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# Combining Minds in Spinoza's Animate Cosmos

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# Outline

1. The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism
2. Panpsychism and the Combination Problem
3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism
  - A. Minds and 'Thinking Substances'
  - B. Degrees of perceptual excellence
  - C. Mind-relativity of content

# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

Why Spinoza is interesting to me:

- Historically close enough to be grappling with recognisable problems
- Historically distant enough to be doing so from a different vantage point



# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

Shared problem: how does the human mind fit into the world described by physical science?

Shared solution (panpsychism): mind is inherent in matter generally, and human minds are just one complex form of this

Different framings:

- Contemporary: fundamental psychophysical laws
- Spinoza: your mind is God's/Nature's idea of your body



# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

Spinoza endorses panpsychism almost in passing:

*"The propositions we have advanced hitherto [about minds and bodies] have been entirely general, applying not more to men than to other individual things, all of which, though in different degrees, are animated.*

*For of everything there is necessarily an idea in God... in the same way as there is an idea of the human body"*

(2P13s)

# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

Why endorse such a bold claim so briefly?

Well, what's the alternative?

## 1. **Substance dualism?** Nope.

Spinoza rejects the possibility of causal interaction between things with alien natures. (2P6, 1P10, 1A4)

≈ The 'interaction problem' that drives many contemporary philosophers away from dualism.

# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

## 2. What about **physicalism**? Nope

Because mental and physical properties are so alien, neither can be intelligibly reduced to the other.

≈ The 'hard problem of consciousness' that drives many contemporary philosophers away from physicalism.

## 3. What about '*a posteriori*' **physicalism**? Maybe mental properties just are certain physical properties, but we'll never understand how or why.

This goes against Spinoza's rationalistic methodology: we must try to make sense of the world.

≈ Contemporary discussions about conceivability and possibility

# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

4. The remaining option is **property dualism**: things have both physical and mental properties, and both are fundamental.

But which physical things have mental properties?

One option: **panpsychism** - *all* physical facts have some corresponding mental fact.

Alternative: **emergentism** - *most* physical things are mindless, but under certain conditions they bring about the sudden appearance of mind.



# 1: The Modernity of Spinoza's Panpsychism

Why not emergentism?

Spinoza emphasises his opposition to views that “conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom... [that] disturbs rather than follows nature's order” (E3pref.)

≈ Contemporary panpsychist arguments appealing to simplicity, continuity, and avoidance of arbitrary boundaries

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Spinoza's system pushes him to panpsychism by the same arguments that push contemporary philosophers (e.g. Chalmers 2013).



## 2: Panpsychism and the Combination Problem

Some but not all panpsychists are 'combinationists':

Panpsychist Combinationism: All the fundamental physical things have minds, **and** the complex minds of complex things are built up from ('combinations of') the simpler minds of simpler things.

E.g. Leibniz is arguably a panpsychist but not a combinationist: his minds ('monads') are simple and partless.



## 2: Panpsychism and the Combination Problem

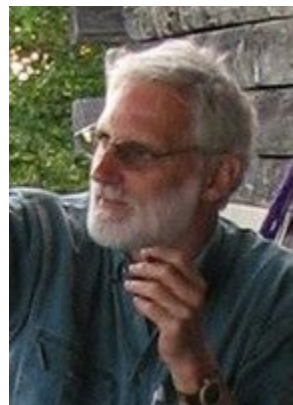
Combinationist forms of panpsychism face a 'combination problem':

*"the problem of explaining how the myriad elements of 'atomic consciousness' can be combined into a new, complex and rich consciousness such as that we possess."*

(Seager 1995, "Consciousness, Information, and Panpsychism")

In short:

- It's intuitively clear how physical things can combine into more complex physical things.
- It's intuitively very unclear how minds can combine into more complex minds.



## 2: Panpsychism and the Combination Problem

Is Spinoza a combinationist?

