On Spinoza's Doctorine of the Eternal Mind

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1 Relevant Propositions, Axioms, and Corollaries

Ax.2,II I say that there pertains to the essence of a thing that which, when granted, the thing is necessarily posited, and by the annulling of which the thing is necessarily annulled; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived and, vise versa, that which cannot be or be conceived without the thing.

Pr.8,II The ideas of non-existing individual things or modes must be comprehended in the infinite idea of God in the same way as the formal essences of individual things or modes are contained in the attributes of God.

Cor.Pr.8,II Hence it follows that as long as individual things do not exist except in so far as they are comprehended in the attributes of God, their being as objects of through–that is, their ideas–do not exist except in so far as the infinite idea of God exists; and when individual things are said to exist not only in so far as they are comprehended in the attributes of God but also in so far as they are said to have duration, their ideas also will involve the existence through which they are said to have duration.

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.

Pr.22,V Nevertheless there is necessarily in God an idea which expresses the essence of this or that human body under a form of eternity (sub specie aeternitatis).

Pr.23,V The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with the body, but something of it remains, which is eternal.

2 Introduction

In Propositions 22-23 of Ethics V, Spinoza turns his discussion to the eternality of the essence of body and the human mind. The full statement of the doctrine is Proposition 23: the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with the body, but something of it remains and is eternal. This doctrine has important implications for Spinoza's moral philosophy as well as his metaphysics and has thus been the focus of much scholarly attention. In this paper, I first put Spinoza's argument on the table with a basic reconstruction. I then consider both Curley's and Bennett's interpretation of the argument and its relevant premises. I agree with Bennett in his objection to what he calls Curley's symmetrical account, but aim to avoid Bennett's conclusion that Spinoza's argument is altogether wrong by exploring the possibility of a new interpretation of the relevant premises.

3 Spinoza's Argument and Reconstruction

Ethics V, contextually speaking, is the final part of Spinoza's magnum opus and primarily concerns itself with human freedom and the power of reason in relation to emancipation from the passions. Propositions 1-21 are chiefly psychological and thus empirical in nature, potentially demonstrable from some sort of data. In contrast, Propositions 21-22 are seemingly analytic or a priori in form, insofar as they are deduced from axioms and premises that are in turn not justified by experience, e.g. the definition of essence in Ax.4,I. This is perhaps not true for Bennett's account of the doctrine which heavily involves Spinoza's cognitive psychology, but nonetheless will be the perspective for the current discussion of the argument and its subsequent reconstruction. The argument is as follows:

> In God there is necessarily a conception, or idea, which expresses the essence of the human body (Pr.22,V) and which therefore is necessarily something that pertains to the essence of the human mind (Pr.13,II). But we assign to the human mind the kind of duration that can be defined by time only in so far as the mind expresses the actual existence of the body, an existence that is explicated through duration and can be defined by time. That is, we do not assign duration to the mind except while the body endures (Cor.Pr.8,II). However, since that which is conceived by a certain eternal necessity through God's essence is nevertheless a something (Pr.22,V), this something, which pertains to the essence of mind, will necessarily be eternal.

Here we perhaps find evidence that the proposition is out of place: all citations are in terms of the Ethics II, except for the reference to the preceding proposition, which is itself solely justified in terms of the first two parts of the Ethics. The proof is constructive and takes the general form of arguing from the existent essence of human body to a *something* that (1) concerns the essence of mind and (2) is eternal. This can be seen in my following reconstruction:

1. There is necessarily in God an idea which expresses the essence of [this or that] human body (Pr.22,V).

2. The body constitutes the [idea of] human mind (Pr.13,II).

3. If X constitutes Y, then the essence of X pertains to the essence of Y (Ax.2,II).

4. The essence of the human body pertains to the essence of the human mind (1, 2, 3).

5. The essence of the human body is eternal (Pr.22,V, Pr.16,I).

6. If X pertains to the essence of Y and X is eternal, then the part of Y that pertains to X is also eternal (Ax.2,II).

7. There is a part of the human mind that is eternal (4, 5, 6).

An interesting property of Spinoza's demonstration is that it includes an arguably unnecessary citation of Cor.Pr.8,II, used to assert that duration is only assigned to the mind while the body endures. Why might Spinoza do this? Perhaps to highlight the importance of the idea of the essence of body being conceived eternally and necessarily in God's essence. Without such conception in God's essence, it would be impossible to assert that the mind is eternal, for such a claim would be unintelligible under Cor.Pr.8,II.

