

DUST DEVILS AND BRAINSTORMS:
DOES SPINOZA THINK I AM REAL?

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Introduction

Like anybody, Spinoza needs real individuals. It's hard to do metaphysics without them. And if he is going to presume to offer advice about morals and politics, it would surely help if human beings turned out to be at least *somewhat* real. How else can Spinoza tell us that we ought to seek adequate knowledge of ourselves and our world, and that we ought to act upon that knowledge and establish a tolerant, liberal republic in which we are free to think what we please and say what we think? Who would be the beneficiaries of these actions? And to whom would he be giving this advice? And, indeed, who would be offering it? The very nature of Spinoza's moral and political projects, at least, presumes that human beings are, if not *totally* real, then at least *pretty much practically* real.

But on the other hand, we know that Spinoza believes that there is and can be only one substance in existence: the most perfect and all-encompassing substance there can be, which he calls "God." There is only one thing that exists in itself, and is conceived through itself. Everything else -- all the other apparent things that seem to be cluttering up the universe -- are *modes* of God, which means that they really are just God, but God fashioned in one way or another. No analogy can be perfect here, but one might initially have in mind a vast supply of clay, out of which are fashioned dozens of little

figurines. Each figurine is fundamentally *clay*, but clay that is fashioned in a distinctive way. But the defect in this analogy is that lots of *different* things go into the making of figurines. There is the sculptor who sculpts them, the different shapes that are imposed on each one, and (as somehow part of it all) the *spaces* separating the figurines. It is hard to imagine two distinct figurines without also imagining something separating them that is not a clay figurine. And this is where the analogy breaks down. According to Spinoza, there is and can be nothing other than the one substance. *Everything* is that substance, modified in some way. So now try to imagine all of those clay figurines, swimming in an ocean of clay, where even the sculptor herself is made of clay, swimming in the same ocean of clay, clay, and more clay, nothing but clay. Is it still obvious that the figurines are real individuals? Michelangelo and I might stare at the same hunk of marble, and speak of the many figures in it, waiting to be freed from the stone. But are all of those individuals real? It does not seem they could be. The individuals are fictions or possibilities in our minds, and only the hunk of marble is real. So are any of us real, according to Spinoza?

To answer this question, we need to look at both bodies and minds in Spinoza's metaphysics. After doing so, I will conclude with some observations about the reality of the self in Spinoza's metaphysics.

The body as a dust devil

There is no way to enter into a detailed discussion of bodily nature in Spinoza without presuming one or another of a range of scholarly interpretations. I will assume a Baylean interpretation of Spinoza's extension, which claims that Spinoza's God is the material

substrate of the universe, the basic matter out of which all things are composed, like the clay in our analogy. The scholastics had a special term for this material substrate: *prime matter*. They usually described prime matter as being entirely formless, but Spinoza seems to have not gone this far. He believed that some features were intrinsic to this substrate, like extension and mobility.¹

According to this interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics, bodies are *modes* of the underlying substrate. To see more exactly what this means, we need to review the understanding of "mode" Spinoza inherited from the later scholastics. The scholastics followed Aristotle in believing that individual substances (like you and me) are composites of form and matter. Each substance also has a set of accidents, or what they called "*real accidents*," which are properties that characterize the substance at a *general* level: the substance is said to be vaguely in motion, or shaped, or heated, for example. But the *specific* motion or shape or heat of the substance is understood as a *mode*. So, literally, the mode is the specific *way* (*modus*) in which the substance is moving, or shaped, or heated. Modes are thus specific determinations of real accidents.

Now the scholastics believed that there is a distinction between the substance and its real accidents. God, for illustration, could miraculously sustain real accidents without a subject, or with a change of subject (as in the case transubstantiation). But not even God could sustain *modes* without a substance, since modes were usually understood

¹ I defend this interpretation in Charlie Huenemann, "Spinoza and Prime Matter," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42:21-32. This interpretation was offered by Bayle in his *Dictionary* of 1697, and has been challenged by Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), Roger Woolhouse, *Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz: The Concept of Substance in 17th-Century Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Tad Schmaltz, "Spinoza on the Vacuum," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 81:174-205.

