

Consciousness in Spinoza: What is it like to be God?

1. Human Minds and God's Mind

Consciousness is central to understanding Spinoza's philosophy, but he hardly mentions it in his work. In this paper I want to explore ways that concepts of consciousness developed and refined in the 20th century can aid in interpreting this 17th century thinker and resolving some of its puzzling features.

Consciousness is central to understanding Spinoza's philosophy because one of the most distinctive elements of this philosophy is its very expansive attribution of mentality. In contrast to our everyday picture of the world as 99% nonmental, with small isolated outbursts of mindedness on at most a handful of planets among billions, Spinoza says that "all [individual things], though in different degrees, are...animated"¹ in the same way as humans; mentality and existence are co-extensive. In addition to this radicalism about the quantity of minds, Spinoza also seems to endorse an unusual position about the way minds relate to each other, on which minds can be components of other minds, or composed of other minds, in a fairly unrestricted way. In particular, "the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; thus when we say, that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God...in so far as he constitutes the essence of the human mind, has this or that idea."²

The problem is that this highly unusual position is expressed almost entirely in third-personal terms: indeed Spinoza boasts of his intention to approach "humans actions and affections" as though they were "lines, planes, and bodies"³. This is all very well, but it seems that on this topic a first-person perspective is vital, and its absence leaves us with a host of baffling questions: what is it like to be an idea in the mind of God? What is it like to be God? What is it like to be an idea in a human mind, or a cell in a human body? What is it like to be an electron?

I won't try to cover all these questions equally. My focus instead is on the basic contrast between human and divine mentality, or more abstractly between mentality as it pertains to finite modes and as it pertains to infinite substances. One of these is familiar to us, while the other – the infinite, all-encompassing mind of God – is barely imaginable. Yet Spinoza claims that they are closely connected: one is a part or aspect of the other. How to understand this vast difference and intimate connection between substance and mode, specifically in terms of first-person mentality, is my problem.

2. Panpsychism and Consciousness

This generates a certain pattern of dialectic. A reader despairs and says that Spinoza's position is mad, or at least clearly false. Margaret Wilson, for instance, claims that "the identification of minds with God's ideas of finite things...does not yield a plausible or tenable account of the human mind."⁴

The common response is to invoke the idea of 'consciousness'. The discrepancy between everyday and Spinozistic accounts of 'the mind' is explained by saying that only some of the minds Spinoza countenances, and only some of the thoughts in them, are 'conscious'. Edwin Curley, for instance, claims that Spinoza "implies quite plainly that such things as stones do not possess consciousness"⁵, while Michael Della Rocca says that "the counterintuitive force of this thesis [panpsychism] might be

lessened if Spinoza could explain why, although rocks have mental states, none of these mental states is conscious.”⁶

There are three problems with this response. One is that it’s not at all clear that Spinoza says this, or where he says it, or whether he can say it while remaining consistent. Wilson argues for this, and Della Rocca admits to the ‘defect’ that “Spinoza has no principled basis on which to claim that not all mental states are conscious ones”⁷.

Admittedly, there are passages in which he talks of things being *more* or *less* conscious, or conscious *of* more or less. But these do not offer any prospect of a sharp division, nor of excluding rocks, lip balm and toothbrushes from some measure of ‘consciousness’. In particular, he says that “in proportion as any given 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...so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly”⁸ and later that “he, who...has a body capable of very few activities, and depending...on external causes, has a mind which, considered in itself alone, is scarcely conscious of itself, or of God, or of things.”⁹ But as noted, this appears to still imply that all mentality is somewhat conscious, which is what this interpretation is supposed to avoid.

A second problem is that if most ‘minds’ are not conscious, in what sense are they distinctively mental? It begins to look as though Spinoza’s position is empty or trivial – that all things are ‘mental’ only in some tenuous technical definition of the term. We should seek to make interpret Spinoza charitably, but not to make him plausible at the cost of triviality.

The third problem is that ‘consciousness’ is a very unclear, contested, concept, and so even if we could find some convincing textual evidence for attributing Spinoza a position on which things have or don’t have ‘consciousness’, it still wouldn’t be clear what he meant; we would have added our own obscurities to his.

So it’s necessary to first interrogate the concept of ‘consciousness’ before we use it to interpret Spinoza.

3. P-consciousness and A-Consciousness

For this, we should distinguish two major developments in psychology and philosophy that have contributed to our 21st-century concept ‘consciousness’.

On the one hand, there is the ‘consciousness’ that underlies several anti-reductionist arguments in philosophy of mind. In reaction to behaviourism and functionalism, which excluded anything distinctively first-person, it has been insisted that there is a certain something about the mind that cannot be captured in any functional, physical, or otherwise third-person account.

This something has been variously called ‘qualia’, ‘phenomenal feel’, ‘what-it-is-like’, ‘experience’, ‘conscious experience’, or ‘consciousness’. This is supposed to be responsible for the ‘hard problem’ and the ‘explanatory gap’ between physical and first-person accounts of processes.

