

Memory, Eternity, and Individuation in Part V of Spinoza's *Ethics*

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1 Introduction

This paper is less an argument than it is a reflection or a meditation. This meditation is occasioned by Propositions 38 and 39 of Part V and their scholia, which to my mind present some deep metaphysical puzzles for any careful reader of Spinoza. These puzzles have to do with memory and eternity, as my title indicates, and I think they ultimately turn on the nature and status of the individuation of finite modes. For what Spinoza says in the scholia to these propositions is that, insofar as we are free, during our lives we strive to minimize the part of our mind that we call memory in relation to that which we call the intellect. On the one hand, this seems perfectly plausible, since he defines memory as an essentially contingent ordering of ideas, an extrinsic and ultimately unfounded chain of ideal associations that is based not on our understanding of the essences of things nor even of their common natures, but on the chance encounters of our experience. And because memory is, as we will see, inherently tied to the body, and especially to its duration, as a part of the mind it must necessarily die along with the body. But on the other hand, following out the logic of this claim, I think, leads us to call into question some of Spinoza's core commitments about the nature of the mind, its relation to the body, and his understanding of individuation. My aim here today is to push on some of these conceptual connections, in the hopes of encouraging further reflection on what is arguably the very heart of Spinoza's metaphysics: his idea of freedom *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Let me begin by sharing with you the two propositions and their scholia. Afterwards, I will proceed as follows: first, I will reconstruct Spinoza's account

of the nature of the mind, which in short is that it is the idea of the body and everything that happens in it. Then, to further unpack this concept, I will turn briefly to his theory of individuation in the corporeal digression after Proposition 13 of Part II. Then I will turn to Spinoza's theory of memory. With all that in place, I will be able to return to the scholia from Part V and explain why I think the overall result is problematic. I think Spinoza's claims about individuation may not be fully compatible with his account of the part of the mind that is eternal. While his metaphysics may for this reason be somewhat unstable, that does not necessarily mean that it is unsalvageable. But we will have to see. These are the stakes of my reflection.

Here, then, are the two propositions and scholia. First there is V, 38. "The more the mind understands things by the second and third kind of knowledge, the less it is acted on by affects which are evil, and the less it fears death."¹ Knowledge of the second and third kind does not die with the body, and so, to the extent that the mind is constituted by adequate ideas, it has less even to fear from dying, that is, the temporal dissolution of the body. There is nothing to fear there where there is nothing to lose. Then follows the scholium, which begins by pointing out that this means that death is less threatening to us insofar as we love God. It concludes by saying: "because (by P27) the highest satisfaction there can be arises from the third kind of knowledge, it follows from this that the human mind can be of such a nature that the part of the mind which we have shown perishes with the body (see P21) is of no moment in relation to what remains."² So, because the mind can grasp things adequately, that is, because it can love God, it is possible for the part of the mind that does not to be reduced to a minimum. It is possible, at least, for us to have more adequate ideas than inadequate ones.

Then we have Proposition 39. "He who has a body capable of a great many things has a mind whose greatest part is eternal."³ This speaks to the close connection between the mind and the body, their union, to which we will return momentarily. For now suffice it to say that the degree of the body's power to act is positively correlated with the degree of the mind's power to think, so that insofar as the body is more capable of acting, the mind is more capable of thinking, and as this means grasping things adequately, through the second and third kinds of knowledge, as we have just seen, this means that a greater portion of the mind is eternal, that is, does not die along with the body. The scholium to this proposition is rather long, and contains some fascinating remarks about childhood—which I won't focus on here; for an extended discussion of that I would refer you to Zourabichvili's book *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*⁴—but I want to draw our attention to its end. Spinoza writes: "In this life, then, we strive especially that the body of childhood may change (as much as its nature

¹Spinoza, *Ethics* V, 38. All quotations are taken from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

²*Ethics* V, 38 schol.

³*Ethics* V, 39.

⁴François Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, trans. Gil Morejón (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming), Part II.

allows and assists) into another, capable of a great many things and related to a mind very much conscious of itself, of God, and of things. We strive, that is, that whatever is related to its memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect.”⁵

We strive that whatever is related to the memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect. We strive to reduce to a minimum all that in the mind is related to memory, for whatever in the mind is related to memory is tied to the duration of the body and dies along with it. Let’s begin to unpack this claim by asking ourselves, first, what it is that Spinoza understands by an individual mind.

