

SPINOZA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ERROR

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Abstract. If we consider certain features of Spinoza's metaphysics, it can seem very difficult to see how error, or the having of false ideas, is possible. In this paper I want to give the metaphysical background to the problem, before turning to a more detailed consideration of how Spinoza in fact accounts for error, or the having of false ideas. I will show the importance of the notions of adequacy and inadequacy in Spinoza's account. Having done this I will return to the central problem of accounting for the ontological status of false ideas vis a vis both the Infinite Intellect, and finite minds.

I. Background to the Problem

If we consider certain features of Spinoza's metaphysics, it can seem very difficult to see how error, or the having of false ideas, is possible. In this section I want to give the metaphysical background to the problem, before turning to a more detailed consideration of how Spinoza in fact accounts for error, or the having of false ideas. We can begin by isolating what might be called the common-sense theory of truth and falsity. I think it is fairly uncontentious to say that prior to studying philosophy and engaging in epistemological reflection, most people would subscribe to some version of a correspondence theory of truth. An idea is true if it represents some state of affairs accurately, in other words, if the mental representation matches, or corresponds with, the external state of affairs represented. The falsity of an idea is a function of its lack of agreement with reality¹ Spinoza

¹ I will simply avoid the issue of whether an idea can properly be said to be true or false. The question whether Spinozist ideas can be construed as propositions is one which I don't want to get into here.

seems to imply a correspondence theory of truth when he says in the *Ethics* that, „A true idea must agree with its object” (E, I, P6).

The problems emerge when we come to (E, II, P5-7). In these propositions Spinoza outlines the causal autonomy of the attributes and of their respective modes², while at the same time affirming their complete structural agreement, or correspondence.³ This agreement is so perfect, that, despite the independence of the attributes, substance conceived through the attribute of thought and substance conceived through the attribute of extension are not two substances, but one and the same substance conceived in two ways. This identity applies at the level of modes also. A thing existing in nature, i.e. a mode of extension, and the idea of that thing, i.e. a mode of thought, are „one and the same thing (...) explained through different attributes” (E, II, P7).

In the light of these metaphysical doctrines, it is difficult to see how Spinoza can account for the possibility of error, in the sense of a failure of correspondence between idea and thing. It seems as if every idea must necessarily agree with its object. And, if we understand the truth of an idea as its agreement with its object, then it would seem that every idea is necessarily true. Indeed, at first glance, it seems that Spinoza supports this conclusion when he states that, „All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true” (E, II, P32).

The demonstration of this proposition makes clear that here truth is being understood in terms of the criterion of agreement with the object stated in (E, I, A6). And the universal truth of ideas insofar as they are related to God is explicitly connected to the perfect agreement of the orders of extension and thought affirmed in (E, II, P7).

The situation appears equally problematic, when we consider the status of our own minds as modifications of the attribute of thought, and as contained within the idea of God, or the infinite intellect. The infinite intellect of God is the eternal, infinite, and immediate mode of the attribute of thought. In the *Short Treatise* (I, IX, 3) Spinoza describes it as a „product or immediate creature of God, also created by him from all eternity, and remaining

² „The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute” (E, II, P6).

³ „The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E, II, P7).

immutable from all eternity. Its sole property is to understand everything clearly and distinctly at all times.”

This infinite intellect consists in a unique and infinite act of comprehension which contains objectively everything which is contained formally in nature, or, in other words, God’s attributes and their modifications (E, I, P30 and E, II, P3-4). As a finite mode of the attribute of thought, the human mind is part of this infinite intellect. Since the parallelism between thought and extension is reflected at every level, including that of finite modes like the human mind, its ideas and their objects, it would seem that the universal agreement of all ideas with their objects, or their truth insofar as they are related to God, must apply also at the level of human ideas and their objects. The implication being that our ideas cannot be false, since they will always agree with their objects.

