

## Understanding

### Bibliography

Lipman, M. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1971.

Spinoza, B. *The Ethics*. New York: J. Simon, 1981.

In chapter four, Harry has written a paper on "Thinking". His teacher, Mrs. Halsey provides many comments on the paper but one in particular hits home for Harry; "There's no fact in all the world that's more wonderful than our understanding of that fact." There is much packed into that statement. What is it for us to 'understand'? What exactly is our understanding of? What is the value of our understanding?

Through a series of rambling deductions, Spinoza addresses these questions in the "On Man" section of *The Ethics*. For Spinoza, all things that exist are an extension of God. Each thing manifests a particular attribute of God as it appears in God. That the human mind is a thinking thing, therefore, is proof that God has a thinking nature (among many others) and that his thinking, like his other attributes, is infinite. Now, any thoughts that a human mind may have are at the same time had by God in that He has this infinite capacity for thought. And any thought that the human mind may have is necessarily 'of' something. Any object on which the human mind focuses is an extension of one of God's attributes. So, man perceives God's essence in all things and his perceptions and thoughts are part of God's infinite thinking. Here we see a divine attribute in man's thought; he is an extension of God's nature and part of the infinite understanding.

But man's understanding is indeed only part of the infinite understanding as man himself and his mind are infinite. The comprehension of the whole of the universe is for the infinite mind of God. The relationship between the parts of perception and understanding and the whole of understanding is illustrated rather deftly in Spinoza's analogy concerning the worm in the blood.

In this account it is seen what effect lack of comprehensive perspective has on our understanding. Spinoza's worm views each blood platelet as a whole, what causes the blood to be, and what effects the blood has on other systems in the body. It is the comprehensive picture which provides the meaning. Despite his intimate involvement with the blood, we say the worm understands very little about the blood. The same is true for people. Without knowledge of the cause of things or situations; without consideration of the effects that existing things produce, there is no understanding.

The Philosophy for Children program emphasizes this comprehensive view of understanding. Our knowledge, our facts do not stand alone and isolated, but exist in a great inter-connected framework. Our thoughts and actions are not capsules but links in a chain. True understanding is not of a single idea but involves consideration of the causal conditions which produce it and of the possible consequences entailed by it. The development of part-whole reasoning skills serves as a tool for the integration of all that we perceive. Only through the examination of the connections which support each fact can we draw meaning from the composite.