

Spinoza and Some of his Medieval Philosophers on the *Summum Bonum*

Benedict Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*) is a youthful work with the typical virtues and flaws one could expect from such a piece.¹ Though the main focus of the treatise is on issues of philosophical methodology, the work opens with strong existentialist undertones:

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good (*verum bonum*), capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected — whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.²

The theme of the vanity of most human endeavours was not meant only to clear the ground from the commonly perceived opinions about how one should lead one's life, but also to begin charting Spinoza's answer to this substantial question.

Following the opening paragraph of the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Spinoza moves swiftly to disqualify the three aims people commonly conceive as the highest good:

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- 1 Spinoza never completed the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, and it first appeared as part of his *Opera Posthuma* in 1677. Unless otherwise marked, all quotes of Spinoza's works are from Spinoza, *The Collected Works*, ed. and trans. by Curley. For the original Latin and Dutch texts I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition (Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. by Gebhardt). I cite the original texts according to the volume, page, and line numbers of this edition (for example, III. 17. 5). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: TdIE – Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*), TTP – Theological-Political Treatise (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*), TP – Political Treatise (*Tractatus Politicus*), CM – Metaphysical Thoughts (*Cogitata Metaphysica*), KV – Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being (*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*), Ep. – Letters. Passages in the Ethics (E) will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(xiom), c(orollary), p(roposition), s(cholium) and app(endix); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or 'demonstration' (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1.
 - 2 Spinoza, TdIE, § 1.

Most things which present themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men think to be the highest good (*summum bonum aestimantur*), may be reduced to these three: wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure. The mind is so distracted by these three that it cannot give the slightest thought to any other good.³

Brushing away sensual pleasure insofar as it is frequently ‘followed by the greatest sadness’, and since it ‘thoroughly confuses and dulls the mind’,⁴ Spinoza points out two general considerations that rule out all three common perceptions of the highest good. First, he argues that wealth, honour, and sensual pleasure frequently lead people to their own demise. Second, Spinoza points out, wealth, honour, and sensual pleasure are not permanent and their fluctuations are, to a large degree, not in our control; thus the love of these objects as the ultimate good makes us strongly dependent on things unstable.⁵ Unlike these three, ‘love toward the eternal and infinite thing feeds the mind with a joy entirely exempt from sadness’, and to that extent, it ‘is greatly to be desired, and to be sought with all our strength.’⁶ But what is this ‘eternal and infinite thing’ whose love should feed our mind? Leaving this question hanging for a brief while, Spinoza begins to expound his view of the *summum bonum*. He first notes that ‘good and bad are said of things only in a certain respect (*non, nisi respective, dicantur*), so that one and the same thing can be called both good and bad according to different respects.’⁷ Then, Spinoza observes that due to ‘human weakness’ (*humana imbecillitas*) we do not grasp the necessary and eternal order of things, and ‘meanwhile man conceives a human nature much stronger and more enduring than his own, and at the same time sees that nothing prevents his acquiring such a nature.’⁸ At this point Spinoza turns to provide his definition of the highest good in terms of this desired and improved human nature.

Whatever can be a means to his attaining it is called a true good (*verum bonum*); but the highest good (*summum bonum*) is to arrive — together with other individuals if possible — at the enjoyment of such a nature. What that nature is we shall show in its proper place: that it is the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature (*cognitionem unionis, quam mens cum tota Natura habet*).⁹

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- 3 Spinoza, TdIE, § 3. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that pleasure is what the vulgar consider as the highest good, while honour is the highest good of the political life. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Ross, rev. by Urmsen, II, 1095b16–23; unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from this edition. Aristotle quickly disqualifies wealth from being the highest good insofar as it is merely a means for something else (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a8). Wolfson stresses the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the opening of the TdIE (Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, p. 236). Cf. Manzini, *Spinoza: Une Lecture d’Aristote*, pp. 56–57.
- 4 Spinoza, TdIE, § 4.
- 5 Spinoza, TdIE, §§ 8–9.
- 6 Spinoza, TdIE, § 10.
- 7 Spinoza, TdIE, § 12.
- 8 Spinoza, TdIE, § 13.
- 9 Spinoza, TdIE, § 13; italics added.

