

Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Tuesdays, Thursdays: 9am - 10:15am

Hamilton College

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Spinoza, *Ethics*

0. [X-Phi on Free Will](#)

I. Freedom and Error - An Overview

At the beginning of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes confronts a serious puzzle in the problem of error. Once he establishes that we are both created and preserved by an infinitely good God, the possibility of error, despite appearances, seems unlikely.

Descartes's solution is constrained by the need to avoid ascribing imperfections to God, while admitting that God's creation is imperfect and prone to error.

Descartes tries to solve that problem by showing how we can act independently of God.

Turning to Spinoza, the problem of error appears even more intractable.

Not only are we created and preserved by God, for Spinoza; we are God!

Descartes availed himself of our independence from God: our free will.

Spinoza denies that we have such freedom, as we have seen.

Descartes can sneak out of the window to go to the party; Spinoza is stuck inside the house.

Further, since we are, in substance, God, it seems that there can be no false ideas; all ideas are true.

All ideas are true insofar as they are related to God (*Ethics* 2P32, AW 178a).

There is nothing positive in ideas whereby they can be said to be false (*Ethics* 2P33, AW 178a).

Every idea which in us is absolute, that is adequate and perfect, is true (*Ethics* 2P34, AW 178a).

Spinoza's solution, in brief, to the problem of error is that while there is no falsity (i.e. every idea is true to some degree) there are clearer ideas and more confused ideas.

The clearer ideas are closest to the truth.

At the upper limit, there are adequate ideas.

In particular, there are geometric ideas which do not admit of any confusion.

But, since we are just one attribute of God, we only have ideas from a particular perspective, and this limitation prevents full apprehension of truth, generally.

II. Freedom and Error - The Dirty Work

Spinoza's account of human error involves his determinism, and his interpretation of human freedom.

We'll start, as usual, by contrasting his position with that of Descartes.

Spinoza denies what appeared to be an uncontroversial assumption of Descartes's, that ideas, in themselves, are neither true nor false.

For Descartes, an idea is a mere representation.

Only judgments can be true or false.

In contrast, as we have seen, Spinoza thinks that all of our ideas are true.

Spinoza argues that every idea contains within itself an affirmation.

Ideas are not mere representations, but carry beliefs with them.

Descartes's view was that an idea is like a picture.

For sensory ideas, we have an image; for non-sensory ideas, we have a non-sensory representation.

We can either affirm or deny that our representation holds in reality.

Spinoza's claim that all our ideas are true thus differs from Descartes's claim that they can not be false.

While Descartes's assumption appeared uncontroversial, it does lead to the odd claim that we are free to choose whether or not to affirm a given belief.

In contrast, many philosophers hold what has come to be known as doxastic involuntarism: we can not choose what to believe.

('Doxa' is Greek for beliefs.)

Doxastic involuntarism is a compelling thesis: just try to believe that, say, your roommate is an alien from Venus.

Even if you are promised a reward for believing such a fact, or threatened with severe punishment, you can not believe it.

You can pretend to do so, but you can not sincerely do so.

Spinoza, rejecting Descartes's view, claims that our ideas are not neutral, but come with built-in beliefs.

I deny that a man makes no affirmation insofar as he has a perception. For what else is perceiving a winged horse than affirming wings of a horse? For¹ if the mind should perceive nothing apart from the winged horse, it would regard the horse as present to it, and would have no cause to doubt its existence nor any faculty of dissenting, unless the imagining of the winged horse were to be connected to an idea which annuls the existence of the said horse, or he perceives that the idea which he has of the winged horse is inadequate (*Ethics* 2P49 Scholium, AW 186b-187a).

Thus, the default belief attached to any idea is an affirmation.

To deny that there is a winged horse, there must be another positive idea which crowds it out, which overrides our initial affirmation.

Spinoza's view that our ideas come with intrinsic beliefs gives us a reason to reject Descartes's claim that truth and falsity do not apply to ideas.

His claim is that even the most confused and inadequate idea has some measure of truth in it.

Even a fantastic idea, like the chimera or a hallucination, reflects a change in a mode of the one true substance, and so has at least a small measure of truth to it.

Thus, Spinoza believes that truth comes in degrees, and that our less-true ideas are, ideally, over-ridden by the more-true ones.

To begin my analysis of error, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error; i.e., the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack the idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to itself (*Ethics* 2P17 Scholium, AW 173b).

Spinoza's view of beliefs highlights the problem of error.

The distinctions between levels of truth among our ideas get his solution started.

He has recast the problem from one of accounting for how we make mistakes to one of describing why some ideas are more true than others.

¹ Bennett makes a convincing argument for reading the Latin *enim* here as 'thus', instead of 'for'.

III. Passive and Active Ideas

Another aid to Spinoza's account of error relies on a distinction between passive and active ideas, and the freedom we have in our active minds.

As long as we are passive, we receive ideas from outside of us.