ontologically as being *nothing other than* the substance itself in a particular state. So the particular motion of a body (like moving eastward at 25 mph) *just is* that body moving in that particular way, and similarly for its particular shape or whatever. One of the biggest breaks Descartes made with scholasticism – what he believed would prove to be “the greatest stumbling block” among his readers – was his getting rid of real accidents and treating all properties as modes.²

Now Spinoza also got rid of real accidents. But he went further still. Descartes, after getting rid of real accidents, still inserted something, a buffer, between (1) the modes of a body, and (2) God, who creates and sustains everything. That buffer is (1.5) *a body*, a created substance. So *God* creates and sustains a *body*, which has a set of *modes*. But Spinoza got rid of the buffer. He denied that there could even be such a thing as a “created substance.” So he let the modes that had belonged to the body belong directly to God.

This ought to strike anyone as confusing and outrageous (and, historically, it has). For it is one thing to say that the property a particular baseball has of traveling at 83 mph as it crosses home plate *just is* that baseball, modified in a certain way; it is quite another thing to say that the same property *just is* God, modified in a certain way. Are we to think that God travels over the plate at 83 mph? What about the stink of a pile of garbage – is it *just God*, modified in a certain way? What about the viciousness of Caligula, or the sinfulness of Judas? Are these things *just God*? **Yes**, says Spinoza; but he thinks the oddness of saying such things is mitigated by inserting the qualification: God, *modified in*

² See Stephen Menn, “The Greatest Stumbling Block: Descartes’ Denial of Real Qualities,” in Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene, eds., *Descartes and His Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

a certain way. We do not say that God moves, stinks, sins, etc., but only God, *insofar as God is modified in such-and-such a way*, moves, stinks, sins, etc. (Does this qualification really do enough to make the claim that creatures are modes of God more palatable? Historically, the answer seems to be *no*.)

Anyway, from the perspective of 17th-century physics, there is good reason to think of bodies as modes, mostly because the early modern philosophers largely disowned all of the Aristotelian machinery that was designed for the purpose of individuating bodies or substances from one another. In early modern physics, all physical properties, including smells and color and shape and temperature, are supposed to reduce to one thing: *homogeneous matter in motion*. Here, for example, is how Spinoza proposes to understand bodies: a body is individuated from its neighbors, including the space surrounding it, so long as the pattern (*ratio*) of motion and rest among its parts is stable:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies. (2p13s)

But what is doing the moving? Ultimately, it seems, some sort of underlying *stuff*, about which practically nothing can be said except that it is extended and movable. Any distinction drawn between this portion of it over here and that portion of it over there can only be based on what that underlying stuff is doing here or there, or how it is moving. It is exactly like distinguishing different swirls in a pool, or different weather patterns in the atmosphere. The “things” (if we want to call them that) are individuated on the basis of what they are doing, or (more specifically) how their parts are moving, and not in virtue of any underlying material difference in the things themselves. Spinoza went well beyond everyone else when he identified this underlying matter with God, but when he claimed that bodies are really only modes of extension, he was simply owning up to what all his peers were in fact committed to: namely, that all matter everywhere is the same, and bodies are only clusters of properties (and, again specifically, properties regarding motion, or changes of place).³

But that is not quite all there is to say on the matter. For when Spinoza defines what it is to be the essence of an individual, he does not refer to a stable swirl of matter, but to a *striving* (*conatus*) of a thing to maintain itself over time (2d2). The parts may change, and perhaps the swirl itself may change a bit within some limits, but the striving remains the same until the thing actually dies or disintegrates. But it is not clear how this conatus is ontologically grounded: out of a region of swirling matter, how does there emerge a *striving* on the part of the swirl to maintain itself over time? Who or what has this striving?

³ Leibniz is an exception to this generalization, as he tried to resuscitate some elements of Aristotelian physics in his account of bodies. For an overview of Leibniz’s account, see

Spinoza's answer seems to be that nothing *has* this striving; or rather, the individual *is* the striving. But, again, where does it come from? Why does it exist? To the extent Spinoza discusses the grounding of the conatus at all, it seems that the conatus of each organism comes from the *outside*, from larger bodies of which the organism is a part. The existence of the larger bodies entails the existence of the strivings of its components. For the sake of illustration, here is a famous passage from a letter of Spinoza's where he compares our epistemic situation in the universe to that of a worm swimming in someone's bloodstream. What we and the worm do not typically see is the way that the overall nature of the organism determines the motions of its parts:

