"Adequate Understanding of Inadequate Ideas: Power and Paradox in Spinoza's Cognitive Therapy"

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Spinoza shared with his contemporaries the conviction that the passions are, on the whole, unruly and destructive. A life of virtue requires that the passions be controlled, if not entirely vanquished, and the preferred means of imposing this control over the passions is via the power of reason. But there was little agreement in the seventeenth century about just what gives reason its strength and how its power can be brought to bear upon the wayward passions.

It *was* generally agreed that a rationally based, rigorously developed science of ethics would be a valuable thing. A science of ethics would be valuable because it would provide solidly (rationally) grounded judgments about what is conducive to a truly good human life -- and such a well-founded judgment might effectively counter the errant inclinations of the passions. Spinoza, of course, provides just such a science of ethics (*ordine geometrico demonstrata)*. But even a rationally-based, deductively structured true knowledge of good and evil is not enough to assure reason's triumph over the passions. The existence of akratic weakness shows that to free ourselves from subjection to the passions, more is needed than just a true knowledge of good and evil - however well-founded and scientifically compelling such knowledge might be (cf. *E*4, P15-17 and 17S). It is not enough for reason simply to point the way to the true good. If we are to be able to exert rational control over the passions, there must be more direct ways in which the power of reason can be brought to bear upon them. But how?

The first half of Part V of the *Ethics* presents Spinoza's answer to this question. As its title indicates, this part of the work deals directly with the power of the intellect to free us from our bondage to the wayward passions. Spinoza's account is rich and complex, outlining a number of ways in which the mind itself, by means of its power of understanding, can directly act to moderate the strength of the passions. The exposition is complex, but conceptually speaking, the pivotal claim, in this first section of Part V, is Proposition 3. The propositions that follow P3 provide information about the "mechanisms," so to speak, by which the understanding transforms the passions, but P3 is supposed to present the conceptual framework within which this transformational process occurs. VP3 reads: "An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it." The suggestion seems to be that forming a clear and distinct idea of a passion is enough to do away with its passive character. This is a remarkable claim, and if credible it would be impressive evidence indeed of the power of the rational mind to transform and control the passions.

I say "if credible," for this claim strikes me (and has struck many readers) as deeply problematic. I want to focus my remarks today on this proposition and its formidable difficulties. I do so first because of its conceptually central place in Spinoza's program of rational therapy for the passions. But in addition, the problems that arise in the attempt to interpret and defend this proposition are central problems for the overall interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy. I will return to this more general point at the conclusion of the paper.

The Proposition, Its Proof and its Problems

EV, P3 speaks of our forming a clear and distinct idea of an affect which is a passion. First question: What is meant, here, by "forming a clear and distinct idea of an affect"? In ensuing propositions, Spinoza uses various other phrases, apparently intending them to refer to the same cognitive activity. For example, he speaks of achieving "clear and distinct understanding" (VP15d), and of "true knowledge of the emotions" (VP4Sch). In Proposition 12 he explicitly invokes *ratio* in this regard. The textual evidence is not entirely univocal, but I propose that we adopt the standard identification of clarity and distinctness with adequacy of conception. Then, for me to have a clear and distinct idea of something will be for me to have an adequate idea of it in my mind or for it to follow from ideas that are adequate in my mind. This is not without its difficulties, as we will see, but neither is any alternative.

Second question: does the term "an affect," as used here, refer to a type of affect (say, fear or hatred) or to a specific occurrence of an affect in a person at a time? There are arguments to be made in support of both of these alternatives. On the one hand, it seems (for reasons to be discussed below) that Spinoza is talking here about knowledge of the second kind (*ratio*). But knowledge of the second kind is often interpreted as purely universal in character, unable to reach down, cognitively, to the level of individuals or singular events. If this is so, it would suggest that Spinoza is urging only that I try to form clear and distinct ideas of fear and hatred as affective types, not of a specific episode of fear or hatred that I might be suffering at this moment. Part 3 of the *Ethics* might provide the kind of knowledge of the passions called for here.

There are some reasons to think that this is what Spinoza had in mind. But there are stronger reasons, I think, for resolving this interpretive dispute in the opposite direction. Most obviously, the proposition makes indirect reference to time when it says that the passion will "cease" to be a passion "as soon as" we form a clear and distinct idea of it. This is the language of time and of events in time. It makes sense to say that a certain affective episode might undergo a change and cease to be an instance of anger. But what could it mean for anger *as a type* to "cease" to be anger? Spinoza must be talking about specific occurrences of passions in us. EVP3 is recommending that we form clear and distinct ideas of occurrent affective states of our own minds and bodies.

