

Essay subject: How do Spinoza and Leibniz attempt to overcome the mind-body problem? Who is more successful?

THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM: SPINOZA AND LEIBNIZ

For a very long time, the mind body problem has been one of the most discussed subjects in philosophy. Actually, this problem is arisen from metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Mind and mental processes are not like physical bodies. Many philosophers have tried to solve this in their own way, and some of these solutions have been the most reasonable ones; such as Dualism and Monism. Spinoza is one of the philosophers who discussed the mind-body problem.

According to Spinoza, there is only one substance and that is God. Since there cannot be two infinities as God and the universe, God is the universe. We, human beings, depend on God, so we are attached to him, in another way, we are characteristics of him. Furthermore, our features such as mind and body are his characteristics also, and these are the only characteristics of him that we are aware of. Actually, these characteristics are the extension and the thought, and now something that Spinoza calls “modes” comes in our way. The mind and the body are the modes of God’s attributes, which are extension and thought. Our minds are the modifications of God’s thoughts, as Phil Rees mentions:

That substance has an infinity of attributes (essences) of which we are aware of only two – thought and extension. My body is a finite mode of the one substance considered under the attribute of extension. My mind is the very same mode of the one substance, but considered under the attribute of thought.(1)

Spinoza says that in order to affect something, they should be the same kind, and this is a very reasonable argument. Since whatever happens in the body, it happens in the mind; they must be the same kind, actually for Spinoza they are the same thing, the mind is the expression of the body. He explains the union of the mind and the body as:

... we understand not only that the human mind is united to the body, but also what should be understood by the union of mind and body.(2)

So we can say that he is a Monist and rejects Descartes' Dualism. As an example to how the mind and body interact, let's think of a blind man. He cannot see anything around him, but he knows there is something to see. Namely, without sensations- physical attributes- he still knows that the stuff around him exists. As another example for how the mind and body interact, I can give one from Phil Rees:

According to Spinoza, when I see a tree I can give two different and parallel explanatory accounts. I can show how light rays are reflected from the tree, focussed by my eye onto the retina, resulting in the firing of various neurons in my brain. Alternatively, I can talk about the idea of the tree interacting with the idea of my eye, resulting in an idea in my mind, though it is exceedingly hard to comprehend what all this means in practice.(3)

While saying the mind and body are the same, Spinoza does not mean that every mind has the same capabilities of thinking. He says:

In proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur

with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly.

And from these we know the excellence of one mind over the others. (4)

Here, he is saying that just like the way the bodies differ from one another, minds are working differently.

Another philosopher that can be considered about the mind-body problem is Leibniz. As we come to the interaction of the mind and the body, their link is not random. Their harmony is so perfect because they were pre-determined to be in harmony:

Leibniz's account of mind-body causation was in terms of his famous doctrine of the preestablished harmony. According to the latter, (1) no state of a created substance has as a real cause some state of another created substance (i.e. a denial of inter-substantial causality); (2) every non-initial, non-miraculous, state of a created substance has as a real cause some previous state of that very substance (i.e. an affirmation of intra-substantial causality); and (3) each created substance is programmed at creation such that all its natural states and actions are carried out in conformity with all the natural states and actions of every other created substance.(5)

Mental processes don't depend on physical ones and physical ones don't depend on mental ones either. They are working together in the same way. Differently from Spinoza, Leibniz says that the mind and the body don't affect each other, they don't interact. Just as the clocks say the same time but in order to do that, they don't have to interact. The mind and the body are the same kind of substance, but they are distinct:

But although Leibniz held that there is only one type of substance in the world, and thus that mind and body are ultimately composed of the same kind of substance (a version of monism), he also held that mind and body are metaphysically distinct.(6)

Since they are metaphysically distinct from each other, they can't interact. But they seem to interact:

According to this system, bodies act as if there were no soul (though this is impossible); and souls act as if there were no bodies; and both act as if each influenced the other. (7)

The reason they seem to interact is the pre-established harmony between "monads". Monads are the substantial forms of being. They are eternal, independent and they cannot act on each other because they are windowless. Everything is composed of these monads.

Leibniz and Spinoza are similar to each other in the way that they both think "bad things happen for the good of the company". According to Spinoza, to control the emotions we should get rid of them. We should think more and understand the universe we will understand that bad things are necessary. This is so much like what Leibniz says. Their ways of getting closer to God are similar, too. According to Leibniz, the more you think, the closer you get to God. Because, by thinking you can create ideas and creating is an attribute of God. According to Spinoza, the more you cause, the closer you get to God. Because, God caused this world and causing is one of God's attributes. Spinoza says that things interact with each other so we can cause something. Unlike him, Leibniz argues that there is no interaction between things.

Spinoza says that we are passive. Our reason is active and I totally agree with him. Because, what makes us reasonable beings that can “cause” is our reason. Leibniz too, praises mind, as I said in the paragraph above, thinking is what makes us closer to God.

Leibniz is much more optimistic than Spinoza since Spinoza says that only God is free. In response to this, Leibniz says that we are pre-determined to be free in our actions. Namely, we can act whatever way we like freely but our actions would be seen by God before. This can be true if we believe God’s time understanding is different from us. For example, we see time like a movie, scene by scene; but God can see the whole movie at once. But this optimism of Leibniz does not work in the mind-body problem. According to me, Spinoza is way more successful at solving this problem. Leibniz’s non-interacting world is not reasonable at all. It seems like Leibniz could not explain how the mind and the body can interact, he just said that there was no interaction at all.

Rather than Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, the idea of the union of the mind and the body is far more acceptable for me because, the pre-established harmony is more speculative than the other. We obviously see they interact with each other and Spinoza’s solution is successful. They are basically the same thing, so the same things happen in them ! It is simple and reasonable.

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