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## Consciousness in Spinoza's Philosophy of Mind

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### Abstract

Spinoza's philosophy of mind is thought to lack a serious account of consciousness. In this essay I argue that Spinoza's doctrine of ideas of ideas has been wrongly construed, and that once righted it provides the foundation for an account. I then draw out the finer details of Spinoza's account of consciousness, doing my best to defend its plausibility along the way. My view is in response to a proposal by Edwin Curley and the serious objection leveled against it by Margaret Wilson and Jonathan Bennett.

Spinoza's philosophy of mind, though at many points anticipatory of movements afoot in the contemporary landscape, appears to lack a serious account of consciousness. In the *Ethics* we find only a few scant remarks about the presence and role of consciousness in the human mind, none of which indicate what consciousness is or how it arises in certain creatures but not others. Edwin Curley once suggested that Spinoza intended his doctrine of ideas of ideas to account for consciousness.<sup>1</sup> An idea of an idea is an idea in the mind whose content is an awareness of another of the mind's ideas, and Curley proposes that to have an idea of an idea is to be conscious of that idea. I am conscious of my being late for rehearsal, for instance, when I have both the idea that I am late and an idea of this idea—having the idea of the idea that I am late is what it is for me to be conscious of my tardiness. This hypothesis has been attacked by Margaret Wilson and Jonathan Bennett, who argue that Spinoza's doctrine of ideas of ideas, if employed to account for consciousness, entails that every mode of substance is conscious, that is, that every mind,

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as well as every individual idea therein, is a conscious individual. This means, for instance, that me, my calloused fingers, and even my cello are all conscious. The objection is that without the ability to distinguish conscious from nonconscious individuals, Spinoza's theory cannot be a defensible account of consciousness.

I hope to show that Spinoza's account is defensible, and to do so I need to show that he is capable of distinguishing conscious from nonconscious individuals. Taking a closer look at Spinoza's doctrine of ideas of ideas, I argue against the traditional interpretation and offer an improved one. I then show that it is this improved interpretation that underlies and throws considerable light on the nature of consciousness in Spinoza's thought—so much, in fact, that with the improved interpretation of this doctrine we are able to draw out the details of Spinoza's account of consciousness and, thereby, show how he proposes to distinguish conscious from nonconscious minds.

### 1. Excessive Objection

Edwin Curley has suggested Spinoza holds that a mind is conscious of one of its ideas when it forms an idea of that idea.<sup>2</sup> Given Spinoza's parallelism of mind and body, there is an idea in the mind for each extended mode that composes its body.<sup>3</sup> As Spinoza argues, modes are expressed through each of the attributes, and a mode conceived under the attribute of Thought is the idea of itself (the same mode) conceived under the attribute of extension: "a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways" (EIIp7s).<sup>4</sup> The idea of the mode's body, Spinoza remarks, is the mode's "mind."<sup>5</sup> Insofar as each mode may be conceived under the attribute of Thought, then, each mode is a mind. This is Spinoza's pan-psychism. A mode is not conscious, however, until it is *aware of* ideas constituting its mind, that is, until it forms ideas of some of the ideas of states of its body. This is what the doctrine of ideas of ideas provides—an opportunity for a mind to form ideas of its other ideas and, thereby, to be conscious of them. As such, Curley proposes that Spinoza's is a kind of higher-order theory of consciousness—one in which a mental state is conscious when it is accompanied by an additional mental state whose content is an awareness of the state in question. The idea of an idea accompanies the idea it is of, and accounts for its being conscious. This is Curley's proposal.

Margaret Wilson and Jonathan Bennett have separately argued that if the doctrine of ideas of ideas does furnish an account of consciousness, then it is such that *all* ideas are conscious.<sup>6</sup> According to Wilson and Bennett, just as for each mode of extension there is an idea of that mode constituting the mode's mind, so for each mind is there an idea of that mind. If

consciousness is equated with there being an idea of an idea for a mind, then since there is an idea of the mind for each mind, each mind, that is, each mode, must be conscious. I call this the excessive objection.

Wilson and Bennett rely on a proposition that is ostensibly about the human mind to establish that there is an idea of an idea for each *human* mind and then argue that this applies to *all* minds. The proposition in question is EIIp20, in which Spinoza argues that just as there is an idea for each human body—its mind—so is there an idea of this idea—its consciousness.<sup>7</sup> While I will later criticize their interpretation of the ideas of ideas doctrine, there is no dispute that, according to EIIp20, there is for each human mind an idea of that mind and that this is an instance of an idea of an idea. Given the proposal that to have an idea of an idea is to be conscious of that idea, it follows that all human minds are conscious.