4 Interpretive Notes

There are three important interpretive notes regarding the reconstruction. The first is the equation of the two phrases "the essence of this or that human body" and "the essence of the human body" and similarly "the object of the idea constituting the human mind" and "the object of the human mind". Regarding the latter, I will continue to hold that Spinoza means to use these two terms interchangeably 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.

Regarding the former, Spinoza's intentions are not as clear. In this case, Spinoza commits the very same reduction in restarting Proposition 22 within Proposition 23: "In God there is necessarily

a conception, or idea, which expresses the essence of the human body (preceding Pr.)" Even if Spinoza does not accept equality between the two phrases, he must accept the implication from (i) the necessary existence of an idea in God which expresses the essence of this or that human body to the (ii) the necessary existence of an idea in God which expresses the essence of the human body generally. In what way does the essence of the instantiated human body differ from the essence of the universal human body, or, further, body generally? If the essence of the instantiated human body is understood as a unique identifier for this or that human body, then certainly this cannot be spelled out in Platonic or Cartesian terms. And It seems that Spinoza is committed to the fact that the essence of the instantiated human body is, as it were, greater than or equal to the essence of the universal human body. That is to say from the essence of this or that human body we derive the essence of human body generally.

The second interpretive note regards the relationship between a thing and its essence defined in Ax.2,II. This relationship is of vital importance for my interpretation of Spinoza's argument–despite no official citation within the text of the demonstration–and so deserve at least some interpretive justification. The first move derived from the axiomatic definition is "(3) If X constitutes Y, then the essence of X pertains to the essence of Y." This is appears rather simple. If X is a necessary condition of Y and the essence of X is a necessary condition of X, then the essence of X is a necessary condition of Y. Continuing onward, if the essence of X is a necessary condition of Y, then the annulling of the essence of X would necessarily lead to the annulling of Y. In this sense, the essence of X would then be a necessary condition of Y and any change to the essence of X would have a casual effect in the essence of Y. And in this sense Spinoza could say the essence of X *pertains* to the essence of Y. But why, then, does the essence of X not constitute the essence of Y? What work is being done by "pertains"? The language chosen by Spinoza seems to indicate a distinction between "pertains" and "constitutes" and this is indeed a topic taken up in the research literature. The second such deduction follows a similar pattern and hits on a similar semantic confusion. Any solution other than keeping Spinoza's ambiguous language and its implications is outside the scope of this paper.

The third and final interpretive note regards the most obvious lingering question in the demonstration: what part of the mind is eternal? What is the something? I argue that (1) each of the three "somethings" in the demonstration is a reference to the same something, and (2) this "something" is the idea in God which expresses the essence of the human body. At the very least (2) holds for the first "something": "In God there is necessarily a conception, or idea, which expresses the essence of the human body and which therefore is necessarily something that pertains to the essence of the human mind." It would be reasonable to assume that Spinoza holds a consistent notation across his demonstration, so why question such an interpretation? Because as currently understood, the part of the mind that would remain eternal would in turn only be the idea in God concerned with the human body, which, as will be explored in Curley's account, could pose possible problems to Spinoza's practical ethics derived from the doctrine of the eternal mind. Once again the interpretation must be bracketed, but the issue does color the subsequent accounts of Curley and Bennett.

5 Curley's Symmetrical Account

Both Curley's and Bennett's account of Spinoza's argument for the eternality of mind primarily concern interpretation of premises rather than logical validity. Indeed, the primary distinction between the two accounts is to what exactly eternality is granted. At a high level, Curley fully applies parallelism and concludes that both human body and human mind are in some sense eternal, i.e. symmetrical in their eternity. Under this interpretation, Proposition 23 is merely understated; Spinoza would certainly make the symmetrical claim for eternal body. Bennett rejects eternal body and emphasizes the asymmetry in the text and the progression of the argument *from* the existent essence of body *to* eternal mind.

Curley's account is fundamentally grounded in Spinoza's conception of true ideas and their relationship to existence, which he argues is outside the traditional requirement of correspondence with reality. Curley (pp. 142) quotes Spinoza to demonstrate the possibility of true thoughts for

non-existent objects:

> And he [Spinoza] will, therefore, call the ideas of such things "true," even though the things themselves never exist at any particular time or in any particular place:
>
> > If an architect conceives a building properly, though such a building may never have existed, and may never exist, nevertheless the thought is true; and the thought remains the same, whether the building exists or not. (TdIE, 69, II:26)

How, then, does a true idea relate to actual existence? As objects of thought comprehended in the attributes of God (Cor.Pr.8,II). Curley interprets Spinoza as claiming "just as the thought remains the same, so, in a sense, the building remains the same," regardless of its actual existence (pp. 142). The idea of the building, in virtue of its truth, is comprehended in the infinite idea of God. From Pr.8,II the same respectively follows for the essence of the building: it is contained in the attributes of God, and is thus eternal.