Spinoza's view of the highest good has a certain social dimension: it recommends, though does not strictly require, the enhancement of other individuals. More importantly, the passage above makes clear that the highest good is the acquisition of certain *knowledge*. What knowledge is precisely at stake, Spinoza seems to deliberately conceal, as he glosses in a note: 'These things will be explained more fully in their place.'¹⁰

Some elements in Spinoza's conception of the highest good will change over his philosophical career — the concept of love (*amor*) which we find in the *Ethics* is different from that of the early works,¹¹ and the notion of the *union* of the mind with 'the whole of Nature', or God, which we find in the early works will be replaced in the *Ethics* by the view of the mind and its object as 'one and the same thing'.¹² Notwithstanding these interesting alterations, the core of Spinoza's account of the *summum bonum* will remain the same: *man's highest good is the knowledge (and love) of God*.¹³

Spinoza's repeated announcement that humanity's highest good is the knowledge of God undoubtedly struck many of Spinoza's contemporaries as disingenuous, as they considered Spinoza a genuine atheist.¹⁴ This perception is deeply erroneous, but I will not argue for this conclusion here.¹⁵ Instead, my aim in the current study is to examine Spinoza's account of the highest good against the background of medieval Jewish Aristotelianism.¹⁶ Spinoza's extensive employment of the Aristotelian notion of the *summum bonum* is not trivial since some of his contemporaries dispensed with this notion as part of their rejection of Aristotelianism.¹⁷ Spinoza himself had hardly any sympathy for Aristotle and his followers,¹⁸ yet he expressed no hesitation about employing this key Aristotelian notion.

10 Spinoza, TdIE, § 13, note c.

11 Compare the definition of love (definition 6) in the Definition of the Affects section following Part 3 of the *Ethics*, with KV II. 5 (I. 63, 16–31). The essential feature of love in the KV is the union (or the desire for union) with an adored object (cf. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, § 79, in Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Adam and Tannery, XI, 387). In the *Ethics*, Spinoza rejects this understanding of love, claiming that the desire for union with an object is merely a *proprium*, but not the essence, of love.

12 See E2p7s.

13 See, for example, CM I. 6 (I. 247, 31), TTP Ch. 4 (III. 60), E4p28d, E4app4, E5p20d, Ep. 21 (IV. 127, 34), and Ep. 43 (IV. 220, 31–221, 21).

14 See Ep. 30 (IV. 166, 25) and Ep. 42 (IV. 218, 18, 35).

15 The reader is invited to consider why Spinoza would invest so much effort in proving that humans' highest good is the knowledge of God, or, if we use Spinoza's own words: 'Who can be so intellectually skillful and cunning that he can give, insincerely, so many and such strong arguments for a thing he regards as false? Who, I say, will he afterward think has written sincerely if he thinks fictions can be as solidly demonstrated as truths?' (Ep. 43, IV. 220, 22–26).

16 For an overview of Spinoza's relation to Aristotle, see Manzini's panoramic study, *Spinoza: Une Lecture d'Aristote*.

17 Thus, Hobbes writes: 'There is no such *Finis ultimus* nor *Summum Bonum* as is spoken of in the old books of the old moral philosophers [...]. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another' (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Curley, I. II. 1).

18 See, for example, TTP, Pref. (III. 9) and Ch. 13 (III. 168).

In the current work I will rely on two outstanding studies. The one, by Warren Zev Harvey, draws a portrait of Spinoza as Maimonidean, stressing the continuity between Maimonides and Spinoza on the issue of morality and the highest good.¹⁹ The other is the magisterial study by Steven Harvey of the reception of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in medieval Jewish philosophy, from its being the subject of almost complete indifference in the period before Maimonides and until it became ‘the best known and most cited work of Aristotle’ in sixteenth-century Jewish philosophy.²⁰

In the first part of this essay I will discuss some main junctions in the medieval Jewish reception of the notion of the highest good. This discussion will be cursory and will mostly focus on matters that will help us approach Spinoza’s views on the issue, views which will be examined closely in the second part of the essay.

Aristotle’s Highest Good in Medieval Jewish Philosophy

The opening lines of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* read:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities.²¹

If all actions aim at some good, we may wonder how the various goods at which our actions aim are interrelated. Aristotle takes a strong position on these issues. He thinks that there is an objective *telic* order of the goods, so that one good is pursued for the sake of a higher good.²² This telic order, however, must end somewhere since otherwise our desires would be ‘empty and vain’, that is, we would never have an ultimate justification for our actions, and instead we would be just trading one desire for the sake of another.

