

1 Affirmation, Judgment, and Epistemic Theodicy in Descartes and Spinoza

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Both Descartes and Spinoza develop their theories of judgment in the service of what may be called epistemic theodicy, in that they seek to reconcile human error with the existence of a perfect God. They have, however, very different conceptions of God and the relationship of the human mind to that God and, therefore, develop very different conceptions of judgment.

Descartes's God is a transcendent being in whose image the human mind has been made and whose commandments we seek to fulfil. Human error is compatible with the existence of a perfect God because we are free to use our cognitive capacities well or poorly. In particular, judgment (affirming, denying, or suspending judgment with respect to the content of an idea) is a matter of a free act of will. God has given us a faculty that allows us to discover a rule for applying our free will in judgment so that we will never affirm a false proposition and that allows us to unerringly affirm certain truths. And, thus, when we err, the responsibility for error falls to us and not God.

For Spinoza, unlike Descartes, God is not a transcendent being; rather, he is the one substance in which all else, the human mind included, inheres. Indeed, for Spinoza, the human mind is an idea in God's infinite intellect and constitutes God's knowledge of the human body. This entails that every idea in the human mind is identical to an idea in God. Since all ideas, insofar as they are in God, are true and, indeed, known, all ideas, in and of themselves, are affirmed. This thesis has at least two troubling consequences. First, it seems difficult to reconcile with the apparent existence of cognitive attitudes such as denial and suspending judgment. Second, it appears to entail that all ideas are believed.

In this paper, I begin by setting out Descartes's account of judgment and how it accomplishes an epistemic theodicy. I then discuss Spinoza's official argument for the claim that every idea is affirmed and note certain difficulties with it that prompt recent interpretations according to which Spinoza's notion of affirmation is reducible to his notion of conatus or striving for self-preservation. I argue that such interpretations must be rejected on the grounds that they fail to preserve the connection between

affirmation and truth that Spinoza endorses. I suggest instead that, for Spinoza, every idea is affirmed in the sense that every idea purports to represent the world as it really is. Striving for self-preservation does not ground this affirmation, but it looks to it for guidance so that each idea pushes us to act in ways that would be conducive to our self-preservation if it were true. When different ideas push us in different directions, how we act is a function of the respective degrees of power associated with each idea, considered as an individual in its own right. I conclude by arguing that Spinoza's notion of affirmation should be regarded as a technical one that is unconnected with the ordinary conception of belief, which, I argue, plays no role in Spinoza's psychology.

1. Descartes's Theory

In the Third Meditation, Descartes proposes the following rule: whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.¹ But before he accepts this rule, he must prove that God exists and is no deceiver because he needs to foreclose the possibility that God designed me in such a way that my faculties mislead me and what I clearly and distinctly perceive is false.² Proving the existence of such a God is the principal task of the Third Meditation.

At the start of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes confronts the worry that he has proved too much. If the existence of a non-deceiving God gives us a reason to trust our clear and distinct perception, wouldn't it also give us a reason to trust all of our perceptions?³ After all, if God is no deceiver, wouldn't he design us in such a way that our cognitive capacities never deceived us? This question is especially troublesome to Descartes because he thinks that our sensory perception of the world provides us with ample opportunities to err: it presents the world to us as having qualities that it does not, in fact, have. It presents, for example, an apple to me as red, fragrant, and sweet when in fact it is none of those things. (At least it is none of those things in the way they are presented to me in sense perception, that is, as intrinsic properties of the apple distinct from its geometrical ones.) Rather, the only properties that the apple truly has are modes of extension: size, shape, and motion. Why then did God, who is no deceiver, design me in such a way that my sensory capacities consistently give misleading testimony?

This is where his theory of judgment comes in, which is, as we will see, designed to show that we, and not God, are responsible for our errors. For Descartes, the mind is composed of two faculties or powers: intellect and volition.⁴ The intellect is that aspect of my mind that accounts for its ability to represent the world and various possibilities concerning it. For example, sense perception, memory, perception of universals, and essences are all ideas that a mind possesses in virtue of the intellect. The will is the aspect of my mind that accounts for my ability to take certain attitudes to the contents represented by my ideas. For example, affirming,

denying, wanting, and fearing are all volitions that a mind possesses in virtue of the will.

Merely having an idea, all by itself, cannot constitute an error, even if that idea represents what is not the case. Only if we affirm an idea that represents what is not the case or deny an idea of what is the case do we err.⁵ When we affirm or deny an idea, we make a judgment. Judgment, thus, for Descartes, involves the cooperation of two distinct mental faculties: intellect and volition.

It is useful to contrast Descartes on this score with some of his scholastic predecessors, such as Aquinas, who thought that (apart from the special case of religious faith) judgment was an act of the intellect alone. According to this scholastic tradition, the first operation of the intellect involves cognizing accidental and substantial form.⁶ By themselves, the representations of these forms are neither true nor false, but when we relate them to each other by a process that Aquinas calls *combining* and *separating*, we form judgments, which are either true or false.⁷ For example, the first operation of the intellect may abstract from sense perception of a red apple a representation of the accidental form of red and a representation of the substantial form of an apple. A judgment results when I combine my representation of redness with my representation of an apple into the form *the apple is red*.

