Spinoza on Error

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J. L. Austin once said to me, of a certain philosophical opinion of Leibniz's, that 'It is a very great mistake, and only a very great philosopher could have made it.' In that paradoxical remark there is at least this much truth: a philosopher can be led into error by the very power of his thought, making serious mistakes that he might not have made if he had seen less and probed less deeply. In this paper I shall illustrate that with an example, namely Spinoza's profoundly wrong view that what we ordinarily call error is really a species of ignorance.

My account of this will involve Spinoza's doctrine of systematic parallelism between the mental and the physical. For a start, I shall devote two sections to explaining what that doctrine is and why Spinoza held it. .

1. Naturalism and rationalism

Spinoza was a naturalist about mankind: he didn't think that we are radically special in any way at all. The whole story about people, he held, can be told with concepts that are needed, anyway, to describe other parts of Nature. Not just other organisms; the concept of life itself has no basic place in the true story of the universe, and the difference between organic and inorganic is like that between complicated and simple, or orderly and jumbled—a smooth difference of degree with no ultimate significance.

What about minds? Spinoza followed Descartes in holding that there is a mental side to each of us, and that it is genuinely additional to the physical side. He also held—as Descartes sometimes did—that there could not be a causal flow between physical and mental. If we look at how mentality seems to be distributed on our planet, it seems reasonable to suppose that

> Physical systems with the right kind of degree of complexity cause mental events to occur; less complex physical systems, or ones that are complex only in other ways, don't have any mental effects.

But this was anathema to Spinoza because he thought that all causal connections must make sense—it must somehow *stand to reason* that this thing has this effect and not that—and he thought that mental items are so unrelated, conceptually, to physical ones that nothing could make it reasonable that they should be linked in one way rather than another. In his view, if some physical systems had mental effects and others didn't, that would have to be a brute fact, an unadulterated case of 'that's just the way it is, for no reason'; and Spinoza is sure that there are no brute facts, that if something is the case then there is a reason why.

So, faced with the seeming fact that pebbles and chisels and rivers and many other physical things have no mental side, Spinoza denies that it is a fact. He offers the bold hypothesis of panpsychism, 'mind everywhere', according to which there is a mental item matched with every physical item. My mind, for example, is a mental complex corresponding to the physical complex which is my body, and this is just one case of a general correspondence between the physical realm and the mental—a correspondence such that any physical simple will be matched by a mental simple, any physical complex by a mental complex. Just as my body is the complex upshot of putting a lot of atoms together in the right way, so my mind is the complex upshot of putting a lot of mental atoms (so to speak) together in the corresponding way; and each of these elementary constituents of my mind corresponds to an elementary constituent of my body. That does not mean that each physical atom in my body has a mind. An atom—or even a cell—is not complex enough for its mental side to be complex enough to count as a 'mind', ordinarily so-called. But an atom or a cell has a mental aspect which differs from having-a-mind only in that it lacks the right kind and degree of complexity.[1]

2. Parallelism

As well as having to confront the appearance that mentality is distributed unevenly throughout the physical world, Spinoza must also face the fact that within systems that undeniably do have mental as well as physical aspects—systems such as you and me—there seems to be causal interaction between the two. It seems obvious that if you are jabbed with a pin a cry out in pain this is because of a causal chain of the form

Jab → Pain → Cry,

but Spinoza must deny this, because it involves causal flow in both directions between the body and the mind. At a minimum, he owes us an explanation of why it *seems* to us that such interaction occurs. His explanation is as follows.

His panpsychism is a *parallelism*: it says that there is a mental realm that corresponds to the physical realm, matching it detail for detail. The mental item corresponding to any physical item x is what Spinoza calls 'the idea of x', and his doctrine of parallelism says that there is an idea of each physical thing or fact or event such that if x is like y then the idea of x is like the idea of y, and if x caused y then the idea of x caused the idea of y. In short, there is a mapping of physical similarities onto mental ones and of physical causal chains onto mental ones. In Spinoza's words: 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (*Ethics* 2, prop 7).

And so the appearance of a causal chain from Jab to Pain to Cry comes from the fact that there are two causal chains going on:

idea of Jab → Pain → idea of Cry
Jab → brain event → Cry

Of these six items, there are three that we know little about, namely the ideas of the jab and of the cry, and the brain event corresponding to the pain. So we fasten onto the other three and out of them concoct a spurious causal chain that runs from physical jab to the mental pain and back to the physical cry.

