

# Spinoza's Attributes And The Human Mind

Blake McBride

December 7, 2000

## 1 Introduction

It is difficult to convey ideas accurately with words. Many words mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes they can even convey the exact opposite meaning than what was intended. Sometimes the context isn't clear and sometimes the meaning of the word has changed with time. These problems are exacerbated when the words are translated from a different language or written a long time ago. These are all difficulties connected with Spinoza's works.

Fortunately for us Spinoza's *Ethics* was written in a geometric form. The geometric form is well suited to convey ideas. It allows one to form an idea being represented by a particular proposition and then test that idea for accuracy against the remaining propositions. This allows a sort of coherence test for the transmission of ideas. The best test for an understanding of any particular proposition is that it is consistent with all the other propositions in the work. If your understanding of a proposition is flawed it will cause the work to appear to contradict itself.

There has been a lot of debate over Spinoza's meaning behind the attributes. This difficulty causes problems in understanding Spinoza's idea of the relationship between body and mind or between the various attributes within a particular mode (individual). What I am proposing in this paper is a particular understanding of the attributes which appears to have a high level of coherence with respect to the remainder of the *Ethics*.

In what follows I will use the words "thought", "idea", and "thinking" in three senses. The first refers to the common notion of thought, human thought, that which occurs in the human brain. The second is what Spinoza refers to as the Attribute of thought or the attribute of thought with respect to God. The last sense is what Spinoza refers to as the attribute of thought with respect to a person. In order to make it clear which sense is intended a subscript will be added to the word indicating the intended sense as follows; thought<sub>1</sub>, thought<sub>2</sub>, thought<sub>3</sub>.

## 2 Generalized Patterns

Human beings have thoughts<sub>1</sub> and human beings have brains. A brain is made up of trillions of individual neurons each connecting to thousands of other neurons. There is an entirely physical process consisting of a bio-electrical cause and effect relationship between the various neurons. I use the word “entirely” because the process which goes on within the brain can ultimately be “entirely” explained in bio-electrical terms. Therefore, the brain is reacting entirely within the physical realm.

When we use the word “thinking<sub>1</sub>” we mean the process which occurs within the human brain that enables us to understand, plan, communicate, etc. Each person has a given amount of knowledge, ability to process this knowledge, a personality, primitive drives, emotions, etc. The sum total of all these things can be used to entirely define that person’s intellect.

We think (have thoughts<sub>1</sub>) with our brains. Although this process is occurring by and within the brain there seems to be something about it that is independent of the neurons which make up and provide the functionality of the brain. When one person has an idea<sub>1</sub> and communicates it to another person (by talking with them) the idea<sub>1</sub> is transmitted, yet none of the neurons has left the one individual and been transmitted to the other. Therefore, it *seems* that although one cannot have a thought<sub>1</sub> without a brain, there seems to be a way of viewing the physical brain and the thoughts<sub>1</sub> within it independently.

There are two especially interesting things about this. First, the thoughts<sub>1</sub> cannot exist without the brain (although as you will see later I do not mean to imply any primacy of the brain over the thoughts<sub>1</sub>). And second, on one hand one can look at a brain and fully describe it in physical terms but the same reactions can be thought of (or viewed) as thoughts<sub>1</sub>. The point being that the same thing can be looked at in two entirely different ways. There are not two things here, just one thing seen in two different ways.

Although the physical realm is easy to understand, thoughts<sub>1</sub> seem to be a little elusive so let us see what thoughts<sub>1</sub> really are. What differentiates one thought<sub>1</sub> from another? A thought<sub>1</sub> is really a given set of neurons in the brain firing in a particular pattern. The key word here being “pattern”. When one person communicates with another what is occurring is that one person’s brain pattern is being duplicated in another person’s brain. So, therefore, pattern is what thought<sub>1</sub> really is. This is a very important point as will be seen.

Although rocks don’t think as we think of thinking<sub>1</sub> the way the human brain does (have patterns similar to those in our brain), the rock does have patterns (molecular, atomic, sub-atomic for example). In fact, if you generalize the meaning of “thought<sub>2</sub>” to mean “pattern” as I am using it here it is easy to see how everything has thought<sub>2</sub>. Certainly not human brain like thought<sub>1</sub> but thought<sub>2</sub> (or patterns) none the less.

Understanding “thought<sub>2</sub>” in this new generalized way leads to some pretty interesting ramifications. First of all thought<sub>2</sub> (or patterns) obviously exist in all things. Secondly, it is not like all things have thoughts<sub>2</sub> contained within them or that thought<sub>2</sub> is an element of them. The thought<sub>2</sub> of a thing and its physical existence are one and the same thing. It is just a matter of looking at the same thing in two different ways. Third, a given thing can be fully described by its thought<sub>2</sub> or its physical make up. Fourth, any change in either of the two is exactly parallel by the other while neither view has primacy (i.e. you must

have something in order for there to be a pattern, at the same time you can't have a thing without a pattern).