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good.²³

19 Harvey, ‘A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean’, p. 161.

20 Harvey, ‘The Influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Medieval Jewish Thought’, p. 136.

21 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a16.

22 On the *objectivity of the telic order*, see Reeve, ‘Beginning and Ending with *Eudaimonia*’, pp. 17–18.

23 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a18–22. Notice that Hobbes rejects the Aristotelian *summum bonum* by disqualifying Aristotle’s argument that telic orders of goods cannot progress infinitely. See n. 17 above.

From the preceding argument we may conclude that there must be some goods which are not sought for the sake of something else. But Aristotle aims at an even stronger conclusion, that there is *one supreme good* towards which *all* human actions aim, and which serves as the apex at which all the hierarchies of justifications of our actions converge. Whether Aristotle succeeds in proving, or merely assumes, that there is such a unique highest good is an important question which, nevertheless, does not concern us here.²⁴ Aristotle points out two key features of the *summum bonum*: completeness, that is, it is a good that is desired by virtue of itself and not for the sake of another good,²⁵ and self-sufficiency, that is, ‘that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing.’²⁶ Having presented the second key feature of the *summum bonum*, Aristotle immediately continues:

and such we think happiness (*eudaimonia*) to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others [...]. Happiness, then, is something complete and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.²⁷

Claiming that happiness is man’s highest good may strike the reader as a shallow and uninformative platitude, as people have very different conceptions of happiness.²⁸ However, Aristotle thinks we have a fair procedure for arbitrating between various conceptions of *eudaimonia*, by pointing out the characteristic activity, or function (*ergon*), of human beings.²⁹ Neither life nor perception are activities peculiar to human beings. The activity that is typical of human beings is *rational* life. Thus, Aristotle argues:

If the function (*ergon*) of a good man to be the good and noble performance of [the rational activities of the soul], and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence.³⁰

Rational life is thus the ultimate human good, but Aristotle thinks he can point out some further specification of humanity’s highest good. We reason both in practical and theoretical, or contemplative, matters. Aristotle thinks that the contemplative activity of the intellect is superior to practical wisdom since it is much more self-sufficient, it is not sought for the sake of anything else,³¹ and because the objects of the intellect are the most knowable objects.³² He thus concludes:

24 See Reeve’s most helpful discussion, ‘Beginning and Ending with *Eudaimonia*’, pp. 19–22.

25 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a30–35.

26 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b15–16.

27 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b16–21.

28 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a20–25.

29 Cf. Kraut, ‘Aristotle’s Ethics’, § 2.

30 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a13–17.

31 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b15–26.

32 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a21.

That which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.³³

Following this conclusion Aristotle points out a few other considerations supporting the superiority of contemplative over practical reason. One of these considerations attempts to spell out the nature of the happiness enjoyed by the gods, the beings which 'are above all other beings blessed and happy'.³⁴ Here again, the *eudaimonia* of the gods is grounded in their typical *ergon*. But what is the gods' typical activity? It is unbecoming for the gods, claims Aristotle, to engage in politics. In fact, all rational activities, apart from one, are unworthy of the gods. But what is the one rational activity which is befitting of the gods?

Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? Therefore, the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.³⁵

Contemplation is thus the *eudaimonia* of both men and the gods, though obviously men, unlike the gods, cannot always stay in this blessed state.³⁶

Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* exerted a decisive influence on the development of medieval moral and political philosophy.³⁷ In his early period Maimonides did not seem to have direct access to the *Nicomachean Ethics*; instead he relied on Alfarabi's rendering of Aristotle's claims.³⁸ According to Steven Harvey, Maimonides gained access to a translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* probably in the 1160s. In *The Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides already cites word for word from the Arabic translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁹

In the *Guide*, Maimonides repeatedly claims that man's true happiness (Arabic: *sa'adah*, Hebrew: *hašlaha*) and ultimate end is the knowledge of God.⁴⁰ Thus, in the eighth chapter of the third part of the *Guide*, Maimonides writes:

Man should take as his end that which is the end of man qua man: namely, solely the mental representation of the intelligibles (*ha-muskalot*), the most certain and the noblest of which is being the apprehension, in as far as this is

33 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178a5–8.

34 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b9.

35 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b20–23.