But this only raises a more serious problem. Among the most troublesome passions -- certainly those from which I most want liberation -- are painful and pain-related emotions. Spinoza's therapeutic program calls for us to gain an adequate understanding of our own painful emotional states. But on Spinoza's own terms this is strictly impossible. Pain is, by definition, a transition to a state of lesser perfection or power. If I could have clear and distinct knowledge of my pain, an idea of a transition to a state of lesser power and perfection would have to follow from ideas adequate in my mind. Were this the case, my mind alone would be the adequate cause of this idea of transition to a state of lesser perfection. But this consequence is absurd, for nothing can follow from my mind alone except that which is conducive to my perseverance in being -- and ideas of transitions to lesser states of perfection are not conducive to my perseverance in being. So, in recommending that we gain an adequate idea of painful passions, Spinoza is, paradoxically, recommending the impossible.

This point can be made in a slightly different way by focusing on the fact that a passion is by definition an idea of a bodily state whose causes are not entirely contained in my body (that's what makes it passive). As such, the idea itself is one which does not follow solely from ideas that are adequate in my own mind. In short, my idea is an inadequate idea (this is also reflected in Spinoza's general definition of a passion as a "confused idea"). In recommending

that we form a clear and distinct idea of a passion, Spinoza is recommending that we form an adequate understanding of an inadequate idea. But this, again, is strictly impossible. For me to have an adequate understanding of something, the idea of that thing must follow solely from ideas that are adequate in my mind. But no inadequate ideas can follow solely from ideas that are adequate in my mind (EIIP11C). So, in recommending that we gain an adequate understanding of inadequate ideas, Spinoza is, paradoxically, recommending the impossible.

The natural response to this line of reasoning is to take it not as a damaging objection, but as a confirmation of the efficacy of the understanding in overcoming painful affects (and other inadequate ideas). The same principles that entail that painful passions cannot be adequately understood also entail that that which is adequately understood cannot be a painful passion. This sounds like the line that Spinoza is pursuing as he says that the passion "ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it." Since "being a painful passion of mine" and "being adequately understood by me" are mutually exclusive predicates, if I can assure that I adequately understand my affect, I thereby ensure that it is not a painful passion.

But this solution to the problem is hardly a solution at all. Indeed, if I could assure that a certain affect is adequately understood, I could ensure that it is not a painful passion. But the problem is that precisely because it is a painful passion, it cannot be adequately understood. To use a geometrical example of the sort that Spinoza favored, consider the following parody of VP3: "A figure which is a triangle ceases to be triangular as soon as it becomes square." This parody illustrates what's wrong with the proposed solution to the paradoxical problem in Spinoza's proposition. True enough -- since being square and being triangular are mutually exclusive predicates, if I can assure that a particular triangular figure is square, I thereby ensure that it is not triangular. But of course I can't assure that a particular triangular figure is square because by hypothesis it is a triangular figure, and as such it has properties that preclude its being square. So too, if I could gain an adequate understanding of a painful passion, I could ensure that it is not a passion. But by hypothesis it *is* a passion, and as such it has properties that preclude my adequately understanding it (*qua* passion).

One might have hoped that the proof of the proposition would resolve these difficulties. One would be disappointed. It reads:

> "An affect which is a passion is a confused idea (by the General Definition of the Affects). Therefore, if we should form a clear and distinct idea of the affect itself, this idea will only be distinguished by reason from the affect itself, insofar as it is related only to the mind (II,P21 and II,P21Sch). Therefore the affect will cease to be a passion. QED"

Here we have a confused idea (a passion) and a clear and distinct idea of that passion -- and these two are distinguished from one another only "by reason." Now it must be the case that two things that are distinguished from each other only "by reason" can nonetheless be quite different since, in this case, one of these ideas is confused and the other is clear and distinct. On the other hand, the doctrine of the *idea ideae*, to which Spinoza adverts here, emphasizes that an idea and the idea of that idea are "one and the same thing conceived through one and the same attribute." (IIP22S) Indeed, Spinoza's proof relies on there *not* being a great difference between these two. If I understand Spinoza correctly, the crux of the argument is the suggestion that two things as different as a confused idea and a clear and distinct idea

could not possibly be distinguished only "by reason" - so the confused idea must have ceased being confused.