I am not much inclined to believe in Spinoza's parallelism. But I think that it is a possible solution to the question of how the mental and physical realms are interrelated and it's no worse than any of the other solutions so far propounded.[2] So I think it deserves respect, even if not credence.

[1] If you want to explore this further, the best place to start is Thomas Nagel's 'Panpsychism', in his *Mortal Questions* (New York, 1979).
[2] In that remark I am agreeing with Nagel, *op; cit.*

I should mention that although the mental and physical realms are metaphysically on a par, Spinoza in his explanations nearly always gives precedence to the physical side. At *Ethics* 2, prop 13 (corollary and scholium), for example, he says that to understand what is excellent about the human mind you need to grasp what is excellent about the human body, and then embarks on some physics and biology to introduce his psychology.

3. The two 'idea of' relations

Spinoza thought, as presumably we all do, that at least some of our mental states have representative features—i.e. they are in some way about items other than themselves. In his terminology, representation comes in through the language of what an 'idea' is 'of'; and 'ideas' include not only perceptions and images but also beliefs, so that an idea of something can be a belief about it.

There are two distinct 'of' relations at work in the *Ethics*. I have already mentioned one: if a mental item I(x) has physical item x as its counterpart under the parallelism, then I(x) is 'the idea of' x. I shall express this by saying that I(x) is the idea *directly* of x. This is obviously not much like what we ordinarily think of as mental representation. Each belief of mine is the idea directly of a state of my body and especially of my brain,[1] but few of my beliefs are in any ordinary sense *about* my brain. If Spinoza is to provide for what we ordinarily take to be thoughts about things—things other than our own bodies—it will have to be through something other than the directly-of relation.

He does also introduce a different way for an idea to represent something. He says that an idea of mine can be not only of my body but of your body; and I'll put this by saying that an idea *directly of* my body may also be *indirectly of* your body. Although Spinoza is absurdly brief in what he says about this, one gets the general idea: when I see, touch, hear you, I come to be in a mental state that represents you because it corresponds to a condition that my body was caused to be in by your body. (See *Ethics* 2, prop 16 (corollaries 1,2) and prop 17 (scholium).

This indirectly-of relation embodies a causal theory of perception, but that is not all. The ideas that Spinoza speaks of include not only perceptions but also beliefs: my idea directly of my body—he seems to hold—is a vast, complex, mostly unconscious belief that my body is thus and so, and my idea indirectly of you is a belief that there is a body of such and such a kind in front of. me. And so the indirectly-of relation provides for beliefs that are about things other than the believer's own body.

4. What makes a belief true?

What makes a belief true? Spinoza says that a true belief is an idea which 'agrees with' its 'object'.[2] Well, what relations are expressed by 'agrees with' and 'is the object of'? From Spinoza's handling of these expressions in his arguments, we learn this much about agreement:

> If x and y are counterparts under the parallelism, then x agrees with y.

And we learn this much about the 'object' relation:

> If x is y's object, then x and y are counterparts under the parallelism.

From these two it follows by trivial logic that every idea agrees with its object, from which it follows, by Spinoza's account of truth, that every idea is true, i.e. that there cannot be any false beliefs. Spinoza accepts that argument

[1] I don't insist on *states of* the brain; it could be events or processes in the brain.

[2] In *Ethics* 1, axiom 6 he says only that if an idea is true it agrees with its object, but he clearly means this as a biconditional.

to that astonishing conclusion (*Ethics* 2, props 32, 33), and works hard to convince us that what we call error is really a species of ignorance—that it doesn't involve false 'ideas' but merely a certain kind of lack of 'ideas',[1] I shan't discuss those arguments.[2] My concern is with what pushed Spinoza into them, namely his doctrine that error cannot consist in outright false belief.

5. A better account of truth?

Why did Spinoza stick with an account of truth that had such an absurd consequence? It is of course initially plausible to say 'A belief is true if it agrees with its object'; but that is plausible only because we are thinking of a belief's 'object' as the item that the belief is, in the ordinary sense, *about*, and that is not what Spinoza means by the 'object' of a belief. Our ordinary notion of a belief's object—or, anyway, our ordinary notion of the source of a belief's truth-value—is indicated by how we refer to the belief in a phrase of the form 'John's belief that. . . ' with a sentence in the gap. For instance, *my belief that there is a keyboard on my desk* is true or not depending on whether *there is a keyboard on my desk*—its truth value doesn't depend on the state of my brain!

