twice the diameter; but this is not a piece of extra information in addition to knowing how to identify the circumference and the diameter. The two are not accidentally related. They are not even ultimately extrinsic to one another. To know what a diameter *is* is to know that it is smaller than half a circumference. To know adequately what space is is to know what a diameter is. To know what space is is to know that it is as present in its absence as in its presence.

It is the nature of reason, the second type of knowledge, to see things as necessary and therefore under the form of eternity. But there is still some sense of compulsion felt by some in the forms of logical deductions—the necessity of “must be” can be felt as a burden. This is removed by the third kind of knowledge. Nothing is being imposed on anything. Even the initial presence of the thing from which anything is being deduced is not a new piece of information: it is another way of speaking of what cannot be imagined not to be. Even the initial term is not merely “given.” It is what would be there even if it were taken away—like space, like thought.

On this picture of knowledge, what can error be? The first type of knowledge is the only source of error (EIIp41; Shirley, 91). But “error” is conceived here not as something that has no basis at all in reality, or that stands in a dichotomous, mutually exclusive relation with truth. Whatever occurs or appears has its own causes, and is ultimately rooted in the nature of Substance or God. Erroneous really means “inadequate”: partial, mutilated, fragmentary. Errors are fragments of truths. The very notion of error as a truly baseless, arbitrary, random appearance, which is in no way a piece of reality, has no place in Spinoza’s system. Indeed, strictly speaking, it is unthinkable and meaningless. Spinoza can thus claim that “there is nothing positive in false ideas” (EIIp33; Shirley 86), that “falsity consists in the privation of knowledge, which inadequate, fragmentary or confused ideas involve” (EIIp35; Shirley, 86), that “inadequate ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate ideas” (EIIp36; Shirley, 87). This has quite radical consequences. Spinoza claims, in E2p47s (Shirley, 95), that

when somebody says that the lines joining the centre of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he surely understand by circle, at least at that time, something

different from what mathematicians understand. Likewise, when men make mistakes in arithmetic, they have different figures in mind from those on paper. So if you look only to their minds, they indeed are not mistaken; but they seem to be wrong because we think that they have in mind the figures on the page. If this were not the case, we would not think them to be wrong, just as I did not think that person to be wrong whom I recently heard shouting that his hall had flown into his neighbor's hen, for I could see clearly what he had in mind.²

In the local context, Spinoza makes this claim for “some” errors; but I would like to tweak this to claim, by Spinoza’s own epistemological claims in the propositions just cited, that it actually applies to all errors. Falsehood does not inhere in any statement per se—indeed, all statements express the Absolute Truth, which is *Deus sive Natura*, in one of its infinite ways of being expressed; for all that is positive in them, whether adequate or inadequate, follows from necessity from that cause, and what follows necessarily from the absolute is an expression of the absolute for Spinoza. The falsehood is more correctly called a relative privation of adequacy which exists only in the comparison of this statement to another, or to other usages of the same words, or between the figures on the paper and the figures in the mind—although each is itself a full expression of God to the extent that it exists—that is, has necessary causal efficacy—at all. Some statements say more, and some less; in themselves, all are truths, but in some, when compared, there can be said to be a relation of relative completeness or incompleteness to them, depending solely on their range. Each incomplete (inadequate) truth is itself a fragmentary element of larger adequate truths. And no matter what we may assert, we are always involving our absolutely adequate knowledge of the essence of God (EIp15; Shirley 40 and EIIp47; Shirley, 94): it is impossible to be wrong about that, just as it is impossible to conceive God not to exist (EId1; Shirley 31 and EIp15; Shirley, 40), just as it is impossible to hate God (EVp18; Shirley, 212-213). What that means is that anything you do not have an adequate idea of *all the time* and implicit in every other idea, is ipso facto *not God*; similarly, anything you can even wonder about the non-existence of, anything you could so much as entertain the notion of the non-existence of, is ipso facto *not God*; and anything you hate is ipso facto *not God*. You cannot be wrong about, doubt, or hate God; that means you may go ahead and be as wrong as you like, doubt as much as you like, hate as much as you like, without ever being in the slightest danger of being wrong about, doubting or hating God. What we call an error is really simply *less complete* than a truth, an effect which is conceived in isolation from a greater or lesser number of its causes; we

2. Let it be noted that as far as I know this is the sole example of a *joke* in the entire *Ethics*.

have a scale of greater and lesser degrees of completeness. There is no true and false: there is only whole and part.

