

# Spinoza's Mind in Modern Affective Neuroscience

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## Abstract

The increasing popularity of affective neuroscience lends itself to more authors utilising Spinoza's dual aspect monism as their philosophical backbone. However, it is important that if Spinoza's work is to be incorporated in this manner, a thorough understanding of his philosophy is maintained, particularly the way that Spinoza relates mind, brain and his understanding of God (universal substance). This perspective piece gives a brief overview of Spinoza's work, mainly from *Ethics*, and discusses how his complex theories may be easily misinterpreted by modern authors.

**Key Words:** Spinoza, dual aspect monism, neuroscience, philosophy, mind, brain

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Understanding the relationship between mind and brain is a fundamental theme within the neuroscience of consciousness fields and in the clinical-philosophical practice that is psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Authors have noted that the traditional split between mind and brain introduced by Descartes (mind-body dualism) has since been highly influential but has likely limited true progress in these fields (Damásio, 1994). Rather, it is now Spinoza, a contemporary of Descartes, whose theories are (re)gaining prominence. However, due to the complexity of Spinoza's writings (particularly in *Ethics*), his theories regarding the mind and brain may be easily misunderstood and therefore formulated incorrectly.

Baruch Spinoza was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher born in 1632 Amsterdam to a self-exiled Jewish family from the Iberian Peninsula. At a Jewish high-school, he studied vigorously with prominent scholars of the time, learning the history of the Hebrews, the Talmud and the Kabbala (two prominent mystic Jewish texts), the

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Old Testament, and the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, which all had a deep influence on his philosophy (Spinoza, 1951). However, Spinoza developed increasingly differing views from the overlying Jewish doctrines, and was eventually expelled from the Jewish community in 1656 aged 23, even though he was yet to publish any formal thesis or piece of work. Contrary to popular belief, Spinoza never lost any belief in God; rather, he came to reformulate his understanding of what God is. Spinoza conceived of God as a 'vast unity of all existence actual and possible', which he also termed Substance. To Spinoza, God is the sum of all existence, is infinite, and operates in total freedom (Spinoza, 1951). His major piece of work, *Ethics*, addresses his evolving views in chapters named 'Concerning God', 'On the Nature and Origin of the Mind', 'The Origin and Nature of Emotions', 'Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions', and 'Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom' (Spinoza, 2023).

Spinoza's relevance to modern neuroscience comes from his perspectives not only on the nature of God, but also on how that nature relates to the human brain and mind, and his parallel interest in the nature of human emotions and how this intersects with the concept of an ethical life. Spinoza's view emphasized that the mind is embedded in nature (and therefore the body) rather than being a separate entity forced to cohabitate inside a brain (e.g. in the pineal gland as per Descartes' view). Spinoza's mind, first and foremost, 'minds the body' and is a 'consciousness of the body' (Ravven, 2003). Thought is therefore also a consciousness of the body, or rather a function of the body becoming conscious, and is similarly affective (emotional and somatic) and contains within it many unconscious representations (images) of the body's various processes (intrinsic, somatic, automatic and memory/emotional) (Ravven, 2003). To Spinoza, an ethical life is created by understanding how these many unconscious processes of the body influence thought, action and behavior, through their associations becoming understood (realized) in conscious thought:

An emotion, which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea thereof (Spinoza, 2023, pp. 240)

Similarly, human freedom, Spinoza argues, comes from learning and discovering these hidden causes or links behind our actions (as they relate to passions, emotions and the body) (Spinoza, 2023).

Since many of Spinoza's theories on emotions marry up nicely with modern neuroscientific findings, it is not surprising that prominent neuroscience scholars interested in affective experience are proponents of this dual aspect monism, including Panksepp, Hobson, Friston, Solms, and, as has been argued, even Freud (Solms & Turnbull, 2011).

However, Spinoza's writings in *Ethics*, particularly the way he relates his concept of God to the human mind and body within the fifth chapter, are commonly misunderstood, debated and dismissed, and lend themselves to be easily misinterpreted if not studied in detail (Spinoza, 1951). For example, Hobson et al. write:

Following Spinoza, we adopt a dual aspect monism as follows: the brain–mind is a unified system with two aspects—an objective brain and a subjective mind. We further commit to the notion that there can be no mind in the absence of brain. This eliminates the dualistic assumption of non-physical causation of mental phenomena. Since both aspects of the brain–mind system are physical, they can be mutually causal. This means that the scientific investigation of the mind is at once the investigation of the brain (Hobson et al., 2021, pp. 13).

Here, Hobson et al. make the statement that the brain-mind is a unified system with two (non-dual) aspects, but then immediately make a contradiction that no mind can exist in the absence of a brain, and that 'both are physical'. This is in direct contradiction to Spinoza's thought, and makes the error of overly reducing the mind to be equivalent or epiphenomenal with the body. This is because in the fifth chapter of *Ethics*, Spinoza explains that part of the mind may actually transcend the physical limitations of the body:

The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains of it something which is eternal (Spinoza, 2023, pp. 253).

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Spinoza goes to great lengths to elaborate that eternity in this sense does not mean an 'indefinite persistence in time', or life after death, because eternity is not comparable to time, and should rather be considered as a mode of thinking (or being). Here, Spinoza introduces three types of knowledge – opinion, rational knowledge, and intuitive knowledge. He views intuitive knowledge as related in part to the infinite mind of God; an understanding (experience) of which is accompanied by feelings of joy and love. This mirrors his relation of brain and mind to intrinsic ethical principles, since this understanding can be 'reflectively transformed into an empathy that extends more widely, finally encompassing the entire natural and social universe', as opposed to purely self-interest through preoccupation with survival and self-determination of automatic and primitive response repositories (Ravven, 2003, pp. 260).

Panksepp and Biven also ground the philosophical aspects of their work in dual aspect monism, but seem to take a less linear and instead a more circular route:

We use these two terms, mind and brain, double capitalized and in both sequences, to highlight that affective neuroscience is

thoroughly monistic, with no remaining dualistic perspectives. The term 'BrainMind' is used more often when we take the bottom-up view, and 'MindBrain' when we take the top down view, both being essential for understanding the 'circular causalities' within the evolutionary strata of the brain (Panksepp, 2012, pp. 7).

Here, Panksepp and Biven appear to represent Spinoza's original formulation more accurately, giving equal precedence to mind and brain, whilst not being overly reductionistic, and not giving precedence to the mind having servitude to the brain. This may best be understood as an emergentist perspective, whereby mental phenomena depend on brain phenomena but are not reducible to such (Cheniaux & Lyra, 2014).

To conclude, the increasing popularity of affective neuroscience lends itself to more authors utilizing Spinoza's non dual monism as their philosophical backbone. However, it is important that if Spinoza's work is to be incorporated in this manner, a thorough understanding of his theory is undertaken, so that concepts such as dual aspect monism and how this relates to mind, brain and Spinoza's account of God (Universal Substance) are not misunderstood. Some neuroscientists may benefit from recognizing when overly materialist and reductionist trends are being utilized, and reflect on the fact that one cannot often have their cake (mind and brain are both equal and opposite forms) and eat it too (mind equals brain).

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