Spinoza's indirectly-of relation is something like our ordinary notion of what a belief is about. Let us use the form 'y is an indirect object of x' as the converse of 'x is an idea indirectly of y'.[3] Then we can try the conjecture that the truth-value of a belief depends upon how it relates to its *indirect* object(s). Isn't that better than what Spinoza offers? If so, why did he not at least explore it?

Here is a possible explanation:

> Spinoza deals sketchily with indirectly-of because he thinks of it as a superficial, unimportant, dispensable part of our conceptual armoury. He would say of the mental item that I have called
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> my belief that there is a keyboard on my desk
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> that if we knew enough we could replace that phrase by a much better one, namely one of the form
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> my belief that. . .
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> with the gap filled by a description of the corresponding brain state. In his account of truth, then, Spinoza is speaking of the best possible notion of truth—the one that is geared to the best possible notion of the content of a belief, the notion that brings in correlated brain states (direct) rather than associated external states of affairs (indirect).

If that were Spinoza's position, he would be flagrantly abusing the concepts of 'belief that P' and 'true belief", under the guise of offering superior versions of them. Some of our contemporaries look forward to the day when we shall have what they see as a properly mature and scientific treatment of cognitive states, one that attends solely to their neural correlates, ignoring their relations to the outer world; and Spinoza would have sympathy with that project—this is suggested by his emphasis on the directly-of relation and by

[1] Spinoza sometimes writes as though there were 'false ideas', but that is not his considered view, as he pretty well admits in saying that 'As regards the difference between a true and a false idea, it is clear from *Ethics* 2, prop 35 that the former is to the latter as being is to non-being'. *Ethics* 2 prop 35 says that 'falsity consists in the privation of knowledge'.

[2] See *Ethics* 2, prop 17 (scholium), prop 35 (scholium), and *Ethics* 4, prop 1 (scholium). These passages are examined in G. H. R. Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 123–126; and in Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza 's Ethics* (Hackett: 1984), section 40.

[3] I use the indefinite article each time because the indirectly-of relation is many-many; the directly-of relation is one-one.

other indications as well.[1] But that is a project that involves throwing out the concept of belief—one of the relevant books is subtitled 'The Case Against Belief'—or at least throwing out any distinction between true and false beliefs. Spinoza might say: 'Just so! We now cannot have that distinction, so we should count all beliefs as true!' But that would be absurd. By moving to a purely internalist way of looking at cognition, we don't find a basis on which to call all beliefs true; rather, we find a basis for dropping the very notion of belief, or at least the notion of a belief as a cognitive state that has content and a truth-value.

In fact, however, I don't think that that is Spinoza's position; and even if it is, it certainly doesn't bring us to the bottom of our problem about why he lets himself be committed to saying that there could not be a false belief. I now explain why.

6. Trouble with the indirectly-of relation

Although Spinoza uses the directly-of relation in arguing that 'there is nothing positive in ideas by virtue of which they can be called false' when he discusses cases of error, trying to convince us that they don't really involve false beliefs, all his examples involve the indirectly-of relation. For example, he discusses the child's naive belief that the sun is a few hundred feet away, and the belief that men are free; these beliefs or ideas are clearly being thought of as erroneous because of how they relate to something outside the believer's body, and Spinoza is arguing that their erroneousness lies in their involving a kind of ignorance—rather than a positive misrepresentation—of that outer reality.

That shows clearly enough that he does not propose a purely internalist handling of the concept of belief, in which the question of a belief's relation to anything outside the believer's brain is not even raised. But it also suggests that something extremely peculiar is going on: there is an enormous split through his procedure, with the directly-of relation being used in his argument against false 'ideas', the indirectly-of relation dominating his defence of his conclusion through the examination of examples. It looks as though Spinoza thought that the notion of false belief—except when construed as a species of ignorance—is unsupportable even when what is in question is falsity with regard to the indirect rather than the direct 'object' of the belief.

