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## Spinoza's Anti-Humanism

## Human Value and Dignity

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You were not intended  
to be unique. You were  
my embodiment, all diversity.

—Louise Glück, “Midsummer” (1992)

## Introduction

Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* opens with a celebration of the uniqueness and *dignity* (*Würde*) of humanity:

The fact that the human being can have the “I” in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a *person* [*Person*], and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person—i.e., through rank and dignity [*Rang und Würde*] and entirely different being from *things* [*Sachen*], such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes. This holds even when he cannot say “I,” because he still has it in thoughts, just as all languages must *think* it when they speak in the first person, even if they do not have a special word to express the concept of “I.” (7: 127; italics in original)<sup>1</sup>

Unlike animals, which are mere *things*, human beings are *persons* (cf. 4:428). This clear-cut bifurcation of entities in Kant's moral universe seems to be grounded in the unique qualities that bestow human beings with *dignity*.<sup>2</sup> Self-consciousness, rationality, and the capacity to act freely, a capacity Kant stresses in other contexts (cf. 28: 255), create a gulf between human beings and the rest of nature (the distinctive capacity of a human being “raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth”).

Kant was not alone among modern philosophers in asserting a deep and unbridgeable divide between humanity and the rest of nature. Arguably, *humanism*—in a sense to be spelled out shortly—constituted the mainstream of

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modern philosophy. For Descartes, human beings are endowed with free will, reason, mental life, and substantial mind, all of which are absent in the lower animals.<sup>3</sup> By virtue of these capacities, claims Descartes, human beings have been properly described in the Hebrew Bible as being created “in God’s Image” (Gen. 1:26–27).<sup>4</sup> Descartes’s veneration of humanity is documented already in one of his earliest writings, a set of notes written in his twenties. One of these fragments reads, “The Lord has made three marvels [*mirabilia*]: something out of nothing; free will; and God in Man [*Hominem Deum*]” (AT X 218 / CSM I 5). Two out of God’s three great *mirabilia*, per Descartes, are instantiated by humanity.

Unlike Descartes, Leibniz was willing to acknowledge not only that animals have souls (*âmes*), but even that animal souls are unperishable (cf. “Discourse on Metaphysics” §34 / AG 65). Still, Leibniz stresses—in his 1686 *Discours de métaphysique*—that rationality and self-consciousness are distinctive human capacities on account of which “all other creatures must serve” humanity (§§12 and 36 / AG 44, 67). For Leibniz, these distinctive human capacities not only elevate them above other animals, or souls, but also place them in community with God, even making them God-like:

Only spirits<sup>5</sup> are made *in God’s image* and are, as it were, of his race [*quasi de sa race*], or like children of his household, since they alone can serve him *freely* and act with knowledge in imitation of the divine nature. . . . And this nature of spirits is so noble that it brings them as near to divinity as it is possible for simple creatures. . . . It is because of this that God humanizes itself [*qu’il s’humanise*], that he is willing to allow anthropomorphism, and that he enters into society with us, as a prince with his subjects. (“Discourse on Metaphysics” §36 / AG 67; italics added)

The religious undertones of Leibniz’s view of humanity as “God’s race” are quite salient in his invocation of both the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 1: 26–27), and the New Testament (“God’s humanizing itself,” i.e., God’s choice to incarnate itself in a *human* body). The view of humanity as being in a middle rank between the divine and nature is quite common in Western religious thought. Following the catastrophes of World War II and with the advent of a more reflective and critical perspective on modern secularism, the question of the *justification* of humanism—and particularly whether it is not a mere uncritical residue of traditional, anthropomorphic, religions—came to the forefront. In the decades following the Second World War, the notions of *humanism* and *anti-humanism* have been discussed extensively (mainly among continental philosophers).<sup>6</sup> Because these notions carry a variety of historical and ideological meanings, it is important to provide at the outset at least a rudimentary clarification of *my* use of these two terms. By humanism I mean a view which (1) assigns a