But it seems obvious that this account in the demonstration suffers from the same problem that we found in the proposition itself. If a clear and distinct idea is significantly different from a confused idea, and if the idea of an idea is *not* significantly different from that idea, then there cannot be a clear and distinct idea of a confused idea. Put a little differently, if my emotional state is indeed a passion, then a knowledge of it that does not know it *as* a passion is not knowledge of *that state*.

I have belabored this point at great length in order to emphasize that there is a *prima facie* conceptual problem at the center of Spinoza's program of rational therapy for the passions. Although it is not technically a paradox, I have referred to it as "paradoxical," for it implicitly recommends doing that which cannot be done. It is not merely a counterfactual, telling us what would be the case if (*per impossibile*) a certain self-contradictory state of affairs were to obtain. It is telling us what does happen "as soon as" a certain self-contradictory state of affairs does obtain. I have also been exaggerating the starkness of the difficulty somewhat in that I have been treating "forming of clear and distinct ideas" and "gaining adequate understanding" as if they were all-or-nothing achievements rather than matters of degree. Spinoza allows for partial understanding and for the development of one's understanding over time. But while this gradualism lessens the sense of stark inconsistency, the basic conceptual problem remains.

The Basic Structure of the Excellent Remedies

And yet – Spinoza goes on about the salutary consequences of acquiring clear and distinct ideas – true knowledge -- adequate understanding – of the passions. He does so in VP3 and he does so throughout the first half of Part V. One might think that having putatively established, in VP3, that a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it, Spinoza would not think it necessary to lay out the process by which such clear and distinct ideas work their magic. But maybe because he knows that further explanation is needed here, he recounts, in some detail, the "excellent remedies" as he calls them -- ways in which the formation of clear and distinct ideas of the affects can remedy the excesses and sorrows of the passions. I do not have time here to follow the details of Spinoza's interesting account. But I do want to consider the overall structure of the cognitive therapy that Spinoza is prescribing here – what sort of knowledge he is talking about, and how it is to have the ameliorative effect on the passions that he claims for it. Since I am concerned about the very possibility of forming clear and distinct ideas of the passions, this would seem to be the place to look in order to discover, in more concrete and practical terms, what Spinoza had in mind.

It seems that Spinoza realized that there might be some who would be troubled by VP3 and its demonstration and thus would have doubts about a therapeutic program that requires that we form clear and distinct ideas of the passions. VP4 immediately seeks to reassure such skeptics with the claim that "There is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept." In light of the questions raised by our extensive discussion above, how could Spinoza be so confident of this point, and what exactly could he mean when he says this?

The demonstration reveals that Spinoza is talking about the common notions. "Those things that are common to all can only be conceived adequately (by IIP38) and so (by IIP12 and L2)

there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept." It is not surprising that Spinoza would appeal, at this point, to the doctrine of the common notions – the ideas of those things that are common to all and are equally in the whole and in the part. These are the ideas with which he introduced the second kind of knowledge in Part II, arguing that they were not subject to confusion, could only be conceived adequately, and hence that they could serve as the basis for *ratio*. So it is not surprising that he would turn to the common notions when in need of a source of adequate, clear and distinct concepts. But there are problems associated with the appeal to common notions, and before turning to their positive role, I want to look at one of these problems.

Spinoza is talking here about forming a clear and distinct conception of an affection of the body. But what he provides for is the formation of a clear and distinct concept of that which every affection of every body has in common with every other -- i.e. a common notion. Is a common notion supposed to be a clear and distinct concept of an affection of my body? In the corollary to VP4 he extends this line of argument to the affects -- i.e. to the ideas of the affections of the body. He argues that we can form a clear and distinct conception of any affect because, as the idea of an affection of a body, the affect *involves* the idea of that which is common to all bodies. Now it seems to me unobjectionable for him to claim that the idea of every affection of the body involves an idea of that which all extended things have in common (after all, as the idea of a mode of extension, it surely does involve the idea of the attribute of extension). And let us grant, for the moment, that the idea of that which all extended things have in common can only be conceived adequately. (IIP38) This yields the conclusion that every affect *involves* a clear and distinct idea (an adequately conceived common notion). But to say that an idea of an extended mode involves a clear and distinct common notion is not to say that that common notion is a clear and distinct idea of that extended mode. That inference would require the general principle "If an idea of a mode M *involves* a clear and distinct idea C, then C is a clear and distinct idea of M." And that doesn't seem to be a plausible principle. (The idea of a triangle involves the clear and distinct idea of extension – but it is not the case that this idea of extension is therefore a clear and distinct idea of a triangle. Or, a more homey example, my idea of a smile involves the idea of a face, but the idea of a face, however clear and distinct it might be, is not therefore a clear and distinct idea of a smile). Thinking back to the demonstration of VP3, it is clear that less is being delivered *here* than was promised *there*. At that point, the clear and distinct idea of the affect was to be the idea of the idea, distinguished only "by reason" from the affect. It is hard to see how the idea of a specific affection of my body and the idea of that which all things have in common could be "one and the same thing conceived through one and the same attribute" (as he says of the *idea ideae*).

