PART II

ETHICS: DE NATURA ET ORIGINE MENTIS
SPINOZA AND THE THEORY OF IDENTITY (2P1–13)

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The recent history of the mind-body problem appears at first glance as the history of a philosophical encounter with Descartes. Spinoza, by contrast, seems to play only a subordinate role.

Yet this understanding has been increasingly questioned in recent years: first of all, it has become clear that a connection between Spinoza and more recent philosophical investigations does exist, albeit obscurely. Secondly, neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio have begun citing Spinoza explicitly. Yet here again a distinction between the uses made of these two thinkers is conspicuous: while Descartes typically is the object from which one wishes to distance or distinguish oneself, Spinoza tends to be seen instead as the precursor and guarantor for one’s own approaches. Arriving as it does across a rift of more than three centuries of scientific and philosophical history, this guarantee seems at first glance peculiar. Spinoza’s key metaphysical presuppositions and background assumptions all diverge radically from those of contemporary theorists, as do his methodological principles, especially his tilt towards geometry. Furthermore, Spinoza’s own ambition seems broadly alien to the ambition of his contemporary followers: significantly, he does not develop his approach in order to explain current or expected empirical findings, but only in order to devise a basis for his Ethics.

Given these deep-seated differences, any reference to Spinoza in the mind-body debate seems highly problematic. Nevertheless, a more detailed reading of Spinoza’s work makes it clear that there is a underlying resemblance to contemporary approaches. In the first part of this article I will briefly sketch the relevant statements present in the Ethics. I will then go on in the second part to consider the central claims of the theory of mind as it is developed at the beginning of the second part of the Ethics. Finally, in the third and last part of this paper, I discuss the systematic and reception-historical relations between Spinoza’s approach and contemporary theories in the philosophy of mind.