A Spinozistic Account
of Self-Deception

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall attempt to demonstrate how Spinoza is able to account for the phenomena of self-deception. Our first step in this investigation is to get a working definition of self-deception, for only once we have that can we judge whether Spinoza’s philosophy is able to provide an account for it. First, we must be careful, in that we cannot simply think of self-deception as a variety of deception in general: because I know what it means for X to deceive Y does not mean that I also know what it means for X to deceive X. Self-deception is significantly different from other-deception.

Second, there is of course an apparent paradox here of which philosophers (and others) have quite often made note: if X is the one deceiving X, doesn’t X know that there is deception taking place, and thus shouldn’t X be able to avoid being ‘taken in’ by this deception? Though this paradox should not be taken lightly, it also should not stop us in our tracks. The fact which is relevant for our concerns is that self-deception does occur — what we want to do here is provide an account, if only a general one, of what is taking place within the mind of the self-deceiver. Once we have examined Spinoza’s own account, we can judge whether he is able to avoid this paradox of what Sartre calls ‘a lie without a liar’.

Sackeim and Gur [10] have provided the most well-known clinical account of the phenomena. They state four requirements which must be fulfilled if we are to claim that self-deception is occurring in a person:

1. The individual holds two contradictory beliefs
2. These beliefs are held simultaneously
3. One belief is not subject to awareness

1. These conclusions were the result of studies involving a Self-Deception Questionnaire (SDQ), which consisted of 20 threatening questions (e.g., “Have you ever wanted to rape or be raped by someone?” and “Have you ever enjoyed your bowel movements?”). Answers were on a Likert scale, with responses of 1 or 2 (“Not at all”=1 and “Very much so”=7) being scored as instances of self-deception.
Our definition, then, will be based on these criteria; self-deception will be characterized as the simultaneous presence of two contradictory beliefs, one of which, due to some motivation, is not subject to awareness.

The factor of motivation (point (4)) will be discussed in the body of this paper; I wish at this point to say one further word concerning the other three points of our definition. Points (1) and (2) seem, when taken together, to require some sort of explanation; how is such an apparent violation of the law of non-contradiction (viz., the simultaneous existence of contradictory beliefs in the mind of the self-deceiver) possible? The explanation is given by point (3) — the reason I can hold both y and not-y at the same time is that I am not aware that I hold one of the two. But we may still want to ask what we mean when we say that ‘X is not aware of held-belief y’? Raphael Demos [6,593] has described this condition as a ‘not noticing’, and Herbert Fingarette [8,39] as a failing to ‘spell out’ one of the contradictory beliefs. Though his analysis has been criticized (and I would agree that it has some problems), I wish to make use of Demos’ characterization of self-deception as a ‘not noticing’. Later in the paper, I will discuss how I think Spinoza’s psychology allows for such a ‘not-noticing’.

The Problem of Belief

Isolated passages of the Ethics may seem to indicate that there are problems with a Spinozistic account of self-deception, given the description of it above. For example, E2p43 says that “He who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth.” This seems to disallow point (3) of the Sackeim and Gur definition
of self-deception, given that the idea which the self-deceiver ‘hides’ from herself agrees with a true state of affairs. If I have the belief that ‘x is the case’, and in fact x is the case, it seems to follow from E2p43 that I could not deceive myself into believing ‘it is the case that not-x’.

There also seems to be a difficulty in accounting for self-deception given Spinoza’s attack on Descartes in E2p49s. In this passage, Spinoza is arguing against the claim that belief is a matter of willing, i.e., that we can ‘decide to believe.’ Spinoza writes:

I [deny] that we have the free power to suspend judgement. For when we say that someone suspends judgement, we are saying only that he sees that he is not adequately perceiving the thing. So suspension of judgement is really a perception, not free will.

If what we believe is not chosen voluntarily, then it would seem that I cannot choose to deceive myself. I may, say, be fooled into believing what is not the case, but this is not a matter of me deceiving myself, but of someone or something deceiving me.