Wilson and Bennett further argue that what EIIp20 asserts as true for a human mind is true for all minds. This is because though EIIp20 explicitly pertains to human minds, its demonstration is completely general. To support his contention that there is an idea of each human mind, Spinoza refers to EIIp1, EIIp3, and EIIp11. EIIp1 and EIIp3 argue that Thought is an attribute and that it expresses God's nature as a thinking thing.<sup>8</sup> EIIp11 is about the human mind; it claims that the mind is the idea of the actually existing human body. After further elaborating on the relation between the human mind and its body, Spinoza remarks in EIIp13s that "the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate." All modes, on account of being expressed through the attribute of thought, are the idea of some body, that is, are a mind, and so, are animate. What Spinoza says in EIIp11 with respect to the human mind, then, applies equally to all minds. Since each of the propositions appealed to in support of the claim that there is an idea of each human mind apply to all minds, so does the claim they support. Since there is an idea of each human mind, so likewise is there an idea for each nonhuman mind.<sup>9</sup>

To hold that human beings are conscious simply because *all* minds are conscious clearly fails to capture what we understand as a prerequisite about consciousness—namely, that some things have it and others do not. Still, just as some discussants of pan-psychism make the view more attractive by noting that creatures may be said to have minds to varying degrees, so might the pan-consciousness position implicated here be ameliorated by noting that all creatures are conscious, again, to varying degrees. Perhaps, but pan-psychism has many skeptics (in fact, one is hard pressed to find philosophers willing to do more than entertain it), and the pan-consciousness view is a

considerably more radical claim that pan-psychism—not only are all things to some degree animate, but according to pan-consciousness, they are also to some degree aware of their being so animated! Spinoza's apparent pan-consciousness, in brief, would be highly implausible.

Here is another entailment of this objection that any defender would also need to account for. My mind, which is the idea of my body, is a complex mode. Just as my body is composed of a great number of smaller modes, so is my mind, being the idea of these, composed of a great number of ideas (cf. EIIp7 and EIIp11–13). Now insofar as the idea that is the idea of my body is a mind, and all minds are conscious, my mind is conscious. But my mind is also composed of a great number of lesser ideas (which are further composed of lesser ideas and so on and so forth), and since each of these is the idea of some body, they too are minds, and since they are minds, they too are conscious. So my being conscious includes each individual mode of my body's being conscious, and since my mind is the totality of these ideas, my mind is therefore conscious of every state of my body. Yet it is absurd to think that my mind is conscious, even at some subconscious level, of every physical state composing my body, and if Spinoza's theory entails this, then it must be wrong as an account of consciousness. We can conclude that either Spinoza did not intend the doctrine of ideas of ideas to account for consciousness, or he did but his view is wildly implausible.

Considerations such as these have led Jonathan Bennett to label Spinoza's theory of consciousness "absurdly excessive."<sup>10</sup> If he is right about EIIp20 and its application to all other minds, then I'm inclined to agree. Though I agree that according to EIIp20 there is an idea of an idea for each human mind, I propose to challenge the traditional interpretation of this doctrine, and with an alternative interpretation, to draw out the finer details of Spinoza's account of consciousness. These details will allow us to see that the second aspect of the excessive objection—the claim that what EIIp20 says about human minds is true of all minds—is false. I will first clarify the doctrine of ideas of ideas and then, through it, illuminate what consciousness is for Spinoza, as well as how it arises in the human mind. With these points, we will then be able to proffer an account of the distinction between conscious and nonconscious minds.

## 2. Revising Curley's Hypothesis

Curley hypothesizes that a mind is consciously aware of an idea if and only if there is also in that mind an idea of that idea. The excessive objection criticizing this proposal rests on two claims: that Spinoza asserts in EIIp20 that there is an idea of an idea for each human mind and, secondly, that this

conclusion is generalizable to all other minds. There is no disputing this reading of EIIp20, and so long as we accept Curley's hypothesis, it follows from EIIp20 that the human mind is conscious. Furthermore, if this is generalizable, then it follows that *all* minds are conscious.

One way to avoid this objection is to revise Curley's hypothesis. Instead of asserting that having an idea of an idea is a mind's being conscious of that idea, we can weaken this to state only that some instances of ideas of ideas constitute a mind's being conscious of those ideas. If so, then we can grant the generalization of EIIp20 without its entailing that all minds are therefore conscious.

For good reasons, however, the hypothesis cannot be weakened. As is the case with other higher-order theories, if we allow that some instances of ideas of ideas constitute a mind's being conscious of those ideas but others do not, then we will not have provided much of an account of consciousness since it may then rightly be asked about those instances of ideas of ideas that do constitute consciousness what distinguishes them from those that do not. Our appeal to this doctrine would then be reduced at best to a preliminary account of consciousness. We aim to hold that having an idea of an idea constitutes a mind's being conscious of that idea, and to do so we must reject ideas of ideas that are not constitutive of consciousness. Secondly, the doctrine as employed by Spinoza is always with respect to a mind's being conscious of some idea. We will discuss Spinoza's application of this doctrine in greater detail later, but for now it is enough to note that the doctrine, when applied in the text, is always with respect to a mind's being conscious, so that to suggest that the two are not equivalent would be to manipulate what is specific in the text. We cannot, then, revise the hypothesis in order to avoid the excessive objection.