On the other hand, there is the ‘consciousness’ that is opposed to ‘the unconscious’, or even to ‘the subconscious’ or ‘the preconscious’. This way of speaking becomes particularly prevalent with Freud,

but since then empirical psychologists have documented many processes that occur in the brain, and are *prima facie* mental in nature, but which the individual is unable to report or reflect upon.

This sort of 'consciousness' is not primarily a term for doing fundamental metaphysics, but for describing the functioning of the mind, in particular the extent and limitations of its self-knowledge. 'Moving from unconsciousness to consciousness' was not a theoretical procession whose possibility was in question, but a practical goal in an individual's life.

Ned Block is most associated with the simple but vital point that these two senses of 'consciousness' are not at all equivalent, and that the unqualified use of the single word 'consciousness' is thus liable to be misleading. Block proposes more specific terms, most prominent among which are 'P-consciousness' and 'A-consciousness'.¹⁰

P-consciousness, or 'phenomenal consciousness', is the qualia, phenomenal experience, or what-it-is-like-ness of a mental state, the feature of mentality that obstructs reductionistic accounts of the mind.

A-consciousness, or 'access consciousness', is the collection of functional capabilities that some mental states lack, and which allow us to call them 'unconscious'. When a state is A-conscious, "its content is poised for free use in controlling thought and action"¹¹, which allows it to be verbally reported, reflectively analysed, used for deliberate plans and reasoning, etc. States may fail to be A-conscious for mundane reasons, such as divided or distracted attention, or more dramatic reasons like Freudian 'repression'.

4. Five Similarities

So we have two distinctions: in Spinoza's work, between mentality as it pertains to God, the infinite substance, and as it pertains to humans and other finite modes; and in modern philosophy, between P-consciousness and A-consciousness. I want to suggest that these two distinctions are substantially analogous, such that it makes sense to interpret the former in terms of the latter. This is in at least five respects:

Firstly, the act of distinguishing P-consciousness from A-consciousness opens up an epistemic chasm within what had previously seemed a bastion of certainty, and this chasm is an excellent place to locate an edifice of counter-intuitive metaphysics. The epistemic chasm is this: we know which of our mental states are A-conscious, almost by definition – they're the ones we can talk about and reflect on. And as long as we assumed that P-consciousness and A-consciousness line up exactly, we therefore also know which of our mental states are P-conscious.

But if the two are distinct, then it's possible in principle for a mental state to be P-conscious but not A-conscious: to be phenomenally experienced by us, without us knowing. Block endorses this in moderate form, such as positing P-conscious visual experience when we know that someone's visual cortex was activated but their attention was distracted so that this activation didn't propagate to frontal cortex.

But the thing is, if it's not pegged to A-consciousness, it's not clear that we have *any* definite way to know whether we have mental states which are P-conscious but not A-conscious. Block himself recognises but tries to minimise this implication, under the heading of "Panpsychic Disaster"¹². But

for Spinoza panpsychism is not disastrous: it's a theoretically elegant postulate at risk of sharp conflict with the apparent evidence, evidence which is substantially weakened if P-consciousness and A-consciousness come apart.

Secondly, both distinctions separate something intrinsic from something relational. P-consciousness seems to be a paradigmatically intrinsic property of whatever state or person has it; conversely, A-consciousness is essentially a certain sort of relation between different mental subsystems. For a pain, say, to be A-conscious is for the pain-system to be appropriately connected to the report-system, the reflection-system, the planning-system, etc.

The same is true of Spinoza's substance and mode, though he doesn't use precisely that language. But whenever he has to define 'substance', he uses phrases like 'exists in itself and is conceived through itself', whereas a 'mode' by contrast is what 'exists in another and is conceived through another'¹³. This made more specific by the next point.

Thirdly, both distinctions separate something at the level of empirical causation from something is analytically prior to empirical causation. We noted just now that A-consciousness is constituted by a pattern of relations; now we can add that these relations are at least primarily causal ones. This means, moreover, that A-consciousness is an appropriate object of direct, detailed, empirical study. By contrast, P-consciousness is widely agreed to be irreducible to any scientific causal process: though it may in fact be involved in causal processes, understanding causal processes is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding P-consciousness.

Again, Spinoza's use of words might obscure the fact that this also applies to his substance and modes. He says, in fact, that substance is the cause of all modes – but then explicitly says that, in the ordinary sense of cause, substance causes finite modes only by the occurrence of its other finite modes¹⁴. Grasping the concept of substance, and the various things that Spinoza claims to prove about it in the 'Ethics', does not depend on any knowledge of particular scientific causal processes.

By contrast, modes are not only involved in empirical causation, but are in a sense constituted by it: they are particular 'modes of' the over-arching causal power of God. Spinoza's comments about the individuation of modes, though they fall short of a comprehensive account, make clear that for modes, to be 'an individual thing' is to be a certain enduring pattern of causal interactions, and no more¹⁵. This is why detailed empirical science can study and tell us about modes, but cannot tell us directly about God except via such knowledge of God's modes.

Fourthly, there is an analogy at the level of mereology. Because they are intrinsic properties, being or belonging to a substance and being P-conscious are invariant across mereological contexts: that is, if something is, say, P-conscious, then it will be P-conscious when considered on its own and when considered as part of any larger whole or collection.