### 3 Spinoza's Attributes

Now, therefore, Spinoza says that man can know two attributes, namely "thought<sub>2</sub>" and "extension". I propose to equate Spinoza's "thought<sub>2</sub>" with my "generalized pattern", and equate Spinoza's "extension" with the physical make up of a thing. With this in mind I will cover a number of Spinoza's propositions in order to demonstrate the coherence of this view with Spinoza's propositions.

In 1D4 Spinoza introduces attributes as "that which the intellect perceives of substance as (if) constituting its essence". This introduction to attributes is rather abstract and difficult to grasp. However, in this definition the phrase "intellect perceives" could also be phrased as "a way of looking at something" or a "perspective". This is a way the human intellect perceives of things (substance).

Further, in Eps. 64 Spinoza makes it clear that the human mind can know no other attributes than thought<sub>2</sub> and extension. This makes it clear how many attributes we are concerned with and what they are.

In 2P7 Spinoza states that "the order and connection of ideas<sub>2</sub> is the same as the order and connection of things". This proposition is the real heart of the matter. It makes it clear that there is a one to one correspondence between the two attributes.

In 2P7 Sch. Spinoza states that "thinking<sub>2</sub> substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that". He then continues with "a mode of extension and the idea<sub>2</sub> of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways". This Scholium makes it abundantly clear that the two attributes are not two different things regardless of how closely they may be related or associated. They are one. Spinoza uses the word "comprehended". This is similar to his use of the word "perceives" in 1D4. This shows that what Spinoza is saying is that there is only one substance and that the human mind is capable of "perceiving" it or "comprehending" it in two possible ways.

If you try to understand Spinoza's use of "thought" as human thought<sub>1</sub> his *Ethics* becomes impossible to understand or reconcile. At this point it should seem clear that my "generalized pattern" fits well with Spinoza's use of "thought" and "idea". Understanding thought<sub>2</sub> in my sense makes his propositions clear and simple. This view by itself, however, does not make everything entirely clear. We will now need to understand how human thought<sub>3</sub> relates to these "generalized patterns".

### 4 Human Thought

In 2P36Dem Spinoza makes an important delineation between thoughts<sub>2</sub> with respect to God and thoughts<sub>3</sub> with respect to a person. This text states that all thoughts<sub>2</sub> with respect

to God are true. This makes perfect sense when one understands that a thing and the  $idea_2$  of that thing are one and the same thing looked at in two different ways so obviously the  $ideas_2$  always exactly correspond to the thing itself. They are therefore always true.

Now, while there is a one-to-one correspondence between a thing and the  $idea_2$  of the thing, there is another important relationship going on. There is a relationship between things which occur to a persons body and  $ideas_3$  which form in the persons mind. This relationship is highly error prone.

In 2P13 Spinoza states that “the object of the  $idea_3$  constituting the human mind is the body ... and nothing else”. Additionally in 2P26 Spinoza states that “the human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing except through the  $ideas_3$  of affections of its own body”. For starters this simply re-affirms Spinoza’s one to one correspondence between the two attributes. But now Spinoza is talking specifically about human  $thought_3$ . He makes it very clear that human  $thought_3$  only involves the human body with which it is a part. Let me give some examples of this.

When you touch a hot pan does your mind perceive the hot pan? No, it does not. Your mind only perceives the pain messages from the nerve endings *in your hand*. When you see a friend are you really seeing your friend? Of course not. Your mind is perceiving the electrical impulses from *your optic nerve*. When you hear a loud noise did you really hear it? No, what your mind perceived was the electrical messages from *your ear*. It should be becoming clear now that the objects in your mind are all of your body. External things may effect your body but the human mind only perceives its body. It seems clear that the only thing your mind has ever experienced is your body!

In 2Post1 Spinoza states that the human body is composed of many extremely complex parts. Further, in 2P14 Spinoza states that the capacity of the human mind $_3$  “will vary in proportion to the variety of states which its body can assume”. In these passages Spinoza makes it clear that the reason man has advanced cognitive abilities when compared to other life on earth is simply because of the more advanced structure of his body. Human  $thought_3$  is simply a product of man’s bodily structure and the states it is made to assume because of the outside environment’s effects on the body.

## 5 Number Of Attributes

The last point I would like to address is the issue regarding how many attributes there are. In 1P11 Spinoza states that “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes ..... necessarily exists”. This seems to be clear that Spinoza considers there to be an infinite number of attributes. People can (indirectly) perceive sound, smell, temperature, etc. but people can not perceive (by the same level of indirection) radio waves. But we do know radio waves exist. Likewise in Eps. 64 Spinoza makes it clear that the human mind is only capable of perceiving the attributes of  $thought_2$  and extension.

Since God is absolutely infinite he contains no negation, therefore to place a specific number on the number of attributes of God would place a limitation on God which is absurd. God cannot have negation otherwise he wouldn't be God. Therefore, there must be an infinite number of attributes. This is articulated by Spinoza in 1D6 and its explanation.