

Spinoza's Theory of Ideas

Maho Eifuku

This book aims to clarify the meaning, historical significance, and scope of “theories of ideas”, the series of accounts on “ideas” by Baruch de Spinoza, a seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher. First, Spinoza’s theory of ideas was influenced by René Descartes to a degree such that it is almost impossible to understand without it. For this reason, I begin by exploring and attempting to grasp the Cartesian theory of ideas, and then seek to elucidate the uniqueness of Spinoza’s. As shown in the subsequent chapters, Spinoza’s account emphasizes the *existence* or *reality* of ideas themselves. At this point, I argue that Spinoza’s theory of ideas is as unique as the philosophical system that underpins this theory, compared with his contemporaries, including Descartes.

The discussion proceeds as follows. Part I explores Descartes’ theory of ideas, focusing on two of its aspects, which he calls “*aequivocatio*”. In Descartes’ philosophy, the role of ideas is interpreted as a lever for transcending from the subjective to the objective realm, which is a general tendency in the reading of *Meditations*. Such interpretations often center on the a posteriori proof of the existence of God in the Third Meditation. As pointed out by commentators, the certainty of the content of the idea of God held by the “thinking I” guarantees the certainty of the existence of God himself as its cause. In this process, we can clearly see a progression from idea to existence. As shown in Chapter 1, the objective reality of ideas plays an explicitly important role in this progression. However, in the same proof, ideas are not only distinguished from the existence of external things and reflect them, but also endowed with a kind of “existence” in themselves. Although not explicitly stated, this holds significant meaning. This overlooked aspect forms the core of my interpretation of Descartes (and simultaneously serves as a necessary premise for understanding Spinoza’s theory of ideas), discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 3 surveys and organizes the positions of their contemporary and eminent philosophers, including Malebranche, Arnauld, and Locke—who developed their theories of ideas under Descartes’ influence—in regard to which one of the two aspects of ideas they emphasized. I then examine Spinoza’s position within the context of these “post-Cartesian” theories of ideas.

Part II of this book investigates how Spinoza inherited and deviated from Descartes’ dual-aspect theory of ideas to develop his own unique theory. The key point here is that, while Spinoza accepted Descartes’ duality of ideas, he emphasized the formal over the objective aspect, contrary to Descartes. In other words, Spinoza explicitly takes the existence of ideas into account. However, overlooking the issue of the existence of ideas also applies to Spinoza’s studies. In Spinoza’s scholarship, when his theory of ideas is thematized, it is always considered in the context of his theory of truth. Briefly, Spinoza’s theory of truth does not adopt the so-called “correspondence theory”, but instead, guarantees truthfulness through the internal marks of true ideas. This epistemological and truth-theoretical aspect undoubtedly constitutes a notable feature of Spinoza’s theory of ideas. Yet, a more fundamental question arises before addressing the truth or falsity of ideas: what, fundamentally, is the *existence* of ideas? For Spinoza, this question is particularly significant because ideas are not necessarily held in the human mind; they exist primarily in God, independent of the human mind. In Spinoza’s framework, being in God also means being in

substance or the world. The primary existence of ideas within God or the world necessitates an ontological investigation of his theory of ideas. Against this backdrop, Part II explores the problem of the existence of ideas in Spinoza. The central question addressed is: what is the ontological status of ideas in Spinoza's system? The answer, in short, is that ideas are "modes of thought"—in other words, they are "singular things (*res singularis*)". While this answer may seem trivial because it seems to be drawn from *Ethics*, what it means for ideas to be modes of thought, and their implications, remains less obvious and unexplored in prior studies. This book seeks to capture precisely Spinoza's claim that ideas are modes of thought and things and their consequences. At this point, we can see how Spinoza deviates from Descartes' dual-aspect framework. Chapter 4 elucidates how the Cartesian dichotomy of "formal" and "objective" aspects is reused in Spinoza's theory of ideas. This reveals their crucial role in the establishment of Spinoza's unique system of parallelism. Next, Chapter 5 examines the nature of this system of parallelism in more detail, demonstrating how the coherence of the entire system is prior to individual human cognition at each specific moment. Consequently, Spinoza's theory of ideas inevitably becomes metaphysical, which constitutes one of its defining features. Chapter 6 focuses on the causal independence within Spinoza's parallelism, as pointed out in the preceding chapter, examining its implications for his theory of ideas. By comparing this with Descartes, based on the discussions in Part I, we will find that Spinoza's significant deviation from Descartes lies in his treatment of ideas as "things" in strict meaning, equivalent to physical objects.

Part III shifts attention from the ontological aspects of Spinoza's theory of ideas discussed in Part II to its epistemological aspects. As revealed in Part II, unlike Descartes, Spinoza emphasized the formal aspect of ideas, making the objective aspect less prominent. On the other hand, in Chapter 4, I show that the objective aspect is significant as something that "opens up the epistemological horizon". What exactly does this mean? In Part III, I examine how individual cognition is realized within the epistemological foundation established at the level of the whole system. Chapter 7 clarifies the ontological status of "ideas of nonexistent entities", exploring how the parallel relationships established in E2p7 and E2p7c are subsequently applied to individual things. Through this inquiry, certain conditions under which ideas and "objective being" are equated are highlighted. However, systematic coherence and its application to individual entities alone cannot explain "false ideas", the most familiar type of ideas for us. Chapter 8 considers how false ideas arise within Spinoza's system of parallelism and how Spinoza believed that true knowledge could be attained. By again comparing this with Descartes, the surprisingly practical nature of Spinoza's epistemology, underpinned by a grand metaphysical system, is brought to light.