36 For a very helpful discussion of the connection between the above passages from *Nicomachean Ethics* X and Aristotle's discussion of God's intellect in *Metaphysics* Λ. 7–9 and *De Anima* III. 5, see Burnyeat, *Aristotle's Divine Intellect*, pp. 42–43.

37 For the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Alfarabi, see Germann, 'Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Society and Religion', § 1. On the reception of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the medieval Latin West, see Bejczy, *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages*.

38 See Davidson, 'Maimonides' *Shemona Peraqim* and Alfarabi's *Fusul al-Madani*'.

39 Harvey, 'The Influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Medieval Jewish Thought', p. 128.

40 See, for example, Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 23, trans. by Pines, p. 492, and III. 28, trans. by Pines, pp. 512–13.

possible, of the deity, of the angels, and of His other works. These individuals⁴¹ are those who are permanently with God. They are those to whom it has been said: *You are gods, and all of your children of the Most High* (Psalm 82. 6). This is what is required of man; I mean to say this is his end.⁴²

In the concluding chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides addresses, in an ascending order, the four species of human perfection, the last of which is the most noble and proper to man alone:

The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues (*ha-ma'alot ha-sikhliot*) — I refer to the conceptions of the intelligibles which teach true opinion (*deot amitiot*) concerning the divine things (*elohiyot*).⁴³ This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance (*qaymut ha-nizhi*); through it man is man.⁴⁴

In justifying the hierarchy among the four species of human perfection Maimonides employs considerations very similar to those used by Aristotle. The second perfection, the perfection of the human body, 'does not belong to man qua man, but qua animal'.⁴⁵ The third species, the perfection of moral virtues, is the aim of most biblical commandments. Still, claims Maimonides, moral perfection too is not an end in itself, but rather a perfection serving an even higher aim. Moral virtue requires the presence of other human beings towards whom one could and should behave morally. Therefore, claims Maimonides, morality does not pertain to man qua man, without dependence on anything else.⁴⁶ It is only the *rational* perfection that pertains to man qua man and is self-sufficient.

Aristotle's view of speculation as humanity's highest good and the locus where man can partake in the activity of the divine was clearly attractive to the medieval philosophers of the three Abrahamic religions.⁴⁷ For Maimonides, the Aristotelian notion was even more attractive for another crucial reason. We have seen that through the notion of the highest good Aristotle is able to identify human happiness (*eudaimonia*) with virtue, that is, excellence in man's typical *ergon*. The strict identification of virtue and happiness provides for Maimonides a readymade, elegant, and naturalistic solution to the problems of Providence and divine justice. Addressing the sorrows of Job, Maimonides writes:

41 Namely, the individuals who strive solely to apprehend God and the other intelligibles.

42 Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 8, trans. by Pines, pp. 432–33. My discussion here is indebted to Harvey, 'A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean', p. 161.

43 Or rather, 'metaphysical things'. See Maimonides, *Guide*, trans. by Schwarz, p. 673.

44 Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 54, trans. by Pines, p. 635.

45 Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 54, trans. by Pines, p. 635.

46 'For if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded', Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 54, trans. by Pines, p. 635.

47 Indeed, Maimonides begins the *Guide* by arguing that it is just the intellect that is the 'divine image' (*zelem Elohim*) in man (*Guide*, I. 1, trans. by Pines, pp. 21–23). Thus, the last chapter of the *Guide* continues and complements its very first chapter.

But when Job knew God with a certain knowledge, he admitted that *true happiness which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him and that a human being cannot be troubled in it by any of the misfortunes in question*. While he had known God only through the traditional stories and not by way of speculation, Job had imagined that the things thought to be happiness, such as health, wealth, and children, are the ultimate good. For this reason he fell into such perplexity and said such things as he did.⁴⁸

The identification of human happiness and virtue guarantees (in a trivial manner) that the virtuous person is happy, and this without ascribing to God anthropomorphic activity, such as judging and policing. Providence, it seems, need not rely on anthropomorphic thinking.