All bodies are surrounded by others, and are determined by one another to existing and producing an effect in a certain and determinate way, the same ratio of motion to rest always being preserved in all of them at once, that is, in the whole universe. From this it follows that every body, insofar as it exists modified in a certain way, must be considered as a part of the whole universe, must agree with the whole to which it belongs, and must cohere with the remaining bodies.
(Letter 32; Geb IV/172-3; Curley, p. xxx)

Spinoza's claim is that a body coheres and strives because such activity is required for the larger body of which it is a part. And this larger body coheres and strives because that is required for the maintenance of an even larger body, and so on, like a series of Russian dolls, proceeding upward to the extended universe as a whole. So, it would seem, if I

"Leibniz: Physics and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, edited by

were taken out of the universe, and put in an empty one, I would lose all unity and disintegrate. My existence, as a striving, is holistically determined by outside forces. So I am not quite like a dust devil in a desert. I am not merely an effect of my environment. I play a functional role in the sustenance of the environments surrounding me. I am a dust devil with a purpose.

The largest body containing me and everything else is God's body, according to Spinoza. He calls the universe as a whole a "mediate infinite mode" of God, which means that it follows more or less directly from the absolute nature of one of God's attributes, which exist necessarily. (He nowhere calls the universe "God's body," but the term seems fitting, so long as we avoid the pitfalls of anthropomorphism.) "The whole of nature," Spinoza writes, "is one Individual, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual" (2p13s, scholium to L7). This largest individual remains the same throughout its infinite change because it keeps the same pattern of motion and rest among its parts, and strives to maintain that proportion. This universal striving, one might conjecture, is God's own striving, or (stated more carefully) an extended expression of God's essence, which is God's power (1p34). Put in yet another way: the one substance exists through its own power, and one way in which that existence comes to be expressed is the entire physical universe.

All of this is exceedingly hazy and imprecise, but Spinoza's texts do not offer more than this to work with. The overall picture I am trying to sketch, in sum, is this:

1. There is one genuine substance, which counts as a genuine individual;

2. The universe of bodies is itself a body, whose essence is some expression or consequence of the one substance's essence;
3. Finite bodies exist only as means by which the universe of bodies undergoes infinite changes while remaining the same individual over time.

It would seem, then, that ultimately there really is just one individual – the one substance – and all finite individuals are just the ways by which that one grand thing maintains its own identity. There is no unity inherent to us, other than the functional role we play in the bigger organisms containing us. As those larger organisms require, we crop up into existence, and then are gone again.⁴

The mind as a brainstorm

The human mind and the human body are one and the same thing, according to Spinoza, conceived in two different ways. Moreover, this holds universally in Spinoza's metaphysics. Each and every body and the idea of that body are one and the same thing, conceived in two different ways. And just as each finite body is contained by another, and that by another, and so on, up to the physical universe as a whole, so each idea is contained in another, and that by another, and so on, up to the infinite intellect, or the mind of God. Since these two nesting structures of minds and bodies are in fact one and the same, they have the same structure: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (2p7), as Spinoza demonstrates.

⁴ Spinoza embraces this consequence: "The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the essence of man" (2p10); and "From

So, given the conclusion of the last section, we would naturally assume that the human mind's existence is as fragmentary, and as dependent on the one substance, as is the human body's. It is; here is Spinoza's account of the mind's existence:

From this it follows that the human mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God. Therefore, when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human mind, or insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partially, or inadequately.

(2p11c)

God's intellect is a field of ideas. Some of these ideas (the ideas of human beings, let us say), imply or contain other ideas, either wholly or in part (idea A partially implies or contains idea B just in the case that some but not all components of idea B are included in or implied by idea A). So human minds arise out of the relations among the ideas in God's intellect, just as human bodies arise out of the relations among bodies, large and small, in the physical universe.