There are at least two ways in which Aquinas and Descartes differ on the issue of judgment. The first difference concerns the nature of the object that receives the action. In the case of Aquinas, the objects of the action are the mental representations of the forms. They are joined together in such a way that one is predicated of the other. For Descartes, on the other hand, the object of the action is an idea, the content of which already has propositional structure. For example, in the case of thinking about a red apple, judgment for Aquinas is the process by which the concept *red* is combined with the concept *apple*. We judge of the apple that it is red.

An interesting result of this difference is that Descartes's theory of judgment allows for attitude to vary independently of content, whereas Aquinas's does not. For example, take the idea that the apple is red. We could affirm or deny that very idea, on Descartes's view, merely by changing the quality of our will with respect to it. But, for Aquinas, the actions of combining and separating are not directed at the bearers of propositions but at sub-propositional elements, and thus separating cannot be like judging a proposition to be false. What is more, separating cannot merely be refusing to combine. Not predicating redness of an apple is not the same as judging the proposition that the apple is red is false. A natural solution to this difficulty for Aquinas would be to hold that separating is somehow like negation. For example, it would result in a judgment that it is not the case that the apple is red. The content of this judgment is, however, different from the content of the judgment that the apple is red. Thus, for Aquinas, unlike Descartes, attitude and content cannot vary independently.

The second point of contrast is that judgment for Aquinas is an operation of the intellect alone, whereas, for Descartes, judgment requires the cooperation of the will, the same faculty that is responsible for purely conative attitudes such as wanting and fearing. This is a curious feature of Descartes's account. Why think that the attitudes involved in wanting that p and affirming that p are the products of the same faculty?

Descartes's motivation is revealed by the context in which he introduces his theory of judgment. As mentioned previously, Descartes is concerned that the existence of a non-deceiving God is incompatible with the fact of human error. Descartes's strategy for absolving God of guilt for our errors is to show that (1) he did not design us imperfectly in giving us the intellect that he did; (2) he did not design us imperfectly in giving us the will that he did; and (3) it lies within our control to use our will and intellect in a way that will never result in error.

Our intellect, Descartes argues, is perfect in its kind. We are, of course, finite beings, and as such there are many things about which we have no ideas. But we must, from Descartes's perspective, distinguish between ideas that we merely lack and ideas that we ought to have but lack. If a lack of ideas is to count as a defect or privation, it would have to be the case that we should have ideas of these things. There is no reason to think, Descartes claims, that we should have ideas of everything.⁸ After all, a craftsman, no matter how skilled, is under no obligation to include everything in every design. Thus, this limitation is not a defect or privation.

We also have ideas, especially those deriving from sense experience, that are confused and obscure. But even these involve no error so long as we do not pass judgment on them. Therefore, that we have confused and obscure ideas does not, by itself, show that the design of our intellects is to blame for our errors.

Next, Descartes argues that our will, too, is perfect in its kind. Indeed, we are perfectly free because our ability to affirm, deny, pursue, and avoid is not limited in any way. Of course, the manifestation of these attitudes in action is limited by our various cognitive and physical imperfections, but the attitudes themselves are not. It is in virtue of this unlimited power of will that we understand ourselves "to bear in some way the image and likeness of God".⁹ The divine will may be more efficacious than ours in virtue of God's greater knowledge or power, but with respect to the will considered in itself, ours is as perfect as his.

What remains to be shown is that God designed us in such a way that the interaction of will and intellect that results in judgment can always take place in a way that is free of error. That this is so is suggested by the rule that Descartes takes himself to have established in the Third Meditation: whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true. Thus, if I only judge true what I clearly and distinctly perceive and in every other case suspend judgment, then I will never fall into error. Because judgment involves the application of the will, or freedom of choice, if I judge something true

that I did not clearly and distinctly perceive, the fault lies with me and not God.¹⁰

Descartes's theory of judgment has been criticized on many grounds, but perhaps the most serious is his claim that judgment involves the exercise of a free will. By affirming that *p*, I come to believe that *p*. Thus, if affirmation is a free volition, then what I believe is up to me. This has struck many commentators as implausible.¹¹ There are two main reasons for this. First, if belief were a matter of decision, then belief would be sensitive to practical reasons. Belief, however, is insensitive to practical reasons. For example, there is some amount of money that would make it prudent for me to believe that the moon was made of blue cheese, and yet there is no amount of money that, in reality, could get me to believe that the moon is made of blue cheese. It is simply not in my power to believe on such a basis.

Second, how I respond to considerations that do affect belief (i.e. epistemic reasons) does not appear to be under my control. For example, if, upon reflection, I conclude that my reasons to believe that the number of grains of sand in the Sahara Desert is even are no greater or less than my reasons to believe it is odd, then it isn't under my control whether or not to affirm or deny either proposition. Of course, I can verbally affirm or deny anything, and such an affirmation or denial can be responsive to practical considerations or unresponsive to what I take to be my epistemic reasons for belief, but such verbal affirmations or denials are not what Descartes is talking about. Rather, he is talking about the mental acts that such verbal affirmations or denials express when they are sincere.

