

Spinoza: Proposition 13, Ethics II

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1 Relevant Propositions, Axioms, and Corollaries

Pr.36,I Nothing exists from whose nature an effect does not follow.

Ax.4,II We feel a certain body to be affected in many ways.

Ax.5,II We do not feel or perceive any individual things except bodies and modes of thinking.

Cor.Pr.9,II The idea of an individual thing existing in actuality has God for its cause not in so far as he is infinite but in so far as he is considered as affected by another idea of a thing existing in actuality, of which God is the cause in so far as he is affected by a third idea, and so ad infinitum.

Pr.11,II That which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing.

Cor.Pr.11,II ...The human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God—not in so far as he is infinite but in so far as he is explicated through the nature of the human mind, that is, in so far as he constitutes the essence of the human mind—has this or that idea...

Pr.12,II Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind is bound to be perceived by the human mind; i.e. the idea of that thing will necessarily be in the human mind. That is to say, if the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind.

Pr.13,II The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body—i.e. a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else.

2 Introduction and Argument

In Propositions 10-13, Spinoza turns his discussion to man and his nature. The punchline is Proposition 13: the object of the idea constituting the human mind is indeed nothing but an existing body. The argument is as follows:

[Begin Pr.13a,II] If the body were not the object of the human mind, the ideas of the affections of the body would not be in God (Cor.Pr.9,II) in so far as he constitutes our mind, but in so far as he constitutes the mind of another thing; that is, (Cor.Pr.11,II) the ideas of the affections of the body would not be in our mind. But (Ax.4,II) we do have ideas of the affections of a body. Therefore the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, a body actually existing (Pr.11,II). **[Begin Pr.13b,II]** Again, if there were another object of the mind apart from the body, since nothing exists from which some effect does not follow (Pr.36,I), there would necessarily have to be in our mind the idea of some effect of it (Pr.12,II). But (Ax.5,II) there is no such idea. Therefore the object of our mind is an existing body, and nothing else.

There are two important properties of Spinoza's demonstration. First, this is actually two separate and independent arguments which I have labeled Proposition 13a (Pr.13a,II) and Proposition 13b (Pr.13b,II). The former asserts that the object of the idea constituting the human mind must *at least* consist of a body but leaves open the possibility for the inclusion of something else. The latter asserts that nothing *more than* the body could constitute the object of the human mind. The result is that the body and only the body constitutes the object of the human mind.

The second property of the demonstration is that each of its subproofs are by contradiction—an irregularity in the early *Ethics*. Why would Spinoza choose such a method? There are two possible explanations: necessity and clarity. A property of most basic logical systems is that all provable propositions can be deduced by contradiction while not all provable propositions can be constructively demonstrated. It could be the unlikely case that the conclusions of Propositions 13a and 13b fall into this latter category, i.e. their demonstration necessitates a proof by contradiction.

On the other hand, given that all true propositions are deducible using contradiction, Spinoza is most likely using the method to deliver a clearer, more concise proof.

3 Interpretation

There are also two important interpretive notes regarding the forthcoming reconstruction. The first is the equation of the two phrases “the object of the idea constituting the human mind” and “the object of the human mind”. I take it that Spinoza means to use these terms interchangeably in his argument and that he intends no important philosophical difference between them. I cite as evidence the language of the demonstrations for Propositions 12 and 13, in which Spinoza begins by restating the original proposition but with the more concise phrasing. Thus it is reasonable to assume that Spinoza can be taken as describing the same concept with both wordings in so far as they pertain to the success of his argument.

The language of Proposition 11 also provides a potential problem. An important aspect of Spinoza’s arguments for Proposition 13 and indeed one of my objections to it involves the possibility of there being more than one object of the human mind. Proposition 11 asserts that whatever constitutes an object of the human mind is an *individual* actually existing thing, which seems to rule out such a possibility. But if we examine the language of the proof, Spinoza is using the word *individual* in contrast with the possibility of an infinite idea and so perhaps instead is inviting the conception of the finite and not necessarily the singular. This interpretation of *individual* as finite also fits more easily within the context of the *Ethics*, for Spinoza seems to take the possibility of multiple yet finite objects of the mind quite seriously in Proposition 13b.

4 First Reconstruction

Proposition 13a

1. Assume that the body is not an object of the human mind.

2. Bodies exist (Pr.11,II or Ax.4,II).
3. Then, the ideas of the affections of the body are in God, but not in so far as he constitutes the human mind (2 and Cor.Pr.9,II).
4. Then, the ideas of the affections of the body are not in the human mind (3 and Cor.Pr.11,II).
5. But there are the ideas of the affections of the body in the human mind (Ax.4,II).
6. Contradiction. Therefore the body is an object of the human mind (1, 4 and 5).

