

## Exam: IPO2021 Essay

**Word count: 2568**

*“Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions.*

”Letter from Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, May 6/16 1643. – In: The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe), Transl. and ed. by Lisa Shapiro, Chicago University Press 2007, p. 62

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### **Introduction.**

The attempt to answer whether humans rely on reason, empirical evidence or both in order to shape their knowledge has been a long and famous debate among philosophers. The quote above tackles the same discussion by pointing out the close relation which two different beings apparently share: the thinking substance and the bodily spirits. Specifically, it wonders how can it be that an immaterial being such as a thinking substance can push bodily spirits to commit voluntary acts. Of course, we should ask ourselves if in fact this happens like that, for an opposite situation might be the case. If the statement is checked more closely, it will be noticed that its main concern is focused on trying to explain how personal experience can stay true if, at first, reasonable thinking's propositions seem to contradict it.

In this essay, I will tackle those same questions in my own way. I will show that actions are part of the images of the world and, as part of the images of the world, they only make sense through established bonds in the thinking substance. These bonds are the only way for the thinking substance to expand its content and meaning, for the content of our thinking substances could not be sufficiently perceived if they do not form bonds with other objects and/or images of the world. Hence, actions (not being necessarily voluntary in the traditional meaning) are another manifestation of the shape of thinking substances, and this is why and how those two apparently opposite concepts both stay valid. They two must be understood as one in meaning senses.

In order to achieve my goal, I will explain widely why thinking substances need to establish bonds. Then, I will point that some of those bonds are related to external entities which do belong neither to the mind nor the nature of thinking substances. These use images of the world which, nevertheless, are defined by the thinking being. Later, such necessary relation implies that voluntary actions happen for the sake of the existence of the thinking being, which must exist. Finally, it will show that the sensation of actions being voluntary encompasses a misunderstanding of the nature of actions.

For the purposes of this essay and for the sake of clarity, I wish to explain some meanings,

definitions and terms before starting. First, a thinking substance is the immaterial part of the consciousness which rely solely on reason and valid logical arguments to shape knowledge. It does not need external evidence in order to prove valid its conclusions and meditations. Second, an object is every particular element or constituent part of the body of the thinking substance of an individual. Third, an image of the world is that which is not an object. Hence, it will be necessary to assume that there exist only the individual and its surroundings; the soul and the body; the mental and the physical world. A image of the world, therefore, is that which is not part of the thinking substance nor can the thinking substance conceive it independently. A bodily spirit can be understood as the physical part of the sensation of being: the body and its wills. An action is the change of state of a thing (material or not); moving changes the position; speaking changes the sound of the environment; etc.

## 1.

Thinking substances need to establish bonds with other concepts in order to encompass all possible thinking substances. Clearly, this implies that some thinking substances appear in the mind before others. Thinking substances are often assigned a name or a label in order to understand them and keep track of them. Such names and labels are not inherent to each object, but here they will be useful to make this explanation easier.

So, let's assume that a person conceived what a triangle (in euclidian geometry) is, relying solely on her inner meditation and the use of reason. One could say "triangles consist on three lines touching each other at a least one point". Evidently, before describing what a triangle is, it was necessary to know what a point and a line were. If the same person would want to calculate the area of a triangle in a sphere, she would need to know about spheres and areas. However, that would not be enough, for we now know that knowledge about calculus is also required. Let's forget that "we know now", that is, we the people; let's assume instead that it was this person we have been talking about who figured out calculus by her own. She will notice that calculus has nothing to do with triangles and spheres in its nature, but only in its possible applications. This person will need to connect two things which do not have direct relation between them, but which can be adapted at will so that they influence each other.

The purpose of such evidence consists in pointing out that thinking substances which do not establish bonds with other thinking substances are incomplete and void. Only the most basic objects can make sense without the need of other objects. That is because objects do not have essence, nature or definition of its own, but they rely of establish bonds to have a meaning. This must not be interpreted as "objects of the thinking substance must always establish bonds", for not all of them do. Instead, its purpose is to point out that human perception conceives concepts which can only be explained by the means of bonds between objects. Besides, human consciousness need bonds to expand and to be able to conceive more things of its own nature or of the nature of the world. Thus, bonds in the thinking substance shape human consciousness.

## 2.

Likewise, some of these bonds must rely on things external to the individual, things which belong to the world of images. We can have the idea of wine, trees, birds, ice..., but it is not possible to describe them in detail, not because the thinking substance is not able to (it might

be, if it has spent a lot of time figuring out the idea of colors, shapes...), but because there will be absolute uncertainty about the trueness of the proposition. We might say a Fenix is a bird which rises from ashes and it will not be true nor false, since it is a made up proposition. Knowledge, undoubtedly, could be based on coherentism, but coherentism does not prove the trueness of the proposition, only the validity of the system of reasoning. Of course, there are some ideas which do not need to be proved right or wrong, such as one's name, one's favorite ice cream and so on.

However, there are some other ideas which rely on the use of concepts, for example: "fire burns". Saying "fire burns" is not the same as saying "there might be something which can cause me pain if I touch it". Saying "fire burns" means that there is something which we can constantly identify as fire and something we can constantly identify as burning. We could not have the idea of burning solely, though it exists, for we cannot know *what is burning*. Burning and fire are whatever we say burning and fire are. Evidently, labelling is not perfect among humans, nor is it constant. In cold climates, people have a lot of words to explain ice, and in tropical climates, people have a lot of words to name trees and flowers.