In any case, let us grant that Spinoza does establish that every affect *involves* a clearly and distinctly conceived common notion. This is a weaker claim than the one he needs and uses in VP3 and its demonstration, but it turns out that it is enough for most of the "excellent remedies" for the passions that follow in rapid succession here after proposition 4. For these do not really require that we have a clear and distinct idea of the passion in the strong sense – i.e. an adequate understanding of the passion. They require only that a common notion be *involved* in the affect -- i.e. that every affect provide an occasion for thinking the common notions. The power of the mind over the passions derives from certain characteristics of the common notions themselves (for example, their intrinsic adequacy, their ubiquity) and certain characteristics of the order of things as revealed by *ratio* (for example, the necessity with which all events occur). These features of common notions and of reality as revealed by *ratio* are available for therapeutic use even if the common notions do not constitute "clear and

distinct ideas of the passions" in the strong sense. But let us take a moment to establish what the common notions are, and then consider the excellent remedies that Spinoza bases on them.

An Aside on the Common Notions

The common notions are, by definition, ideas of that which is common to all modes of extension -- equally in the whole and in the part of all extended things. Spinoza tells us that they include the idea of extension itself and the idea of motion and rest (IIL2) -- the immediate infinite and eternal mode that follows from the attribute. I take it that more broadly understood they are ideas of the structural and dispositional features of God's active self-expression which are always and everywhere the same. Loosely following Curley we can think of them as ideas of nomological uniformities in nature – ideas of the regularities of God's activity that we are trying to describe when we try to discover and formulate the "laws of nature." I think of them as ideas of the most basic ways in which God always and everywhere acts.

Every thing and every event in nature manifests the ways in which God always and everywhere acts extendedly. These regularities of the divine extended activity are implicitly and actively present in every extended thing and event. So, too, given that the *ordo et connexio* of ideas is the same as the *ordo et connexio* of things, the ideas of these regularities are implicitly and actively present in every idea of every extended mode. Thus, if I have any idea of any extended mode, I have adequate ideas of the fundamental ways in which God always and everywhere acts extendedly – I have clear and distinct common notions.

Back to the Excellent Remedies

We are now in a position to return to the issue of the way in which forming clear and distinct common notions can help in dealing with the passions. Spinoza outlines a number of such ways. The common notions articulate the most fundamental ways in which things follow from the power of God. As such, they reflect the necessity which characterizes that activity and thereby reveal that all things are necessarily as they are. Spinoza argues (and provides examples to illustrate) that a recognition of the necessity with which all things happen will lessen our emotional response to them. Moreover, the common notions, as ideas of the causal regularities in nature, bring causal relations to mind and thereby remind us of the many causes that concur in the production of our affective states. Spinoza argues that, being mindful of the many causes at work, our emotional response will be, so to speak, diluted, and the power of our affective response to any single thing will be lessened.

More important, even, than these salutary effects, is the positive influence over the passions that comes from the intrinsic power which the common notions possess simply in virtue of their status as adequate ideas. The idea of extension is a common notion. Extension is an attribute – what the intellect perceives as the essence of God. Having (better, *being*) the idea of an attribute is intrinsically intellectually satisfying, since it is the idea of that which is in itself, caused by itself, conceived through itself, requiring nothing beyond itself to be thought. It is a maximally powerful idea, and the mind is maximally active in thinking that idea, since all other adequate ideas follow from it.