Proposition 13b

1. Assume there is another object of the human mind apart from the body.
2. Nothing exists from which some effect does not follow (Pr.36.I).
3. Then, there must follow an effect [*in the object of the human mind*] from this new object of the human mind (1 and 2).
4. Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind is perceived by the human mind (Pr.12,II).
5. Then, the human mind perceives this new object of the human mind, i.e. the human mind contains the idea of some effect of this new object (3 and 4).
6. The human mind contains only the ideas of the affections of bodies [*and modes of thinking*] (Ax.5,II).
7. Contradiction. Therefore there cannot be another object of the human mind apart from the body (1, 5, and 6).

5 Objections to First Reconstruction

I have two objections to argument as reconstructed, one minor and one that invites a reinterpretation of the assumptions in the argument.

5.1 First Objection

First the minor. Notice that Pr.12,II only guarantees the perception of whatever *happens in* the object of the human mind. Similarly, Pr.36,I only ensures that all that exists produces some effect. The move, then, in Pr.13b,II from 3 and 4 to 5 can be questioned. Consider a new, existent object of the mind. By 2, it must have an effect. But suppose this effect does not occur in the object of the mind, but somewhere else. Then 4 still follows from Pr.12,II but does not guarantee 5, for 4 only guarantees perception of that which happens in the object in the mind. That is to say, the human mind is not necessarily guaranteed to contain the idea of some effect of this new object of the mind and thus the final contradiction does not hold.

There are two problems with this objection. The first is that it is not at all clear that an existence object of the mind could have an effect which does not occur in the object of the mind. I grant that Spinoza would likely deny this. Similarly, the problem is altogether avoided with the bracketed clause already found in 3, which ensures that the effect of any new object of the human mind must also occur in the object of the human mind. Whether this is to be understood as an implicit assumption or a proposition deducible from Spinoza's principles will be left on the table.

5.2 Second Objection

The second objection begins by noticing that the argument for Pr.13a,II works for any X = existent object of the human mind. That is to say so long as X guarantees ideas of its affections in the human mind, it is an object of the human mind according to Spinoza's argument as reconstructed. So what necessarily guarantees such affections in the body case? Here Spinoza cites Ax.4,II which states that "we feel a certain body to be affected in many ways." Clearly this axiom does not independently exclude the possibility of alternative feelings of affection but merely asserts the certainty of those of the body. Therefore, within Pr.13a,II, the argument works for any X such that the human mind contains the ideas of the affections of X, which would at least be satisfied if X were felt to be affected in many ways.

The same game can be played regarding Pr.13b,II up until 6, justified by Ax.5,II: "we do not

feel or perceive any individual things except bodies and modes of thinking.” Unlike the citation of Ax.4,II previously, Ax.5,II clearly excludes the possibility of any type of perception of individual things that are not bodies or modes of thinking. In 6 Spinoza directly asserts from this axiom that the human mind has in it only these two individual ideas. Under this interpretation of the argument, Spinoza could of just have easily cited Ax.5,II instead of Ax.4,II in the demonstration of Pr.13a,II. But what Ax.5,II opens up is a question regarding the capacity of modes of thinking as an object of the human mind and this is precisely my objection.

Let X = modes of thinking. If Ax.5,II alone implies the existence of ideas of the affections of bodies in the human mind, then it alone must also imply the existence of ideas of the affections modes of thinking in the human mind. Then the human mind must contain the ideas of the affections of X by the proposed reconstruction of Pr.13a,II. This interpretation of Pr.13a,II is represented in the bracketed clause found in 6, which appends the affections of modes of thinking as contained in the human mind.

Continuing the critique to Pr.13b,II results in no contradiction between 5 and 6. The new object of the human mind apart from the body, modes of thinking, is therefore also a necessary component of the object of the human mind. A problem with this objection is that it does not explore exactly what Spinoza means by modes of thinking and could therefore be a misuse of the concept and its establishment in Ax.5,II.

6 Second Reconstruction

1. There is a single, existent object of the human mind (Pr.11,II).
2. Modes of thinking cannot constitute the object of the human mind (implicit assumption).
3. Assume that the body is not an object of the human mind.
4. Bodies exist (Pr.11,II or Ax.4,II).

5. Then, the ideas of the affections of the body are in God, but not in so far as he constitutes the human mind (4 and Cor.Pr.9,II).
6. Then, the ideas of the affections of the body are not in the human mind (5 and Cor.Pr.11,II).
7. But there are the ideas of the affections of the body in the human mind (Ax.4,II).
8. Contradiction. Therefore the body is an object of the human mind (3, 6 and 7).
9. Therefore the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, and nothing else (1, 2 and 8).

7 Conclusion

The solution I propose to my second objection is a reworking of Spinoza's proof in Proposition 13a with one new proposition and one new assumption. The new proposition comes from a strict reinterpretation of Pr.11,II as previously discussed. Rather than allowing the possibility of multiple objects of the mind, the interpretation takes individual to mean numerically one. The new assumption comes from observing that Spinoza does not consider modes of thinking as a candidate for being the object of the human mind. These two steps allow Spinoza to skip the complications of Proposition 13b, including the first objection I raised regarding Pr.12,II.