Maimonides' endorsement of Aristotle's view of speculation as man's *summum bonum* was quite controversial. *Prima facie*, Maimonides seems to prefer the acute metaphysician over the pious person who observes the scriptural commandments. If this were so, one may well wonder why should the acute metaphysician spend any effort on observing the commandments rather than squarely concentrating all of her efforts on achieving more adequate knowledge of God and the other intelligibles. For the Jews of the late Middle Ages this was not merely a speculative question. Being subject to frequent violence by their Christian neighbours, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Jews recurrently had to choose between the sword and the cross. To have the courage and motivation to abide by one's faith, one had better not consider it a mere 'second rate' good. It is in light of this grey historical horizon that one should consider Joseph ben Shem Tov's (1400–1460) attempt to reconcile the Aristotelean valuation of metaphysical speculation with more traditional rabbinic values. Joseph, a courtier of John II of Castile and the author of several philosophical works, died as a martyr to his faith.⁴⁹ Part of his long commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* has recently been edited and published.⁵⁰ His much shorter treatise, *Kevod Elohim (God's Glory)*, a study of the highest good, follows the arguments of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in some detail.⁵¹ Joseph endorses Aristotle's argument that contemplation is man's highest good, while politely rejecting Maimonides' view that most of the biblical commandments aim merely at the achievement of moral virtues.⁵² Among the readers of *Kevod Elohim* was Benedict Spinoza, who cited a passage from the very end of the work in his *Theological-Political Treatise*.⁵³

48 Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 23, trans. by Pines, pp. 492–93; italics added.

49 Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 381.

50 See Neria, 'It Cannot be Valued with the Gold of Ophir (Job 28. 16)', pp. 567–724.

51 Joseph's discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* relies on the early fifteenth-century Hebrew translation of the work by Meir Alguades that was made from the Latin translation by Robert Grosseteste and on Averroes's *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. See Harvey, 'The Influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Medieval Jewish Thought', pp. 130 and 136.

52 Joseph ben Shem Tov, *Kevod Elohim*, 7a.

53 Spinoza, *TTP*, Ch. 5 (III. 80. 7–14): 'Rabbi Joseph, son of Shem Tov, adds in his book, *Kevod Elohim*, or *Glory of God*, that even if Aristotle (who he thinks wrote the best *Ethics*, and whom he esteems above all others) had included all the things which concern the true *Ethics*, and which he has

Spinoza on the Highest Good and Beatitude

In the fourth chapter of his 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza sets out to explain ‘as briefly and clearly as I can’, the nature of the highest good:

If we really want to seek our advantage, then since the intellect is the better part of us, we should certainly strive above all to perfect it as much as we can. For our supreme good must consist in the perfection of the intellect. Next, because nothing can either be or be conceived without God, and because we can doubt everything so long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God, all our knowledge, and the certainty which really removes all doubt, depends only on the knowledge of God. It follows that our supreme good and perfection depend only on the knowledge of God, etc. [...] Since knowledge of an effect through its cause is nothing but knowing some property of the cause, the more we know natural things, the more perfectly we know God’s essence, which is the cause of all things. *So all our knowledge, i.e., our supreme good, not only depends on the knowledge of God, but consists (consistit) entirely in it.*⁵⁴

Let us look closely at this rich passage. In its beginning, Spinoza asserts that ‘the intellect is the better part of us.’ Spinoza does not motivate the last claim, and one may wonder to what extent Spinoza agrees with Aristotle’s view that rationality is man’s typical *ergon*. In the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, the appendix to Spinoza’s 1663 book, *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy*, Spinoza addresses the definition of man as a rational animal and notes: ‘Aristotle erred very seriously if he thought that he adequately explained the human essence by that definition of his.’⁵⁵ The context of the discussion in the *Cogitata Metaphysica* is Spinoza’s claim that species and genera are not real beings and ‘cannot be called true or false,’⁵⁶ and I believe that the target of Spinoza’s criticism here is Aristotle’s identification of the essence of things with their genera and species (for Spinoza, essences are absolutely real, while genera and species are mere *entia rationis*).⁵⁷ Both in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and in his very late work, the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza employs the notion of man as rational animal and claims that reason is the proper *function* of the mind:

The end of the Republic, I say, is *not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata (ex rationalibus bestias, vel automata facere)*, but to enable their minds and bodies to *perform their functions (suis fuctionibus fungantur)* safely, to enable them to use their reason freely.⁵⁸

embraced in his own Ethics, but had carried out all of them diligently, this still could not have helped him attain salvation. For he did not embrace the things he teaches as divine teachings, prophetically revealed, but only as dictates of reason.’

54 Spinoza, TTP, Ch. 4 (III. 59. 29–60. 12); italics added.

55 Spinoza, CM I. 1 (I. 235. 26–27). A few lines earlier, Spinoza notes that ‘Plato was no less aware (*cognovit*) than anyone else that man is a rational animal’ (I. 235. 21), thus apparently agreeing with this claim.