## 3. Rethinking the Ideas of Ideas Doctrine Underlying Consciousness

In order to controvert the excessive objection, we need to reject its claim that what Spinoza says of the human mind in EIIp20 is perfectly generalizable. We can do so once we have a better understanding of Spinoza's actual account of consciousness, and to explain this we must first understand the doctrine of ideas of ideas that underlies it. As I will show, Curley, Wilson, and Bennett all misunderstand this doctrine. After drawing out the true characterization of an idea of an idea, I will then take a close look at how Spinoza uses it to provide an account of consciousness in human minds. With this we will then be in a position to show that such an account is not generalizable to all minds.

Curley, Wilson, and Bennett all have in mind a conception of ideas of ideas according to which the idea of an idea and the idea it is of are distinct ideas. Curley, for instance, suggests that we understand an idea of an idea "as a proposition about another proposition."<sup>11</sup> Wilson, likewise, understands an idea of an idea as a second-order idea.<sup>12</sup> Bennett thinks this as well. He understands an idea of an idea to be a separate idea whose representational content is the idea it is of or about.<sup>13</sup> With the idea of an idea being distinct from the idea it is of, the resulting account of consciousness is a kind of higher-order theory.

This interpretation of the doctrine of ideas of ideas is flawed. To expose its error we need to look at EIIp21s. There, I argue, Spinoza characterizes an idea of an idea and the idea it is of as one and the same idea. EIIp21 states that "This idea of the Mind is united to the Mind in the same way as the Mind is united to the Body."<sup>14</sup> Now the idea of the mind is an idea of an idea, so EIIp21 is an explicit instance of Spinoza's doctrine of ideas of ideas. Generalized, this proposition states that the idea of an idea is united to the idea in the same way in which the idea is united to its object.

Idea of an idea : Idea :: Idea : Object

Spinoza's demonstration of why this is so is not very helpful. His argument simply asserts that the unity of the mind and the body equally applies to the union between an idea of an idea and the idea. Luckily, his scholium is a bit more helpful.

This proposition is understood far more clearly from what is said in EIIp7s; for there we have shown that the idea of the Body and the Body, i.e. (by EIIp13), the Mind and the Body, are one and the same Individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of Thought, now under the attribute of Extension. So the idea of the Mind and the Mind itself are one and the same thing, which is conceived under one and the same attribute, viz. Thought. The idea of the Mind, I say, and the Mind itself follow in God from the same power of thinking and by the same necessity. For the idea of the Mind, i.e., the idea of the idea, is nothing but the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object.... (EIIp21s)

Spinoza again appears to simply assert that the union that holds between a mind and its body is the same as that between a mind and the idea of that mind. His argument, as I understand it, is an argument from analogy and turns on a particular conception of what an idea of an idea is—a conception he does not make explicit until the latter portion of the scholium. Understanding Spinoza's argument here requires moving his description of what it is to be an idea of an idea from the latter

portion of the scholium to the beginning. With the proper account of ideas of ideas in mind, we are then able to understand the analogy Spinoza draws between the idea of the body and the body on one hand, and an idea and the idea of that idea on the other. Let's see how this works.

An idea of an idea, we are told in the latter portion of the scholium, is "the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object."<sup>15</sup> With this we can fill in the analogy. We learned in EIIp7s (clarified in EIIp13) that the mind and body is one and the same individual conceived in two ways. We can conceive the body without the mind, that is, we can conceive the individual under the attribute of extension alone, and can likewise conceive the mind without the body, that is, we can conceive the individual under the attribute of thought alone. Since they are nevertheless one and the same individual, the distinction between them is a conceptual one. In a later characterization of the relation between an affection of the body and the idea of that affection, Spinoza notes that the affect and its idea are united in the same way as the mind and its body and that the distinction between the mind and its body is not real but only conceptual (EIVp8d).<sup>16</sup> Since the argument from analogy in EIIp21s identifies the distinction between an idea of an idea and its idea as the same as the distinction between a body and its mind, just as a mind and its body are one and the same thing conceived in two ways, and so only conceptually distinct, so is an idea and the idea of that idea one and the same thing conceived in two ways, and so only conceptually distinct. This is the analogy Spinoza is drawing in the scholium, and insofar as the distinction between a mind and its body is merely conceptual, so likewise is the distinction between an idea of an idea and the idea it is of merely conceptual.

Once we insert the latter characterization of ideas of ideas into the earlier portion of the argument, the argument goes through. The idea of the mind is united to the mind in the same way as the mind is related to its body, then, because like the mind and its body, the idea of the mind and the mind are one and the same thing conceived in two ways. An idea of an idea and its idea, then, are one and the same thing, and the distinction between them, like that between a mind and its body, is merely conceptual.

So the traditional interpretation is flawed in distinguishing an idea of an idea from the idea it is of. With this, furthermore, we can see that it is inappropriate to characterize Spinoza's account of consciousness as a precursor to higher-order theories, at least insofar as these theories distinguish a mind's being conscious of an idea from the idea it is conscious of. But if Spinoza is not espousing a kind of higher-order theory, what might an account of consciousness identifying consciousness

with having an idea of an idea look like? To answer this we need to look at Spinoza's employment of the conceptual distinction and the sense in which an idea of an idea is the "form" of the idea it is of.