This is not the Leibnizian account of Spinoza that the mind is eternal in virtue of its existence as a sort of Platonic idea, such as one might say about a circle or triangle. Indeed, Curley emphasizes that Spinoza's existence of objects like our building is actual and not merely possible. It is actualized by its containment within something which actually and eternally exists. For Curley, the circle or Platonic idea are examples of that which do not exist eternally for they are conceived to exist with relation to a particular time and place and not necessities of the divine nature.

Curley is not unaware that Spinoza is silent on the eternality of the human body, but sees him as committed to the position insofar as the argument rests upon Pr.8,II which he asserts applies equally to both mind and body. Curley does admit to finding trouble fitting his interpretation with the practical implications of Spinoza's doctrine explicated in Pr.38,V and Pr.39,V, in which "Spinoza says that the more the mind understands things by the second and third kind of knowledge and the more the body is fit for many things, the greater will be the part of the mind which is eternal" (pp. 143). That is to say, the portion of the mind that is eternal increases as one increases

their knowledge from the prospective of the eternal and via Curley's symmetric parallelism by improving the body. Curley interprets Spinoza's language as indicating that "an increase in our understanding involves, not merely an increase in our consciousness of the eternity of the mind, but an increase in the eternity of the mind itself," a doctrine which he finds "completely unintelligible" (pp. 143).

6 Bennett's Objections to the Symmetrical Account

Bennett raises an objection to the symmetrical account exactly in this vain. He agrees with Curley that, as Curley understands it, Spinoza's practical advice following from the eternal mind is unintelligible. Spinoza speaks only of having a large eternal part of the mind, and never a good part. Under symmetric parallelism, the eternal part of the body would indeed operate in such a strange fashion. I agree with this criticism; if Spinoza's practical advice is to make much sense we must abandon strict symmetry between body and mind in the analysis of the eternal.

Bennett raises two more objections to the symmetrical account, both of which have already been touched on. The first is that no serious interpreter would be willing to hold Spinoza to strong, completely symmetrical positions on the eternality of body. While Curley asserts (pp. 142) that "the human body is not absolutely destroyed in death, that something of it too remains which is eternal," it is not completely equal to Bennett's (pp. 359) stronger symmetric proposition "the human body is not absolutely destroyed with the human mind, but something of it remains which is eternal." That is to say, if Curley truly holds the eternality of the mind in parallelism and symmetry to that of the body, then the proposition must also hold in parallel and in reverse.

Does Curley hold such a position? The implication on Bennett's part is that Curley would not be willing to accept his stronger claim. But in my interpretation, Curley's account is compatible with the claim that the human body is not destroyed with the human mind (and, of course, vice versa). If Curley is to make any sense at all, death as understood in Pr.23,V must not be the absolute destruction of the human body, nor could it be the absolute destruction of the human

mind. Then Bennett's stronger claim is true in virtue of the fact that the human body is never absolutely destroyed, regardless of the human mind, i.e. something of the human body *always* remains and is eternal. But is this Spinoza's position? This objection is most powerful as an argument from silence–if this were the true Spinoza, certainly he could have showed himself much clearer in the Ethics.

Bennett's second objection draws a connection to Leibniz's account. Bennett asserts that, at a high level, the symmetrical account of Spinoza's doctrine of the eternal mind is "understood to be a mere truism (essences are eternal) decorated in a mistake (the suggestion that essences are parts)," without a "contentful conclusion" and lacking "thick roots in Spinoza's thinking" (pp. 359). Just as Leibniz worried about Spinoza's immortal soul being no different than the immortality granted to a geometrical figure, Bennett points out that by generalizing the argument found in Pr.23,V for any attribute the justification then loosely falls to the definition of essence and their sharing of parts, e.g. the essence of body is eternal, the essence of body takes part (pertains) in the mind, thus the mind is eternal. I agree with Bennett's second criticism as well. While Curley's is not the Leibnizian account, its corresponding argument fundamentally plays upon the definition of essence as opposed to the essence of body–what appears to be the true beginning of the Spinozistic argument. Bennett sees his asymmetrical account as giving us a strong reason for why the body's essence would be in or part of the mind as well as why Spinoza might think of it as a one-way street.