2 The Idea of the Body

Spinoza’s commitment to the principle of sufficient reason entails that for any given thing, there must be a cause of its existence as well as for its nonexistence. If it does exist, the cause for a thing’s existence must either pertain to the thing’s essence or nature, or it must be external to this nature, in which case there must be a cause for its existence that is distinct from the thing itself. Now because human beings are numerically distinct from one another, this means that it does not pertain to the essence of the human being that it exists; that is, indeed, characteristic only of God as substance *causa sui*. Consequently if there exists such a thing as a human mind, its existence must be conditioned by the existence of something outside of it that is its cause. In the order of finite causes or *natura naturata*, the mind is an idea that is brought into being by an idea temporally prior to it which is its efficient cause; in the order of infinity or *natura naturans*, the mind is an idea whose cause is God considered absolutely.

But insofar as it is an idea, there must be something of which the mind is an idea. Ethics II proposition 11 reads: “The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists.”⁶ The demonstration is straightforward enough, proceeding in three steps: 1. as a mode of substance, the mind is a mode of thought or an idea; 2. the thing of which it is an idea cannot be something that does not exist, or else the idea could not be said to exist either; 3. the thing of which it is an idea cannot be something infinite, or else the idea would also be infinite, or in other words it would exist eternally, which contradicts what we know to be true of the mind. Thus the mind is an idea of a finite singular thing that actually exists.

What thing is that? Ethics II, 13 tells us: “The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else.”⁷ The mind is the idea of the body. This is Spinoza’s most fundamental claim about what a human mind is; we can treat it as a

⁵ *Ethics* V, 39 schol. Translation modified. Zourabichvili argues that *corpus infantiae* must not be understood as ‘the body of the child’, or ‘the infant’s body’, as Curley has it.

⁶ *Ethics* II, 11.

⁷ *Ethics* II, 13.

definition of the mind, and I'll be returning to it later. For now, note the following. The notion we have so far is that the mind is an idea whose object must exist in order for the idea to be said to exist; the body is its object, although we do not yet know what that body is. The mind thus appears, at this point in the analysis and according to Spinoza's own arguments, to be something that would necessarily perish along with the body. But of course this is what will be contradicted by the theory of the eternity of the mind in Part V. There, as we have already seen, Spinoza does contend that part of the mind dies along with the body—namely, that part of the mind that is constituted by inadequate ideas, and in particular all that is related to imagination or memory. However, there will be a part of the mind that expresses the essence of the body *sub specie aeternitatis*, which is not limited to the duration of the body and which can be said to exist even after the body perishes. But first let's take another small step forward by asking ourselves about the nature of the individual body of which the mind is an idea.

3 The Body and Individuation

Immediately after the proposition just cited in Part II *De Mente*, Spinoza famously turns away from the mind to explicate the nature of bodies in general. For, as he says, as ideas differ from one another as regards their perfection in reality in accordance with how their *objects* differ from one another, in order really to understand the mind “it is necessary for us. . . to know the nature of its object, i.e., of the human Body.”⁸ And in this digression *de natura corporum* we get Spinoza's only comprehensive statement on the topic of individuation. Let me very quickly reconstruct the outlines of his theory.

The simplest bodies, *corpora simplicissima*, are distinguished from one another only by reason of motion and rest.⁹ But the human body is a composite body, made up of innumerable corporeal parts. As is well-known, he defines such an individual body by its internal communication of a certain fixed and determinate ratio of motion and rest. Here is the passage in full:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of 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.¹⁰

The strength of this theory of individuation is that it does not require the nature or persistence of any particular part that participates in constituting the whole.

⁸*Ethics* II, 13 schol.

⁹*Ethics* II, DNC L1.

¹⁰*Ethics* II, DNC def.

The theory is designed to be able to explain how it is possible for a body to remain an individual while it continuously varies in terms of the parts that make it up, in terms of its relative size, and in terms of its relationships with other, external bodies. For Spinoza, there is nothing confounding about the ship of Theseus; you can replace every single one of its parts, but so long as those parts continue to communicate their motions with one another in the same fixed manner, it will retain its individuality. Human bodies are highly complex, a composite made up of a great number of composite bodies with their own individuality: as a result, human bodies can affect other bodies and be affected in a great many ways while fully retaining their individuality.¹¹ And this is the nature of the body that is the object of the idea that we call the human mind: it is a highly complex conjunction of composite bodies whose formal unity is nothing other than its internal communication of a determinate ratio of motion and rest.

