

Modality of Thought in Spinoza (and Lewis) – Sophia Hallier (Tübingen)

I argue, with a little help of David Lewis, that Spinoza is a modal realist in respect of thoughts: Spinoza assumes (counter-intuitively) that the mind is a mode and not a substance. Thus, there is no underlying faculty or bearer of potential, but the mind is itself an idea which is again followed by other ideas – thoughts or desires a person has. Spinoza draws a presentist picture of a person's mental life that consists of a constantly changing conglomerate of competing ideas.

Now the question arises: how does this plurality of ideas form one unified and individual mind? For example, why is an architect more prone to think about plans of different houses while a doctor is more likely to think ideas about anatomy? Spinoza distinguishes between existing ideas that are inside a mind and essentially rooted ideas that don't exist. Thus, all thoughts are equal concerning their ontological status – but not all of them exist. At this point David Lewis comes into the picture and proposes that each person holds an individual set of various belief systems. Although these systems do not always have to co-exist in the mind, the respective mind can access them at any time as all ideas are in God essentially. Even though modes in general and hence ideas are not individual, minds become individual through the person's affective and empirical pathway: on the one hand, personal memory is formed by the quantity of experiences and thoughts – the more frequent one is affected, the more likely an associated belief-system reoccurs. On the other hand, the quality of our memory enhances corresponding to the complexity our thoughts and our belief systems.