Those ideas are of bodies, as we saw above, and in 2P11, 2P12, and 2P13.

Ideas of bodies are inadequate, or mutilated, or confused.

They are confused especially because they are caused by the interaction of my body and other bodies.

Recall Descartes's discussion at the end of the Second Meditation: the wax brought him more knowledge about himself than it did about the wax.

The inadequacy of our understanding of wax and other objects outside of ourselves prevents us from excluding those overriding ideas which block them out.

The inadequate ideas are not false, exactly; how could they be?

But, they are less true than the adequate ones.

They are governed by psychological associations, rather than by logical ones.

The distinction between my active and passive ideas mirrors Spinoza's distinction between two ways to conceive of substance: *natura naturans*, or active nature, as God conceives himself; and *natura naturata*, or passive or generated nature, God as conceived through modes.

Spinoza has removed as much of the anthropocentric view of God as he could from Descartes's metaphysics.

But, there are limits.

We are finite, and any account of the world and its structure will have to include us.

Spinoza includes us by making us part of God, considered in a finite mode.

IV. Inadequate and Adequate Ideas

Spinoza claims both that all ideas have some truth, and that the ones that are active are more true than the ones that are passive.

Let's take a particular example of an idea which might be thought to contain an error.

Descartes considered two ideas we have of the sun: a sensory idea and one derived from reason.

He determined that the former is false, and the latter is true.

Spinoza, in contrast, thinks that both are true, to different degrees.

We do make an error, when we affirm that the sun is small, or not so far away, as it appears.

But that error is, properly speaking, just inadequacy, not falsity.

When we gaze at the sun, we see it as some two hundred feet distant from us. The error does not consist in simply seeing the sun in this way but in the fact that while we do so we are not aware of the true distance and the cause of our seeing it so. For although we may later become aware that the sun is more than six hundred times the diameter of the earth distant from us,² we shall nevertheless continue to see it as close at hand. For it is not our ignorance of its true distance that causes us to see the sun to be so near; it is that the affection of our body involves the essence of the sun only to the extent that the body is affected by it (*Ethics* 2P35 Scholium, AW 178b).

² Indeed: the distance from the earth to the sun is more than ten thousand times the diameter of the earth.

On the other hand, there are some stronger, clearer, and more adequate ideas.

Those things that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole can be conceived only adequately (*Ethics* 2P38, AW 179a).

Common ideas are those that come from the use of reason, which is one of three kinds of knowledge Spinoza describes in 2P40 Scholium 2.

The other kinds are sensory, which Spinoza calls opinion or imagination, and intuition, which Spinoza says is the highest kind of knowledge (5P25, AW 189).

In this case, we can see Spinoza aligning with Descartes.

Descartes claims that what I called the Class III beliefs were free from errors of reliance on sense experience, from reliance on the resemblance hypothesis.

Class III beliefs are innate, and so secure.

Similarly, Spinoza claims that the common ideas are the result of reasoning, which does not rely on inadequate ideas received passively from outside of us.

These most-secure beliefs are active ideas that we discover ourselves.

They are governed by logical necessity, and they allow us to engage God.

The human mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God...and thus it is as inevitable that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are true as that God's ideas are true (*Ethics* 2P43 Scholium, AW 182).

Primarily, the common notions concern pure geometry and philosophy, and knowledge of God.

V. Spinoza's Determinism

It looks as if Spinoza is encouraging us to spend our time focusing on the adequate ideas, those which Descartes would have called clear and distinct.

Unfortunately, the situation can not be quite that simple.

According to Spinoza, we just lack the freedom to choose other than the way in which one chooses.

Everything is determined.

Spinoza criticizes Descartes for using the method of doubt, in part because he says that such doubt is impossible.

Again, we can not freely choose our beliefs.

We can only pretend to believe that we are dreaming, or deceived.

If Cartesian doubt is impossible, then no counsel against it could be effective or even appropriate.

Still, Spinoza defends a kind of freedom which arises from focusing on the active ideas.

For Spinoza, freedom is having a greater proportion of adequate ideas, so that one is more fully self-determining.

Since we can never have only active ideas, purely adequate, freedom, like truth, is a matter of degrees.

Even though our actions are determined, we can still strive (in some sense) to be free of our passions, our base desires.

Such striving leads us to a kind of eternity.

We can strive to be free by contemplating ourselves as finite modes in Nature.

The mind's intellectual love towards God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the mind's intellectual love towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself... From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God (*Ethics* 5P36, and Scholium, AW 191-2).

Spinoza, in the end, urges us to give up the commands of the passions, to free ourselves from our confused understanding, and to contemplate the eternal as a route to happiness. He derives advice on how to live from the metaphysical and physical realities he has described. While he phrases that advice in the language of love of God, the advice itself is not particularly religious. Indeed, it echoes Plato's counsel away from the constraining and never-satisfying pleasures of the body, and toward philosophy and the love of knowledge.