*unique value* or *rank* to human beings among other things in nature; (2) stresses the primacy—or even the constitutive role—of the human *perspective* in understanding the nature of things; and (3) attempts to point out an essential property of humanity which *justifies* its elevated and unique status. *Prima facie*, claims (1) and (2) do not entail each other, though one can point out tacit and nonextravagant premises that would allow the inference of the one from the other.<sup>7</sup> Claim (3) rules out arbitrary and speciesist versions of humanism. Historically, claims (1)–(3) have been frequently asserted together as elements of a cohesive worldview.<sup>8</sup>

By ascribing a unique value to human beings, humanism assumes a certain gulf between humanity and nature which does not allow us to treat human beings like any other things in nature.<sup>9</sup> For many humanists the nature vs. humanity gulf does not even allow the application of the methods of natural sciences to the disciplines of the humanities.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophical humanism does not commence with modernity, and it can perhaps be traced back to Protagoras's celebrated dictum "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not"<sup>11</sup> and to Sophocles's "Ode to Man."

In an earlier work, I argued that Spinoza is the great enemy of the school of humanism (see Melamed 2010b). In contrast to the humanist philosophers, Spinoza considered human beings as marginal and limited beings in nature, beings whose claims and presumptions far exceed their abilities. "What do the common people not foolishly claim for themselves . . . they confuse God's decrees with men's decisions and posit a nature so limited that *they believe man to be its chief part*?" (TTP, chap. 6 / G III/82/7–10).

The critique of anthropocentric and anthropomorphic thinking is a persistent and central theme in Spinoza's thought from early on,<sup>12</sup> and it only becomes stronger and more extensive in his later works.<sup>13</sup> One of the most figurative statements of this critique appears in a letter that recasts the famous saying of Xenophanes. Here Spinoza responds to Hugo Boxel's criticism that Spinoza went much too far in rejecting the attribution of *any* human perfections to God:

When you say that you do not see what sort of God I have if I deny in him the actions of seeing, hearing, attending, willing etc., and that he possesses those faculties in an eminent degree, I suspect that you believe there is no greater perfection than can be explicated by the aforementioned attributes. I am not surprised, for I believe that *a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God's nature is eminently circular*. In this way each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God and regarding all else as ill-formed. (Ep. 56 / G IV/260/1–10; italics added)

Alongside his critique of anthropomorphism, Spinoza frequently attacks the view of humanity as either the most important part of nature<sup>14</sup> or as transcending nature. Both in the *Ethics* and in the *Political Treatise* Spinoza scolds those who uphold the common perception of humanity as a “dominion within a dominion [*imperium in imperio*],”<sup>15</sup> i.e., as constituting an autonomous realm of beings that disturb rather than strictly follow the laws of nature by virtue of their unique endowment with free will.<sup>16</sup> In an earlier work (see Melamed 2010b), I argued that whatever exclusive qualities the humanists claim bestow humanity with a unique status, elevated above the rest of nature, Spinoza would either argue that the belief that humans have this quality is a cozy fairy tale (as in the case of free will), or he would deny that human beings are *unique* in having these qualities (as in the cases of self-consciousness, love, or the ability to act morally). Spinoza’s strict naturalism about human beings—i.e., his insistence that human beings play according to the very same rules as the rest of nature—elicited a strong repulsive reaction among his contemporaries and successors,<sup>17</sup> though, in the case of Nietzsche, it also earned him an admirer.<sup>18</sup>

Spinoza’s clear-headed view of human beings, their limited rationality, their desires, ambitions, and delusions, does not, however, lead him to misanthropy. As he writes:

Let the Satirists laugh as much as they like at human affairs, let the Theologians curse them, let Melancholics praise as much as they can a life that is uncultivated and wild, let them disdain men and admire the lower animals. Men still find from experience that by helping one another they can provide themselves much more easily with the things they require, and that only by joining forces can they avoid the dangers that threaten on all sides. (E4p35s)<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a book whose aim is to lead us toward *human* blessedness and freedom.<sup>20</sup> The *Ethics* is a book about human beings not because humanity is elevated above the rest of nature, but for the simple reason that its author, being a human being, desperately wished to know the conditions required for *his* pursuit of blessed life.

