

September 28, 2004

Sandra

Thanks for the library service.

I'm afraid I was not clear in my description of what Spinoza intended and what Damasio reads into Spinoza. I'm going to try again. I do this for my own benefit, to see if my own thoughts are clear, and you shouldn't feel you need to read this – I know you've got plenty of stuff to read.

The expression from Spinoza is "The mind is the idea of the body."

From the Spinoza bio that I just read; I understood this quote to mean the following:

1. All things (whether physical things or mental experiences) are composed of the same basic stuff.
2. Just as some physical things have magnetic fields or electric fields, some physical things have mental experiences, including ideas. Thus ideas are just a natural property of the body. For Spinoza, a brain is just a body part that obeys the same laws of nature that govern everything else.
3. Ideas are not some spiritual or supernatural phenomena distinct from the physical body in which the ideas occur; rather, ideas are natural physical phenomena. I think you will agree that this is exactly what you would call "scientific monism" and I believe Spinoza was the first to articulate it.
4. When he uses the term "body", he includes "brain". The expression "idea of the body" should be read the same as "the magnetic field of the magnet", i.e., the magnetic field is a natural property of the stuff that makes up the magnet, and ideas are the natural property of the stuff that makes up the body.
5. The "mind" is just the totality of ideas; consequently, mind is not something in a different realm than body with an independent volition; rather, mind is just a natural property of body which is made of the same stuff as everything else and obeys the same natural laws.

This is straight scientific monism and it does not acknowledge a mind/body problem. According to this line of thinking, if you understand everything about the stuff that makes up the body, you will understand everything about the mind.

Here is the way Damasio reads it.

1. Damasio proceeds as though bodily events cause mental experiences – he calls certain bodily events "emotions" and these occur before any mental experiences. Only some time after the bodily emotional events occur are the feelings that are associated with the emotions experienced. Those feelings are not bodily events but are mental experiences, and most of us use the term

“emotions” to refer to these feelings. He acknowledges a mind/body problem: even if one knew everything about the body (brain), he’s not sure that one would know anything about the mind. But nevertheless, he proceeds as though the bodily emotional events cause the emotional feelings.

2. Regarding these emotional feelings, Damasio says they have content about the body. Unlike Spinoza, Damasio makes a distinction between the brain and the body. The content of feelings, he says, has to do with bodily events. For example, the feeling of a particular emotion is the totality of how different parts of the body feel; furthermore, an emotional feeling is nothing more than the feelings of those particular parts of the body.

3. For Damasio, not only are emotional feelings the feelings of different parts of the body, but all mental experiences relate to different bodily events – or at least all experiences refer to the states of different bodily parts.

4. For Damasio, the “idea of the body” is a mental experience of the state of the body. And the mind is just the totality of those mental experiences – a mental map of the whole body.

So: for Spinoza, mental experiences are natural physical properties of the physical constituents that comprise the brain/body; for Damasio, mental experiences are maps of the body. Completely different ideas.

Spinoza is a straight-forward scientific monist who (naively, in my view) doesn’t see that there might be a mind/body problem. Damasio proceeds like a scientific monist but acknowledges the mind/body problem and consequently is potentially a dualist but doesn’t commit one way or the other.

Having said all that, the quotation from Spinoza that I quoted above (The mind is the idea of the body.) is apparently wrong. Spinoza wrote in Latin and the biography that I read translates the quote as I put it. My impression is that Damasio’s book has the same translation. But the NYRB review uses a different translation: “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body.” This may be seriously different and I would have to read the original Spinoza to be confident what he intended.

Anyway, I don’t agree at all with Damasio’s description of emotions. His philosophy, at least as expressed in this book, is lite lunch as it probably must be for the audience he seems to intend. Regarding his mental model, I give him points for effort but not for substance.

Sid