Notice that Spinoza writes not just of the human mind, but of "*the nature of the human mind.*" What is this nature? Well, it should come as no surprise that the nature of

this it follows that the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God's

the mind is the idea of the body's nature – namely, the idea of the body's conatus. The nature of the human mind is also a conatus, or a striving to maintain itself over time. The mind's striving, like the body's, is also determined by the requirements of the strivings of larger and larger minds or ideas, and all of these strivings are determined in the end by the striving of God's great big intellect – which is the idea or mind of God's body. Ultimately, as in the case of bodies, our minds are merely the means by which the intellect of God maintains itself. Spinoza makes the parallel between bodies and minds in the same letter quoted above, the one comparing us to a worm in someone's blood:

You see, therefore, how and why I think the human body is a part of Nature. But as far as the human mind is concerned, I think it is a part of Nature too. For I maintain that there is also in Nature an infinite power of thinking, which, insofar as it is infinite, contains in itself objectively the whole of Nature, and whose thoughts proceed in the same way as Nature itself, its object, does. (Letter 32; Geb IV/173-4; Curley, p. xxx)

So if our bodies are (purposeful) dust devils in the maelstrom of the physical universe, our minds are also (purposeful) “brainstorms” in the massive thundering cognitions of the infinite thinking thing in nature (the “Thunderhead,” as I am tempted to call it).

Something more perhaps needs to be said in order to make this view of the mind a bit more familiar. David Hume famously observed that when he introspected, he never encountered a self, but only a bundle of impressions or ideas. But he regarded these

attributes” (2p10c).

impressions as passive. Spinoza, by contrast, thinks each idea has a striving to perpetuate itself. Ideas with more powerful strivings inevitable win out over weaker ideas, and this point is crucial both to Spinoza's explanation of why many people end up in a kind of mental servitude to ideas that are promoted vividly and vigorously, and also to Spinoza's philosophical therapy program, which urges replacing irrational ideas with rational ones. The mind, according to Spinoza (and later Nietzsche and Freud; later still, Dawkins and Dennett) is a battlefield of ideas, all of which strive for dominance; *we* (as subjects) are the overall heat and din of the battle, not indivisible souls who experience the ideas. But Spinoza goes further than this, taking the turmoil of the mind to be playing some instrumental role in a grand process of cognition taking place globally, rather like a Hegelian *Geist*. So we are not merely battles, but battles in the midst of a vast ideational war of sorts, whose end is only to perpetuate itself. (And here we can see how Schopenhauer connected with Spinoza: the will to existence has no other goal than its own perpetuation, which entails human striving and misery; better not to exist at all!)

Reality of the self

By this point we have probably seen enough to be able to understand how Spinoza can offer moral and political advice to individuals. Let us recap: insofar as we exist, we exist as particular strivings entailed (ultimately) by God's essence. The same goes for other things, with which we causally interact. To the extent our actions and behaviors by our own "marching orders," so to speak, they are free, and to the extent they are compelled by others' marching orders, we are not free. The highest moral and political goal, for Spinoza, is freedom, or self-determination. The advice he offers amounts to strategies for

being as self-determined as possible. And this is what his moral and political philosophy aims toward.

Still, we might wonder whether this really amounts to freedom, since our “self-determination” is really the characteristic way in which we are compelled to act, given the natures of the bigger individuals containing us. One is reminded here of Hegel’s notion of freedom, according to which the individuals who are most free are the ones who take the striving of the world-spirit as their own, and join in the cause of the spirit’s great historical unfolding. Napoleon was the world-spirit on horseback precisely because what he was doing was aligned perfectly with the world-spirit’s agenda (or so Hegel thought). But the rest of us might feel that this so-called freedom is nothing other than being a pawn in someone else’s game – and that doesn’t sound much like freedom at all.

It is here that the question of the reality of the self in Spinoza’s philosophy becomes most acute. In order to pursue the matter more deeply, I want to turn to Spinoza’s most involved discussion of it, which is found in part 5 of the *Ethics* (entitled, appropriately enough, “Of human freedom”).

We need to prepare the ground a little bit. First, recall that Spinoza thinks that each and every portion of extended stuff will include some important intrinsic features. These include the features that make the stuff extended and movable and susceptible to being described accurately by geometry. We might think here of Euclid’s basic axioms: they lay down the perimeter for the domain of geometry. Similarly, there are mental analogues to these physically intrinsic features, and Spinoza calls them *common notions*. Common notions are perhaps like laws of logic, such as that any two things identical to a third are identical with one another. All ideas have these features carved in them; that’s

what makes them entities of thought. When the mind is able to make constructions and draw conclusions from these inherent common notions, the mind has a form of knowledge Spinoza calls *reason*. Otherwise, when the mind gains ideas as a result of its body's fortuitous encounters with other bodies, it is said to *imagine*. Reason, according to Spinoza, always yields adequate (or complete) knowledge; imagination is always inadequate (or incomplete).