One may object that Spinoza has here only pushed the problem of error back one step. If error is just partial truth, surely the implicit judgment that the part is in fact the whole is still a plain error, in sharp dichotomy to the truth that whatever one may be conceiving is part of a larger fact. But actually Spinoza dispenses with the idea of “judgment” altogether: an idea, he tells us, insofar as it is an idea, always already involves affirmation and negation. That is, one does not first have an idea—an awareness of some image, like a “dumb picture on a slate”—and then in addition either affirm or deny its reality or truth. Its mere presence is all the affirmation there is. However much information is present is what is affirmed, not some additional claim about that information. By default, one is affirming whatever is encompassed in the largest and most complete set of ideas operating in one at any time. The horizon of one’s awareness is the horizon of one’s affirmation. To have them within the horizon of awareness is to have a body capable of being affected by them without losing its characteristic ratio of motion and rest in the relation of its parts. Having them within this horizon of awareness is just to have them operating in relation to one another, either connecting into chains of causal entailment or contradicting, that is, excluding, one another.

What is the process of “connecting”? What is “reasoning”? Merely what all *action* is: finding the efficient causes entailing effects, that is, intrinsic necessities that *produce effects*. There are no passive ideas: all ideas are active, themselves have a conatus, that is, their essence is an endeavor to have effects, to persist, to preserve themselves, to maximize their own activity. This means they will each endeavor to thrive and connect with whatever is consistent with their greater perfection, which is to become parts of causal chains of necessities that constitute adequate ideas, that is, to become truly active. The ideas *themselves* do this. This does not involve any separate operation of affirming anything as true, but merely as it were to consider them as candidates for truth, to merely have them in play against one another. As long as one has not yet connected one’s awareness to the infinite horizon of Substance, taking anything less as the totality of ideas available to be related to one another without excluding one’s own bodily existence, one is to that extent involved in inadequate (“false”) ideas. The first kind of knowledge is not false, according to Spinoza: it is merely limited. All falsehoods are partial truths. “There is nothing positive in false ideas by virtue of which they are called false.” Falsehood is just the limitation of an idea, its incompleteness.

Spinoza’s favorite example is the appearance that the sun is 200 feet away (EIIp35s; Shirley, 86–87): it is true that it appears 200 feet away and this remains *part* of the truth which is not destroyed but only supplemented when the rest

of the more adequate account of the causal story is arrived at. When we think it really *is* 200 feet away, this just *means* that we *lack* the knowledge of a bunch of other things: laws of optics, astronomy, atmospheric deflection, the structure of the eye and brain and so on. A more true—that is, complete—knowledge would simply involve supplementing the initial appearance into a complete matrix of causes; and importantly, this would not make the appearance vanish. We still see the sun the same way, rising and setting, even when we come to know that it is not revolving around the earth. Now the only thing that is “wrong” with this is that it is a limitation on our power: it makes us more passive rather than active, for we are unable to act in ways that incorporate and can affect this interconnection of things. For this reason, our incomplete or “false” knowledge causes us pain. True knowledge, the knowledge of necessity, the third kind of knowledge, is by nature joyous, for it is literally an expansion of our being. To know is to be enlarged, to be doing more, for more of what happens in the world to follow from what one is. It makes more of what happens become one’s own doing.

Thus errors, like modes themselves, are actually “things of reason,” that is, things that exist not in themselves but only in comparison to something else, as something that finite minds construct when comparing a greater reality to a lesser reality. Do these differences, and hence these errors, “really” exist? Do modes “really” exist? Or even attributes? All of these seem to be dependent upon a way of looking at them. Attributes are *defined* (EId4; Shirley, 31) as what appears to the intellect—the human intellect—as expressing or constituting the essence of substance, namely, as expressing infinity. Individual things “express” the nature of an attribute in a fixed and finite and determinate way. They are “considered” one and the same thing “to the extent” that they act in tandem (EId7; Shirley, 63). “To express,” or “to be perceived as constituting,” means to express (or “be perceived”) *to someone*. To say something is “considered” a certain way means that *someone so considers it*. Who is this someone? It is the mind as expressed in the mode of a particular human mind. Substance and every attribute of substance, in their own nature, are undivided, indivisible. My mind, as a mode of that substance as the attribute of thought, sees things as divided. It sees itself as separate from other minds. It sees bodies as separate from each other. It sees cause as separate from effect. Are these things really there, in God, or not? Without these separations, there is no time: everything happens at once. For it is all one thing. Even to see modes as separate from one another, even modally separate—this mode as opposed to that mode—is that something that exists in the mind of God?