Clearly, whatever account Spinoza gives of error, it will not be applicable to ideas insofar as they are related to God. Nor will falsity be accounted for in terms of a lack of correspondence between idea and thing. As we will see, Spinoza’s account of falsity is connected rather to the notions of adequacy and inadequacy. And ideas will turn out to be inadequate only, „insofar as they are related to the singular Mind of someone” (E, II, P36). We have already seen that (E, II, P32) affirms the ontological and epistemological priority of true ideas.

Another proposition of direct relevance to the question of error or falsity is (E, II, P33), which follows straightforwardly from (E, II, P32). Since there is no falsity in God, and since there can neither be, nor be conceived, ideas outside of God, the characteristic of falsity in false ideas cannot be anything positive. Given that it is nothing positive, falsity is defined as „the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve” (E, II, P35).

It is made clear that this privation is neither an „absolute privation” (by which Spinoza seems to mean a state of negation affecting both minds *and bodies*⁴), nor absolute ignorance.⁵ The distinction between error and absolute ignorance is clearly a function of the correlation of the orders of thought and extension. Since the human mind exists within the infinite intellect of God, and since this infinite intellect is in perfect correspondence with the order of things in extension, it is simply impossible for the human mind to

⁴ „For it is minds, not bodies, which are said to err, or be deceived” (E, II, P33).

⁵ „For to be ignorant and to err are different” (E, II, P33).

be in complete ignorance. This is because such ignorance would necessarily involve existing *outside* of the infinite intellect, which is impossible. By the sheer fact that the human mind exists in the infinite intellect it must contain at least some true ideas.

Having determined the ontological and epistemological status of falsity in the propositions mentioned above, in (E, II, P41), Spinoza locates falsity epistemologically in the first kind of knowledge or imagination. Falsity has been defined as the privation of knowledge involved in inadequate, mutilated and confused ideas. Now it is made clear that such ideas are found solely in the first kind of knowledge. „Knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and third kind is necessarily true” (E, II, P41).

We now have the basic elements we need. Ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are necessarily true. The ideas involved in the second and third kinds of knowledge are, likewise, necessarily true. There is thus a clear connection between the second and third kinds of knowledge and the order of ideas as they exist in the infinite intellect of God. Falsity on the other hand, is, in some sense, a function of imagination, which grasps ideas in a confused, mutilated way.

Now we turn to an account of Spinoza’s theory of ideas, and explain what Spinoza means when he says that the ideas involved in the first kind of knowledge are the only cause of falsity.

II. The Theory of Ideas

As we have already seen, Spinoza’s first statement about the nature of ideas, in the *Ethics*, is at (E, I, A7), where he says that, „A true idea must agree with its object” (E, I, A7). The word «object» here translates the Latin *ideatum* and names the intentional correlate of the *idea*, i.e. that mode of the attribute of extension *of which* it is the idea. Here Spinoza provides the extrinsic mark of truth. As Roger Scruton (1989, p. 64) puts it, „every idea (...) displays what Spinoza calls the extrinsic mark of truth, namely an exact and necessary correspondence to its *ideatum* (E, II, D4)”.

Scruton is quite right to point out that the possibility of false ideas is connected with the fact that ideas, although necessarily possessed of the extrinsic mark of truth, or relation to their objects, may nevertheless lack the intrinsic marks of truth (1989, p. 64). But before we discuss what the

intrinsic marks of truth are, we should examine some more of Spinoza's account of ideas.

At (E, II, D3) Spinoza defines an idea as a «concept» which the mind forms solely from the fact that it is a modification of the attribute of thought. He uses the term «concept» because he wants to define the idea as „an action of the mind”⁶ rather than a passive affection of the mind, caused by the object in extension. This clarification derives its justification from Spinoza's denial of any causal interaction between the orders of thought and extension.