This means: the bonds between objects of the thinking substance and the images of world are based on the ground that the thinking substances defines *beforehand* the image of the world, defines what it will understand for that image of the world. This does not mean that the images of the world do not exist unless a thinking substance provide them of a definition, for their existence is an attribute independent to the thinking being. Some colors which are invisible to human eye existed even though we did not know it for a long time. It does mean that the thinking substance cannot make sense of an image of the world until it defines it by the means of its previous bonds. For example: "I am seeing something new. It is orange, it is hot, it is dangerous, it moves a lot, it perishes if water falls on it". It goes without saying that many previous ideas (bonds) are needed to make up this description.

Again, some bonds must rely on external entities, for there are ideas which are part of the thinking substance, but which the thinking substances could not have had conceived by its own. Now, it must be said that these bonds rely on the sum of previous bonds, just as it is the case of non-external bonds (i.e., the ones mentioned above about triangles, spheres and calculus). There is the famous case in which in the past native American people labelled many rocks as "jade", but it was discovered some decades ago that "jade" actually was three different kind of rocks. The point, however, is stating that some scientist decided that jade was three different kind of rocks not because they woke up one morning and decided so, but because of previous bonds (knowledge). Maybe, they relied on the fact that some kind of rocks are more rocky, or more soft, or more light or more heavy. The point here is noticing that our relation with the external world (a point of interest for both this essay and the quote) might often be tricky and confusing.

### 3.

We have showed that thinking substances often need to establish bonds with both objects and images of the world. It also has been shown that the "bonds between objects of the thinking substance and the images of world are based on the ground that the thinking substances defines *beforehand* the image of the world". This could be interpreted also as the image of the world being part of the thinking substance. Besides, the bonds consist not only on ideas, such

as "I need calculus to calculate the area of a rectangle in a sphere", but sensations and actions too. I will focus on actions.

Those three terms "ideas", "sensations" and "actions" are correlated. For example, the making of the idea "fire burns" needed the sensation of burning and the action, probably, of touching the fire. Actions are part of the image of the world and, thus, they are defined by the thinking substance. This means, actions happen because of the needs of the thinking substance. The thinking substance encounters a lot of ideas and sensation in both its internal (objects) and external (images of the world) way of establishing bonds. Actions, thus, are just another kind of bond.

Someone might decide to sit or not, to eat or not, to steal or not. However, in the process of sitting, eating or stealing there are implicit bonds which are the only source which provide the action with meaning and sense. Therefore, firstly, actions have meaning only on the condition of the thinking substance having given it to it before and all actions must have meaning, for otherwise they could not be perceived. For example, when walking on the sidewalk, when cooking, when reading or thinking, many states change, but not necessarily the individual is aware of that. That is: the bond was not established. As curious as it sounds, it is pretty normal that people have different opinions about what counts as an action and not. Some religious people think that there is a non-physical world which influences me and which I can influence. That is, they formed different bonds concerning the nature of their actions.

Secondly, actions are an attribute of awareness. Awareness or consciousness, likewise, can only be provided by the processes of the thinking substance, for it is the medium through which the bonds are established. Then, thirdly, the sense of action can only be obtained by the process of the thinking substance. To put it in another words: right, we think that we act, we are sure that we act. However, acting is only another manifestation of the thinking substance, like the idea of meditating about calculus, labelling rocks or sensing burns.

It is important to clarify that the so-called voluntary actions are not voluntary in the sense making up our minds from nothing, but in the sense that the thinking being organizes its bonds in a non-predetermined way, for neither there are rules on how to do it nor the content to do it is given by nature or birth. It is like putting a lot of different color papers inside a box and shaking the box; the order of the papers can not be predicted nor it is predetermined. Voluntary, thus, means "non-predetermined". So, whether someone decides to sit or not, to eat or not, to steal or not is something which has allowed and brought to a person by the means of the bonds, which are the ones who provide with notions and ideas. Everything that can be known, is known and everything that can be done, is done. The sensation of "I could have eaten, but I decided not to eat" is merely a misunderstanding: in fact, what happens is that this person got two manifestations of its thinking substance about which appears to be the same topic. For example, the manifestation in the form of an action: "I did not eat" and the manifestation in the form of an idea: "I could have eaten".

## **Conclusion.**

In this essay, I have showed that the so-called voluntary actions are only another manifestation of the thinking substance, which consist on ideas, sensations and actions. Actions are born from

the need of the thinking substance to expand all the possible bonds it can make. Likewise, all the characteristics of actions are in fact characteristics of the bonds made up of an object and an image of the world. Actions are just another kind of bond which rose up from the processes of the thinking substances. Thus, the dilemma in the quote can be tackled by noticing that the difference between thinking substance and what the bodily spirit it does (i.e. actions) must be understood in a new way.

This is due to the fact that the thinking substance needs to rely greatly on the forming of bonds. These bonds can be made between an object and another object or an object and an image of the world. The thinking substance needs to define the images of the world in order to be able to use them to establish bonds. Thus, images of the world make sense only within the definition or perception of the thinking substance. That is the same case of actions, for they are of the image of the world. So, we must meditate what happens within us, within the thinking substance and only then meditating about our actions.