I would like to make two points here. One is that this theory also explains what death is, for Spinoza: death is disindividuation, the *loss* of this internal ratio of the communication of motion and rest among the parts of a body. He draws this conclusion himself in the scholium to Proposition 39 of Part IV: “I understand the Body to die when its parts are so disposed that they acquire a different proportion of motion and rest with one another.”¹² He even says here that this doesn’t necessarily correspond with the body’s being changed into a corpse. An individual body can die without becoming a cadaver: witness the Spanish poet, whose illness resulted in an amnesia so complete that his former self can be said to have passed away. What matters is the ratio of communication of motion and rest, an internal formal unity; losing that is death. And the more a human body can affect and be affected by other bodies without undergoing disindividuation, that is, while retaining its characteristic ratio of communication, the more the mind that is the idea of this body can think.

Second, the whole theory of individuation is, obviously, cashed out only in terms of bodies; Spinoza never explicitly gives us a theory of ideal or mental individuation. But as Don Garrett has argued, we can infer what such a theory would look like:

a thinking thing is an individual in virtue of being the idea of a composite body with a fixed ratio of motion and rest; it persists as the same individual through time in virtue of being the idea of the same composite body, constituted by the same fixed ratio of motion and rest; and it is distinguished from another thinking individual in virtue of being the idea of a (numerically) different union of bodies, where each such union is constituted by a fixed ratio of motion and rest.¹³

This seems correct to me. But I think it will cause problems for Spinoza’s claims

¹¹ *Ethics* II, DNC Post. I.

¹² *Ethics* IV, 39 schol.

¹³ Don Garrett, “Spinoza’s Theory of Metaphysical Individuation”, in *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 309-10.

in Part V. We need to make one last stop on this detour, however, before we get there. And that is Spinoza's account of memory.

4 Memory

The kind of thing we have been describing, the human mind, is capable, due to its being the idea of a body that is capable of affecting and being affected in many ways, of thinking many things. Indeed, the human body's degree of complexity means that it can be affected in multiple ways at once, and this has consequences for the mind as well; it is the origin of memory. "If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also."¹⁴ Memory forms spontaneously as the association the mind forms between the ideas of the different external objects that affected us at one and the same time. Thus if I happen to have been powerfully affected by another person at the same time as I encountered a particular piece of music, such as one Chopin's Raindrop Prelude, I may spontaneously think of that person upon hearing the Prelude again. Spinoza defines memory as such in the scholium to II, 18: memory is "nothing other than a certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body—a connection which is in the mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body."¹⁵

Spinoza immediately adds two clarificatory notes. First, he restricts the scope of which kinds of ideas can be considered memorial. It is not just any idea, but ideas that involve the nature of things outside the human body. More precisely, these are ideas of the affections of my own body. It is not, strictly speaking, an idea of Chopin's Raindrop that I remember. Rather, what I remember is an idea of my body's being affected by Raindrop.

Second, he points out that this means that the associative connection between any two ideas is forged not according to the order of the intellect, but according to the order and connection of the affections of the body. This is why we can recognize memory as essentially random; memorial associations are based not on the order of understanding, which is identical for all people, but on the contingent order of experiences or encounters with external bodies. The order of the understanding is the same for all people, but the disorderly nature of experience means that our memories will differ. Thus from the contingency of their own encounters, we can explain why two people might have different memorial associations for one and the same object of affection. Spinoza's example is that a farmer might think of a plow and a field when they think of a horse, whereas a soldier might think of the battlefield.

¹⁴*Ethics* II, 18.

¹⁵*Ethics* II, 18 schol.

