HOMO COGITAT:
SPINOZA'S DOCTRINE AND SOME RECENT COMMENTATORS

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1. Cogitatio in Spinoza's Axioms and Definitions.

What can be learned from Spinoza's definitions and axioms about what he took to be the activity he describes by the verb 'cogitare' and its cognate noun 'cogitatio'? The second axiom of Part II of the Ethics, "Homo cogitat," is followed by another about the modes of cogitatio: it lays down (i) that there can be no modus cogitandi (such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word 'affectus animi'), unless in the individual who has it there is an idea of the thing it is about, and (ii) that there can be an idea without any other modus cogitandi (EIIA3). This directs attention to the definition of "idea": namely,

Per ideam intelligo Mentis conceptum, quem Mens format, propterea quod res est cogitans (EIID3).

An 'explicatio' is attached to it:

Dico potius conceptum, quam perceptionem, quia perceptionis nomen indicare videtur, Mentem ab objecto pati. At conceptus actionem mentis exprimere videtur.

And that prompts one to ask: What is the conceptus a mind forms, simply because it is a res cogitans?

Still, we have learned something. We have not learned what 'ideas' are (Spinoza's Latin word 'idea' cannot be better rendered into English than by adoption) but we have learned something about their function in thinking. The most elementary exercise of thinking is forming an idea; and forming an idea is an action, not something caused ab objecto. This presupposes that ideas have objects. And that should remind us of EIA6, that a true idea must agree with its object. That does not strictly presuppose that all ideas are true or false, but it strongly suggests it; and, as we shall see, Spinoza believes it (EIIP49D). So, from the definitions and axioms of Ethics I and II, we are entitled to infer: (1) that merely forming an idea is thinking, and all thinking involves forming ideas; (2a) that ideas have objects, and (2b) are true or false; (3) that if they are true they agree with their objects; and (4) that their objects do not cause them to be formed.

Since forming an idea is sufficient and necessary for thinking, and since all the definitions and axioms tell us about the internal character of ideas, as distinct from what does or does not cause them, is contained in (2a), (2b), and (3), we must begin with them. What is it for an idea to be true or false? What is it for something to be the object of an idea - to have a relation to an idea usually signified in Latin by putting the noun or noun phrase standing for the
object in the genitive case as qualifying the noun or noun phrase standing for the idea? And what is it for an idea to ‘agree’ ("convenire") with its object?


Since philosophers today for the most part think ‘true’ and ‘false’ in their fundamental senses refer to the truth and falsity of propositions expressed by sentences, it is natural for them to assume that the truth or falsity of ideas Spinoza speaks of is propositional truth or falsity, and hence that ideas are propositions. Modi cogitandi such as love and desire will then be what Bertrand Russell called ‘propositional attitudes’; an idea’s agreeing with its object will be a proposition’s being true of its object. Edwin Curley develops an interpretation of ‘idea’ on these lines in his pioneering Spinoza’s Metaphysics, where ideas are regarded as propositions, and their objects, on the lines of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, as facts which they depict (Curley (1969), 53-55, 123-6).

There is direct textual evidence for such a propositional interpretation. In some of Spinoza’s examples, ideas are expressed by sentences: thus in E II P40 S1 his specimens of the confused ideas of imagination usually called ‘universal notions’ are presented in the form of sentences: "that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal." This has led Jonathan Bennett, to declare that "[m]uch of the time Spinoza takes ideas to be propositionally structured, i.e., to be of the form ‘that p,’ where ‘p’ stands for a sentence" (Bennett (1984), 51).

To the evidence of the verbal form in which Spinoza expresses a number of his examples, Curley has recently added an argument from the best explanation (Curley (1975), 169-70, 173-74). Spinoza goes on to reject Descartes’s distinction between forming an idea and affirming something; and Curley has suggested that the best explanation of his doing so is that he rejects Descartes’s doctrine that ideas are in us quasi imagines and he conceives them instead as propositions. I shall examine this suggestion in its place; but, for the moment, I shall confine myself to showing that the textual evidence for Curley’s contention that "[m]uch of the time, Spinoza takes ideas to be propositionally structured" (Bennett (1984), 51) is weak. That evidence is that Spinoza frequently expresses ideas in sentences. It is inconclusive, because, as nobody disputes, he also expresses ideas by nouns and noun phrases. The variation in the forms in which he expresses ideas linguistically would be natural if, like Descartes, he did not think of any linguistic expression of ideas as prototypical.

That he does not is supported both by what what he says about the relation of words to thought and what he does not say. First, he does not say that ideas are propositionally structured and nobody is likely to embrace the doctrine that they are in a fit of absence of mind. If Spinoza had embraced it, and especially if he was led to differ from Descartes because he did, why did he not explicitly say so? No answer to this question is plausible.

Secondly, he does say that it is dangerous to confuse ideas with their verbal expressions. Propositional theorists characteristically find the relation of language to the world to be relatively unproblematic, and that of Cartesian