Now, in fairness to Descartes, he does allow that some reasons to believe are so powerful that I cannot but judge in accordance with them.¹² Such judgments are still free for Descartes because he distinguishes freedom of indifference from freedom of spontaneity. For example, I do not experience freedom of indifference with respect to occurrent clear and distinct perception. Rather, the clarity and distinctness of that perception command my assent, just as perception of something good commands my desire. I do, however, still enjoy freedom of spontaneity because it is the nature of the will to seek the true and the good. Thus, ultimately, for Descartes, I choose what to believe.

My account of Descartes's theory of judgment has assumed that, for him, the will's control with respect to judgment is (1) direct rather than indirect and (2) includes affirmation and denial rather than merely passing and suspending judgment. Both assumptions are controversial. With respect to (1), some commentators have claimed that the will's influence over judgment is only indirect and is mediated by direct control over some other mental act—for example, selective attention.¹³ With respect to (2), some commentators have argued that the will controls not affirmation and denial but rather whether to pass or suspend judgment.¹⁴ Once that decision is made, affirmation and denial are determined by reasons for belief and not the will itself.

My reasons for making these assumptions is that they are, in addition to being plausible readings of Descartes's text, presupposed by Spinoza in his critique of Descartes, as we will see in the next section. Yet, as we will see, Spinoza's ultimate reasons for rejecting Descartes's theory of judgment are independent of these assumptions. Even if Descartes's theory is that the will merely indirectly controls whether we pass or suspend judgment, Spinoza's reasons for rejecting direct control over affirmation and denial generalize to any theory on which the will has unconditional control over any mental act.

2. Spinoza on Judgment

Unlike in Descartes, there is no systematic development of a theory of judgment in Spinoza. Rather, there are a few unsystematic remarks strewn throughout part 2 of the *Ethics*. Not only are these remarks unsystematic, but, as we will see, they are not sufficient to explain the role that affirmation and judgment play in Spinoza's psychology. I will argue, however, that it is possible to reconstruct a Spinozistic account of judgment from materials drawn from elsewhere in the *Ethics*.

Let us begin by considering those remarks where Spinoza is principally concerned with criticizing Descartes's account of judgment. He writes in 2p48:

The Mind is a certain and determinate mode of thinking (by 2p11), and so (by 1p17c2) cannot be a free cause of its own actions, or cannot have an absolute faculty of willing and not willing.

This amounts to a rejection of Descartes's doxastic voluntarism, the claim that what we decide to believe is up to us in the sense that it involves the exercise of a causally unconditioned faculty of free will. Spinoza's reasons for rejecting it stem from what we might call his naturalism. He thinks that nature is uniform and that every natural phenomenon is governed by the same laws. This includes human beings. They are not, in his words, a "kingdom within a kingdom" that "disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature".¹⁵ This entails that when someone affirms a proposition, their action is governed by natural laws and conditioned by causal antecedents that necessitate it.

His second objection is expressed in his claim that "the will and the intellect are one and the same".¹⁶ In other words, judgment does not involve two independent factors: the intellect, which allows us to understand or consider some content, and the will, which ultimately judges the truth or falsity of that content. Rather, it is the same faculty by which we understand and affirm a proposition.

But, as Spinoza's discussion of this claim makes clear, his thesis is stronger than that a single faculty is responsible for judgment. Rather,

he believes the much more radical proposition that every idea is both simultaneously a representation of a proposition and the affirmation of that proposition. Moreover, an affirmation is nothing over and above the idea of the affirmed content. In short, ideas and affirmations are identical. On the face of it, this claim is highly counterintuitive. Surely we cognize propositions that we do not affirm. For example, we can entertain propositions, the truth of which we deny or doubt. Why, then, does Spinoza believe this radical thesis, and how can he deal with the phenomenon of denial and doubt?

Spinoza's official argument for the claim that every idea is an affirmation (found in 2p49d) begins by saying that we can't have an idea of a triangle without affirming that the triangle is such that its interior angles are equal to two right angles, and that we can't affirm this proposition without having an idea of a triangle. Thus, the affirmation of the proposition that a triangle is such that its interior angles equal two right angles is nothing over and above the idea of the triangle. Because, Spinoza claims, this example was selected at random, we can infer a universal generalization: the affirmation of any proposition is nothing over and above the idea of its subject; that is, affirmations and ideas are identical.

There is much to criticize in this argument, but perhaps the most serious problem is that not every affirmation is entailed by an idea of the subject of the proposition affirmed. The claim that every affirmation is identical to some idea should not be confused with the more plausible claim that every idea entails some affirmation. This more plausible claim can be explicated with the following schema: for all x , there is some F , such that x is inconceivable unless x is F is affirmed. This would be true if, for example, we conceived of things via their essences, and doing so entails that we judge that things satisfy some essential description. Spinoza's claim is, rather, the much more implausible claim that every affirmation is such that its subject is inconceivable without that affirmation. This is clearly false. For example, I affirm the proposition that Paris is the capital of France, but it is not true that no one could have the idea of Paris without affirming that it is the capital of France.