I contend that the attack on the Cartesian ‘will to believe’ only hurts Spinoza’s ability to account for self-deception if we assume that when someone deceives herself, the unawareness on the part of the deceiver is something that is actively willed, for this is what Spinoza is denying we have the ability to do. What he will claim is that the unawareness is the result of the lack of strength of the idea which is ‘not noticed’. Spinoza’s point in E2p49s is that when our judgement is suspended, it is a result of an inadequate understanding of the object/idea, and not because we have willed ourselves to believe or not believe in it. But it is a mistake to suppose that a true idea has its strength (or ‘affective power’) based on its truth, for this Spinoza repeatedly denies. If we say that the truth of an idea is not an active force, or at least not the only active force, in determining whether we believe an idea or not, then we avoid the ‘problem’ which E2p43 posed for finding an adequate account of self-deception in Spinoza.

It seems clear at this point that it will be important to our investigation to determine what Spinoza means by truth and belief in order to see to what degree (if any) each is involved in his ability to account for self-deception. Truth is defined at the very beginning of the Ethics. In E1a6 Spinoza writes:

A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea (ideatum).
He comes back to this axiom in E2p32dem:

All ideas, which are in god, agree completely with the objects of which they are ideas.

The key, it seems, is to understand what Spinoza means by ‘agree’; I follow Bennett in seeing nothing too complex here. In keeping with his parallelism, Spinoza is saying that the idea of object x is a true idea if “every mental item agrees with its systematic physical counterpart, its direct object.” [2,168] Spinoza’s account of truth is thus a version of a correspondence theory.

What is important to note for our investigation of self-deception is Spinoza’s stress on the fact that the truth or falsity of an idea (qua true or false) has nothing to do with the affective power of that idea. He writes at E3p19:

He who imagines that what he loves is being destroyed will feel pain. If, however, he imagines that it is being preserved, he will feel pleasure. (my emphasis)

The point is quite clear: the power an idea has to affect my behavior is a result of what I imagine to be the case, not what happens to be the truth (in a sense of a correspondence between the idea and a given state of affairs.) Spinoza states this most strongly in E4p1:

Nothing positive contained in a false idea can be annulled by the presence of what it true, in so far as it is true.

Again, truth, as truth, has nothing to do with affective power. Following from p1 is the claim made in E4p14:

No emotion can be checked by the true knowledge of good and evil in so far as it is true, but only in so far as it is considered as emotion.

Spinoza is reaffirming his claim as to the impotence of truth with regard to its affective power. Bennett understands the two propositions above to be

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4. The “in so far as it is true” qualifier at the end of this proposition does suggest that there is some force which the truth of an idea has; this, as will be discussed below, involves the ability of true ideas to be integrated with other ideas.
saying “that the truth as such has no corrective power on the mind: when you tell me something surprising, its effect on me depends purely on whether I believe it and not on whether it is true.” [2,286] This seems to me to be accurate. And again we see that the comments Spinoza makes concerning true ideas in E2p43 do not preclude him from holding that self-deception takes place.

But given what Spinoza has said about truth, what is it, we may ask, that the self-deceiver is deceiving herself from? We tend to think of the self-deceiver as someone ‘hiding’ from herself what she (on some level) knows to be true in order to avoid the negative consequences which would result from her facing this truth. I may, for example, not wish to ‘notice’ the true feelings that someone with whom I am deeply in love has in return for me if this knowledge would upset me in some way. To take a somewhat more trivial example, someone may deceive himself into being unaware of the time so as to think that a unpleasant experience is closer to being over than it really is. But these examples involve my being unaware of the truth (either the loved one’s true feelings or the true time). However, we have just seen that the truth of an idea is impotent in regard to having affective power over my believing something or not. Does Spinoza have an answer for this?

I think he does. The key is to understand the self-deceiver not as being unaware of the truth, but as being unaware of what he believes on some other level, and this belief may or may not be true, in the sense of a correspondence of idea and object(s). Belief, not truth, is what is important for self-deception.

Belief for Spinoza is an important and complex concept. One important component of belief is the notion of adequacy. Spinoza gives us a definition of an adequate idea in E2d4:

By an adequate idea I mean an idea which, in so far as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties — that is, intrinsic characteristics — of a true idea.