When Spinoza says of the mind and its body in EIVp8d that they are one and the same thing conceived in two ways, and so only conceptually distinct, he does not mean that the mind and body are strictly identical and only distinct with respect to our thought about them, as we might say that my niece and my brother's daughter are only conceptually distinct.<sup>17</sup> A conceptual distinction, as Spinoza understands it, is not merely a distinction between two ways of conceiving one and the same thing. While this characterization may reflect the historical understanding of this distinction, Spinoza understands it to represent a distinction in fact that is independent of the mind conceiving it.

Modes are affections or modifications of the attributes (EIdf5), and the attributes are really distinct (EIp10), so a mode or modification of one attribute is distinct from that same mode as an affection or modification of another attribute.<sup>18</sup> When we comprehend a mode under the attribute of extension, for instance, we are capturing the mode in one of the ways in which it expresses itself. Were we to comprehend the same mode under the attribute of thought, we would be capturing the mode in one of its other ways of being expressed, and so on for whatever other attributes the mode is expressed through. In each case we comprehend one of the ways the mode itself is or is expressed; the mode itself is so distinguished, and this distinction is captured in the comprehension of it under its various attributes.<sup>19</sup> Yet the different conceptions of a mode under various attributes are all conceptions of one and the same mode. So a mode is numerically identical with its expressions under or through each attribute, but not strictly identical since a factual-though-not-numeric distinction holds between the mode as it is expressed through each attribute. This is the basis for Spinoza's understanding of the conceptual distinction—that one thing can be truly conceived in different ways.<sup>20</sup>

Now we need to understand what it means to describe an idea of an idea as the "form" of the idea. When Spinoza characterizes an idea of an idea in EIIP21s as "the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object," he means, in part, that the mind entertains the idea *only* as an idea. An idea of an idea is an awareness of an idea independent of its object—it is the idea conceived autonomously, that is, apart from its correspondent body. "Form" designates the idea as an idea but not an object. This is the sense of Spinoza's characterization of an idea of an idea as the "form" of an idea.

These two points—that an idea of an idea is conceptually distinct but numerically the same as the idea it is of, and that

an idea of an idea is a consideration of an idea apart from its object—are sensible enough on their own, but things get a little tricky when we combine them. For starters, to say that an idea of an idea and the idea it is of are conceptually distinct means that a single idea may be conceived, and truly so, either as an idea that is an idea of an object or as an idea that is an idea of itself as an idea alone. An idea of an idea is the idea considered apart from its object, but this consideration of the idea is only conceptually distinct from the idea considered; factually, the considering and the considered are two aspects or conceptions of a single numeric idea. The implication, as I see it, is that an idea of an idea is an idea's consideration or awareness of itself as an idea and apart from its object; an idea of an idea is an idea's being aware of itself as an idea. There is a conceptual distinction between an idea's being conscious and what it is conscious of, but each of these are aspects of one and the same idea. This is how the doctrine of ideas of ideas, at least as argued for here, is able to proffer an initial sketch of consciousness.

While this sketch explains how it is that ideas of ideas may account for consciousness, it does little to explain why some minds are conscious but others are not. Nor does it explain how consciousness arises in those minds fortunate enough to have it. In the next section I draw out from the *Ethics* how consciousness arises in human minds. With this we see more clearly how Spinoza construes consciousness as an internal feature of the mind (or idea) that is conscious, and with this we will then be able understand how consciousness is restricted to those minds capable of being sufficiently internally configured. With this we will have Spinoza's best account of the distinction between conscious and nonconscious minds.

#### 4. What is it for a human mind to be conscious?

It is not until EIIP22, where Spinoza introduces the notion of an idea of an idea of an affection, that an account of consciousness reveals itself in the geometric fabric of the *Ethics*.<sup>21</sup> Until then we have only learned what the human mind is, and what an idea of an idea is. In EIIP20 we learn that the idea of the mind, insofar as it is the same as the idea of the body, is the complex idea constituted by the various ideas of the body. This complex idea follows in God in the same way in which the body, which is likewise a complex mode consisting of other bodies, follows in God. In EIIP21 and E11p21s we learn that the idea of the mind and the mind itself are one and the same thing conceived in two ways. At this point we were able to propose that an idea of an idea, that is, an idea of a mind, is the mind's self-awareness, but nothing in the text thus far explains how this might actually arise in certain minds. The threshold to an

account of consciousness is crossed, I suggest, by Spinoza's mention of the human mind's ability to perceive "not only the affections of the body, but also the ideas of these affections" in EIIp22. This is because this is the first instance in which a mind is capable of forming ideas of its own (mental) states, and this is what it is to be self-conscious, that is, to be self-aware.

To make sense of EIIp22, we need first to understand what an affection is, and then to clarify what it means to have a perception of the idea of one. By "affection" Spinoza means something like an expression, alteration, or change of substance or one of its modes.<sup>22</sup> Modes, for instance, are characterized as affections or expressions of substance (EIDef5), and individual modes are themselves further composed of affections insofar as they undergo change and alterations within themselves (EIIIDef3). These changes or alterations, furthermore, are how the body's power is increased or diminished, and like the modes they express and substance they are expressions of, affections are both thinking and extended (EIIIDef3). Affections, then, are the flux of substance, and like substance, they are expressed through both (all) attributes.