3. Belief, Affirmation, and Conatus

Spinoza's claim that every idea is an affirmation appears to entail that every idea is believed because the affirmation of a content is often thought to constitute or give rise to a belief. After all, on the face of it, I cannot affirm that Paris is the capital of France without believing that Paris is the capital of France, at least so long as I affirm it. But if every idea is an affirmation, then, it is natural to think, every idea constitutes or gives rise to a belief.¹⁷

The claim that every idea is a belief would be problematic for Spinoza for at least two reasons. First, Spinoza thinks that a mind can contain

ideas whose contents exclude one another. For example, Marlow might have an idea that represents Ms Wade as loving her husband and a different idea that represents her as not loving her husband. What is more, according to Spinoza, if one of these ideas is stronger (I will return to the question of what it means for one idea to be stronger than another presently) than the other, then it, and not the weaker, will determine behaviour. And yet, if every idea is a belief, then the weaker idea is still a belief despite not guiding behaviour. The weaker idea is, thus, likely to strike many philosophers as failing to satisfy the functional profile of a belief.

Second, as Justin Steinberg has pointed out, Spinoza denies that all non-veridical ideas involve error.¹⁸ For example, he says that the idea that the sun is two hundred feet away does not, in and of itself, constitute an error but does so only in a context where the possessor of this idea lacks a stronger idea of the true distance. Suppose someone has such a stronger idea of the true distance. If every idea were a belief, then they would believe that the sun was only two hundred feet away and not commit an error. It would be hard to make sense of Spinoza if this were his position.

Diane Steinberg has proposed an account of belief in Spinoza that denies that every idea is a belief. On her interpretation, all (and only) ideas that are stronger than ideas opposed to them are beliefs, where strength is characterized in terms of the power of the conatus of that idea. In other words, *S* believes that *p* just in case *S* has an idea *i* whose content is that *p* and *i* are stronger than any idea whose content excludes *p*.¹⁹ This account would explain why Spinoza thinks, for example, that a person who has an idea of the sun as two hundred feet away but also has a stronger idea of the true distance of the sun does not err. The person's behaviour and subsequent thought are determined by the idea of the true distance and not by the idea of the sun as two hundred feet away, so it is natural to say that they believe the idea of the true distance, not the idea that represents it as closer than it really is.

But Steinberg's proposal isn't satisfactory either. If we concede that the notion of belief plays any role in Spinoza's psychology (a point about which I'm sceptical, as I will explain presently), then a counterexample to her account can be found in Spinoza's discussion of thoughts about the future. According to him, our ability to think about the future depends upon the association of ideas. If someone has an experience of *x* and *y* together, subsequent experiences of *x* will cause thoughts about *y* and vice versa. Similarly, if someone has experiences of first *x* and then *y*, subsequent experiences of *x* will cause thoughts about *y*. He writes:

Let us suppose, then, a child, who saw Peter for the first time yesterday, in the morning, but saw Paul at noon, and Simon in the evening, and today again saw Peter in the morning. It is clear from 2p18 that as soon as he sees the morning light, he will immediately imagine the sun taking the same course through the sky as he saw on the

preceding day, or he will imagine the whole day, and Peter together with the morning, Paul with noon, and Simon with the evening. That is, he will imagine the existence of Paul and of Simon with a relation to future time. On the other hand, if he sees Simon in the evening, he will relate Paul and Peter to the time past, by imagining them together with past time. And he will do this more uniformly, the more often he has seen them in this same order.²⁰

If I first see Peter in the morning, Paul at noon, and Simon at night and then, the next day, I see Peter in the morning, I will, in virtue of psychological laws of association, automatically think of Paul at noon and Simon at night. But I will not think that Paul is currently present at noon because I have an idea of the sun being lower in the sky than it would be at noon. That idea is more powerful than the idea that represents the sun as having its noon position, and their contents are metaphysically incompatible. Therefore, the idea of Peter in the morning excludes the idea of Paul at noon. Assuming that Spinoza has a psychologically serious notion of belief, it seems natural to say that, although I will not believe that Paul is present at noon, I will, *ceteris paribus*, believe that Paul *will be* present at noon. This can be seen from the fact that I will act as if it were true that Paul will be present at noon.

This, however, does not fit Steinberg's model of belief in Spinoza. Recall that, on Steinberg's interpretation, *S* believes that *p* just in case (1) *S* has an idea that *p* and (2) *S*'s idea that *p* is stronger than any idea that *S* has whose content excludes *p*. The problem is that, in the scenario described by Spinoza in 2p44s, I have no idea whose content is that Paul will be present at noon. I have, instead, an idea whose content is that Paul is present at noon and ideas that are associated with it by a temporal sequence. If there is a belief that Paul will be present at noon, then it is this complex that represents that content and no one idea. (Perhaps it will be objected that this complex is itself a complex idea. But the ideas that would constitute this complex idea are, by hypothesis, contrary to one another, in that their contents are metaphysically incompatible. Things that are contrary to one another cannot be in the same subject [3p5]. As 3p10 makes clear, being contrary in the sense that their contents are incompatible is a way of being contrary governed by 3p5.)