This seems to define adequate ideas as being self-evident. But as Bennett observes, this definition has little to do with the way Spinoza uses the term in the rest of the Ethics. In E2p24d Spinoza gives us a more useful description when he says that:

The human mind does not involve an adequate knowledge of the component parts of the human body.
Bennett sees the implication of this being that “an idea of mine is inadequate if it is caused from outside my mind.” [2,177] Thus, as he also notes, adequacy is not a property, but a relation. [2,178] This understanding characterizes the notion of adequacy in terms of logical connections; adequate ideas are those that are in an integrated relation with the other ideas which constitute my mind. Adequacy is thus a matter of completeness and the compatibility of an idea within a larger framework.

An adequate idea is, then, one which can be integrated into the functional unity which we call our mind. Spinoza’s example of a winged horse is helpful here. He writes:

[L]et us conceive of a boy imagining a winged horse and having no other perception. Since this imagining involves the existence of a horse, and the boy perceives nothing to annul the existence of the horse, he will regard the horse as present and he will not be able to doubt its existence, although he is not certain of it. (E2p49s)

The point is that if we had no other ideas in our mind with which the idea of a winged horse would conflict, we would necessarily regard the horse as being really existent, i.e., we would believe that it exists. As Bennett says, “the thought (or idea or imagining) of an F will be present in my mind as the belief that there is an F, unless something blocks me from believing that.” [2,163] What would ‘block’ such a belief would be the presence of other ideas in my mind, ideas which preclude the existence of F. As Beavers and Rice say:

[T]here is an extent to which all thoughts, when taken one at a time apart from any other, are true and never erroneous; but when considered in the light of other thoughts, the originals now appear to be inadequate or simply not the case.[1,104]6

5. The mind is not a simple substance for Spinoza, but a complex idea. He says in E2p15: “The idea which constitutes the formal being of the human mind is not simple, but composed of very many parts.” Bennett’s use of the term ‘field’ is helpful here — the mind can be thought of as a psychological field, with the different ideas which make it up occupying different parts of this field.

6. As Beavers and Rice point out, Spinoza makes this same point in the .QP5Tractatus de intellectus emendatione.QP6 when, in a discussion of doubt, he writes: “Were there only one idea in the mind, whether true or false, there would be no doubt, nor certainty either, but only a certain kind of awareness.” (Tr. in [1,100])
This is paralleled on the physical level in E2p13c by Spinoza’s law of inertia:

Hence it follows that a body in motion will continue to move until it is determined to rest by another body, and a body at rest continues to be at rest until it is determined to move by another body.

In a like manner, “a particular idea remains in the mind until a second or stronger idea comes along at[sic] pushes it out of the way.” [1,104-5] For most, if not all of us, there are many stronger ideas in our minds which keep us from believing that a winged horse exists outside my imagination, and we would continue in this belief until we were presented with stronger ideas to the contrary (e.g., seeing such a horse, perhaps on several occasions, or reading biological studies on how such a horse is genetically or evolutionarily possible.)

Belief can then be viewed as a matter of ‘fitting’; X’s belief in y is a matter of how y fits into a particular psychological field, viz., the complex idea which is X’s mind. But this is not all there is to belief. We don’t merely believe the idea which is the most adequate, but the idea which has the most strength, in the sense of having the greatest affective power on my behavior. The adequacy of an idea can contribute its affective power, but as we are passive creatures, there are other things which, through no doing on our part, play a role in making a particular idea more or less powerful. In other words, inadequate ideas have affective power too. So when I say that I believe y, it means that y has affective power for me.

We have seen that for Spinoza, truth qua truth has no affective power. But truth has affective power in so far as it is related to adequacy, and adequacy has, I want to contend, some effect on the strength of an idea. A false idea can never be fully integrated in my mind (as long as there is one other true idea present in it.) But this is not to say that a false idea could not have more affective force than a true one, and it is because of this that Spinoza is able to account for self-deception. False ideas may be able to be integrated with other ideas to a further extent than some true

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7. An important consequence follows from this, especially for our present investigation: there are degrees of fitting, and thus degrees of belief.