And so he did. Despite my hints that Spinoza could have allowed for beliefs to be false if he had defined truth in terms of the indirectly-of relation, really that is not so, *given his account of the latter*. If we ask Spinoza what entitles a belief of yours to count as being about an item other than your body, his answer is that this can be so because the belief is the idea directly of a state of your body that results from your being 'affected by' that external item (*Ethics* 2, prop 16). And that is the only provision he makes for a belief or idea to be of or about something other than the believer's body; it is his entire theory of the indirectly-of relation. Spinoza has committed himself to saying that a belief can have x as its indirect object only by being the mental counterpart of a brain state that is *caused by x*, and it can be the belief that P (where P is not about the believer's body) only by being the mental counterpart of a brain state that is *caused by the fact that P*.

This implies that a belief of mine can count as my belief that there is a keyboard on my desk only if its cerebral

[1] Actually, the contemporary enemies of mental representation, most of whom are outright materialists, hold that beliefs *are* neural states rather merely being *correlated* with them. I have used the latter formulation so as to conform with Spinoza's property dualism. It does no harm in the present context, for the issue about mental representation cuts right across the issues between outright materialism and Spinoza's kind of parallelism.

counterpart—its direct object—is caused by the presence of a keyboard on my desk; it can count as my belief that the desktop is black only if its cerebral counterpart is caused by the blackness of the desktop; and so on. But obviously a state of my brain cannot be caused by something that does not exist: I can't be in a cerebral state caused by a keyboard that isn't there, or by the blackness of a desktop that is really brown. So even if we define truth and falsity through the indirectly-of relation, we still get the devastating result that there are no false ideas.

There is one exception to this, pointed out by Spinoza himself in *Ethics* 2, prop 17. My idea indirectly of x will remain unchanged, even after x has altered or moved, just so long as my body does not relevantly alter. So Spinoza does have room for positive misrepresentation by an idea of its indirect object, but only in the special case where a belief that was true is now false. This kind of falsehood, which consists in merely being out of date, is only a minuscule fraction of what we normally think of as false belief.

7. A suggested explanation

The fact that Spinoza cannot make liberal provision for false (indirect) belief, any more than he can for false (direct) belief, suggests that although he demonstrates his thesis in terms of the directly-of relation and defends it in terms of the indirectly-of relation, he really means (or half means) to be talking, throughout, about both at once. He may have realized (or half realized) that he ought to regard falsehood indirectly about things as being almost as hard to come by as falsehood directly about them.

It would not be out of character for him to demonstrate in terms of one relation a doctrine that he meant to apply also to another. There is plenty of evidence that his official demonstrations in the *Ethics* do not always give his real or his best reasons for the conclusion. I think that this is because he liked his demonstrations to be short, and to depend upon his technical terminology; and sometimes his real or best reasons couldn't be forced into that mold.

That applies to our present case. To attack the notion of false belief in terms of the indirectly-of relation would have required more words than he liked; and it would also have been more informal than he liked, for the indirectly-of relation is not part of the technical apparatus—it occurs mainly in one of the informal discussions, playing virtually no part in the official deductive structure.

That suggested explanation of Spinoza's strange performance was for many years the best I could find. (I didn't find the secondary literature helpful, because no-one else seems to have noticed the problem.) But I became dissatisfied with it, because I am sceptical about philosophical coincidences. It is not likely—I came to think—that a philosopher should provide bases for two utterly different ways a belief can have content, one relating it to the brain, the other to the external world, and that it should *just happen* that each of them is unfriendly to the concept of false belief. And when it is as tough and deep a philosopher as Spinoza, I thought, one should suspect that there is a common cause for both halves of this story, presumably in the form of a positive, deep, general reason for thinking that there is something problematic about the notion of a false belief—a reason that does not arise from the details of any theory.

8. A better explanation

That suspicion was right: there is a profound reason why Spinoza should deny that any belief can be downright false—a reason that he did have, in the sense that it arises out of views that he did hold. He doesn't explicitly present it anywhere, but I am pretty sure that it had actual force in

his thinking, even if only subliminally, and that it deeply explains his holding that false belief is impossible.

