Spinoza’s Eternal Self

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Introduction

In this paper, my principal aim is to consider Spinoza’s notions of the self and mind. It seems to be rather unanimously accepted, among Spinoza scholars, that Spinoza had a Humean bundle theory of the mind and the self. Any human self is just a bundle of God’s ideas. Because of the problems faced by the bundle theory of the self, one should, as much as possible, avoid attributing such a view to any great philosopher of the past. In this paper, I will first consider the reasons why scholars are so fond of attributing the bundle view to Spinoza. I argue that it is true that Spinoza thought that any mind is a bundle of ideas but that bundling by itself is not sufficient for there to be a mind that belongs to somebody. After that, I will give a positive account of Spinoza’s theory of the self. It will be claimed that, in a sense, any thinking thing is identical with God. Thus, the self of Charles Dickens is Spinoza’s only substance God acting with a certain force characteristic to Charles Dickens. This idea will be further elucidated by Immanuel Kant’s notion of intensive magnitudes. It will be claimed that once Spinoza’s theory of the self is given this interpretation, there is room for individual immortality which should be distinguished from personal immortality. Also this view swims against the current of contemporary Spinoza research.

1 Bundle Theory

1.1 Subjects and Bundles: the Problem of Subjectless Bundles

The temptation to attribute a sort of bundle theory to Spinoza seems to stem from two principles. First, Spinoza thinks that individual bodies are composite entities consisting fundamentally of simplest bodies (corporae simplicissimae). When a set of such simplest bodies form a composite body they are tied to each other through a relation Spinoza calls ratio of motion and rest. It is this ratio which fundamentally is responsible for the individuality of a body. Parts of the same body may come and go without the destruction of that body if the same ratio of motion and rest is preserved. Second, Spinoza thinks that there is a perfect parallelism between mental and bodily items. Suppose now, that a body B exists
which at a certain moment is composed of two simplest bodies x and y. That x and y form a body means that they are tied to each other by a certain ratio R. Because of the parallelism there are mental counterparts, or ideas, of x and y, and also of the relation R, which will be abbreviated as I(x), I(y), and I(R) respectively. Thus, a mental individual I(B) whose individuality is determined by I(R) exists when B exists. Of course, there are several more or less sophisticated versions of Spinoza’s bundle theory and this rough picture does not do full justice to them, but I believe the problems in this simple version are imported to the more sophisticated versions, too.¹

It seems that the bundle theory is built on plausible premises, and I do not want to quarrel with them. Thus, I accept that there is a parallelism between compositional mental entities and bodies. But the problem is why these compositional mental entities that correspond to bodies should be minds of subjects; i.e., why they couldn’t just be free-floating complexes of ideas. Moreover, why can’t it be the case that these complex mental entities be complex ideas in one and the same mind without any multiplicity of subjects? (Of course, Spinoza allows that these complex ideas are all in God, but he grants the existence of several subjects.) So, the bundle theorist has to answer that the relation I(R) is of such nature that its instantiation is, ipso facto, the instantiation of a subject distinct from the instantiation of any other I(X). However, it seems difficult to hold such a position. To explicate, I do not want to deny that the mind of a human subject requires a certain kind of coherence of ideas or that her mind has to be united to a body in some way or other. But the big question that I believe has to be faced is what makes a complex of ideas, be it as coherent as it may, the mind of somebody. A particular human mind may contain extremely coherent subsets but it seems that it would be rather daring to call these subsets minds that belong to distinct subjects. One might be tempted to answer this by pointing out first that for Spinoza a body is individuated by its form, a ratio of motion and rest, and then, second, that for Spinoza there is a perfect parallelism between mind and body. Thus, corresponding to any individual body there is an individual mind. This is certainly true, but it would give no answer to the big question, i.e. what makes this mind the mind of someone.

1.2 Acting Bundles

It is extremely important for Spinoza that human beings act. Even though he stresses the finitude of human beings and their being constantly exposed to external causes by which they are affected, he also leaves room for certain events being completely caused by us and thus being actions. Spinoza defines acting as follows:

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e., (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature,

¹ For a version of bundle theory in Spinoza, see (Della Rocca 1996, pp. 41–43).