One important consequence of this is that a Spinozist «idea» is in no way *derived from* its object, in the way assumed by theories which see the idea as deriving its content *from* the object by some process of representation. Spinoza does sometimes speak of representation, and the *objective* being of ideas, or their *intentionality*, may seem to suggest a relation of representation. However, it would be a mistake to think of the Spinozist idea as a kind of mental intermediary, occupying the space between the mind's eye and its external object. The Spinozist idea is better conceived as a conceptually informed, and essentially judgemental, act of awareness whose direct object is some modification of the attribute of extension, even if, as in the case of perception of external objects, this direct object is an affection of the body, rather than, e.g. the sun. We can get a sense of the closeness of the relation between *idea* and *ideatum* if we consider that, in accordance with Spinoza's view, a child could not learn its first concepts *from* objects, since even the very first object of which it was cognisant would have to be the object *of* a corresponding idea in the child's mind.⁷ The objects, and the ideas which constitute the awareness of those objects, would arise simultaneously but autonomously.

The next definition I want to look at (E, II, D4) takes us back to our earlier discussion of the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic marks of truth. In this definition, Spinoza explains that the adequacy of an idea is a function solely of its possession of the intrinsic marks of truth. This does not mean that an «adequate» idea has no relation to an object. On the con-

⁶ „By idea I understand a concept of the Mind that the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing. Exp: I say concept rather than perception, because the word perception seems to indicate that the Mind is acted on by the object. But concept seems to express an action of the Mind” (E, II, D3).

⁷ „To him, all ideas are equally innate, since they are all modifications of the attribute of thought, and none is „caused” by anything in the realm of extension” (Allison 1987, p. 114).

trary, it is only in having an adequate idea (an idea which has the intrinsic marks of truth) that we can determine the character of the object corresponding to it. As we have seen above, every idea necessarily agrees with its *ideatum*. At the same time, as long as an idea lacks the intrinsic marks of truth, or is inadequate, the sheer knowledge that it must agree with its *ideatum* does not suffice to tell us *what* its ideatum is.

The most important intrinsic properties of the idea seem to be, firstly, the degree to which it is appropriately integrated into the order of the infinite intellect of which we are a part, and secondly, the degree to which it is transparent to our understanding, that is, the extent to which we can see all that follows from it. But since an idea will always agree with its proper *ideatum*, we can also express this as Allison does, by saying that an idea is adequate if we are able to deduce from it all of the properties of its *ideatum*.⁸ The example Allison gives helps to further illuminate the nature of adequacy. He makes the point that the concept of a triangle, which a person without geometric knowledge has, is inadequate because that person would be unable to derive the various geometric truths that follow from this concept. In other words, his idea is like a vague perception of something, which makes out its general outlines, but does not command a clear perception of its intricate details.⁹

Now let us consider the example Spinoza gives, at (E, II, P35), of our sensory perception of the sun. According to Spinoza, we imagine it to be „about 200 feet away from us”. In order to clarify what Spinoza means by „imagine” here, it is helpful to turn to (E, II, P17) where Spinoza discusses this issue. By „images” he means those affections of the body whose ideas involve an affirmation of the presence of external objects. Obviously the sun is not 200 feet away from us. It is both much further away, and much bigger than it appears. In what, then, does the falsity of our sensory idea consist? Spinoza says that the imagining itself is not false, *qua* imagining. We do indeed have an idea which presents the sun to us as a certain size and a certain distance from us. According to Spinoza, the falsity consists in

⁸ „The basic feature of an adequate idea...is its completeness...an adequate idea is simply one from which the properties of its ideatum can be deduced.” (Allison 1987, p. 103).

⁹ „The mathematician’s idea of a triangle is adequate because all the mathematically relevant properties of the figure can be derived from it. Correlatively, the conception of a triangle possessed by someone ignorant of geometry is inadequate precisely because this cannot be done.” (Allison 1987, p. 103).

the fact that while we have the sensory idea we lack the ideas of its true distance and of the causes of us imagining it as 200 feet away. However, it is not that we imagine it as we do *because* we lack other relevant ideas. Even when we learn its true distance, and learn all of the factors involved in causing us to have that perceptual experience, it nevertheless continues to look closer than it really is.