When Spinoza speaks of forming clear and distinct ideas of the affects, in these propositions after VP4, this is a large part of what he has in mind. Each affect, since it involves the common notions, presents an opportunity to think these ideas – to indulge one's mind in the

activity (highly pleasurable – even joyful activity) of thinking these ideas. Since the common notions are literally common to everything (in the sense of being "involved in the idea of " everything) every affect, every sense experience and every thought provides an occasion to think these ideas. Thus these ideas become more firmly established and the pleasure provided by them becomes more constant and more stable. The common notions are an ever-present, constantly available source of cognitive potency and active affective joy. As noted already, the idea of extension, a common notion, is the idea of an attribute -- what the intellect perceives as the essence of God. To think of things in terms of the law-like ways in which God's power is expressed through the attribute of extension is to relate them to the idea of God. Spinoza says that we can bring it about that every affect is related to the idea of God. In this way, every affect can nudge the mind in the direction of the idea of God. And that ascending path leads directly to the knowing love of God.

To the extent that one's mind is chiefly constituted by the common notions, one's ideas are adequate ideas – and since only adequate ideas can follow from adequate ideas, there is no chance that inadequate ideas will be spontaneously generated within the mind. To return to the issue with which we began, although Spinoza calls these common notions "clear and distinct ideas of the passions," and though they may have the above-mentioned kinds of therapeutic value, in fact they do not constitute adequate cognition of the passions, since the ideas of the passions cannot follow from them alone. So just what *is* the epistemic relationship between the mind constituted chiefly by common notions and the wayward and painful passions?

By definition the passions are the result of my body's being acted upon by things and forces in the surrounding environment. Now these sorts of causal interactions take place in accordance with the causal principles that we call the laws of nature. Since the common notions are clear and distinct ideas of these law-like regularities, the presence of common notions in my mind can reveal to me that the interactions with the environment that produce the passions are instances of universal natural causal uniformities.

To the extent that I come to see my interactions with the environment in these terms – in terms that reflect the most fundamental ways in which God acts – those environmental factors that are acting upon me are brought into my thinking about myself. My mind comes to encompass the ideas of these things with which I am in causal interaction. So now my mind contains the idea of the cause, the idea of the natural law-like uniformity in accordance with which such interactions take place, and the idea of the resulting affection of my body. (On Curley's model, all parts of the deductive-nomological explanation are in place). So at last the idea of the affection of my body follows from ideas all of which are in my mind. Have I finally achieved that which seemed to be denied me – an adequate understanding of the passion?

Well, it would seem that way, except that that of which I now have an adequate understanding is not a passion. Things have changed in the course of my coming to understand my interactions with the environment as instances of the most fundamental causal workings of nature. Let us consider a couple of these changes.

First, since the ideas of the causes of the affection of my body are now contained within my mind (both the vertical and the proximate horizontal causes), the affection of the body which previously seemed to be a passion now appears as an internally caused natural event -- an active affect, not a passion at all. Since my mind has become ideas of the causes of the

affection, the idea of the affection follows from my mind alone, and its previous passive character is gone.

This would seem to be a vindication of Spinoza's initial claim (VP3) with which we began – that an affect that is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it. But what about the objection, raised then, that for it to be possible for me to achieve an adequate understanding of a painful passion, it would have to be possible for the idea of a transition to a state of lesser perfection to follow from my mind alone? That is supposed to be strictly impossible, according to Spinozistic principles. The answer is that as my mind has been, so to speak, enlarging to encompass causal factors with which I am interacting, so too (by IIP7) my body has been enlarging beyond what I previously took to be the skin-bounded limitations of this finite organism. So, while that which I previously imagined to be my body is suffering in that interaction which I previously called a passionate affect, the larger whole of which it is but a part – the larger whole which is now my body – is not.

But, it may be objected, that larger body with which I am now identified might well be adversely affected in its interactions with external factors. In terms of its place in the greater environment, it will indeed be undergoing changes which lessen its power to persevere in being -- painful passive affections. And, for all the reasons discussed at length above, I will not be able to achieve an adequate understanding of those changes. Still, a helpful therapeutic prescription might be to tell me that these passions will cease to be passions as soon as I form a clear and distinct idea of them. Then, in my effort to do that which cannot be done (to acquire an adequate understanding of that which I cannot adequately understand) perhaps I will acquire the requisite larger perspective on myself and my relationship to other things in light of which that putatively passive state that I was trying to understand is revealed as an internally caused natural event -- an active affect.