In one of his discussions of error, Spinoza says of certain mental contents which might generate so-called error that 'they are not contrary to the true' (*Ethics* 4, prop 1 (scholium)). That phrase is suggestive. I think that *Spinoza was grappling with the problem of how something that is real can be contrary to the true*. Suppose that there were a genuinely false belief—that is, for some value of P it is the case both that P and that x believes that not-P. Both of those reports must be part of the total true story about the universe. On the one hand the speed of light is finite, and on the other John believes that the speed of light is infinite. John's mind is a natural object, it's a small chunk of the real, just as his body is or as the pebble in my shoe is. How can a natural object contain something false? Or, in other words, how can a false proposition occur in a true account of reality?

9. A aside: Falsehood compared with pathology

Spinoza's denial that anything real can be untrue is similar in spirit to his denial that anything real can be wrong or defective. Because he thinks that Nature (or God) has no purposes and is subject to no external standards, he firmly rejects the idea that there is any pathology of Nature: he pours scorn on certain common attitudes by saying that they imply that 'Nature has gone wrong'. We tend to think there is something intrinsically wrong or bad or substandard about a child with leukemia; but Spinoza would say that a child that has leukemia is a perfect specimen of one kind of natural object, and is not evidence that Nature has made a mistake.

A single frame of mind can encourage one to think that nothing real is intrinsically bad and that nothing real is false. I accept the former doctrine, while strenuously rejecting the latter; but I agree with Spinoza that the notions of real pathology and real falsehood are problematic, differing from him only in thinking that in the case of falsehood the problem can be solved. Let us now consider how.

10. 'A queer kind of medium, the mind'

How could a false proposition have a use in a true description of some part of the universe? A philosopher who was asked that question, out of the blue, might well say:

> A falsehood can be part of a truth when the truth reports the existence of a false belief. We can get 'the speed of light is infinite' into an account of the real world if we can find someone who believes that the speed of light is infinite. There is no problem about how something real can be false, or about how a falsehood can be needed in telling the whole truth. The appearance of mystery vanishes as soon as we remember that some parts of reality are mental representations such as thoughts and beliefs, for we know that such mental items have that feature of being-about-something which enables them to be at once real and false.

Spinoza would refuse to say anything like that unless he could explain why it was true. He would want some account of how the trick is worked, of what is conceptually going on when a falsehood is nested inside a true report of a belief. And he would refuse to be fobbed off with the pseudo-explanation that this just is a fundamental property of the mind. We have been warned against such 'explanations' by Wittgenstein:

> Understanding, meaning, interpreting, thinking. . . seem to take place in a queer kind of medium, the mind; and the mechanism of the mind, the nature of which, it seems, we don't quite understand, can bring about effects which no material mechanism could.

> Thus e.g. a thought (which is such a mental process) can agree or disagree with reality; I am able to think of a man who isn't present; I am able to imagine him, 'mean him' in a remark which I make about him, even if he is thousands of miles away or dead.[1]

The attitude behind Wittgenstein's irony in this passage is the attitude Spinoza takes to all such matters; he is never willing to regard any aspect of the mind as simply 'queer' and to be taken on faith.

Indeed, Spinoza must think that every truth about how the mind functions is isomorphic to some truth about how the body functions; this is required by the parallelism doctrine (*Ethics* 2, prop 7). It follows that if any belief is false, some corresponding sort of physical item must also be false or at least have some analogue of falsity. That, for him, must always be the acid test of whether some mental operation has been properly understood.

So he does have a genuine problem: the question of how something real can be 'contrary to the true' is a superb one. It is not answered just by insisting that mental representations obviously can be contrary to the true, if that is left unexplained; and we should not be put off by the plea that it can't be explained because it's mental and therefore occult or queer or inherently mysterious.

11. The functionalist account of belief

A decent explanation of how beliefs can be false must be embedded within a general account of what kind of state a belief is. Spinoza offers no such account. Instead of trying to analyse the concept of belief, he merely introduces the term 'idea', says that ideas are beliefs, and leaves it at that. So he has no theoretical framework within which to answer his wonderful question about how a belief could be false. How can we fill this gap in what he offers us?

The functionalist kind of theory that is most popular these days looks just right for the purpose. It associates the belief that P with a certain kind of function from sensory inputs to behavioral outputs. Stated roughly and abstractly, it says that to believe that P is to be disposed when one has such and such perceptions to engage in such and such actions. When the details are filled in,[2] the result is an explanation of how a proposition about the external world—such as 'There is a keyboard on my desk'—gets into a description of someone's mind, including an explanation of what makes a particular doxastic state count as the belief that P rather than the belief that Q. Functionalism splendidly does not take refuge in the plea that it is a fundamental unanalysable property of the mental that mental states can be representative.