5 Individuation and Eternity

Now, while certain aspects of this account of memory are appealing, I think it is unduly restrictive, because it posits that memory is essentially inadequate by definition. It rules out the possibility of what I would like to call anything like *adequate memory*. I cannot remember anything adequately. If I formed an adequate idea of an external body that once affected me, either by recognizing a common nature between my body and this external body, or by grasping the essence of that thing as a singular nature, I could not, on this account, remember it. I think Spinoza would here say that I would then only be capable of *understanding* it. In other words, remembering is *strictly opposed* to understanding. If I understand something, I cannot remember it, and if I remember it, it is because I have only inadequate ideas of it. So defined, as being inherently and unavoidably inadequate, tied to the contingency of bodily experiences in finite duration, it makes sense, I think, that Spinoza would suggest that memory does not survive the body and that we ought to strive to minimize it. But I wonder whether we ought to accept this definition. For, first, while surely most memorial association is inadequate, I am not convinced that there can be no such thing as an adequate memory.

Let me give an example, which will also let me get to my second problem. I remember the whole sweep of my encounter with a person with whom I was formerly in a relationship. I remember certain things that are, at least at first glance, only haphazardly associated with them due to the contingency of my experiences; I think of them and certain pieces of music, or certain places where we did things together, or certain other people with whom we shared experiences. But on the other hand, the fact that these pieces of music, these places, these other people were there as well with myself and this other person—for a Spinozist, such things must not be a matter of contingency but strictly a matter of *necessity*. I remember my joy at experiencing a work of art with another. Let me grant even that it is true that the memory is of the idea of the affection of my body in the moment when I was affected by the work of art we experienced together. But there is something adequate in this memory; the object of the idea is my affection, but the affection itself expresses a common nature and a capacity for being positively affected in the triad formed by myself, the other person, and the work of art. Alexandre Matheron once remarked that the core of the theory of adequate ideas is that “there is always something adequate in every inadequate idea,”¹⁶ but it seems to me that especially in Part V Spinoza tends to lose sight of this insight, and treat memory as *purely inadequate*.

Now of course, Spinoza is surely right that “The Mind can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the body endures,”¹⁷ and to that extent memory surely dies with the body. But is it not true *sub specie aeternitatis* that this encounter took place between my body, that of the other

¹⁶Alexandre Matheron, “Physics and Ontology in Spinoza,” in *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, trans. and ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, David Maruzzella, and Gil Morejón (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 44.

¹⁷*Ethics* V, 21.

person, and the work of art? Why, in other words, would this fact—the fact of this joyful encounter, as an interaction between modifications of substance that follows necessarily from the divine nature—not be a feature of the adequate idea of my body *sub specie aeternitatis*? I recognize that I am here running the risk of making Spinoza a Leibnizian, by turning Spinoza’s notion of the idea of the body *sub specie aeternitatis* into something like the Leibnizian notion of the complete concept, that is, the idea of a particular subject to which pertains every true predicate of it. But my worry is that we lack a clear enough criterion for distinguishing between those things that do, and those that do not, pertain to the idea of the body *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Let me say just a few more words about the theory of individuation in the light of eternity. We know that the mind is the idea of the body, and of course that nothing happens in the body of which there is not an idea in the mind, even if it is unconscious. Yet now we see that there is a set of ideas that must exist in the mind which are said not to outlast the body, because they pertain to the mind only insofar as it expresses the body durationally. One way of expressing my worry here is that Spinoza’s conception of individuation is *static*, that is, there is no durational or temporal aspect to it. I would say that, if I’m right about that, then this is an aspect of Spinoza’s metaphysics that we ought to carefully reconsider. For I think individuation is a process, not a settled affair; I, for instance, was not individuated once and for all after I existed childhood. Or if I was, I would like to say that my individuality was thereafter affected, significantly, by the experiences I’ve had since then—but of course, those experiences would by the definitions we’ve been exploring belong merely to the order of memory, of contingent experience, and would not pertain to my essence *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In other words, Spinoza’s account of individuation is powerful and compelling, but it is radically non-durational. The exclusion of memory from anything that could individuate, from modal essence in the light of eternity, testifies to this. I want to end not with a definitive statement here, but by asking whether we ought to accept that individuation is accomplished once and for all, or whether there might be aspects of *our essence* that are determined in and through our experience, that is, in and through our interactions with others in time. If not, then what Spinoza says in Part V is right. But if it is true that I know and feel that I am eternal,¹⁸ I also feel that I am durational.

¹⁸“And though it is impossible that we should recollect that we existed before the Body—since there cannot be any traces of this in the body, and eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time—still, we feel and know by experience that we are eternal” (*Ethics* V, 23 schol.).