Wisdom and Beatitude in Spinoza and Qoheleth

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Introduction

The beatific person, the *beata*, Alexander Douglas wants to tell us, has in some important sense transcended particularity:

> Identifying with the superdeterminate being of God, she identifies with all perspectives equally—the one she inhabits no more than the ones that seem most alien to her. (2024, 122)

Instead of clinging to but one limited perspective, to *her* experience—*her* pain, *her* joy, *her* agita, *her* amour propre—she inhabits a world of different points of view. She has succeeded in becoming, in the words of Saint Paul, "all things to all men," though likely not the way in which Paul meant it (1 Corinthians 9:22). This comes as the result of seeing things from a God's eye point of view. For Spinoza's God, on Douglas's telling, is *superdeterminate*. On this telling, he "has *every possible* determinate nature" (66). Further:

> God doesn't cognise the world from one privileged standpoint, but nor does he grasp it only in some centreless, Neutrally Objective 'view from nowhere.' Rather, he cognises it from *every perspective*, though the resulting understanding is irredeemably incoherent in certain ways. (116)

Beatitude, then, involves nothing less than an *imitatio dei*:

> [Beatitude] involves escaping attachment to any idea of self. But the escape is into an identification with, or emulation of, God's superdeterminacy. The beatific person will therefore make no meaningful distinction between *her* perspective and the perspectives of others. (118)

Beatitude also reflects wisdom. Douglas reads EVp42s, which speaks of how the wise person "obtains true acquiescence of the soul always" (in Douglas's translation), to mean that this Spinozist sage recognizes their relation to God and all of nature—recognizing that "you, an expression of God, also have a superdeterminate being" (74). This wisdom, then, is the cognizance of the true order of things, of—as Spinoza puts it in the *Treatise*

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on the Emendation of the Intellect—"the union with all Nature which the mind has" (G II 8 27–28).[1]

I might register points of disagreement with Douglas. I might, for example, ask questions about what "identifying" with a superdeterminate nature means for identity conditions as Spinoza might conceive of them. He tells us that what constitutes the being of a human mind is just an idea with a particular body (or maybe bodily nature) as its representational content (see EIIp11–13). If this is so, what does it mean for us to identify with a nature that is, in Douglas's sense, superdeterminate? How can *I* in some sense endure past death with this identification with a particular body gone?

But there's too much beauty in Douglas's interpretation for me to feel totally righteous in pressing at it this way. What I want to do instead is explore two interconnected themes that arise, maybe implicitly, in the course of Douglas's book. The first of these is the nature of this "wisdom" that the wise person has. It is, on my reading, causal knowledge. Once we have this in sight somewhat, I'll move on to the next theme, which is yet another way in which Spinoza might be seen as setting himself in gentle, solid, and ingenious opposition to Scripture—specifically, Ecclesiastes.

Wisdom and Causal Knowledge

The wise man, the *sapiens*, is a recurring character in *Ethics*.[2] Maybe his most prominent scene comes at the very end of the work, EVp42s, where he is contrasted with the *ignarus*, the ignorant man. The *ignarus* is tossed about by lust [*libidine*] and external causes, and never finds the soul's true rest. He lives as if unaware [*quasi inscius*] of himself, of things, and of God. As soon as [*simulac*] he is no longer acted upon, he ceases to be.[3] His *esse* is, in a real sense, to be passive.

The *sapiens* is the mirror image of the *ignarus*. He is active and conscious—of his place in nature, of God, of himself, and of things. He is more powerful and capable of more things than the *ignarus*. In a word, he is more *active*. He has achieved *animi acquiescentia*, repose of the soul.

[1] I quote from the text in Gebhardt's edition (Spinoza 1925), by volume, page, and line numbers. All English passages from Spinoza's works that do not appear in quotations from other volumes are my own translation.

[2] My rather archaic use of "the wise man" and associated masculine relative pronouns rather than "the wise person" to refer generically to the wise human being should not be taken to have any connotation beyond wanting to stay close to the Latin, in which "*sapiens*" is a masculine substantive. Everything I say holds equally well of persons of any gender, human or otherwise.