But to say that the state, when adequately understood, *is revealed as* an active state, suggests that its apparently passive character was only apparent. Adequate understanding of something, after all, knows it as it truly is. If it is impossible for me to attain adequate knowledge of a passion, and if whenever I do achieve adequate understanding of a putatively passive state it comes to be known as active, maybe my initial take on the state as a passive state was erroneous. Maybe it never was really passive. Maybe only inadequate cognition of the first kind would ever even suggest that any state is a passion. Maybe passions are always just confused and inadequate ideas.

That was supposed to be an ironic way of putting the point. *Of course* passions are just confused and inadequate ideas. Passions are by definition confused and inadequate ideas. Then perhaps this explains the therapeutic power of adequate cognition. Adequate understanding of a passion dispels the confusion, thereby transforming the passion. This is not entirely wrong, I think, but it is misleading, for talk of "dispelling the confusion" makes it sound as if there is something there -- confusion -- that is the source of a problem and that needs to be done away with. But, as we are clearly told in IIP35, the confusion in question is not something -- it is the *lack* of something -- the privation of knowledge. And a privation is not something that needs to be dispelled or transformed. A privation is not, in itself, anything at all. But until it is adequately known, it might seem to be something.

I have been suggesting that to the extent that we come to understand our own affective states in terms of the basic laws of nature, we will expand our self-conception, taking in more of the environment around us, and thereby know that which previously seemed to be an instance of

passion as a case of internally caused activity -- an active affect. The more we know adequately, the less ignorant we are, and the less ignorant we are, the less we know of pain or passion, for these are but confused privative ideas.

To put it a little differently: the ideas of pain and passion are inadequate ideas. But no ideas are inadequate in themselves. Ideas are only inadequate relative to a specific individual mind (IIP11Cor), and if the boundaries of that mind can be altered (so to speak) the idea's status can be changed from inadequate to adequate, thereby doing away with its apparent painful and passive character.

This all seems appropriately Spinozistic to me, and it will resolve the problem for any specific instance of a putatively painful passion. But it is limited in its efficacy. No matter how broadly I enlarge the scope of my mind (and thus my body) to encompass more and more of the causes in the horizontal causal order, my effort is always incomplete. IP28 assures us that this series of causes will have no end. To some extent, then, my knowledge will always remain incomplete and inadequate, and to that extent I will remain a victim of ignorance, pain and passion (or at least I will continue to imagine that I am).

Before concluding, I want to look at one further way in which the program of understanding the passions can overcome their putative passivity. We saw above that in his discussion of the excellent remedies for the passions Spinoza's emphasis is on the common notions. In seeking to form clear and distinct ideas of our passive emotions, we are to form adequate ideas of the lawlike ways in which God always and everywhere acts. We are to come to know our affective states as instances of those nomological regularities. This focus upon the common notions has a kind of liberating potential beyond that which has been discussed thus far.

An important thing to notice about the laws of nature is that they do not conflict with each other. (This is true, as well, of the principles of a consistent geometry). By this I mean that as events and processes occur, it is never the case that what would happen in accordance with a law of nature is opposed, hindered or interfered with by the workings of some other, conflicting law of nature. The laws of nature do not contravene each other, and that which would happen in accordance with the laws of nature is never thwarted by the interposition of contrary law-governed factors. Of course a billiard ball can be deflected from its prior path, but the deflection manifests and instantiates the relevant laws of motion as fully as did the initial direction and pace of motion. Looked at from the perspective of the initially moving billiard ball, it might seem that the natural course of things has been thwarted by its deflection, but in truth the natural course of things, as defined in terms of the most basic laws of nature, has been as fully expressed in the deflection as it would have been in continued undeflected motion.

The most fundamental, lawlike ways in which God’s nature is expressed do not conflict with each other; thus they never fail to find full and unhindered expression. It is this fact that warrants the view that there is no unactualized potential in Spinoza’s God. God’s infinite structured power (*potentia*) finds unhindered and complete expression as structured activity (*actualitas*). The mutual consistency of the most basic lawlike ways in which that power is expressed guarantees that when viewed at this level, there is no sign of conflict, of thwarted effort, of unrealized potential, of frustrated desire.

In coming to know myself and the affections of my body in terms of the common notions -- adequate ideas of the non-conflicting law-like regularities of the divine activity -- I come to

know myself in a way that reveals nothing of conflict, of frustrated effort or desire. I know nothing of pain, passivity, or weakness. My mind consists of ideas of constellations of complete and unhindered expressions of divine power as activity. That which previously registered in my mind as a painful passion is now known as it is in God – and known as it is in God it is revealed to be a locus of pure activity.