56 Spinoza, CM I. 1 (I. 235. 18).

57 Spinoza, CM I. 1 (I. 235. 10–16).

58 Spinoza, TTP, Ch. 20 (III. 241. 3–8); italics added.

When we say, then, that the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously, I mean that they pass a *human* life, one defined not merely by the circulation of the blood, and other things common to all animals, but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind (*vera Mentis virtute, & vita definitur*).⁵⁹

At least at first sight, there seems to be a slight, yet significant difference between the two passages above. The passage from the twentieth chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* stresses the proper functioning of *both* the human mind and body,⁶⁰ while the *Tractatus Politicus* passage seems closer to Aristotle's (and Maimonides') view that human virtue is constituted by the excellence of the *mind alone*. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza presents the excellence of the human body and mind as correlative features: 'In proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its Mind is more capable of perceiving many things at once.'⁶¹ Towards the conclusion of the *Ethics*, Spinoza even asserts that the eternity of the human mind is correlative to the capacities of the human body.⁶² Spinoza's key doctrine of the parallelism between minds and bodies — and more generally, between ideas and their objects (E2p7)⁶³ — seems to commit him to the concomitant excellence of the human mind and body; yet if this is so, one may wonder how he could assert in E4p52d: 'Man's true power of acting (*vera hominis agendi potentia*), or virtue, is reason'. Are there no parallel bodily features to the activity of human reason? Why do these features not equally constitute 'man's true power of acting'?

Attempting to answer this uneasy question, let me point out that for Spinoza virtue is 'nothing but acting from the laws of one's own nature.'⁶⁴ Is there any asymmetry between the human mind and body in terms of their ability to act from their own natures? In the few places where Spinoza spells out under what conditions man acts from his nature alone, the focus seems to be on the mental aspects. Thus, in the second chapter of the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza writes:

Because we ought to reckon human power not so much by the strength of the Body as by the strength of the Mind, it follows that people are most their own masters when they can exert the most power with their reason, and are most guided by reason. So I call a man completely free just insofar as he is guided by reason, because to that extent he is determined to action by causes which can be understood adequately through his own nature alone, even though they determine him to act necessarily.⁶⁵

59 Spinoza, TP, Ch. 5 (III. 296. 11–15).

60 Furthermore, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza refers to (non-human) animals as merely '*called* irrational (*irrationalia*)' (E3p57s), thus implying, contrary to Aristotle, that animals too have some degree of rationality.

61 E2p13s (II. 97. 7–10). Cf. E2p14.

62 E5p39: 'He who has a Body capable of doing a great many things has a Mind whose greatest part is eternal.'

63 For a detailed study of this doctrine, see Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, Ch. 5.

64 E4p18s (II. 222. 24). Thus, for Spinoza just as for Aristotle, the virtue of a thing is the proper activity of its nature.

65 TP, Ch. 2 (III. 280. 18–25).

Since Spinoza defines freedom as acting (and existing) from the necessity of one's nature (E1d7), and in the above passage the completely free person is said to be guided by reason,⁶⁶ it seems that reason belongs to man's nature, that is, it is the proper activity of the nature of the human mind. But does reason *exhaust* human nature or essence? I believe it does not, for otherwise the mind-body parallelism would collapse.⁶⁷ Spinoza's repeated stress on the mental as man's true virtue is, I believe, consistent with the existence of parallel physical/bodily features which constitute the essence and virtue of the human body.⁶⁸ These last features may not be as salient as man's mental virtues, but given Spinoza's causal parallelism they should be just as real.

Let us return to the passage from *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* quoted at the beginning of this part of the paper. Following the assertion that the intellect is the better part of us, Spinoza infers, just like Aristotle, that the perfection of the intellect is our supreme good. At this point, Spinoza spells out what constitutes the perfection of our intellect, that is, the knowledge of God, and specifically knowledge of God's essence which is the cause of all things. Although the last point may appear trivial, it is much bolder than it seems.⁶⁹ Spinoza is strictly committed to the view that in order to know a thing, one must first know its cause.⁷⁰ Now, since God's essence is the cause of all things,⁷¹ the knowledge of God's essence *becomes the strict condition for any knowledge*. As a result, knowledge of God's essence becomes trivial: any knowledge must presuppose it. These considerations lead Spinoza to assert that 'the human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence' (E2p47), and that 'God's infinite essence and his eternity are *known to all*' (E2p47s).⁷² This radical accessibility of the knowledge of God's essence allows Spinoza to argue in Part 4 of the *Ethics* that the supreme good (the knowledge of God) 'can be enjoyed by all equally'.⁷³