Let this suffice for a brief explanation of an affection. What is it to perceive an idea of an affection? An affection of the human body is the body's being affected in some way, that is, the body's undergoing some event or change. The idea of this affection is the idea of the event or alteration in the mind—the alteration conceived through the attribute of Thought. But what of the *perception* of the idea of an affection? In the demonstration to EIIp22 Spinoza refers to the perception of the idea of an affection as the idea of the idea of an affection. To perceive the idea of an affection, then, is to form an idea of the idea of that affection. This is the affection's being self-conscious, so the idea of an affection is an affection's being self-conscious, and this is the first instance of genuine consciousness in the *Ethics*.

If this is what it is for an affection of a human mind to be conscious—to have the idea of itself as the idea that it is—then what does it mean to say that the human mind itself is conscious? Spinoza has indicated in EIIp21 and EIIp21s that there is an idea of an idea for the idea that is the human mind. The question is whether, and if so how, we can extend the introduction of conscious affections in EIIp22 to conscious minds. Consider, for example, being aware of a pain. A pain is an affection, and the idea of the idea of that affection is the pain's self-awareness. So far, however, it is only my skinned knee, for instance, that is aware of its pain. And this seems right, since when I skin my knee it is my knee and the idea of my knee from which pain registers. To understand the consciousness of the human mind, then, we need to consider the relation between it and its conscious affections.

When any one of the many ideas that are of the human body are affected in some way, so is the idea of the body as a whole, that is, the mind. This is because the mind is the totality of the ideas of the body; if one of the ideas composing the mind undergoes some affection or change, then so does the mind itself undergo some affection or change. Spinoza suggests as much in EIIp23 where he describes the mind's self-awareness as arising from the awareness of the ideas of its affections. He writes that "the mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body" (EIIp23).<sup>23</sup> So the mind is self-aware only through the self-awareness of its constituent ideas.

But this raises a question: Is the mind conscious in virtue of having affections that are themselves conscious, or does the mind become conscious by forming ideas of its already self-aware affections? In other words, is the mind's being conscious constituted by the consciousness of its affections, or is it something over and above these? Both seem appropriate, but does that mean that being conscious of an affection is both the affection's forming an idea of itself *and* the mind forming an idea of this affection? If these are taken to be two separate processes, then Spinoza's account of consciousness would seem overly convoluted. Closer inspection reveals that the mind is conscious in virtue of its affections' being conscious. This is because the mind's ideas of its affections just are the affections' ideas of themselves. This can be explained by recalling that for Spinoza the idea of the mind is a composite of a great many number of other ideas. The mind's awareness of some affection, then, is the affection's self-awareness, which is (also) an idea in the mind. So while the mind is what is conscious, it is nevertheless more accurate to say that it is the ideas that compose the mind that are conscious and that the mind is conscious in virtue of these.

Now this is right with respect to the mind's being conscious or aware of its affections, but what of the mind's awareness of itself as the complex idea that it is? Nothing we have said excludes there being an idea of the mind that is the mind's self-awareness. In fact, this is precisely what Spinoza means by "the idea of the mind" in EIIp21 and EIIp21s: The idea of the mind is an idea of an idea, and this is the mind's self-awareness. So not only is the mind aware of its affections in virtue of those affections being aware of themselves, but so is the mind itself self-aware since there is also for it an idea—the idea of the mind. With this we have explained what consciousness is for Spinoza, as well as how consciousness arises. All that remains is to use this to address what distinguishes conscious from nonconscious minds.

### 5. What distinguishes conscious from nonconscious minds?

We were able in the last section to construct an account of what consciousness is, both for an individual idea or mental state and the mind it is an idea in. The conclusion thus far, then, is that a conscious idea or mind is one with the capacity to form an idea of itself, where forming such an idea is an idea or mind's being self-aware. The question we now need to answer is why certain ideas are so able but others are not?

For starters, note that Spinoza does not claim that the human mind is conscious of all of its ideas. His claim in EIIp22 is rather that the human mind is capable of forming ideas of its affections, and as we have seen, affections are the alterations or changes of a mind (and body), so if the mind is conscious only of its affections, then it is conscious only of those states of its mind in the process of some alteration or change. This suggests that the mind is not conscious of its fixed states, which is confirmed in the proposition following EIIp22 where Spinoza argues that "the mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body" (EIIp23).

Second, it is not obvious that the mind is conscious of each of its affections. Spinoza states that the human mind perceives the ideas of its affections but does not specify whether this applies to some or all of them. It is reasonable, moreover, to suppose that he did not intend to state that we are conscious of every alteration or change of our mind and body. So the human mind is not conscious of its fixed states but only of its affections, and it is not even conscious of each of these. It is false, then, to attribute to Spinoza the claim that the human mind is conscious of each of its modes, as the excessive objection implies.