I will return to the question of belief in Spinoza at the end of this section, but let us for now merely note the difficulty of locating a plausible notion of belief in the context of his claim that every idea is affirmed and turn now to the notion of affirmation itself. Several recent commentators have tried to explicate this notion in terms of Spinoza's conatus doctrine. According to the conatus doctrine, "each thing, in and of itself, strives to persevere in its being". This means that all of nature—from the stars in the sky to the smallest particle of matter—is animated by an urge to self-preservation. Human beings are

no exception to this law, and Spinoza uses his conatus doctrine as the basis of his psychology.

The human mind, for Spinoza, is a complex idea that represents the human body. It is a complex idea, in that it has parts that are themselves ideas that represent parts of the human body. Because each of these constituent ideas is, for Spinoza, a thing, they, too, strive for self-preservation. The conatus, or striving for self-preservation, of each thing is the ground of its causal powers. It determines both what something tends to do and how successful it will be if it is opposed by external causes.

Can Spinoza's conatus doctrine be used to explain why Spinoza thinks that every idea is an affirmation? Michael Della Rocca claims that every idea is an affirmation, for Spinoza, because every idea is bound up in the conatus of the agent who possesses it—that is, produces effects that are beneficial to the agent or that the agent regards as beneficial unless prevented from doing so by other ideas.²¹ He sees Spinoza as offering here both a theory of belief and affirmation according to which every idea is both affirmed and believed.

In a similar vein, Diane Steinberg has argued that every idea is an affirmation because every idea strives to affirm (i.e. preserve) the existence of its object. Steinberg, however, denies that every idea is a belief and argues that only an idea that is more powerful than any idea that excludes it is a belief.

Such proposals face a serious problem. As far as I can see, there is no way to analyse affirmation as the manifestation of the conatus that retains the connection between affirming an idea and the truth of that idea that Spinoza obviously intends it to have. He writes:

[B]y will I understand a faculty of affirming and denying, and not desire. I say that I understand the faculty by which the Mind affirms or denies something true or something false, and not the desire by which the mind wants a thing or avoids it.²²

It is clear from this passage that Spinoza thinks affirmation is related to truth in such a way as distinguishes it from “the desire by which the mind wants something”. Efforts to understand affirmation in terms of conatus, however, fail to preserve any connection to truth that distinguishes it in this way. Della Rocca's interpretation fails because being such as to tend to produce effects that are beneficial or regarded as such doesn't distinguish affirmation from desire. After all, desires often tend to produce effects that are beneficial or regarded by me as beneficial. For example, my desire that I eat leafy greens tends to produce effects that are beneficial to me or are regarded by me as such. Thus, on Della Rocca's interpretation, such a desire would be an affirmation and, indeed, a belief.

Steinberg's proposal faces a similar objection. According to her, every idea strives to affirm (i.e. preserve) the existence of its object.²³ But to

see this as an account of judgment requires an equivocation on ‘affirms’ because I can affirm the existence of some object (that is, have a mind-to-world directed attitude towards the proposition that it exists) without affirming its existence (that is, striving to preserve its existence) and vice versa. For example, that I affirm (in the sense that has a mind-to-world direction of fit) the existence of my coffee cup does not entail that I will try to protect it from harm. And I can, for example, perform actions that will protect an as of yet unborn child from harm without affirming that the child presently exists. The conatus doctrine only tells us that each idea affirms its object in the sense of protecting-from-harm and not in the sense of taking-to-exist.

If the affirmation is not reducible to the conatus of each idea or of each mind, why then does Spinoza believe that every idea is affirmed? I propose that we can begin to find the answer to this question by looking at Spinoza’s claim that all sense perception is affirmed unless we have an imaginative idea (imagination, for Spinoza, as for most early moderns, pertains to imagistic thoughts, which include sense perceptions) that excludes it. Spinoza writes:

If the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the Body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body.²⁴

Although it is not immediately obvious, this text concerns sense perception because an idea of a state of the body that has an external cause (“involves the nature of an external body”) constitutes, according to 2p16c1, sense perception of that cause. But Spinoza says that not only do we have sense perception of the external cause but we also judge it to exist (“the human mind will regard the same external body as actually existing”). That is, every perceptual idea entails an affirmation of the proposition that the object of the idea exists.

His reasons for thinking this derive from his account of intentionality. According to him, there are two sources of intentionality. There is the primitive underived intentionality by which every idea represents the body to which it is identical. There is also derivative intentionality that has a causal/informational basis. If the body is in a state that has an external cause, then the idea of the body represents that state and also the external cause in virtue of the fact that the state carries information about the cause. This is the kind of causal/informational intentionality that allows us to infer fire from smoke and the age of a tree from the number of rings in its trunk. When we are in a state that implies the existence of an external cause (via causal/informational connections), we will represent that cause as existing unless we receive new information that tells us the cause no longer exists. This new information is encoded

in a state of the body, which is incompatible with the present existence of the cause of the previous state.

Spinoza's argument for 2p17 is revealing. He writes:

Dem: For whatever happens in the object of any idea, the knowledge of that thing is necessarily in God (by 2p9c), insofar as he is considered to be affected by the idea of the same object, i.e. (by 2p11), insofar as he constitutes the mind of something. Therefore, whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human Mind, the knowledge of it is necessarily in God insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, i.e. (by 2p11c), knowledge of this thing will necessarily be in the Mind, or the Mind will perceive it, q.e.d.