Conversely, A-consciousness, and being a particular mode, are properties possessed only in certain mereological contexts. A mental state that is A-conscious within my brain is not necessarily A-conscious with respect to any larger group that it is considered a part of; for instance, if my brain is a part of my Philosophy Department, thoughts in my brain may not be available for global control of the Department if nobody there listens to my ideas, even though they are available for global control

of my brain and body. Similarly, a mode of substance may be a human mind when considered on its own, and an idea in the mind of God when considered in a different context¹⁶.

Finally, the specifics of A-consciousness resemble the factors that Spinoza explicitly mentions when he talks about the features “wherein the human mind differs from other things, and wherein it surpasses them”¹⁷. As quoted earlier, these include on the one hand being capable of “forming many simultaneous perceptions”, and on the other hand how much “the actions of [the] body depend on itself alone”. That is, Spinoza seems to associate human-level thought with a causally insulated functional space in which multiple mental contents can interact. This bears at least a superficial resemblance to Block’s talk of a ‘global workspace’, into which A-conscious contents are ‘broadcast’, and from which they can influence planning, reflection, speech, etc.

5. Sketch of an Interpretation

Given these similarities, it is worth considering whether Spinoza’s views on mentality can be helpfully interpreted in terms of P-consciousness and A-consciousness. Here is a sketch of what that might involve:

Suppose that the term ‘substance’ in the ‘Ethics’ were taken to mean, among other things, ‘subject of P-consciousness’. The claim that there is only one substance then means that there is only one subject of P-consciousness, while the claim that every existing thing has a mental aspect, which is an idea in the mind of God, means that every existing thing corresponds to a P-conscious experience of this subject.

These various P-conscious experiences interact with each other in systematic ways that parallel their physical interactions, and some subset of these causal interactions are those which constitute A-consciousness, i.e. the functional availability of some experiences for the control of others in an enduring system. Considered physically these are the brains of animals; considered mentally they are the minds of animals.

These latter entities, which are merely complex modes of God, or complex actions performed by God, can be called ‘subjects of consciousness’ in the sense of A-consciousness, so as to match our intuitive sense of ourselves as distinct subjects. But, matching Spinoza’s doctrines, they are not ‘subjects of consciousness’ in the sense of P-consciousness, but merely particular configurations of the mental states of another mind. We are analogous perhaps to the complexes of a neurotic or the personas of someone with multiple personality disorder.

So this interpretation does support something like a distinction between ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ minds and mental states, but only in the sense of A-consciousness, not P-consciousness. Moreover, this distinction in terms of A-consciousness is a relational, not an intrinsic difference, and is likely, on analysis, to turn out to be a difference of degree, proportionate to the degree of functional insulation and integration that objects display.

6. Concluding Remarks

This position is of course very incomplete, and not at all free of problems; moreover I have made several significant assumptions in presenting it.

I have assumed, for a start, that there is something called P-consciousness, irreducible to functionalist or behaviourist analysis. Moreover I have assumed that Block is correct in distinguishing different senses of 'consciousness', and in supposing that they can occur separately. Both of these might be disputed: my intention is merely to show that if modern conceptual developments of 'consciousness' are accepted, they open up ways to explore and analyse Spinoza's philosophy.

I have also assumed that it makes sense to retrospectively read such concepts into Spinoza. It might be objected that Spinoza is unlikely to have foreseen or recognised the kinds of concepts we have been discussing.

I would make two replies. Firstly, even if we abandoned all claims about Spinoza's own thoughts, it is still worthwhile investigating what plausible reconstructions of 'Spinozism' we can extract from his texts.

Secondly, it need not be claimed that Spinoza anticipated, in developed and articulated form, modern distinctions between P-consciousness and A-consciousness. Consciousness, whatever it is, is something everyone is intimately acquainted with, and is thus very likely to have at least some inarticulate ideas about. It's also very likely that such inarticulate ideas will influence the doctrines and arguments that a philosopher endorses. For these reasons, and despite the dangers of anachronism, I believe that interpreting his views in these terms may be not only a plausible but also a faithful way to do so.

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¹ Ethics, II P13S

² Ethics, II P11C

³ Ethics, III Preface

⁴ Wilson, 1999, p.126

⁵ Curley, 1969, p.126

⁶ Della Rocca, 1996 p.9

⁷ Ibid., p.9

⁸ Ethics, II P13S

⁹ Ethics, V P39S

¹⁰ Block, 2002

¹¹ Block, 1994

¹² Block, 2008, Section XI Heading

¹³ Ethics, I D3, D5

¹⁴ Ethics, I P28, Note also that P18 specifies that God/substance is the 'immanent' cause of finite things only, i.e. not a cause in the sense that implies a distinctness between cause and effect.

¹⁵ Ethics, II D7, and D1 in the physical interlude

¹⁶ The human mind might well also be an 'idea in the mind of' any complex organised system of which it is a part – such as perhaps in John Searle's 'Chinese Brain' or 'Chinese Room' thought experiments. The specific conditions for this are very unclear – it might be that every collection of interacting objects constitutes an individual, just a very weak and unstable one.

¹⁷ Ethics, II P13S