In order to determine the basis for the conscious/nonconscious distinction we need to return to EIIp13s. Recall that the excessive objection holds that Spinoza's claim about human minds being conscious is generalizable to all minds. After noting that the discussion of ideas thus far is completely general and therefore that what is true of the human mind is true of all ideas, Spinoza adds an important qualification:

However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality. (EIIp13s)

Spinoza continues by noting that "to determine what is the difference between the human mind and the others, and how it surpasses them it is necessary for us ... to know the nature of its object" (EIIp13s). Spinoza's point is that given his

parallelism thesis, whatever attribute-neutral fact is true of a body is also true of its corresponding mind (and vice versa), and since the object of an idea is more easily understood than the idea itself, we can determine the difference between human and other minds by understanding the differences in their corresponding objects or bodies. So whatever it is in virtue of which human minds are more real or excellent than other minds, we can understand by considering whatever it is that likewise makes their bodies more real or excellent than other bodies. Despite a reluctance to provide a detailed account of the distinction between human and other minds,<sup>24</sup> Spinoza does proffer a general one: "I say this in general, that in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once" (EIIp13s). Given what we have already said about consciousness—namely, that a mind is conscious on account of its forming ideas of the ideas of its affections—Spinoza may have in mind the notion that a mind that is able to perceive its own mental states is more real or excellent than one that is not so able.

All of this suggests that EIIp13s is a kind of turning point in EII. Spinoza has thus far discussed the relation between Thought and Extension and the nature of ideas generally. In the digression on bodies he will do the same for the general nature of bodies, that is, modes conceived under the attribute of extension. But in EIIp13s, as with the latter portion of the digression on bodies beginning with the consideration of different types of individuals (EIIp13l7s), Spinoza departs from the generality thesis and directs his further meditations toward the nature of the human mind in particular. Given his parallelism between the attributes, we can expose this difference by considering the mind or the body—and as I will now show, Spinoza offers hints at both.

Spinoza hints in the scholium to EIIp13, and explains in greater detail in the digression on bodies that follows, the manner in which more complex bodies are more excellent or real than simpler ones. A complex body, that is, one that is composed of other complex bodies or "individuals" rather than merely simple bodies, Spinoza writes, "can be affected in a great many other ways, and still preserve its nature" (EIIp13l7s). The postulates that follow this specify that the human body is highly complex (EIIp13pos1–6). The human body, then, is capable of being affected in a great many ways while retaining its nature.<sup>25</sup> The idea is that bodies are more real or excellent relative to their ability to be affected by, that is, experience, the world in more ways (so long as they retain their nature in doing so). So a body that is capable of experiencing more of the world than another is thereby more real or excellent. The capacity to hear is an example of a way of experiencing the world, and other



things being equal, a body that can hear is more real or excellent than a similar body lacking this capacity. Turning to the mind, we can see that a similar rationale applies to being conscious.

The correlate in the mind of a body being affected in different ways, recalling EIIp13s, is the mind's perceiving many different kinds of things. Spinoza expands upon this in the propositions immediately following the digression on bodies. The human mind is a complex mode consisting of a great many other individual ideas, and so, is capable of perceiving a great many things. Because of its complexity, it is also able to form memories and images of the things it perceives, and can even recollect earlier ideas.<sup>26</sup> Spinoza notes that there is, furthermore, an idea of the human mind, that is, an idea whose content is the mind itself (EIIp20). That this mind is self-conscious is then confirmed in EIIp21 (though already implicitly stated in EIIp20, since the idea of the mind is an idea of an idea). So the propositions following the digression on bodies elaborate on the complexity of the human mind and the unique capacities it enjoys as a consequence. One such way in which the human mind perceives more of the world than other minds, as we've seen, is its perceiving its own mental states (EIIp23), and this, like the other capacities discussed following the digression on bodies, reflects the human mind's being more complex than other minds. So the quality that distinguishes the human mind from others is its being more complex, and it is from this that its ability to perceive its own mental states, that is, its ability to be self-aware, follows. Complexity, then, is the factor that distinguishes the more real or excellent individuals from the less. Conscious minds are therefore distinguished from non-conscious minds on account of their being more complex. This, as I understand it, is how Spinoza characterizes the distinction between conscious and nonconscious minds.

How does this fare as a response to the excessive objection? Proponents of the objection might reply that Spinoza's is a bland generalization and that as such it is insufficient to ground the distinction between conscious and nonconscious minds. Given what we've said thus far, they ought to acknowledge that Spinoza does indeed have an account of consciousness that suggests how conscious and nonconscious minds are to be distinguished, but they may still criticize that the grounds of his distinction are too vague to suffice as an adequate response to the objection made. We can press this worry with the following point: The ideas in the mind that are self-aware are not as complex as the idea that is the mind. It is not, then, just the human mind but, rather, ideas in it that are sufficiently complex to be self-aware, and so, more complex than any nonconscious mind. If we cast this in terms of "mental states" rather than "ideas in the mind," then the claim is that any self-conscious mental state is itself—the mental state—

more complex than any nonconscious idea or mind. Where, then, is the line that distinguishes the sufficiently complex from the insufficiently complex ideas?