8. The distinction Spinoza makes between the affective power of adequate and inadequate ideas is not in terms of their strength, but in terms of the states which arise from them. He writes: “The active states of the mind arise only from adequate ideas, but its passive states depend solely on inadequate ideas.” (E3p3)
ideas, given that those true ideas are not integrated, but are what we may call isolated.\footnote{It is important to mention here something which was suggested in the discussion of the winged horse example. Neither the affective power an idea has for me, nor that idea’s adequacy are determined by me. Rather, in keeping with Spinoza’s strict determinism, they are determined for me. Further, in E2p36 Spinoza makes the claim that inadequate or confused ideas follow in my mind with the same necessity as do adequate or clear and distinct ones. Thus, Spinoza and Freud would agree that self-deception is not something for which we can blame a person. (Demos, on the other hand, because he bases his analysis of lying to oneself on what it means to lie to another, does view the self-deceiver as blameworthy [6,589].) The prescriptive advice which Spinoza would give to the self-deceiver — the rough equivalent of psychoanalysis for the Freudian — will be part of his instructive comments of E4.}

Thus far we have said that belief is a matter of the strength of an idea, and, to a lesser degree, the adequacy of the idea. It was also said that by the strength of an idea, we are referring to its power to affect my behavior. And again, self-deception cannot be explained in the same way as other-deception; it is not a matter of X deceiving X, the way other-deception may be characterized as X deceiving Y. Self-deception must be, in Spinozistic terms, a matter of one idea being more powerful than another, and by powerful, again I understand Spinoza to be saying that the idea has more affective force, in the sense of calling me to action. To answer what it is in an idea which gives it this power, we now turn to the subject of the motivations behind self-deception.

\textbf{‘Noticing’}

We have not yet demonstrated how Spinoza would account for point (3) of Sackeim and Gur’s definition of self-deception. The question is how can we ‘not notice’ an idea which we possess, that is, be unaware of a simple idea which makes up part of the complex idea which is our mind. To answer this, recall what was said above (see note 5) about the mind being a complex idea. While Spinoza does, I believe, have an account of self consciousness,\footnote{I side with Rice [15] and Zac [22,124-8] against Bennett and others in concluding that E2p20-23 can be successfully interpreted as an account of self consciousness.} he does not say that we are, or ever can be, conscious of all our ideas at the same time. Furthermore, of the ideas of which I am at any time conscious, most of them are not known adequately. E2p22 said that the mind perceives changes in the body, as well as the ideas of these changes (though not that we are conscious of all these changes.) P23 adds that this is the only way in which the mind knows itself:
The mind does not know itself except in so far as it perceives ideas of affections of the body.

P24 makes the important addition that the mind’s knowledge of the body is not adequate knowledge. So, as Spinoza says in p28, when it comes to its knowledge of the affections of the body, the human mind does not know clearly and distinctly, but confusedly. Finally, p29 concludes from all this that the knowledge the mind has of itself (which comes via its knowledge of the body) is not adequate knowledge, but is confused. The corollary to this proposition elaborates on this conclusion:

Hence it follows that whenever the human mind perceives things after the common order of nature, it does not have an adequate knowledge of itself, nor of its body, nor of external bodies, but only a confused and fragmentary knowledge. For the mind does not know itself save in so far as it perceives ideas of affections of the body. Now it does not perceive its own body except through ideas of affections of the body, and it is also only through these affections that it perceives external bodies. So in so far as it has these ideas, it has adequate knowledge neither of itself nor of its own body nor of external bodies, but only a fragmentary and confused knowledge. (my emphasis)

The point which is important for the present investigation is that, against Descartes, Spinoza is claiming that it is not possible for me to have a clear and distinct idea of my mind. Not all of my ideas are known to me, and of those that are, many are known only confusedly. It is in this way that he has made room for the possibility of ‘not noticing’ certain of our ideas.

It should be recalled that Spinoza doesn’t allow for suspensions of judgment in the sense of ‘deciding to believe’. He does say, however, that we ‘fluctuate’ between ideas (E3p17,p31). I may have two contradictory ideas, one of which is stronger at one time, the other at another, but, in keeping with E2p49s, this fluctuation has nothing to do with anything I do; rather it is a result of something the environment does to me. And if we recall the discussion of the necessity with which our ideas follow from one another, regardless of their adequacy, we again see how this fluctuation is not something which I do, but in keeping with Spinoza’s determinism, is something which is done to me. And as was said, false ideas can be more powerful than true ones. The fluctuating which occurs is due to the varying strengths of ideas in different regions of my psychological field.
How does this help in an explanation of self-deception? If we investigate the possible motivations for an act of self-deception (point (4) of Sackeim and Gur’s definition), I think an answer will be clear. Freud has said that self-deception comes about according to a basic pleasure/pain principle: we deceive ourselves into being unaware of or not noticing certain things because confronting them would bring us pain or because not confronting them (confronting their contradiction) would bring us pleasure. Spinoza emphasizes the relation between pleasure and our desire for the good in E3p13s:

Again, we see that he who loves necessarily endeavors to have present and to preserve the thing that he loves; on the other hand, he who hates endeavors to remove and destroy the thing that he hates.

