

Spinoza on Memory and Reason

Spinoza's theory of memory is an understudied topic. Some investigations have focused on the role played by memory with regard to Spinoza's accounts of personal identity and identity through time (Rice 1971, Saw 1972, Matson 1977, Ablondi and Barbone 1994, Waller 2009, Weigel 2009, Thiel 2011, Lin 2013 and Rojas Peralta 2016). None of them, however, provide an explanation as to what memory is, in Spinoza's account, and how it is supposed to determine the life of an individual by interacting with the rest of her mental content and functions. The aim of this paper is to offer such an explanation.

I will analyse the definitions of memory that Spinoza provides in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and in the *Ethics*. In both texts, Spinoza sharply distinguishes between memory and intellect, denying the latter any mnemonic power. He grounds the human capacity of retaining and retrieving images of objects in a corporeal function. Conversely, the intellect is regarded as a purely spiritual power.

Yet Spinoza also contends that the intellect can aid one's memory—despite the dependency of the latter on a purely mechanic corporeal function—and increase the strength of one's mnemonic associations. He suggests that, by arranging the mnemonic content in a meaningful order, the intellect can favour the retention of information first acquired through random experience (TIE 81-83). Recollection of corporeal images, in turn, impacts the unfolding of reasoning processes, or even makes them possible, by allowing the retrieval of stored knowledge that refers to abstract notions and universal moral maxims (*Ethics* V, p10, schol). Indeed, since the intellect has no memory, if purely intellectual notions can be remembered, they can only be stored by referring to images that depend on sense perception, including words.

However, it remains unclear whether and how, according to Spinoza, the intellect can interact with the memory and help the retention and recollection of information stored in the body, without assuming any interplay between functions of the mind and functions of the body—which would contradict Spinoza's thought-extension parallelism (*Ethics* II, p7, schol and *Ethics* III, p2). The puzzle is further complicated by Spinoza's rejection of free will, which implies that nobody can freely select the mnemonic content which is the object of retrieval and present awareness—let alone can one rearrange her memories at will.

To solve these tensions, I will use the contemporary distinction between “episodic” and “semantic” memory (Tulving 1972) as a heuristic device, and show how memory is understood by Spinoza under different perspectives. I will argue that when Spinoza refers to cases of episodic memory—that is, those which involve a temporalization of their objects—he dismisses them as incompatible with the intellect and its order and connection of ideas. Our episodic memory can only reflect the order and connection of our fortuitous encounters with external things through time. Conversely,

cases in which memory is reduced to its semantic functions—or to its synchronic associations between ideas—are considered by Spinoza as instances which allow for the intelligibility of mnemonic associations and for a seeming interaction between intellect and memory themselves. When understood in this second sense, the notion of memory extends as far as to cover all imaginative knowledge given to a certain mind, at a certain time, through simultaneous and synchronic association of ideas. Only in this sense, I argue, memory can be conceived as “the whole soul [...] insofar as it imagines one idea after another according to a particular association” (Malinowski-Charles 2004, 106, my translation).

By its capacity to regard the ideas deployed by one’s memory through a non-temporal perspective, I contend, the intellect can eventually observe causal relationships connecting the nature of remembered things, which do not necessarily involve or depend on one’s biography. Indeed, the knowledge of such causal relationships, based on eternal and universal properties of things, constitutes for Spinoza the foundation of our reasoning (*Ethics II*, p40, scholl). Items of memory—images and sense data—need therefore to be associated to each other in a way capable of reflecting and recalling at each time such universal properties of things, in order for them to become meaningful signs and vehicles of rational knowledge through time. For when one mnemonic item becomes the object of fortuitous, episodic recollection, it will necessarily recall a frame of other images which allow the intellect to track the same order and connection between things, strengthening the already existing connections between images in the body.

Word count: 747 words (title included)