The answer: whatever ideas are in God’s mind are true. The idea of the world as separated into modes is not in God *except insofar as he constitutes the nature of*

a particular mind that so sees it. This mode—myself—sees itself as separate from other modes. Note that what makes modes real is simply the fact that modes see modes as real; their realness coincides exactly with their appearance to be real, they are performatively verified by the fact that they come up for the question of verification at all. With this mode, which is me seeing itself as separate from other modes, comes this mode's view of time, of cause and effect, of separate objects, and so forth. Does God see things this way? Yes. But only in and as this expression of thought which is my mind. In other words, God sees things this way, but sees things *otherwise as well!* And in God, both views are indivisible: the world as separated into modes and the world as indivisible, the world with comparatively greater and lesser realities and the world where everything is itself a fully real and true expression of God, the world with error and the world without error. *God being the inseparability of thought means he is also all possible views on the whole, including both separation and non-separation, duality and non-duality, negativity and no-negativity!*

Now we can begin to see where a modified version of the solipsism problem comes in. Spinoza tells us that the mind is nothing more or less than the idea of the body. That is, one and the same mode of substance is, in terms of the attribute extension, conceived as this body, and, in terms of the attribute of thought, conceived as this mind. The mind is not in the body. The body is not in the mind. The mind is not connected to the body. The mind is not separated from the body. The mind is not reducible to the body. The body is not reducible to the mind. Rather, mind and body are quite literally two names for one and the same thing (that is, one mode, that is, a set of modes working together at some time as the cause of a single effect).

This means that for Spinoza there is no such thing as a “mind” which is aware “of” some other “thing.” In an important sense, knowledge involves no “of” relation at all. As for Leibniz a few years later, but with an entirely different justification, knowledge or awareness of the world is not actually a relation between two things, subject and object. When we perceive something, we do not have a representation of that thing “in” something else called “our mind.” On the contrary, the mind simply *is* the body, viewed in terms of the attribute of thought rather than extension. Every mental event is also a bodily modification. When I see that cup on my table, my mind or vision does not somehow go “out there” in the world to apprehend the cup. Rather, the causal interaction of light with my eyes changes the configuration of my eyes, and thus of my brain. I am not aware of the cup: I am aware of *only* my own body and its changes. More strictly, my awareness *is* my body, conceived under the attribute of Thought. The world I see around me is actually no different from the appearance of the

sun as being 200 feet away: the true causes of it are generally misconceived. In fact, my awareness of the world I see around me is just awareness of my own body. I know only my own body. Further, the way I perceive them follows from a combination of both the external body and my own body—and Spinoza says more from the latter than the former. I cannot know the nature of these external things at all from my perception of them; what they tell me about is mainly my body, but I can never disentangle what comes from where, what really belongs to external things. Again, in the final analysis, I know only my own body. For I, my mind, simply *am* the awareness of my own body. My mind is my own body, looked at not as so much body but as so much awareness or information. My mind extends no farther than my body. The very chunk of extension which is my body is the chunk of awareness that is my mind, and by definition my mind can never extend beyond that, any more than my body can.

Thus far, Spinoza is a solipsist. How is this overcome? How then can we know that there are external things at all, let alone that they are interacting with my body and causing these alterations in it? This is where Spinoza's concept of "common notions" becomes important. A common notion is not a universal, such as horse or man, which derives from the weakness of our imagination. It is rather, Spinoza says, what is equally in the whole and in the parts. It is the same in, common to, equally present in, all parts of the universe. This is to be contrasted both to a putative universal, like horse, and a putative particular, like Mr. Ed. The universal essence "Horse" or horseness is not present in all parts of the universe: it is present only where there are horses, and is absent wherever horses are not. Mr. Ed's presence is even more restricted: he is only in Wilbur's stable, and nowhere else. A common notion, by contrast, is equally everywhere.