In this demonstration, Spinoza says that the human mind is God's idea of the human body—that is, the idea that constitutes knowledge of the body in the divine intellect. This being so, the idea of the body in God's intellect—that is, the mind—must be affirmed because, presumably, knowing that p entails affirming that p . But how should we understand affirmation so that every idea, whether it is related to God's mind or ours, is affirmed, yet not every false idea in the human mind constitutes an error?

My proposal for making sense of Spinoza's remarks on truth and affirmation has been prefigured by my criticisms of attempts to reduce affirmation to conatus. It is simply to read him as specifying the direction of fit that pertains to ideas. On this interpretation, the intended contrast between "affirming [. . .] something true" and "the desire by which the mind wants a thing" is that which obtains between that which purports to represent the world as it really is and that which doesn't. Moreover, construing the connection between affirmation and truth as specifying a mind-to-world direction of fit allows Spinoza's claim that every idea is affirmed to be consistent with his claim that not every false idea constitutes an error. There is no error in merely having a false mental representation with a mind-to-world direction of fit. This general point could be illustrated by the case of credences. Credences have a mind-to-world direction of fit, and yet I commit no error simply in virtue of having nonzero credences towards false propositions. For example, I commit no error if I evenly distribute my credences between the propositions that the fair coin will land heads and that the fair coin will land tails, although one of them is false.

Although this answers the challenge of characterizing affirmation, serious difficulties remain. Just as Descartes faces the problem of showing how human error is compatible with the existence of a perfect God, so, too, does Spinoza face a similar problem. If our minds are fragments of God's infinite intellect, every idea of which constitutes knowledge of the world, how can we account for attitudes such as doubt and denial in the

human mind? A similar problem arises for error and misrepresentation, and consideration of how Spinoza addresses it will shed light on how Spinoza tries to account for doubt and denial.

According to Spinoza, “[a]ll ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true” and “there is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false” because all ideas are modes of God. If there were ideas that were false in and of themselves, then God would have false ideas, which is incompatible with divine omniscience—or, as Spinoza would put it, it would be incompatible with the fact that “whatever follows formally from God’s infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection”.²⁵ And yet, this claim appears to be incompatible with the claim, which Spinoza endorses, that the human mind is an idea in God and that human minds can commit errors and misrepresent the world. Spinoza’s solution is that a given idea can be false relative to the human mind²⁶ and true relative to God.²⁷ He illustrates this with an example of an idea that represents the sun as being two hundred feet away.²⁸ This idea is false only if it occurs in a mind that lacks knowledge of the true distance of the sun. A human mind can both have an idea of the sun being two hundred feet away and lack knowledge of the true distance of the sun, but God cannot. Therefore, an idea that represents the sun as two hundred feet away can be false in a human mind but cannot be false in God.

Whether or not Spinoza’s account of falsity succeeds is a difficult question that I cannot take up here. Rather, I would simply like to note that Spinoza’s treatment of attitudes other than affirmation, such as doubt and denial, is structurally similar. First of all, just as there is nothing positive in an idea in virtue of which it is not true, so, too, there is nothing positive in an idea in virtue of which it is not affirmed. And just as falsity results from the interaction between ideas, there is evidence that Spinoza thinks that attitudes such as denial and doubt result from the interaction between ideas. For example, he gives the example of a child imagining a winged horse and not perceiving anything else. In this circumstance, he claims that the child will regard the horse as present. He writes:

For if the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence, or any faculty of dissenting, unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded the existence of the same horse, or the Mind perceived that its idea of a winged horse was inadequate. And then either it will necessarily deny the horse’s existence, or it will necessarily doubt it.²⁹

In this text, Spinoza clearly states that we deny or doubt an idea x only if, in addition to idea x , we possess an idea y whose content excludes the content of idea x (in the case of denial) or we possess an idea z whose

content entails that idea x is inadequate (in the case of doubt). This states a necessary condition on doubt and denial. (Diane Steinberg objects that all of our perceptual ideas are inadequate, and thus, upon recognizing this, Spinoza's theory predicts that we suspend judgment, which strikes her as implausible.³⁰ But Spinoza says that *doubt* results from this recognition and says nothing about suspension of judgment.³¹ Doubt, for Spinoza, is the state of being less than certain about something, which he also thinks is the correct attitude to take towards the deliverances of the senses.)

Are there other conditions that must be in place for us to doubt or deny? Presumably yes because if we take *exclusion* to be a relation of logical or metaphysical incompatibility, then it is symmetric; that is, both ideas exclude each other.³² But in typical cases of denial, the idea that causes me to deny something is not itself denied. For example, if I have a perceptual idea that represents the distance of the sun as two hundred feet away and I have another idea that causes me to doubt it, say an idea that represents the true distance of the sun, then I deny the misrepresentation precisely because I don't doubt the true one.