Spinoza expresses the last point by saying that „an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun.” (E, II, P35). This perceptual appearance has a certain necessity to it. Given the laws of nature, the nature of our perceptual organs and so on, the sun *must* appear as it does. In a similar way, an object far away will necessarily appear smaller than one nearby, even if the objects are, in fact, the same size. Even when I learn its true distance, and understand the necessity of the sensory idea qua sensory idea, I will continue to have the same sensory idea when I look at sun, even while I have other ideas which re-contextualise that appearance in a way that changes its significance.

In some sense then, an inadequate idea is like a case of mistaken identity. Initially, when I had only the content of the appearance to work with, I made a judgement about the distance of the sun on the basis of an appearance, which I took at face-value, as if it were an adequate perception of the sun. Now, I know that the *ideatum* of the sensory idea is not, in this case, the sun, but an *affection of my body* caused by the sun.¹⁰

In acquiring adequate ideas of the sun, I learn to recognise the intrinsic relativity of my perceptual experience, and correct it through a knowledge of the relation between the sun and my body which transcends the relativity of imagination. The appearance persists, but is, in a sense, negated or transformed, by the rational explanation. It is now recognised as *appearance*, and its relativity is recognised *as relativity*, from the standpoint of an intellectual order which is *not* relative.

We thus have a distinction between two orders of ideas, the order of imagination, or the „common order of nature”, and the order of the intel-

¹⁰ „The image which constitutes the perception of the sun is indeed an idea. But the *ideatum* of that idea is not what the perceiver takes it to be. It is not the sun, which is represented quite falsely as a small red ball a few feet in diameter swimming through a sea of blue. The true *ideatum* of this idea is, rather, the modification in the body of which it is, so to speak, the mental aspect. Being inadequate, however, the idea is referred not to the bodily process which is its material correlate, but to the sun, of which it presents only confused and partial cognition.” (Scruton 1989, p. 64).

lect. The two necessarily co-exist. We cannot get rid of the relativity of imagination because we are embodied beings who relate to an external world through sense-organs. In order to escape it we would have to be disembodied, purely intellectual beings, which we are not. At the same time, sense perception, and the system of imaginative ideas formed on the basis of sense perception, cannot give us adequate knowledge of reality.

Relativity and the fortuitous association of ideas is built into the very character of our perceptual experience of the world. As long as we naively allow our perceptual experience to dictate to us a picture of what the world is really like we will be in error.¹¹ However, the error will consist not in the appearances themselves, but in our failure to recognise them *as appearances*, therefore *as relative*, and to correct them through ideas of the pure intellect. The order of the intellect, unlike the order of imagination, is not relative. Since, ultimately, the order of the intellect is the order of the *infinite intellect*, which is in perfect agreement with the true order of nature, and since *our* intellects are parts of this infinite intellect, it is possible for us to correct, though of course only partially, the relativity of our sense perception and the mental representations of the world based on those perceptions.¹² Error, then, consists primarily in a kind of naïve realism about perception, or the failure to understand the relativity of the system of ideas based on perception. This turns out to be simply the failure to correct perceptually derived systems of ideas by means of our access to the unchanging order of the infinite intellect, which is the „same for all”.

III. Some Problems with Spinoza's Account of Error

The account of error provided here is, in its general outline, plausible. But some serious problems remain. First of all, it is difficult to understand how sensory and imaginative ideas can form any sort of totality, or even set of unified objects, for the infinite intellect. The account that Spinoza gives of the first kind of knowledge, especially sense-perception, seems to present

¹¹ „Perceptual ideas reflect the condition of the organism in its interplay with the environment...insofar as the mind takes such ideas to represent some external thing as it is in itself, rather than the manner in which that thing affects its own sensory apparatus, it inevitably falls into error.” (Allison 1987, p. 107).

¹² „Error is avoided insofar as our thought follows the „order of the intellect.” (Allison 1987, p. 107).

it as necessarily fragmented and subject- relative. A phenomenological examination of perceptions supports this characterisation. It seems to be a necessary feature of sense perception and imagination that it can only represent one side of an object at a time. Spinoza does not, as far as I know, discuss this example, but it is clearly consistent with his account of perception. Even if I was in orbit I could never see the „front” and the „back” of the moon at the same time. To give another example, the apparent size of objects will necessarily vary in accordance with their varying distance from my sense organs.