[3] Here I will register some small disagreement with Douglas's translation of the passage which reads, in Latin, "*& simulac pati desinit, simul etiam esse desinit*" (G II 308 19–20). Douglas's translation is "And the more he ceases to be acted on, the more he ceases to be" (2024, 74). But "*simulac*" is not comparable, so I believe this passage would be better rendered as: "And as soon as he ceases to be acted upon, at the same time he also ceases to be."

This has resonances with Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. In the proemial part of this work, Spinoza speaks of the work of acquiring "some human nature more firm than his own" (G II 8 19–20). The highest good is for this nature to be enjoyed [*fruatur*] by him and by others if possible (G II 8 19–20). What is this nature? Spinoza says that is "cognition of the union which the mind has with all Nature" (G II 8 26–27). This, it seems extremely natural to conclude, is the "height of wisdom [*sapientiae culmen*]" he speaks of a few pages later (G II 14 7).

The *sapiens*, then, is the person who understands his place in the cosmos. Put into the metaphysical language of *Ethics*, he understands himself as but a mode of God, at once thinking and extended, which follows from the divine attributes. This wisdom dovetails with beatitude, because the latter requires, in a strong sense, correct cognition of one's place in the causal order of creation. Let me spell out how this is so.

Beatitude, Spinoza tells us in the preface to *Ethics* V, is freedom of mind [*Mentis Libertas*] (G II 277 11). This beatitude appears to be a scalar concept: It increases when our minds take on certain qualities. In particular, it increases when we are more conscious of ourselves and of God. He writes, in EVp31s:

> Therefore, the more anyone is rich in [*pollet*] [the third kind of cognition], the better he is conscious of himself and of God, that is, he is more perfect and more blessed. (G II 300 1–3)

So the more of the third kind of cognition we have, the more blessed we become. The third kind of cognition, *scientia intuitiva*, "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to adequate cognition of essences of things (EIIp40s2 / G II 122 17–19). This adequate cognition of the essences of things must involve the cognition of God as cause of those things. This is because, as EIp15 says, all things are in God and cannot be or be conceived without him.

My reading here, then, is that this cognition of the third kind consists precisely in having adequate knowledge of the causes of things—specifically, of our affects. This is supported by EIa4: the cognition of an effect both involves and depends on the cognition of its cause. It's also bolstered by other portions of the text. In the scholium to EVp20, Spinoza gives a sort of recap of part V so far. He writes:

> And with this I have reckoned all remedies of the affects, *or* all that which the mind, considered in itself alone, is able to do against the affects [*adversus affectus potest*], from which it is clear that the mind's power over the affects consists:
>
> (1) In cognition of the affects themselves (see p4s)

(2) In this, that it separates an affection from cognition of an external cause, which we imagine confusedly (see p2 and p4s)

(3) In the time where the affections which are referred to things we understand overcome those which are referred to things which we conceive confusedly, *or* in a mutilated way (see p7)

(4) In the multitude of causes from which affections which are referred either to the common properties of things or to God are assisted (see p9 and p11)

(5) Finally, in the order which the mind is able to order its affects and connect them with each other (see p10s and in addition p12, 13, and 14)

It's this last entry that I'm concerned with here. What is this order and connection that the mind capable of giving to its affects? The obvious answer seems to be that if is the order and connection of nature, or rather Nature, writ large. It is their connection to God. Spinoza references EVp14, which reads:

> The mind is able to bring it about that all affections of the body *or* images of things are referred to the idea of God.

So one segment of this order and connection, the one which the *sapiens* possesses, connects this particular affection of his body to God as its ultimate cause. But, of course, this causal connection is mediated through infinite and finite modes. Here's what Spinoza writes in EVp6 and its demonstration:

> *P6. Insofar as the mind understands all things as necessary, so far it has more power over an affect,* or *the less it endures from the same.*
>
> Dem: The mind understands all things to be necessary (by EIp29), and to be determined to exist and operate by an infinite nexus of causes (by EIp28); hence (by the preceding proposition) to that extent it brings it about [*efficit*] that it endures less from affects which are originated [*oriuntur*] from the same, and (by EIIIp48) is less affected towards those affects [*ipsas*].