To show how such an understanding of the motivation behind self-deception could be accounted for by Spinoza, let us take the example Bennett uses in his discussion of falsity and error. Suppose, he says, that “I hallucinated a tiger, and for a while though I was seeing an actual tiger.” [2,169] Most of us would, after very little time, realize that the presence of a tiger in my study is very difficult, if not impossible, to integrate with the other ideas which are in/make up my mind (e.g., that tigers are not indigenous to Milwaukee, that a tiger could not have opened the locked doors to my apartment, that I am tired, and say, have been drinking (or taking LSD), and thus am more prone to hallucinations, etc.).

But suppose I am a great ‘tiger-phile’, and my one wish in life is to see a live tiger before my (let us suppose impending) death. Could not the idea that there is a tiger in my study be integrated with these ideas, which ‘reside’ in a different part (different than the ideas which preclude the tiger’s existence) of the unity of ideas which I call my mind? And could not the overwhelming desire (in the sense of the pleasure it would bring me) be stronger than the true, yet undesirable, idea that the tiger does not exist? In this part of my field of ideas, the idea that the tiger exists would have greater strength than the idea that the perception of a tiger is a hallucination. This example would seem to fulfill the four requirements which Sackeim and Gur have spelled out for self-deception to occur, especially if we accept Freud’s account of the motivation behind the unawareness.11

But let us look at what is surely a more common occurrence of self-deception. In the case of an unrequited love, I may choose to not notice certain ideas of mine (e.g., that the object of my desire has been avoiding me, that he or she is in love with someone else, etc.) because confronting
them would bring me pain. The more pleasurable ideas (which may, though need not, be true, e.g., the person loved may have shown me some friendly affection in the past) bring me happiness, and may become stronger in that they affect my behavior — I live my life as if this person did love me in return.12

Spinoza himself mentions a very common (perhaps the most common, he would say) example of self-deception. Men, he says, are deceived into thinking that they are free (E2p35s). The reason for this, he says, is that they are ignorant of the causes which determine their action. But the reason for this ignorance may be due to the pain which they feel they would suffer if they confronted themselves with the truth that their actions are determined.13

But it has been argued, correctly I would say, that the pleasure principle does not explain all the reasons for which I may deceive myself. As Fingarette has pointed out [8,67-70], we at times deceive ourselves with regard to ideas which we feel threaten our self-identity (and this, I would agree, cannot always be reduced to a simple avoidance of painful feelings.) For a working definition, then, let us say that the motivations for self-deception are a seeking of pleasure, avoidance of pain, and/or a desire to preserve one’s self-identity. For example, let us say that I have a good friend whom I have admired and respected for many years. Then one day, I learn that others have brought forth evidence that strongly indicates that

11. In their recent study, Starek and Keating [22] have shown a correlation between high levels of self-deception and success in competition. By deceiving themselves as to their abilities, athletes can give themselves a better chance of winning and achieve the pleasure which comes from it.

12. The question may arise as to why we don’t always deceive ourselves. For example, the idea that I will inherit a large sum of money from a distant relative brings me a great deal of pleasure. But this idea doesn’t have any affective power over my behavior — I still continue to teach for a living rather than just sit at home waiting for the check to arrive in the mail. The reason for this has to do with the adequacy of the idea, in that it is overpowered by other, more adequate (better fitting) ideas, most specifically, the improbability of such an event occurring. As Beavers and Rice say, “the issue of belief, and Spinoza’s analysis of it as affective, is thus integrally bound up with his general conception of truth”. [1,101] Some ideas are too inadequate to be believed, regardless of the pleasure they bring me.