This has some important, though perhaps counter-intuitive, implications. First of all, it suggests that the whole of nature, i.e. the system of things which is in perfect agreement with the infinite intellect, is not a possible object of sense perception. Obviously it isn't a possible object of sense perception for us, but this not all. Rather, it would seem that the whole of nature, insofar as it is in agreement with the order of the infinite intellect, cannot be the sort of thing that *could* be *perceived*, as opposed to *conceived*, by *any* being. In one sense, the relation of the infinite intellect to the whole of nature clearly cannot be perceptual, since it lacks sense organs. But one can admit this obvious fact and still imagine that the whole of nature, considered by itself, without relation to the infinite intellect, *is a sensible object* (of infinite complexity perhaps), meaning that it *could*, conceivably, be perceived by a being who, for example, was large enough, or who had sense organs of the requisite complexity. What I'm suggesting is that this sort of perspective on the whole of nature is not a possibility in Spinoza's system, despite his, to my mind misleading, talk about the «face of the whole universe». In other words, I am claiming that in Spinoza's system, the whole of nature must constitute a rational, and not a sensible unity.

I will give one final illustration of this before I move on. Having recognised that we can only ever see one side of the moon at a time, we might still believe that the synthesis of all the possible perceptual perspectives on the moon exists as a *sensible*, rather than as a *conceptual*, synthesis. A moments reflection shows that this is not so. What we *mean* by a sensible, or a perceptual, object, is an object such as it appears to us in sense perception. Also, perhaps, such as it *could conceivably* appear in sense perception. But it is not conceivable that a being with senses could see, e.g. the moon, as a perceptual totality, i.e. as a perceptual synthesis of all possible perceptual perspectives on the moon. What we mean when we speak of „the moon as a whole” is essentially a rational synthesis of perspectival perceptual images of the moon, guided by the concept of a sphere. We *know* that the moon is

roughly spherical, but its rough sphericity is a conceptual and not a perceptual fact. Of course, this does not mean that the perceptual experience is not crucial. Perhaps a more accurate way of putting this would be to say that the „moon as a whole” is a conceptual synthesis of perceptual experiences. If we did not have the concept of a sphere, of a three-dimensional body, etc. we could never conclude, solely on the basis of perceptual aspects of the moon, that it was a three dimensional, roughly spherical, body.

All this leaves the ontological status of sensory ideas quite mysterious. It would seem to suggest that sensory ideas cannot exist for the infinite intellect, precisely as sensory ideas, i.e. in their essential fragmentariness and subject-relativity. But these features are, precisely, what is essential about sensory ideas. Therefore, in some sense, it seems that sensory ideas do *not* exist in the infinite intellect. But if they do not exist there, then where do they exist?

A connected, but slightly different problem remains in relation to the elusive ontological status of false ideas. Spinoza says at one point that the true is related to the false as being is to non-being (E, II, P43). When Spinoza describes the difference between true and false ideas, or, in other words, adequate and inadequate ideas, he seems to imply that nothing really changes in the original sensory idea when it is supplemented by other, more adequate, ideas of, e.g. the sun. But this doesn't seem to fit with the overall sense of that example. Certainly the sensory idea remains even once I know the true distance of the sun, and is in some sense the same as it was before. But in another, more important sense it is not the same. For originally it was the sole content of the judgement about the sun. It determined my understanding of the nature of the sun and its relation to me. Now it no longer does so. It is there, but I interpret it differently, as *appearance*, whereas before I took it to be an adequate perception of the objective distance of the sun, its size, and so on.