Here's what I think we should take away from this proposition and its demonstration. First, a key part of the cognitive therapy of beatitude (so to speak) is the recognition of the necessity of things. God could not have been otherwise, and since he is the cause of everything in the world, both with respect to its essence and with respect to its existence, neither could anything else.

Second, the kind of reordering that Spinoza recommends above is done only once we actually achieve the cognition that all of our affects are en-

meshed in an "infinite nexus of causes." Once, and only once, we achieve this kind of knowledge can we bring about this reordering. Thus it is that whoever "devotes himself [*studet*] to moderate his affects and appetites from love of freedom alone will strive [*nitetur*] to know the virtues *and their causes* [emphasis mine]" (EVp10s / G II 289 5–7).

A particular picture of the *sapiens* now emerges. Having rid himself of the illusion that he is a free and undetermined cause, he is able better to understand the way in which he is united to God and nature. He understands the virtues and their causes, and is in a position to begin—or continue—to engage in the cognitive therapy of beatitude. The *sapiens*, in other words, can be considered a stepping stone to becoming the *beata*. In becoming her, he will not lose wisdom, but merely reach, as the *Treatise* has it, the height of wisdom. There are echoes of this (though I don't claim they're decisive) in chapter 1 the *Theological-Political Treatise*, in a discussion of Christ:

> And also in this sense we are able to say God's wisdom, that is, wisdom which is above human [wisdom], to have assumed human nature in Christ, and Christ to have been a way to salvation. (G III 21 9–12)[4]

Spinoza *contra* Qoheleth

Spinoza is well known for reappropriating or reinterpreting parts of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for his own ends. Here, I'll contend, there's a fruitful way of reading his final contrast between the *sapiens* and the *ignarus* as a challenge to the picture of wisdom set forth in Ecclesiastes.

Why choose this as a touchstone? Well for one thing, Spinoza explicitly invites this comparison. He writes, in EIVp17s, the following, immediately after quoting Ecclesiastes 1:18:

> But I do not say this so that I will conclude thence, in the end,[5] [it] to be more excellent to be ignorant than to know, or that in respect of moderating the affects nothing would lie between [*nihil intersit*] the fool and the understanding one [*intelligens*]; but because, for that reason, it is necessary to know both the power and the impotency of our nature in order to determine what we may be able to do, what reason reason may and may not be able to do, in respect of moderating the affects. (G II 221 18–24)

[4] I think Clare Carlisle (2021, 222–223n48) makes a plausible choice in translating "a way to salvation" with an indefinite rather than a definite article, so I adopt her reading here. Carlisle (2021, 109–111) notes other places in Spinoza's work where he explicitly links Christ, as an embodiment of divine wisdom, to beatitude.

[5] The Latin here is *Atque haec non eum in finem dico, ut inde concludam*. The "*non eum*" presents some difficulties (for me anyway), so I have chosen the best way I could see to give the sense of the sentence in good English.

So in keeping with the theme we saw in the last section, Spinoza is drawing a sharp distinction between the fool and the wise person in respect of their power of restraining the affects. The language is slightly different: here he uses "*stulto*" and "*intelligens*" rather than "*ignarus*" and "*sapiens*." But the conceptual relation between these two seems the same in both cases; they're being contrasted because of the power of their mind over the affects.