13. Spinoza of course would say that this realization would not cause pain, but would result in a certain liberation for them, in that they would then be better able to control their environment. I do not want to say that Spinoza is saying that the ignorance on the part of most of us regarding the true cause of our actions is due to self-deception, only that it is a possible reason.
my friend is a child molester. To believe this would not only shatter my view of my friend, but also would threaten the view I had of myself. Despite perhaps even strong empirical evidence to the contrary, I may continue to believe that my friend is innocent in order not to be forced to drastically alter the ‘picture’ I have of myself. Referring back to E3p13s, the thing loved in this case is the picture (an idea) I have of myself, namely, as someone who would not trust, respect, and admire a child molester, and belief in the evidence brought against my friend will shatter this picture.

Concluding Notes

Spinoza’s psychology puts him in very good position to account for our holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time (points (1) and (2) of the definition of self-deception given by Sackeim and Gur.) As has been said, the mind for Spinoza is not a hard and fixed unity, like the Cartesian ego or Leibnizian prime monad; though possessing some unity, it is a complex idea, and our idea of it is not clear and distinct, but confused. Thus it is clear how, under the Spinozistic conception of the mind, we could hold two contradictory beliefs and only be aware of one of them.

This is further supported by Spinoza’s famous discussion of ‘the worm in the bloodstream’ in a letter to Oldenburg. He writes:

Now let us imagine, if you please, a tiny worm living in the blood, capable of distinguishing by sight the particles of the blood — lymph, etc. — and of intelligently observing how each particle, on colliding with another, either rebounds or communicates some degree of its motion, and so forth. That worm would be living in the blood as we are living in our part of the universe, and it would regard each particle as a whole, not a part, and it would have no idea as to how all the parts are modified by the overall nature of the blood and compelled to mutual adaptation as the overall nature of the blood requires, so as to agree with one another in a definite relation. (Ep. 32)

Though this example is being used by Spinoza in a different context, the implications are important for our present attempt to provide an account of self-deception. This passage indicates that for Spinoza there are parts of our mind which function as individuals in their own right. Thus a part of a mind (i.e., a subset of the complex idea) can serve as a whole when looked at from within, i.e., from a relative perspective.
Point (3) is explained by the discussion of fluctuation; at one time one idea may be stronger, that is, have more affective power, and at another time (though perhaps never), the contradictory of that idea may be stronger. And though I don’t want to over-emphasize the point, Spinoza’s explanation is somewhat similar to Freud’s view of the mind as being composed of parts, only some parts of which are subject to consciousness.\textsuperscript{14} The point is that in order to account for self-deception, one must see the mind as being made up of different parts, some of which are ‘hidden’ from me, for only then can we ‘not notice’ certain ideas. (For Descartes, on the other hand, all ideas are subject to scrutiny — there would be in a sense nowhere for the contradiction of an idea ‘to hide’, or, more accurately for Spinoza, ‘be hidden’.)

Finally, this view of the mind as being composed of different parts also allows Spinoza to avoid Sartre’s criticism of self-deception, viz., that it supposes the existence of a homunculus in the mind who is doing the deceiving (and thus isn’t really self-deception, but ‘homunculus deception’). Spinoza’s account is not a matter of ‘not-mind’ deceiving mind, but of a part of the mind not allowing another part to be noticed.

One could argue that Spinoza is not really describing self-deception, but rather ‘idea-deception’. It has been the claim of this paper that when an idea is not noticed and its contradictory is, it is a result of the latter’s being stronger. Isn’t it then a matter of the idea deceiving me, and not me deceiving me? And it will not do to say that since the idea is in my mind (in the psychological field), it is part of me, and thus when it deceives me, I am deceiving me — ‘the worm in the bloodstream’ example will not allow for this way out. The way to meet the objection is to examine what causes an idea to be strong (and thus believed). As we have said, it is a matter of the affective force of the idea, and of its adequacy. And even though I do not cause these (that is, I do not will an idea to have affective force, nor do I will it to be adequate), they are a result of who the functional unity I call ‘me’ is. For Spinoza then, self-deception is neither a matter of X deceiving X, nor of x (the homunculus) deceiving X, nor of idea I deceiving X, but of I, residing in region A of the complex idea which is X’s mind, being stronger than not-I, which resides in a region other than A.

\textsuperscript{14} Though as Lee Rice has pointed out to me, for Freud the parts are “regions” of the mind, while for Spinoza, they are more accurately described as “temporal functions”.

Bibliography