At the very end of the passage I quoted at the beginning of this part, Spinoza makes another intriguing claim: 'all our knowledge, i.e., our supreme good, not

66 On degrees of freedom in Spinoza, see Garrett, 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory', pp. 298–99.

67 To be sure, the parallelism asserted in E2p7 pertains to *causal* relations and structures (notice the reliance in E2p7 on E1a4). Causal relations are really the scaffolding of Spinoza's ontology. Still, it is not clear to me that all the features of the modes can be accounted for in terms of causal relations. If there are features of minds or bodies that cannot be accounted for in terms of causal relations, there may well be some asymmetries between minds and bodies in spite of the causal parallelism of E2p7.

68 See E5p39s (II. 30s. 24) where Spinoza presents having sound mind and body as being *equally* important for the constitution of human happiness or felicity.

69 For a detailed discussion of Spinoza's bold views on the proper order of philosophizing, see my review of Ayers (Melamed, Review of Ayers, *Rationalism, Platonism, and God*).

70 See E1a4: 'Cognition of an effect, depends in, and involves, the cognition of its cause'. From the use of E1a4 in E2p45d we can learn that Spinoza is committed to an even stronger claim: *any* cognition, regardless of whether it is adequate or not, involves cognition of its causes.

71 See E1p16c1: 'God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect'.

72 Italics added. Cf. E5p18d and TTP, Ch. 4 (III. 68. 15–17). Notice, however, Spinoza's claim that people commonly 'do not take note of the true idea of God which they have' (CM II, pref., I. 249. 20).

73 E4p36. The demonstration of E4p36 relies on E2p47.

only depends on the knowledge of God, but consists entirely in it.⁷⁴ While all of our knowledge *depends* on the knowledge of God's *essence* (or '*natura naturans*'),⁷⁵ Spinoza is entitled to make the further claim that all of our knowledge *is* just knowledge of God, since he holds that everything is in God,⁷⁶ and thus whatever we know is either God's *essence* or God's *propria*,⁷⁷ that is, the properties which follow from God's *essence*.⁷⁸

Following Aristotle and Maimonides, Spinoza identifies metaphysical knowledge not only with man's highest good, but also with his true happiness, or felicity:

The true happiness and blessedness of man (*vera hominis felicitas & beatitudo*) consists only in wisdom (*sapientia*) and in knowledge of the truth, not at all in the fact that he is wiser than others, or that others lack true knowledge. For their ignorance does not increase his wisdom at all, i.e., his true happiness.⁷⁹

Blessedness (*beatitudo*) is the affect of the mind when it is endowed with perfection (E5p33d). Just like Aristotle and Maimonides, the identity of human virtue and felicity allows Spinoza to claim, in the final proposition of the *Ethics*: 'Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself' (E5p42).⁸⁰ While the common people believe that virtue should be rewarded by happiness, the identification of human virtue and happiness pulls the rug out from under this commerce of goods.⁸¹

Spinoza's ethics merges intellectual consequentialism (the view of knowledge as the highest good) and virtue theory.⁸² Knowledge is both our *summum bonum* and our highest virtue. Since all knowledge depends on (and in fact, consists of) the knowledge of God, the knowledge of God is our highest good and virtue. Spinoza ties these threads together in a passage which appears in the appendix to the fourth part of the *Ethics*:

74 Spinoza, TTP, Ch. 4 (III. 60. 12).

75 '*Natura naturans*' is Spinoza's term for the reality of God's essence, or the attributes, while '*natura naturata*' is the term for the realm of the modes which follow from God's essence. See E1p29s.

76 See E1p15. Cf. KV I. 3 (I. 35. 20). For a discussion of the nature of the 'in' relation, see my *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, chs 1 and 3.

77 This is the meaning of Spinoza's claim: 'Since knowledge of an effect through its cause is nothing but knowing some property (*proprietaem aliquam*) of the cause, the more we know natural things, the more perfectly we know God's essence, which is the cause of all things' (TTP, Ch. 4, III. 60. 10–11). In *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (pp. 50–52), I argue that the modes are God's *propria*.