What does this mean? Again Spinoza has mainly geometric models in mind. The common notions are the basis of our ability to reason, he says, and the only source of adequate ideas, and this is possible only because there are some things about extension that are just as present in the whole of it as in any part of it, and which are equally whole and complete in each and every patch of it, no matter how small. This is because without them, extension would not be extended, which is a contradiction in terms. In any patch of extension, qua extension, a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. This necessarily follows from the nature of extension, which necessarily exists. Any extension of which the straight lines were not the shortest distance would, Spinoza thinks, not be extension at all, for straight line simply means the shortest distance between two points, and points means that which the shortest distance between is straight. Because my body is a patch of extension, this property of straightness-being-shortest is fully present, completely present, in my body. More to the point,

all the deductions made in Part I of the Ethics are common notions. To know them, my mind does not need to extend beyond my body. It is a kind of knowledge of my body, of something about my body, of the nature of my body as a mode of extension. Or more strictly, it is information, or idea, that is involved in each and every particular idea which composes my mind, which is itself the complex idea of my body. My body is a complex set of modes of extensions maintaining a constant ratio of motion and rest and acting together to produce the effect of maintaining its existence. Each such mode involves extension qua extension, that is, the common notions which are in all parts of it equally, without which it would not be extended, just as all the points and all the lines and all the angles of a triangle involve the idea of space, and could not exist if this idea, *per impossibile*, were removed. My mind is this same complex set of modes, viewed as a complex set of pieces of information. Each of these involves thought as thought, the common character of information, informativeness, affirmation, which is in all parts of it equally, without which it would not be thought. That is the idea of God, Infinity, Whatever Exists, which all other ideas involve. Hence Spinoza can make the seemingly astonishing claim that the human mind always and necessarily involves an adequate idea of God (EIIp47; Shirley, 94–95). For all common notions are by definition everywhere adequate.

Among these things I know of my body, simply as my body, are the facts that it is determinate, and that it is changing. But from the common notion of God, which is itself internally involved in every part of my body, I know that God, the infinite, cannot be determinate, and that whatever is determinate is finite. For, Spinoza says, “determination is negation,” that is, finitude, the state of being limited by something other than it which circumscribes it, while God is infinite and indeterminate—pure indeterminacy. Similarly, I know that the infinite cannot become other than it is, since there is no other to cause it to change, or into which it could change. It thus cannot change. So my changing perception means that my body is changing, which means it is affected by external things. Since causality is logical entailment, Spinoza asserts that cause and effect must have something in common, namely the attribute of which they are modes, the idea of which is involved in both. So I know that changes in my body are caused by external things of the same type—that is, other modes of extension. Even though I do not perceive external things, in other words, the very fact that my perception changes means that there are external things affecting my body, which means there are external ideas affecting my mind, though I never actually perceive them as such. Knowing all this is just the knowing of my own body which *is* my own mind.

The ideas that are involved in every single one of the component parts and relations internal to my body are the Common Notions, like the idea of Substance.

It is these that allow me to know that my body is finite, in spite of the fact that my knowledge never extends beyond my own body. My body is limited, and as limited it is not self-determined, but involves the common notion of extendedness, on which all the parts depend. Internal knowledge of my body involves both knowledge of its limitedness and of the necessary existence of something that by definition exists both within and beyond it, since this something's non-existence cannot be conceived. It follows necessarily from the nature of my body as a mode of extension, therefore, that it is effected by other modes external to it. I know this by knowing my own body, from within my own body, as it were. I do not know external things in any other way. Knowing that it is the nature of a mode, I know that it cannot produce its own representations. Hence I can deduce that its changes are the result of the causal effect of external bodies upon my body. I cannot know what those bodies are, the nature of those bodies, because my perceptions of them are always mixed with the nature of my own body. But I can know, by knowing my body, *that* there are external causal influences on my body.

In other words, imagine that you *are* a circle. The mind of this circle is just the idea of the circle: this piece of information affirming the presence of a circle, which as a circle has such and such properties. You cannot “know” anything outside of yourself. All you know is the circle. This knowing is just what you are. But when you come to know anything about yourself *rationally*, that is, in a way that involves necessity and logical entailment—for example, that your diameter is less than half the length of your circumference—you are bringing into play the common notions that are found equally through every part of this circle that you are, which are involved, by definition, in each part of its circularity. Involved in each idea that is part of this rational knowledge of the circle is the idea of space or dimensionality itself: Euclidean geometry. For the nature of dimensionality itself is involved in every rational bit of knowledge you have about yourself qua circle. To know what space is, however, is to know that it cannot be limited by anything but more space, that outside of any finite and circumscribed space there must be more space. This means that by apprehending myself as circle, as a determinate shape with identifiably necessary internal relations, I have to apprehend the fact that I must be determined not by myself, but by external things, even though by definition I can never know those things, for I can only know that which I am. Involved in any rational self-knowledge, any necessary deduction about yourself as a circle, is the adequate, complete, notion of space itself: not part of that notion, but all of it, for it is equally complete in all the parts that involve it. So merely by knowing yourself more thoroughly, rationally, understanding your structure and its necessity, you are also knowing the existence of the outside world that you can never know.