Of course, all ideas in God's mind are self-determined, since there is nothing external to God, and so God can be said to have nothing but fully adequate knowledge. Since our minds and bodies are finite, we are bound to have a lot of inadequate knowledge. But to the extent that we can replace the ideas we gain through the imagination with ideas we have derived from reason, our knowledge grows in its adequacy, and our minds more and more resemble the mind of God. Indeed, let us not forget our ontological foundation: our minds more and more *become identical with* the mind of God. Our individuality begins to slip away, as we are joined in an intellectual union with the massive thinking substance.

Now we are in the territory of the second half of the last part of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and the twenty or so propositions concerning the eternity of the human mind. Spinoza introduces this block of propositions with a demonstration of the claim that "The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal" (5p23). He elaborates:

As we have said, this idea [of the essence of the human body] is a certain mode of thinking, which pertains to the essence of the mind, and which is necessarily

eternal. And though it is impossible that we should recollect that we existed before the body . . . , still we know by experience that we are eternal. For the mind feels those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in memory. For the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves.

Therefore, though we do not recollect that we existed before the body, we nevertheless feel that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body from an eternal perspective, is eternal, and that this existence it has cannot be defined by time or explained through duration. (5p23s; Curley's translation slightly altered)

Let us go over this carefully. How do we regard the conclusions of reason? If we are platonistically-inclined rationalists, as Spinoza was, then we regard the conclusions of reason as eternal truths, meaning truths that do not at any time *become* true or *cease* being true; they are at all times true. So if, through the exercise of our reason, we form an idea of the essence of the human body, then we have conceived an eternal truth of the following form: "The existence of this particular dust devil is necessitated by the existence of an infinite mode of God." We see the possibility of our existence from the view of eternity. This idea we have in mind is an idea of the essence of the human body, and so (since the mind just is the idea of the body) this idea must pertain somehow to the essence of the human mind. Hence, *something* pertaining to the essence of the human mind is eternal. Now since we are operating here in the realm of reason, and not the realm of the imagination, there can be no memory of such a timeless existence; memory

is a product of the imagination, according to Spinoza. But, curiously enough, Spinoza adds that, nevertheless, we can “feel” that our mind is eternal, since we do in some sense “feel” something when we reason. There is a force of thought pushing us toward our conclusions, just as there is a causal force present in sensation, and these forces can be felt. “For the eyes of the mind,” Spinoza writes, “by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves.” By this I think he means: *seeing* that X follows from Y is a phenomenological episode, whose object is itself eternal.

In the ensuing propositions of part 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza describes a return to our ontological origins, in a sense. The key to human blessedness is the recognition that the essence of our mind *just is* God, modified in a certain way. This act of rational self-recognition fills us with a certain self-esteem, since (according to Spinoza’s psychology), the mind always experiences joy when it portrays to itself its own power and perfection. This joy that is associated with the idea of God engenders an intellectual love of God. Thus, in what is sort of a crescendo in this part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza demonstrates that

The mind’s intellectual love of God is the very love by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is finite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human mind’s essence, considered from an eternal point of view; that is, the mind’s intellectual love of God is part of the infinite love by which God loves himself. (5p36)

As Spinoza points out, though we might talk about *coming* to recognize our eternity, or at some point *experiencing* the intellectual love of God, it is a fundamental ontological fact that we have never been anything other than God, modified in a certain way. What we are

doing, as we meditate upon these propositions, is stripping away the illusion that we are substances, and revealing the truth of our identity with the one substance. As Spinoza says, “The mind has had eternally the same perfections which, in our fiction, now come to it” (5p33s).

If we reach this point of epistemic transcendence, then we are supposed to realize that the striving of God is really our own striving. Fundamentally, we are not compelled by forces alien to ourselves, but forces inherent to ourselves, given who we really are. But then what all this amounts to is that the answer to the question in this essay’s title is: “Not really.” The one substance is real, of course; indeed, it is the only real thing. And the existence of this one substance really does entail purposeful dust devils and brainstorms, just as a consequence of the existence of its infinite modes. But the trick – the key to human freedom, and human happiness – is to recognize that our bodies and minds are not true substances, but are short-lived implications of far deeper forces.