What has happened here? Did we indeed achieve an adequate understanding of a passive affect? Did a passive state get transformed into an active one? What happened is that a state which was known confusedly and inadequately came to be known as it truly is. And known as it truly is, it reveals itself as a locus of pure activity. There can be no adequate understanding of passive emotional states, for adequate understanding of things reveals them as they truly are in God, and in God there is no passivity -- there is only pure, complete, unhindered and unobstructed expression of divine power (potentia) as activity (actualitas).

There *appears* to be passivity because in our nescience and confusion we imagine ourselves as isolated individual creatures struggling to survive in hostile environmental conditions, seeking to reduce what we imaginationally experience as pain and to increase what we imaginationally experience as pleasure. But these experiences are themselves the products of our failing to know things as they truly are -- as they are in God. So long as I do not have adequate ideas of the basic ways in which things follow from God and of how they interact with each other and of how I am a fully active, harmoniously integrated mode within that infinite modal order, I will imagine all kinds of things.

What's really getting transformed here is not the passion, but my conception of myself -- from an inadequate *mis*conception of myself in terms of various putatively passive states -- memories, lusts, hopes and pains -- into a more adequate understanding of myself as a fully active finite manifestation of the infinitely active divine self-expression. I am coming to know myself in terms that reflect the order in which things follow from God ("the order of the intellect," Spinoza calls it). I am coming to know myself in a way that makes no reference to the confused and disordered ideas that led me to believe that I was afflicted by painful passions that required therapeutic remedy.

But if that being as which I am coming to know myself is without passions, without memory and without desire, in what sense is that being *me* at all? Spinoza would say that that fully active manifestation of divine power as which I am coming to know myself is in fact me, whereas my previous apparently struggling and suffering self is revealed as mostly an ephemeral symptom of confused ignorance. It should not surprise us to discover that when, having known ourselves inadequately, we come to know ourselves as we are in God, things look quite different. This, I take it, is a not-so-surprising consequence of what Spinoza told us back in the Scholium to Proposition 29 of Part II -- that "the mind has not an adequate, but only a confused and mutilated knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature."

Conclusion

In concluding, let us turn again to the proposition (VP3) with which we began. A clear and distinct idea of something -- an adequate understanding of something -- reveals that thing as it truly is. If an adequate understanding of a bodily affection reveals it to be without passive character, then that affection's putative passivity was only a reflection of the privation of knowledge that characterizes *imaginatio*. We were correct, then, to argue in the beginning that

it is impossible to form a clear and distinct idea of a passion. One cannot form a clear and distinct idea of something which exists only as a lack of knowledge -- just as one cannot form a bright and clear image of darkness. Spinoza was somewhat misleading in suggesting that a passion would cease to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it, for that wording suggests that it was once truly a passion, whereas in truth there are no passions. Still, if I erroneously believe that I am suffering from painful passions, I need to get to know things as they truly are in order that I might be relieved of that erroneous belief. So Spinoza does well to suggest to me that I can understand these painful passions, and that if I do, they will lose their painful and passive character. Such a suggestion provides me an incentive to achieve the kind of understanding in light of which I will feel no need to pursue therapy for painful passions.

One problem remains, though. I am arguing that our belief that we are suffering from passions is a result of our confused and inadequate understanding. But confusion and inadequate understanding are themselves evidence of passivity. If we are to use the inadequacy of the ideas of the *imaginatio* to explain away the appearance of passions, how do we explain away the existence of these very inadequate ideas of the *imaginatio*? This is a topic for another paper, but suffice it to say (as Spinoza says of the passive affects) that these inadequate ideas of the *imaginatio* will cease to be inadequate as soon as we form clear and distinct ideas of them. If an individual is captivated by inadequate ideas, the best that can be done for her is to encourage her to try to form clear and distinct ideas of those inadequate ideas. There is an element of paradox in this advice, of course, for it will be impossible for her to form clear and distinct ideas of inadequate ideas as such. But in the process of trying to do the impossible, she may attain to a different level and kind of self-understanding, and her mind thereby come to be comprised almost entirely of adequate ideas. The problem of her captivation by inadequate ideas is then no longer a problem at all. Certain kinds of problems -- those seemingly generated by ideas that are inadequate in the mind -- are not problems for those who have a clear and distinct understanding of themselves.

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