I would like to conclude with some comparative considerations. For, though Spinoza's approach to this problem is very uncommon, if not unique, in Western thought, it bears important structural similarities to at least two other cases, neither of which is part of the Western canon: that of the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE), and certain claims, possibly influenced by Zhuangzi's own approach, found in Chinese Buddhist philosophy. In Zhuangzi's case too, with his very differently constructed epistemology, the overcoming of solipsism is done by completely accepting solipsism.³ I can never see beyond my own perspective—but the having of a perspective, precisely qua the having of a perspective, internally entails the positing of other, alternate perspectives. Indeed, a perspective is not a “perspective” unless it implies the existence of alternate perspectives. For anything to be present, to be “here,” to be “this,” is already for it to be part of a perspective that posits a “not-here,” a “that.” But that is precisely the positing of an alternate perspective. In other words, we need not go outside of our perspective to have access to the presence of alternate perspectives. I think we can see, in their very different idioms, some similarity here between the method of Zhuangzi and Spinoza. Both look to some intrinsic characteristic of finitude per se as the sole means of transcending finitude. In Spinoza's case, the nature of a limited mode, qua limited mode, is to be externally affected by other modes. This nature of the limited mode, however, is deduced entirely from the common notions which are immanent to it, since they are by definition immanent to every conceivable mode. In Zhuangzi's case, it is the nature of a “This/That” (*shi/fei*) perspective to posit the alternate position against which it has to be contrasted, thereby involving the view of the other on itself. The nature of any perspective is to posit and oppose, and therefore to involve, other perspectives. This too comes solely from the nature of a perspective, of any This, which necessarily entails a This/That, considered as such. In both thinkers, then, we notice a structurally similar move: the transcending of solipsism not by trying to reach something beyond the finite.

The derivative Buddhist cases can be noted in the Huayan Buddhist claims both that “all phenomena are present in each phenomenon,” on the one hand, and that “no phenomenon knows another phenomenon,” on the other.⁴ In the

3. For a complete elaboration of this reading of Zhuangzi's epistemology, see my “Zhuangzi as Philosopher,” available at <http://www.hackettpublishing.com/zhuangziphil> as supporting material to my *Zhuangzi: The Essential Texts with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).

4. See, for one example among thousands, Fazang, *Huayanjing yihai baimen*: “One small speck of dust ... pervades all times and places, and yet this one speck of dust, and all other phenomena do not know each other or see each other. And why? Because each one is the entire

case of Tiantai Buddhism, we have a perhaps an even more thoroughgoing example, in the claims that all things are at once “nothing but matter” and “nothing but mind,” as well as “nothing but scent,” “nothing but sound,” “nothing but form” and so on (Zhiyi, *Sinianchu*, Taisho Tripitaka 46.578c)—in short that any and every possible phenomenon is absolutely alone in the cosmos, and yet this *internally* establishes the seemingly paradoxical claim that every *other* possible phenomenon is *also* alone in the cosmos. Each one is all there is, and this is known about all the others from *within* every one of them. In the Tiantai case, this amounts to the claim that while I am the only being in the cosmos, *who I am* is also you, not merely as some inner Atmanesque essence but in all the details of your every action and thought, for each of these actions and thoughts is as validly and necessarily experienced as these and as those; my existence as the only being in the cosmos is thus also you being the only being in the cosmos. These resonances, in spite of the vast difference in presuppositions and terminology and perhaps even ultimate metaphysics, perhaps provide a good starting point for a more extended engagement between Spinoza’s thought and that of the Daoist and sinitic Buddhist traditions, which has up to now been pursued only on the highly misleading level of comparative metaphysics and possibly ethics, based on the problematic assertion that we are dealing in all these cases with metaphysical monisms. That may or may not be true, but the truly interesting part comes when we consider the unusual epistemological resonances between these disparate systems, which have large implications for how we should correctly understand the putative monism in each case. But a further exploration of this issue must be postponed to a future work.

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perfectly interpenetrating universe, integrating all into itself with no other universe outside of it. Thus they do not need to further know or see each other. Even when we speaking of knowing or seeing, all of it is the entire universe knowing and seeing; ultimately there is not additional universe to see or know” (Taisho Tripitaka 45.627b, my translation).



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