Like Spinoza's account of the indirectly-of relation, functionalism does relate beliefs to their causes. But whereas Spinoza implies that if I believe there is a keyboard on my desk then

> The cause of my cognitive state is *the fact that there is a keyboard on my desk*,

which implies that there cannot be false beliefs, functionalism only says something of the form: if I believe there is a keyboard on my desk then

> The cause of my cognitive state is *something that has relation R to states of affairs in which there is a keyboard on my desk*.

Where R is some kind of similarity relation. That allows that a cognitive state can count as the belief that P even if it is

[1] L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1958). pp. 3f.
[2] As they are, more fully than elsewhere in the functionalist literature, in Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behaviour* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), chapters 2–4.

not caused by the fact that P; and so it places no obstacle in the way of allowing that some beliefs are false.

So functionalism has foundations that one might expect Spinoza to approve, yet does not end up with his catastrophic conclusion that there cannot be false beliefs. Why didn't he think of it? There doesn't have to be any answer to this; but I think there are two answers—that is, that two features of Spinoza's thought would have impeded him even if he had come somewhere near to thinking of the functionalist account of belief.

12. One obstacle: counterfactual conditionals

Functionalism understands beliefs as dispositions to act in certain ways in such and such circumstances. It analyses 'John believes that P' as a counterfactual conditional, that is, a proposition saying that if such and such *were* the case John *would* behave thus and so.

That is acceptable to me, because I think counterfactual conditionals are all right: we use them all the time, and have some idea of how to sort out the true from the false ones. But there is evidence that Spinoza did not think that counterfactuals are all right. As a strict determinist, he thought that whatever happens is inevitable, and this seems to have persuaded him that there is something fishy about the notion of '. . . if the course of events had been different from what it actually was. . . '. Even today some philosophers hold that if determinism is true then counterfactuals are out of business; I don't agree, but their view is not an absurd one.[1] The question of how counterfactuals can be legitimate in a deterministic world is quite tough.[2]

Anyway, for whatever reason, Spinoza was visibly hostile to counterfactual conditionals. The most graphic example is in a letter where he is replying to a correspondent who has asked, among other things, 'whether by our precaution we can prevent what would otherwise happen to us'. This cries out for the obviously true counterfactual answer, which goes like this: Yes; for it can happen that I step back onto the kerb and survive, whereas *if I hadn't taken that precaution I would have been run over*. But here is what Spinoza says instead:

> Since one could ask a hundred such things in an hour without arriving at any conclusion about anything, and since you yourself do not press for an answer, I shall leave your question unanswered.

He was often rude in his letters, and this correspondent had proved to be especially annoying. Still, this surly rebuff needs to be explained; and I think it shows Spinoza's unwillingness to use a counterfactual conditional if he could talk his way out of it.

That's one reason why Spinoza was not well placed to accept the functionalist account of belief.

13. The second obstacle: teleology

There is another obstacle as well, involving a feature of functionalism that I have so far kept out of sight. It is that the functionalist account of belief also uses the concept of desire or want. Any attempt to get at what someone thinks through how he behaves, or how he would behave if. . . , must appeal to what he wants.

If you are not sure that that is right, I offer you a challenge.

[1] See for example Richmond Thomason and Anil Gupta, 'A Theory of Conditionals in the Context of Branching Time', *Philosophical Review* 89 (1980), 65–90, at pp.75f.

[2] For two contrasting views about it, see David Lewis, 'Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow', *Nôus* 13 (1979), 455–476; Jonathan Bennett, 'Counterfactuals and Temporal Direction', *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984), 57–91.

Take any belief you like, any kind of action A you like, and describe circumstances C (not involving desires) in which you think that someone who believes P is bound to do A; and I undertake to describe to you someone who believes P and is in circumstances C but does not do A, because his desires are different from those of the person you were thinking of. For example, you might think that the belief that (P) the liquid in this glass is poisonous would certainly lead, in (C) normal circumstances where there are no threats or duress, to (A) the person's not drinking the liquid in the glass. But that assumes that the person does not want to be ill or die. Replace that person by one who is suicidal, and the likely behavioral expression of the belief that P is quite different. So, as I said, functionalism has to relate belief not only with input-output but also with desire. Its basic doctrine about belief is that it is first and foremost a cognitive state which combines with a conative state—a wish or want or hope or desire—to produce behaviour.