7 Bennett's Asymmetrical Account

Bennett's account of Spinoza's doctrine of the eternality of the mind begins by observing that Proposition 23's premise concerns the eternal essence not of human mind but of human body. In other words, "it is because my body has an eternal essence that my mind has an eternal part" (pp. 360). He denotes his account asymmetrical because it steadily rejects the eternality of body, only mind is eternal. If Curley's account is based on the relation between truth and actual existence,

then Bennett's account is based on the logical relations between the essence of an idea and the idea itself. Indeed, a basic understanding of Bennett's interpretation of Spinoza's cognitive psychology is needed to appreciate his account of the doctrine at hand.

Bennett interprets Spinoza as categorizing thought content (the ideas themselves) into those that concern thoughts indirectly of things, e.g. thinking of trees outside a window, and those that concern thoughts directly of states of one's body. These latter thoughts are those relevant to Pr.23,V, according to Bennett. He argues that these thoughts are apparently not representational ("the mental counterpart of a cerebral episode is not what we ordinarily call a thought about that episode") but argues that Spinoza must consider them representational in at least the context of thoughts whose content concerns necessary truths:

> Suppose that P is a logical truth, and that there occurs in my mind the thought that P; what can Spinoza say about this thought content? Presumably, it cannot have come indirectly from some realization outside my body of the fact that P: where necessarily true thoughts are in question, the 'indirectly of' relation is useless to us, and so we must turn to the 'directly of' relation. Spinoza must say that when I think that P (where P is a necessary truth), the proposition that P or some physical equivalent of it is realized or instantiated by my body, and my thought is the counterpart of that under the parallelism (pp. 360).

What does this mean for Pr.23,V? The first upshot for Bennett is that Spinoza, in the context of necessary and eternal truths, cannot distinguish between eternal truths about my mind (e.g. that there could in fact be a mind with such and such an essence) and thoughts in my mind (e.g. that there could in fact be a body with such and such an essence). Bennett claims that this further implies that anything declared eternal in virtue of being an essence of my mind and corresponds to an essence of my body must also be treated as something in or apart of my mind in virtue of being the thought of my body's essence.

In order to directly apply this Pr.23,V, Bennett makes an interpretive stance of the previous questioning regarding "pertains". For Bennett, that which pertains to the essence of the human

mind is indeed done in terms of the items in it. The claim that 'the essence of the human mind is eternal because something which is necessarily eternal pertains to it' is equivalent, for Bennett, to the claim that 'the essence of the human mind is eternal because of eternal items in it'. With this interpretation, Bennett conducts his own argument reconstruction:

> Take a necessary truth about the body, note (a) the corresponding truth about the mind, and then redescribe it as (b) a thought in the mind. The upshot is that you have got a single item which is at once (a) eternal and (b) contained in the mind. Q.e.d. (pp. 361)

Bennett does not see his interpretation of Spinoza as plausible and his primary objection to it is once again indebted in Spinoza's cognitive psychology. Bennett argues that Spinoza's argument as reconstructed "implies that there are no contingent truths of the form 'He has the thought that P' where P is a necessary truth (pp. 361)." But what does this mean, exactly, and how does it relate to the original demonstration? Bennett's objection is essentially a proof by contradiction. He asserts a cognitive psychology that allows Spinoza's metaphysics regarding the eternality of the mind to hang together nicely and then objects to the logical implications of the initial assumption. In other words, Bennett's account actually says little about the proof and its constructive elements as demonstrated by Spinoza and laid out in my reconstruction.

8 The Possibility of A New Interpretation

The challenge for a Spinoza apologist is then to construct an argument for the doctrine of the eternality of the mind that (1) meets Bennett's objections to the symmetrical account and (2) does not fall into the pitfalls of relying on an ineffectual cognitive system. I agree with Bennett that the only systemic solution is asymmetrical. The human mind is not absolutely destroyed along with the body, not the other way around. Not only does such an account fit much easier within Spinoza's metaphysical system and moral philosophy, but the argument from silence is particularly strong, i.e. the lack of evidence for the eternality of human body (derived from the eternality of the human mind) is indeed evidence for its refutation as genuine Spinozistic position.

On the other hand, it seems possible that one could adopt Bennett's criticisms of the symmetrical account without also adopting his interpretation of Spinoza's complex account of human cognition. The evidence for this possibility is the language used by Spinoza in his demonstration. Nowhere does it explicitly reference a distinction between essence of ideas and the ideas themselves. Spinoza's argument is in entirely different terms and thus the possibility of a new interpretation remains open.

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