He describes human minds as composite minds:

*“the human mind, is not simple, but compounded of a great number of ideas... [because] there is necessarily in God the idea of each individual part whereof the body is composed... [and so] the idea of the human body is composed of these numerous ideas of its component parts.”*

(2p15)

He also seems to think that wholes are reducible to their parts (1p12d, cf. Letter 35)

## 2: Panpsychism and the Combination Problem

I think Spinoza is usefully read as a something like a combinationist (unlike Leibniz).

He doesn't explicitly frame or address the combination problem.

But his system may offer resources for it.



# 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

What would a Spinozistic sort of combinationism look like?

Some key features:

- A. Many minds, but only one thinking substance
- B. Differentiation among minds
- C. Mind-relativity of content

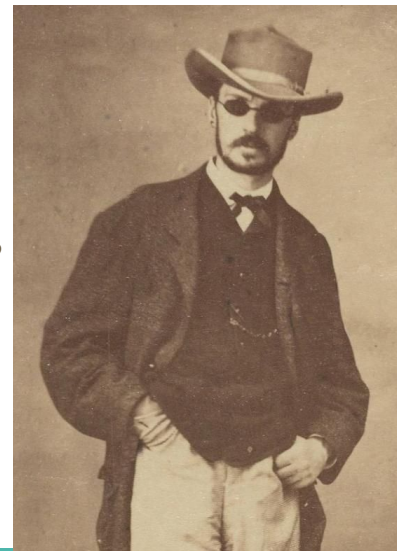
# 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

A. Many minds, but only one thinking substance

Arguments against combinationism often emphasise the seeming separateness of minds.

Each mind exists independently of all others:

*“the breaches [between minds] are the most absolute breaches in nature.” (James, 1890)*



### 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

In 17th-century terms, separate and independent entities are 'substances'. (E.g., for Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, 'thinking substance' is synonymous with 'mind' or 'soul'.)

Spinoza *denies* that we are thinking substances.

Nature is the only thinking substance, and we're just thoughts in Nature's mind.

Thinking substances can't combine, but thoughts can.



# 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

## B. Differentiation among Minds

Question: what's special about human minds?

Spinoza says that to determine “wherein the human mind differs from other things, and wherein it surpasses them,” (2p13s), we would need to know the nature of the human body, whose full powers “nobody has yet determined” (3p2s).

Reasonable caution, now and in the 17th Century!

# 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

But we do get some idea, in 2P13s:

*“in proportion as any given body is:*

- *more fitted than others for doing many actions or receiving many impressions at once, so also is the mind, of which it is the object,*

- *more fitted than others for forming many simultaneous perceptions;*

*and*

- *the more the actions of the body depend on itself alone, and the fewer other bodies concur with it in action,*

- *the more fitted is the mind of which it is the object for distinct comprehension.”*

This is not straightforward to interpret!

But it is suggestive: human minds are characterised by ‘unity in diversity’.

# 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

## C. Mind-Relativity of Content

Spinoza claims the following about the minds in general:

- Self-Representation: every thing's mind is an idea of itself (2p21)
- Nature-Representation: every idea involves knowledge of Nature (2p45-46)
- Causal Exteroception: a thing's self-representing ideas come to also represent external things when they affect it (2p16)

### 3. Resources for Spinozistic Combinationism

This leads to what Michael Della Rocca' calls "the mind-relativity of content".

Every idea in my mind is also an idea in Nature's mind, but it has different properties relative to my mind and to Nature's:

- Relative to Nature's mind it specifically represents part of my brain; relative to my mind it may also represent its external cause
- Relative to Nature's mind it is clear and adequate; relative to my mind it may be confused and inadequate



# Conclusions

Spinozistic Combinationism would involve:

- Distinguishing 'mind' as thinking substance (doesn't combine), from 'mind' as idea (combines easily)
- Systems differ in how far they display 'unity in diversity', with the human mind 'surpassing' other things in this regard.
- Mental elements are shared between minds, but have different properties relative to each.

# References

Quotations from the Ethics are from Torin Doppelt's 'Ethics 2.0' <https://ethics.spinozism.org/>

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