78 Warren Zev Harvey pointed out the similarity between these claims of Spinoza and Maimonides' assertion in the *Guide*, III. 8 that man's highest good is the knowledge of God 'and the actions which proceed from him' (Harvey, 'A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean', p. 161). Indeed, in the preface to Part 4 of the *Ethics* (III. 267. 90), Spinoza refers to the modes as 'God's *actions* which follow from the necessity of his nature' (italics added).

79 TTP, Ch. 3 (III. 44. 22–25). Cf. TTP, Ch. 4 (III. 60. 19) and E2p49s (II. 136. 1) and E4app4 (II. 267. 5).

80 Cf. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, p. 239, and Manzini, *Spinoza: Une Lecture d'Aristote*, pp. 84–86.

81 'From this we clearly understand how far they stray from the true valuation of virtue, who expect to be honored by God with the greatest rewards for their virtue and best actions, as for the greatest bondage — as if virtue itself, and the service of God, were not happiness itself, and the greatest freedom' (E2p49s, II. 136. 2–7).

82 Cf. Garrett, 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory', p. 297.

In life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason. In this one thing consists man's highest happiness, *or* blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God. But perfecting the intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature. So the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., his highest Desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things that can fall under his understanding.⁸³

The last two parts of Spinoza's book, the *Ethics*, contain most of the elements of Spinoza's ethical theory, but Spinoza's *Ethics* does not begin in Part 4 (or even 3) of the *Ethics*. The very first page of Spinoza's *magnum opus* presents an explication of the highest good: '*Per Deum intelligo ens absolute infinitum*' (E1d6).

Conclusion

Spinoza was no fan of Aristotle. In a letter from October 1674, he asserts plainly: 'To me the authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates is not worth much.'⁸⁴ Still, Spinoza's attitude towards Aristotle was not one of complete and unreserved rejection. On some issues, such as the rejection of the Aristotelian ban on actual infinity, Spinoza's attack on Aristotle went far beyond that of most of his contemporaries.⁸⁵ Yet, on many other issues, Spinoza critically adopted, and reinterpreted, key Aristotelean concepts and doctrines. In this manner Spinoza adopted and heavily employed the Aristotelian concept of essence while divorcing it from its original and standard association with teleology. We can discern a similar attitude in Spinoza's reception of Aristotelean ethics. Spinoza adopts key doctrines and concepts from Aristotle and Maimonides, yet at the end of the day these elements acquire a new, and frequently surprising, meaning.

A bit more than a third of a century ago, I recall myself as a child coming across an odd volume in the library of my father's Hassidic *shul*. The title of the book, *Sefer ha-Midot* (Hebrew: 'the Book of Ethics'), was not the reason for my surprise; most Hassidic libraries contain books on piety and ethics. The reason for the surprise was, of course, the author of this specific book of piety, namely, Aristotle.⁸⁶ In his masterly study, Steven Harvey traced the fascinating history of the Jewish reception of the *Nicomachean Ethics* from almost complete ignorance and indifference in the

83 E4app4 (II. 267. 1–14).

84 Spinoza, Ep. 56 (IV. 261. 30).

85 See my 'Hasdai Crescas and Spinoza on Actual Infinity and the Infinity of God's Attributes'. For the rejection of actual infinity by self-proclaimed early modern anti-Aristotelians, such as Hobbes and Locke, see my 'Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy', pp. 137–42.

86 Most likely, this volume was the 1866 Lemberg reprint of Itzik Satanow's 1790/91 edition, *Sefer ha-Midot le-Aristoteles*. See Friedberg, *Bet Eked Sepharim*, II, 554.

early Middle Ages to the early modern period during which the book became one of the most cited works in rabbinic literature.⁸⁷ The terminology of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is today spread over much of the canonical rabbinic literature on piety. In many of these works, Aristotelean terms are put to work in a very original and surprising manner, just as in the works of our friend, Benedict of Amsterdam.

87 Harvey, 'The Influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Medieval Jewish Thought', pp. 136–37. Indeed, any cursory search of Aristotelean moral terminology (such as, *hašlaḥa* (happiness), or *ha-ṭob ha-'elyon* (the highest good)) in databases of rabbinic literatures will yield thousands of hits.

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