At this point, I think that we can make use of the conatus to determine which cognitive attitude will obtain. Thus, like some of the accounts that we considered earlier and rejected, my account will appeal to Spinoza's conatus doctrine, but unlike those accounts, my account does not reduce affirmation to the conatus or the causal powers of an idea. Rather, my proposal is that the conatus associated with an idea pushes towards actions that would conduce to self-preservation if the idea were true, including imaginative content that doesn't represent the body parallel to the idea but rather the external causes responsible for its state. That is, the conatus takes an idea to be affirmed and determines us to act appropriately. When ideas conflict, their actions can generate attitudes of doubt and denial.

Before explaining exactly how this works, it will be useful to review a few details of Spinoza's theory of individuals and how it relates to the conatus doctrine. Let us begin by considering body under the attribute of extension and then apply the theory of complex individuality that Spinoza develops to modes under the attribute of thought. For Spinoza, simple bodies can join together to form complex bodies if they communicate their motions to one another according to a fixed pattern.³³ What is more, a complex body can lose parts and still survive if those parts are replaced by functional equivalents.³⁴ That is, both mereology and identity through change are determined by functional or causal properties. The resulting complex bodies can themselves be parts of even more complex bodies if their motions similarly realize a fixed pattern. There is, according to Spinoza, a hierarchy of increasingly complex bodies—each of which satisfies this condition—that terminates with a single super-individual that has every simpler body as a part.³⁵ The human mind,

according to Spinoza, is the idea of the human body, and every idea is identical to the body that it represents. Thus, the human mind and the human body are identical.³⁶ The human body is a complex body that has many simpler bodies as parts that are bound together by their functional organization. Similarly, the human mind is a complex idea that has many simpler ideas as parts that are bound together by their functional organization.³⁷

On this picture, the natural world is composed of a great many individuals at many different levels of complexity. Spinoza's conatus doctrine says that each thing strives to persevere in its being.³⁸ Because each of these individuals at each level of complexity is something in its own right, they exhibit this striving for self-preservation. But to the extent that they are parts of a more complex whole, their actions coincide with and are regulated by the striving of that more complex whole of which they are parts. For example, the human heart is both an individual with its own functional organization and part of the human body. As a genuine individual, the human heart strives to preserve its own functional organization and contributes to the human being's striving to preserve its own functional organization.

Now we are in a position to see how Spinoza could use his conatus doctrine to generate attitudes of denial and doubt from a collection of ideas that, insofar as they are in themselves and insofar as they are related to God's mind, are all affirmed. Each idea, insofar as it is in itself, is affirmed because it has a mind-to-world direction of fit and determines, in virtue of its conatus, mental actions that would result in its self-preservation if its content were true. But insofar as they are parts of a mind that contains ideas that conflict with them, their actions will be transformed as a result of a struggle between them and their rivals. The outcome of this struggle will, in turn, be determined by the relative strength of those ideas. The relative strength of each idea is a matter of the conatus of each and the conatus of the mind of which they are parts. Insofar as an idea is part of a mind, what would preserve itself coincides with what would preserve the mind. But, insofar as an idea is a passion, its interests can diverge from those of the mind to which it belongs. It cannot, of course, destroy the mind because Spinoza thinks that nothing can destroy that in which it inheres,³⁹ but it could seek to produce effects that result in the continued existence of the mind at a suboptimal degree of power.⁴⁰

This divergence of interests can generate mental conflict that grounds attitudes such as denial and doubt. Denial results from an idea, which in itself is affirmed, being joined to ideas that exclude it (that is, their contents are logically or metaphysically incompatible with its content), that are stronger than it. Because of the weakness of the denied idea relative to the strength of the ideas that exclude it, the net result of their combined power is action that would conduce to the survival of the mind

of which it is a part if its content were false. Doubt results from an idea being joined to stronger ideas whose contents entail that it is inadequate. Because of the relative weakness of the denied idea, the net result of its struggle with the ideas that indicate its inadequacy is action that would conduce to the survival of the mind of which it is a part if its content may or may not be true.

In other words, doubt and denial are the result of a struggle between ideas, all of which purport to represent the world as it is. In themselves, they produce actions that would be beneficial to themselves and to the mind of which they are parts if they were true, but, in combination with each other, they produce actions that are determined by the net force that results from each of their individual strivings. In this way, affirmation begets denial and doubt.

This account of affirmation, denial, and doubt entails that, whereas affirmation is fundamentally a subpersonal phenomenon, denial and doubt occur only at the level of human mind. (We can, of course, say of a mind that it affirms an idea, but this just means that it has an idea that is not denied or doubted. Nothing new need take place at the personal level for a mind to affirm an idea.) Ideas that are doubted or denied at the personal level are still affirmed at the subpersonal level. Those ideas still purport to represent the world as it really is, but their voices are drowned out by rival ideas. The mind containing them does not affirm them insofar as it doubts or denies them, but at the subpersonal level they are, as it were, still arguing their case.