How does this compare with what Ecclesiastes says about the benefits of wisdom over foolishness? Here's a sample (I quote from the translation in Seow 2008):

> But when I set my heart to know wisdom and knowledge of prudence, I knew that even this is a pursuit of wind, for, in the abundance of wisdom is much vexation; when one increases knowledge one increases pain. (1:17–18)

> I turned to observe wisdom and irrationality and folly, for who is the person who will come after me? Shall he control what has already been achieved? I have observed that wisdom has advantage over folly, as light has advantage over darkness: the wise have their eyes in their heads, but fools walk in darkness. But I also know that one fate befalls them all. So I said in my heart: "If the fate of the fool befalls even me, why then have I been acting excessively wise?" I said in my heart that this, too, is vanity, for there is no remembrance of the wise forever—as is the case with the fool—because all too soon everything is forgotten. O how the wise dies just like the fool! (2:12–16)

One rabbinical commentary (by Samuel ben Meir, also known as Rashbam, a medieval French rabbi) suggests that on one interpretation, the wisdom in this passage "is the common wisdom which the world needs and which is not profound" (Meir 1985, 108). But on another, "the meaning of the word is profound and superior wisdom" (108). That notwithstanding, the same fate comes to *sapiens* (the Hebrew word used in verse 14 is חָכָם, *khakhám*) and *ignarus* (in Hebrew, כְּסִיל, *ksil*) all the same: "Nevertheless one is the same as the other, for they both die alike" (Meir 1985, 108). A modern commentary by C. L. Seow emphasizes the same theme:

> On the one hand, it is true that the wise do have advantage over fools, even dramatic advantage (like light over darkness!). On the other hand, the reality is that death sets a limit to the advantage. The wise have no advantage over fools as far as death is concerned. (2008, 135)

It's worth noting that, when uptaken into the early Christian commentary tradition, the rough edges of this passage were sometimes sanded

down. We find Saint Jerome, for example, writing the following in his commentary:

> For the wise and the foolish [*insipiens*] will not be similarly remembered in the future, when the conclusion [*consummatio*] of the universe comes. And by no means will an equal result be had [by the two], since the one will go on to consolation [*refrigeria*], the other to punishment [*poenam*]. (Jerome 1959, 1.1:269; translation my own)

And if anything, this view better reflects that of Spinoza than that of the author of Ecclesiastes (traditionally called Qoheleth). For the latter, both the fool and the wise man end up in the grave. Wisdom makes not a whit of difference to one's ultimate fate. For the former, as for Jerome, it literally makes *all* the difference (though differently, since Spinoza arguably isn't concerned with damnation). The wiser we become, and correspondingly the more blessed we become, the more "what perishes with the body" is "of no moment with respect to that which remains" (EVp38s / G II 304 28–30).

The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* begins with a brief, ostensibly autobiographical interlude where Spinoza explains how he came by his method of perfecting the intellect. After rehearsing the emptiness of wealth, honor, and sensuality, he hits on the thing that will fulfill him: "Love towards the eternal and infinite thing alone feeds the soul with joy" (G II 7 24–25).[6] While Qoheleth[7] admonishes that the "end of the matter" is to "fear God, and keep his commandments," (12:13), Spinoza concludes, both in *Ethics* and in the *Treatise*, that it is rather beatitude—which is, as *Ethics* V repeats over and over, the intellectual love of God. The road toward beatitude, in turn, is paved with wisdom: with the proper cognition of the causal order in which we find ourselves caught, and with the tools to eke out as much freedom as we can. The *sapiens*, as Douglas reminds us, "is conscious 'of God, of himself, and of things by some eternal necessity'" (2024, 74).

And, Douglas is right to point out (throughout chapter 6 of his book and elsewhere), this is supposed to make a difference here and now. Yet again, this reflects the advice of Qoheleth, but in a different key. For him, "there is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (2:24). But for Spinoza, this is not so. What can be achieved is "a possible escape from . . . attachment to a narrow self and the permanent risk of conflict with others" (Douglas 2024, 128). Where Qoheleth has his feet firmly on the ground, Spinoza's vision asks us to look beyond these narrow pleasures to an eternal hope.

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[6] For an exposition of this portion of the *Treatise* see Carlisle 2021, 26ff.
[7] Or possibly a later interpolation. For details see Seow 2008, 391ff.

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