The difference I am trying to bring out here can be illustrated by considering the well-known phenomenon of the perceptual double-take. Imagine you are walking in the forest at dusk and, suddenly, you are startled to see a figure crouching silently in the undergrowth. Your pulse races and you experience momentary fear. Then, just as suddenly, you „realise”, or, in other words, *see*, that it is really a tree trunk, that *looks like a man*, in this light and from this angle. The perceptual content in some sense remains the same, the object hasn't literally changed, nor have you moved your head, but something has changed in your interpretation of the perceptual content. Now you may find that you can simulate the illusion again, just as one can

switch between the two aspects of the famous duck/rabbit picture. Doing this, you can re-experience the „appearance” (*now* understood *as* an appearance) of the figure crouching in the bushes, and yet *know*, at the very same time, that it *is not* a human being, but a tree trunk.

Clearly, in some sense the content of the perceptual idea is not the same now as it was before, since, in the first instance you were *fooled*, whereas in the second case you are not. To put it metaphorically, in the first instance you were within the perceptual act in such a way that you could not see it from the „outside”. Your whole consciousness was filled with the certainty: there is a figure crouching in the undergrowth. In the second instance, you are in some sense *within* the perceptual act, but now, the act is itself contained within a wider scope of awareness, which enables you to observe it, without being fully committed to it. And yet, the notion of degrees of commitment does not seem readily reconcilable with Spinoza’s conviction that there is no distinction between the intellect and the will, and thus that every idea involves commitment to a judgement purely through its content as an idea. This account does not seem able to accommodate the fact that the nature of the commitment in the first and second instances changes in some important way.

Margaret Wilson discusses the general problem of the status of false ideas with respect to the infinite intellect. Since I have a false idea, in this case about the distance between the sun and myself, and since my idea is a part of the infinite intellect of God, it seems to follow that there is, in God, a false idea. But this seems to contradict Spinoza’s claim that „All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true.” (E, II, P32). Wilson attempts to resolve this problem in a variety of ways, but admits that none are fully satisfactory. The persistent problem, according to her, is the seemingly irreducible fact that, „The uninstructed person does have the idea that, say, the sun is 200 feet away. But one is tempted to insist, this idea is false, period.” (Willson 1996, p. 110).

Now, I think Wilson must be getting at something similar to what I have discussed above with regard to the double-take. The problem seems to be connected to the fact that acts of understanding, or acts of judgement, are essentially acts of a cognitive subject, and that these acts in some sense determine the scope and transparency of that subject’s awareness. Spinozist ideas are not propositions, capable of existing independently of being thought. It is not as if someone *has* an idea in mind, and then, through a separate act of the mind, understands that idea. To think this way would be to ignore Spinoza’s clear statement that ideas are not like mute pictures

on a panel, but always acts of understanding (E, II, P43) It is not the mere occurrence of a certain mental content, describable from a third-person perspective, but precisely a first person intelligible awareness of some content. But such an awareness seems to presuppose a subject, although this subject need not be distinct from its acts of understanding.¹³

This clearly connects up with our earlier discussion of adequacy. It may be remembered that we illustrated it by examining the difference between the concept of a triangle held by a trained mathematician, and that held by a person ignorant of geometry. The difference was essentially a difference in the depth and breadth of understanding. To give a sense of this depth, we spoke in terms of a move from a vague «perception» of the general outlines of the concept, to a clear perception of its internal structure. The difficulty comes when we consider that each stage on the spectrum from vague to clear perception of the content of a concept represents the perspective of a cognitive subject. This can be illustrated through the metaphor of looking through a camera. I can vary the focus and thus perceive some object more or less clearly and distinctly, but I cannot perceive it as in focus, and as out of focus, at the same time. I can only occupy one segment of the spectrum of adequacy at a time. Presumably, the infinite intellect occupies a perspective which is both totally comprehensive in scope, and perfectly adequate in terms of clarity of „focus”. Since it comprehends all ideas, its knowledge clearly cannot be discursive, or involve any sort of inferential movement from idea to idea. It must grasp everything in a single, perfectly adequate intuitive act, in which it grasps both God’s essence, and all that is contained within it, or follows from it.