Let's address the broader worry first—that Spinoza's attempt at a distinction is too vague to be adequate. Without a more precise account of the kinds of complexity involved and the reasons (or degrees of?) why some minds have it but others do not, Spinoza's account is vague, but I understand this as a virtue of his theory. If we understand consciousness to be a product of a certain degree of complexity in the mind, a degree paralleled in the complexity of the body, then it seems fair to conjecture that determining how and where the transition from nonconscious to conscious ideas or minds occurs is a matter for the physical and cognitive sciences. That Spinoza does not attempt to determine the precise degree or type of complexity necessary for being conscious is sensible since the contemporary versions of these sciences are only now beginning to approximate answers. This is the point of Spinoza's remark that he cannot explain, but nor is it necessary to do so, the finer details of the distinction between human and other minds (EIIp13s). It is unrealistic to expect that Spinoza should have attempted to draw the precise distinction himself, and prudent that he neglected to do so. As long as his appeal to complexity is coherent, his theory remains a research project open to empirical support and possibly confirmation.

This is perhaps plausible with respect to distinguishing the human mind's being conscious from other nonconscious minds, but Spinoza's assertion that ideas or mental states in the mind are conscious as well puts a significant burden on his theory since, to remain plausible, he now needs to explain why these ideas or states in the mind are themselves more complex than any nonconscious state or mind. It is reasonable to regard the human mind as more intricate and complex than the minds of most other modes, but to claim as much of the individual states or ideas that compose the mind seems a stretch. If Spinoza cannot explain why ideas in the human mind are more complex than those of any nonconscious mind then he is stretching his claim to a distinction grounded in complexity past its breaking point. Can it really be the case that the idea of the sensation of the cello bow in my hand, for instance, is itself more complex than any nonconscious mind?

To see whether this suffices as a worry or not we need to clarify what is included in a conscious idea of my mind. My suggestion is that the complaint rests on an oversimplification of what is included in a conscious idea. Take the idea of the sensation of the bow in my hand. The idea of the sensation, that is, the mental state of awareness, is the idea's being self-aware, but it is not simply the idea of my hand that is self-aware but, rather, the idea of my hand as an idea in my mind. Being aware

of the bow in my hand requires, in other words, the sensation of the bow, and this arises only by the nerves in my fingers relaying information to the brain where it is then processed. So the idea in my mind that is the awareness of the bow in my hand includes the idea of my hand and the affection felt by the bow, but it also includes the relaying and processing of this affection in the mind. As such, an idea of my mind's being self-aware requires the interaction of the idea of that part of my body in conjunction with the processes of my mind, and if we agree that the human mind is more complex than any nonconscious mind, then its being implicated in any conscious idea in my mind explains how that idea, relying as it does on the complex mind, is more complex than any nonconscious mind. Spinoza's claim that the human mind knows itself through its perception of its affections suggests that the mind is implicated in each of its conscious ideas (EIIp23), and with this Spinoza is able to offer a response to the more pressing worry confronting his view.

## 6. Conclusion

Summing up, I have shown that Spinoza's doctrine of ideas of ideas has been misinterpreted and that, rightly construed, it amounts to the claim that an idea of an idea is numerically the same as the idea it is of, and that this suggests that an idea of an idea is simply an idea's being self-aware. I then showed how Spinoza relies on this doctrine to develop an account of consciousness, and that built into this account is a distinction between conscious and nonconscious minds. So by rethinking his doctrine of ideas of ideas we are able to extract an account of consciousness that avoids the excessive objection and that remains plausible as a research project today.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 128.

<sup>2</sup> I am elaborating on Curley's suggestion, which is quite brief.

<sup>3</sup> Spinoza's parallelism thesis is expressed in EIIp7 and EIIp7s. He there argues that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (EIIp7). Elaborating on this, he notes in the scholium that "whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of extension, or under the attribute of thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, that is, that the same things follow one another" (EIIp7s). For each extended mode of substance, then, there is a corresponding idea of that mode, and vice versa, for every mode of Thought there is a corresponding object.

<sup>4</sup> In citing Spinoza's *Ethics* I will begin with an "E" signifying the *Ethics*, then give the part number (I-V), then indicate where in that

part the citation occurs. EIIp21d, for instance, refers to *Ethics*, part two, proposition twenty-one demonstration. EIIp1317s refers to part two, proposition thirteen, lemma seven scholium. Other abbreviations include "a" for "axiom," "c" for "corollary," "def" for "definition," and "pos" for "postulate." All quotations from the *Ethics* are taken from Edwin Curley (ed. and tr.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Where significant, I will include the Latin as well: "*Modus extensionis et idea illius modi una eademque est res, sed duobus modis expressa*" (EIIp7s).

<sup>5</sup> Spinoza notes this about the human mind in EIIp11 and then adds in EIIp13s that what is true of the idea of the human body is true for the ideas of all bodies, i.e., all minds.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Wilson, "Objects, Ideas and 'Minds': Comments on Spinoza's Theory of Mind," in *Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 133–39. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 184–91, cited hereafter as *Study*.