Earlier, we considered some accounts of belief in Spinoza and found them wanting. Having explained what affirmation is, for Spinoza, can we leverage this account of affirmation to give an account of belief? I am pessimistic about the prospects for doing so because I suspect that the ordinary conception of belief is irreducibly normative and such notions do not easily fit into Spinoza's system. To see why belief might be normative, consider the difficulty of defining belief according to its functional role—that is, having certain inputs and outputs. For example, we might attempt to define belief as something that is formed on the basis of evidence and guides action. But this will not do because some of our beliefs are formed not on the basis of evidence but wishful thinking, and sometimes our actions are not guided by our beliefs but by representational states whose truth we do not endorse, as when we refuse to step out onto the glass floor of the CN tower despite believing the floor is strong and will not break. Rather, beliefs *ought* to be formed on the basis of evidence and *ought* to guide our action. I suspect similar problems will arise with any attempt to define belief in non-normative terms.

The normativity of belief makes it difficult to square with Spinoza's philosophy of mind. Spinoza's philosophy is sometimes described as naturalistic because he thinks that all phenomena can be understood in terms

of inviolable natural laws that are always and everywhere the same. Such naturalism is not a hospitable environment for the normative because natural law tells us what must happen given certain causal antecedents and not what ought to happen. Accordingly, Spinoza's treatment of normative concepts such as perfection and imperfection, good and evil, and just and unjust reduces them to descriptive, non-normative elements. This strongly suggests that nature, for Spinoza, is ultimately non-normative. Thus, if belief is indeed an irreducibly normative notion, as I suspect it is, then Spinoza's naturalistic philosophy of mind is not well-suited to accommodate it. Indeed, although Spinoza sometimes speaks of belief in passing, in the principal source of his psychological views, the *Ethics*, he never refers to it in rigorous formulations of his psychological principles. This being so, I propose that we abandon the attempt to define a Spinozistic notion of belief from his views of seemingly related topics such as affirmation, denial, and doubt and accept that Spinoza's psychology is belief-free.

Conclusion

I have argued that both Descartes's and Spinoza's theories of judgment result from their attempts to reconcile the fact of human error with the existence of a perfect God. The problem is particularly acute for Spinoza because the human mind is not only produced by God but is also, indeed, a part of the infinite intellect and constitutes God's knowledge of the human body. For this reason, Spinoza thinks that every idea is affirmed, which I have argued means that every idea purports to represent the world as it really is. Thus, just as there is nothing positive in an idea in virtue of which it is false, so, too, there is nothing positive in them in virtue of which they are denied or doubted. Similarly, just as every idea is true relative to God's mind, so, too, is every idea affirmed relative to God's mind. Insofar as they are related to the human mind, however, ideas can be denied or doubted. These cognitive attitudes emerge from the interplay of ideas that are, in themselves, affirmed. This means that some ideas are simultaneously affirmed and denied or doubted. This is possible because affirmation and doubt and denial are phenomena occurring, in the first instance, at different levels. Doubt and denial attach to ideas at the level of the human mind, whereas affirmation is essentially at once subpersonal and divine. (The relationship between how things are *quantum in se est* and how things are in relation to God is a complex topic. Exploring this further would require an in-depth discussion of Spinoza's notions of eternity, duration, and perception *sub specie aeternitatis*, which I cannot undertake here.) Because it is subpersonal, and so is consistent with denial and doubt, I have argued that affirmation, in Spinoza, should be understood as a technical notion that is unconnected to folk-psychological notions such as belief.

Abbreviations and Conventions

Passages of Spinoza's *Ethics* are cited in the following way: app = appendix; a = axiom; c = corollary; d = demonstration or definition depending on context; p = proposition; s = scholium.

AT	Descartes, R., <i>Oeuvres de Descartes</i> , ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery.
CSM	Descartes, R., <i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> , ed. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch.
ST	Aquinas, Thomas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i> .

Notes

1. AT VII 35/CSM II 24.
2. AT VII 35–36/CSM II 25.
3. AT VII 54/CSM II 38.
4. AT VII 36–37/CSM II 25–26.
5. AT VII 37/CSM II 26.
6. ST I.75.6; 85.2.
7. ST I.16.2.
8. AT VII 56–57; CSM II 39–40.
9. AT VII 57; CSM II 40.
10. AT VII 59–60; CSM II 41.
11. Williams (2005: 162–3), Curley (1975: 177–8), Wilson (1978: 127).
12. AT VII 58–59; CSM II 41.
13. Della Rocca (2006).
14. Schüssler (2013).
15. E3pref.
16. 2p49c.
17. Della Rocca (2003: 207).
18. J. Steinberg (2018).
19. D. Steinberg (2005: 151).
20. 2p44s.
21. Della Rocca (2003: 209).
22. 2p48s.
23. D. Steinberg (2005: 154).
24. 2p17.
25. 2p7c.
26. 2p36d.
27. 2p32, 2p32d, 2p33, 2p33d.
28. 2p35s.
29. 2p49s.
30. D. Steinberg (2005: 408–9).
31. 2p49s.
32. See D. Steinberg (2005: 151).
33. Definition following A'' of the *Short Physical Digression* following 2p13s.
34. L4 following A3 of the *Short Physical Digression*.
35. L7s of the *Short Physical Digression*.
36. 1p7s.
37. 2p14.

38. 3p6.

39. 3p4.

40. 3p11s.

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