Now, as long as one is prepared to accept that ideas, as acts of understanding, are essentially first-personal, as well as the impossibility of a subject occupying more than one perspective at a time (however complex that

¹³ In connection with this, I agree with Lloyd in her criticism of Curley’s reading of the relation between ideas and their objects as simply «logical», rather than intentional (Lloyd 1996, pp. 52-53). Curley (1969, pp. 119-143) suggests that the body can be taken as a set of facts, while the mind as a set of propositions describing those facts. On that interpretation, the inclusion of the individual mind in the infinite intellect of God becomes the uncontroversial, but relatively uninteresting, claim that propositions about the human body are included in the totality of propositions about the world. But this fails to capture the way the Spinozistic mind takes body as its object – what we might now call the intentionality of the mind. In contrast to the external nature of the relation between propositions and facts, the relations between a Spinozistic mind and its body are imbued with the sense of a direct bodily awareness.

perspective is), we are faced with the following dilemma: either the infinite intellect comprehends our ideas, in which case it contains within itself an infinity of mutually exclusive subject-perspectives, which seems absurd, or it comprehends our ideas, but in a sense which objectifies them, so that as they exist for the infinite intellect they are no longer the perspectives of this or that subject, in which case the relation between finite subjects and the infinite intellect is broken, and the status of finite subjects, as subjects, is relativised in a counter-intuitive way.

To go back a bit, I can reformulate Wilson's problem by suggesting that the sheer experiential fact of a cognitive subject being mistaken cannot be negated by the fact that another cognitive subject integrates the (false) idea into wider context of ideas, the lack of which made it false in the first place. For surely the one who is actually in a state of privation of knowledge is the one who has only the inadequate idea. And yet the fact that they are in such a state can only be determined from a standpoint outside of that state, a standpoint from which their error is no longer a privation, since it has, from that wider perspective, been reintegrated into the context from which it was torn. This exposes something paradoxical about the very idea of falsity, as it must appear in Spinoza's system – its elusive status as a kind of non-being.

Let's say that the uninstructed person says to a friend „the sun is 200 feet away”. This friend has an idea of the true distance of the sun, and understands all the factors involved in the fact that the sun *appears* to be 200 feet away. The two of them are standing looking at the sun. Both have the same, or pretty much the same, sensory idea. As far as imaginative knowledge goes, both perceive the sun as closer than it really is. The difference being that one lacks the information which would put his estimate of the sun's distance in the proper perspective. All he has is the sensory idea, which involves an implicit (false) judgement about distance. He is in error, but he does not know that he is in error. The judgement is not false *for him*, as he believes it to be true. His friend, on the other hand, does know that he is in error. She knows because the scope of her ideas in this matter extends beyond that of her simple-minded friend. *She* is able to point out his error, and yet she is not herself guilty of that error. In other words, she has the same sensory idea, but because of the presence of other ideas, she understands it as an appearance, and can compensate for this.

Let's now extrapolate this example to the relation between the finite mind and the infinite intellect of God. When ideas are related to an infinite intellect they necessarily become parts of the act of understanding of an

infinite cognitive subject. The infinite intellect *cannot* be in error because it can never be in the position either of lacking relevant ideas, or of relating available ideas in incompatible ways. The infinite intellect involves an unchanging order against which all other, finite, intellects must be measured.

However, as mentioned earlier, this seems to deprive the finite intellect of its status as a cognitive *subject*. To put the sun example in first person terms, so long as I judge that the sun is 200 feet away, *I* am in error. The error is a function, not of the ideas themselves, but of the finite scope of my intellect, of the fact that it lacks other relevant ideas which, if present, would change my interpretation of the sensory idea. However, while I am in error, I do not know that I am. Only someone else, who has the relevant ideas, can know that my idea is false. The infinite intellect, obviously, does have all the relevant ideas. So, in a sense, the totality of false ideas could only be recognised as false from the infinite intellect's perspective. On the other hand, they couldn't be false *for* that perspective. As unsatisfactory as these apparent implications are, perhaps they point to something essential about the elusive nature of falsity as privation.

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