<sup>7</sup> Following the claim in EIIp19d that there is an idea or knowledge of the human body, EIIp20 states that "there is also in God an idea, or knowledge, of the human mind, which follows in God in the same way and is related to God in the same way as the idea, or knowledge, of the human body." The "in God" locution simply refers to nature—the idea of the body and the idea of this idea both follow from the order of nature, which is all Spinoza means by 'in God'.

<sup>8</sup> According to EIIp1, "Thought is an attribute of God, or, God is a thinking thing." EIIp3 expands on this by arguing that "In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything which necessarily follows from it."

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is further confirmed by remarks in the preface to EIII, where Spinoza rejects the conception of a human mind as a kingdom within a kingdom and promises to treat questions of the mind as though they were questions of "lines, planes and bodies."

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 128–29.

<sup>12</sup> "Objects, Ideas and 'Minds'," 135.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 184. Bennett thinks there is an idea of an idea for every idea, including ideas of ideas. The resulting metaphor, he suggests, is this: "If an extended thing x is compared with a thin circular disc, then its mental counterpart could be compared with an infinitely high column made up of a disc I (x) surmounted by a disc I (I (x)) surmounted by a disc I (I (I (x))) and so on" (*Study*, 184). That each "idea of" iteration is a further disc shows that Bennett understands them as distinct as well, though he does briefly consider them as not being so (*Study*, 185).

<sup>14</sup> The "this" in the proposition is referring back to EIIp20, which argues that there is a human mind that follows from God in the same way as the human body.

<sup>15</sup> "*Nam revera idea mentis, hoc est, idea ideae nihil aliud est, quam forma ideae, quatenus haec ut modus cogitandi absque relatione ad obiectum consideratur*" (EIIp21s).

<sup>16</sup> EIVp8 brings several of the eventual threads of this discussion into clear illumination. He argues there that "the knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it" and supports this, in part, by uniting the idea of an

affect with the affect itself, just as he has earlier united the mind and body of each mode.

<sup>17</sup> This clarification also applies to EIIp7&s.

<sup>18</sup> A sharp identification and classification of the real, modal, and conceptual distinctions in Spinoza's thought, though important, is beyond the scope of this paper. My aim here is only to establish that a mode under one attribute is not strictly identical to the same mode under another attribute, which I take to be a fairly uncontroversial reading of Spinoza.

<sup>19</sup> Here's an additional argument: We know a mode through its causal history (EIIa4), but the causal history of an extended mode is distinct from that of the same mode known through the attribute of thought (EIIp6). Since true ideas agree with their objects (EIIa6), the knowledge of a mode under one attribute must agree with the mode conceived under that attribute, and as such the mode so conceived cannot be strictly identical to the mode conceived under another attribute, since then our knowledge would be incomplete.

<sup>20</sup> More could be said here, especially in regard to how Spinoza's conception of the conceptual distinction relates to and possibly reflects Descartes, cf. Justin Skirry's "Descartes's Conceptual Distinction and its Ontological Import" (*Journal of the History of Philosophy* 2 [2004]: 121-44), but my aim is only to note that the two conceptions are numerically but not strictly identical. The deeper explanation underlying this I leave for another day.

<sup>21</sup> Curley would have us believe that consciousness is present in EIIp19 (*Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 128). Wilson and Bennett argue that though Spinoza refers to consciousness, he nowhere accounts for the how of its arising.

<sup>22</sup> This is a common term in the *Ethics*, but it is not defined until EIII. Spinoza defines an "affect" as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (EIIIdef3).

<sup>23</sup> Spinoza's remark about the mind's being aware of its *conatus* further supports this. In EIIIp9d Spinoza shows that the mind is conscious of its striving to persevere by appeal to the conclusion in EIIp23 that the mind is conscious on account of its ideas of its affections, i.e., on account of its affections, which are its ideas, forming ideas of themselves. So the mind's striving or *conatus* manifests itself through the ideas that compose the mind, and the mind is therefore conscious of this striving or *conatus* on account of its being conscious of its ideas that manifest this.

<sup>24</sup> "I cannot explain [the distinction between human and other minds] here, nor is that necessary for the things I wish to demonstrate" (EIIp13s). His general suggestion and his digression on bodies, as well as the account of the human mind that follows, nevertheless do discuss elements of the likely details of this distinction.

<sup>25</sup> This is true especially with respect to postulate I, which states that "the human body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite" (EIIp13pos1), and postulate III, which states that "the individuals composing the human body, and consequently, the human body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways" (EIIp13pos3).

<sup>26</sup> These capacities are catalogued in EIIp14-18, following

immediately upon the digression on bodies.

<sup>27</sup> Material from the second and third sections was presented as "Rethinking Spinoza's Doctrine of Ideas of Ideas" at the Indiana Philosophical Association Spring meeting (Marian College, 2006) and the Spinoza Colloquium at the American Philosophical Association 2006 Central Division meeting. I am grateful to those who offered their comments at these meetings. I am especially grateful to Tad Robinson, whose comments and suggestions helped to clarify many aspects of this paper and to avoid several deep mistakes.