Spinoza would have rejected this, because he had declared war on the ordinary concept of desire. Really, there is nothing wrong with this concept, but he thought there was, for an honourable reason: he had noticed a real difficulty in the concept, which I shall now explain.

We use the concept of desire or want or intention in an explanatory way. We say things like

He raised his hand so as to deflect the stone

He drank because he wanted to slake his thirst

and so on, as answers to the question of why he raised his hand, why he drank. Spinoza noticed that in doing this we explain a certain event by referring to something—the deflection of the stone, the unthirsty state—that comes later than it and is indeed caused by it. This is absurd, he said; it 'reverses the order of nature', treating an effect as though it were a cause, e.g. treating the deflection as though it produced the arm-raising instead of vice versa.[1] He concluded that it can never be right to explain an action in terms of a want or purpose or desire or intention; and this attempt to keep teleology out of his system dominates much of the later parts of the *Ethics*—a reader who doesn't grasp that much has no chance of properly understanding those parts.[2]

Now, Spinoza is wrong about that. We may grant him his point about kinds of causation: there are only efficient causes, pushes from earlier events; there are no final causes, pulls from later ones. But a possible future state or event can come into the explanation of an action without helping to cause it, because an action can be caused by a thought about a possible future—my raising my hand may be caused by my believing that if I raise my hand the stone *will be* deflected.

In fact, this is a topic that functionalism is also helpful with. One way of saying what functionalism offers is this: It analyses the concept of belief in terms of behaviour and desire, and analyses the concept of desire in terms of behaviour and belief. But that makes it sound circular, which it is not. Really, functionalism presents belief and desire as distinct but collaborating functions from perceptions to actions, or as two kinds of mental state that jointly produce overt behaviour; and it does this in such a way that you cannot understand its account of one of them without at the same time coming to understand its account of the other. You might suspect that a theory which thus runs the two

1 *Ethics* 1, Appendix.

2 For a fairly full discussion of this much neglected matter, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, ch. 9 and the pages referred to under 'teleology' in the index.

concepts in a single harness is in danger of fusing them together, smudging the line between the cognitive and the conative. In fact, however, for reasons that I cannot go into here,[1] that does not happen.

I am not contemptuous of Spinoza for his failure to see how to legitimize the concept of desire. So far as I know, nobody had much understanding of it until quite recently, and I cannot find a glimmering of an understanding of it in any of his predecessors or contemporaries. When he rejected the ordinary concept of desire, then, he was not being stupid and narrow; rather, he had seen something which everyone else had overlooked.

14. Conclusion

So there we have it. Spinoza ends up asserting the patently false thesis that what we call error is not outright false belief, but rather a kind of ignorance; and that fact, taken on its own, might suggest that the man is simply incompetent. If we add his definition of truth in terms of agreement between idea and object, he looks not just incompetent but stubborn: why did he retain a doctrine of truth that had that consequence? Throw in the material about the indirectly-of relation and the waters get muddier still, without making Spinoza's reflection in them any less unattractive.

But then see him asking how anything real can be contrary to the true. The one reply that seems right and relevant is that a mental representation such as belief can be real in itself and yet false in what it represents or says. But it's a sign of Spinoza's greatness that he would never accept this in the spirit of 'It's just a fact about beliefs that they can be false', and that before accepting the notion of a false belief he would insist upon knowing what was going on, having an explanation of how false belief is possible. We can explain this, but only with help from counterfactuals (which Spinoza rejected for sober reasons) and from the ordinary concept of desire (which he also rejected for sober reasons). And so he was trapped.

In this matter, I see Spinoza as up to his neck in error, and yet as gloriously shining with insight and intellectual integrity. And I have learned a lot about belief from thinking about his failures with it. This is the only way I know to learn from Spinoza—trying to pin down what he thought, and wrestling with him to find out his deepest reasons for thinking it.

[1] They are expounded in my *Linguistic Behaviour*, pp.51f.