Instead of reiterating my overview of Spinoza’s systematic and multilayered attack on humanism (see Melamed 2010b), I would like to concentrate in this chapter on *one* question: whether in spite of Spinoza’s deep critique of humanism, we can rescue from his thought any notion of human value, rank, or even dignity. Given my claims so far, one can easily see that this is not a trivial task. Still, because the main aim of the *Ethics* is charting the paths toward human flourishing and blessedness, and because Spinoza believed we should *equally* strive to promote the flourishing of other human beings,<sup>21</sup> one might wonder whether this striving toward shared blessedness is grounded or motivated by a unique

value or rank shared by human beings. The two most promising venues which could lead Spinoza to ascribe substantial value to human beings are human friendship (recall the end of the last quote) and human (partial) rationality. I will begin by examining the value of human friendship. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I will consider the question of whether Spinoza's modest view of humanity's status within nature allows for any notion of human *dignity*. In the third and final part, I will examine the value Spinoza ascribes to *rationality*, and the implications of this issue for his understanding of the value of humanity.

### 1. The Value of Human Friendship

To begin our discussion of the value of human friendship we will turn first to Spinoza's critique of vegetarianism (the reasons for this choice will become clear before long). As we shall shortly see, Spinoza has a view quite distinct from, if not fully opposed to, that of Kant about the metaphysical or ontological differences between human beings and the lower animals. Still, ironically, both end up with virtually the same conclusion: we may use animals "at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us."<sup>22</sup> Spinoza writes:

The law against killing animals is based more on empty superstitions and unmanly compassion [*muliebri misericordia*] than sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us the necessity of joining with men, but not with the lower animals [*brutis*], or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them as they have against us. Indeed, because the right of each other is defined by his virtue, or [*seu*] power, men have a greater right against the lower animals than they have against men. Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensations [*Nec tamen nego bruta sentire*]. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree [*conveniunt*] in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects. (E4p37s1 / G II/236/34–237/10)

In this passage Spinoza openly asserts that in many respects the lower animals are very much like us: they have sensations ("not that I deny that the lower animals have sensations"), and they even have rights ("we have the same right against them as they have against us"). In other passages in the *Ethics* Spinoza affirms that animals have minds and mental lives,<sup>23</sup> and in one passage he even refers to the "animals that are called irrational [*quae irrationalia dicuntur*],"<sup>24</sup> thus insinuating that at least to some degree all nonhuman animals *are* rational.

Still, attempting to explain briefly “the excellence of the human mind over” the minds of other things, Spinoza writes:

I say this in general, that 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 than others of perceiving many things at once*. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, *so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly*. And from these [truths] we can know *the excellence of one mind over the others*. (E2p13s / G II/97/8–14; italics added. Cf. E2p14 / G II/103/8–9)

I cannot elaborate here on the intricate features of Spinoza's epistemology which account for the relative excellence of minds, since such a discussion would take us far afield from our main topic.<sup>25</sup> For our purposes it suffices to note that, generally speaking, Spinoza considers the human mind more capable—and more powerful—than the minds of other animals, though this difference seems to be one of degree.<sup>26</sup> I stress that it is only generally speaking that the human mind is superior to the minds of all other animals, since in the context of another discussion in the *Ethics*, Spinoza asserts that in some cases the capacities of the lower animals exceed those of humans: “Many things are observed in the lower animals that surpass human ingenuity [*quae humanam sagacitatem longe superant*]” (E3p2s / G II/142/10).

Let us return to the issue of vegetarianism and look closely at Spinoza's argument against vegetarianism. Spinoza's argument in E4p37s1 relies on two major premises. The first is his principal claim that the right of each thing is coextensive (if not strictly identical) with its power.<sup>27</sup> We will not study this crucial and intriguing claim here. The other major premise is that insofar as we do not share the same nature with the lower animals, we cannot “join them,” i.e., *we cannot “use” them as friends*. Spinoza elaborates on this last point in the Appendix to Part 4 of the *Ethics*:

Apart from men we know no singular thing in nature whose Mind we can enjoy [*gaudere*], and which we can join to ourselves in friendship, or some kind of association. And so whatever there is in nature apart from men, the principle of seeking our own advantage does not demand that we preserve it. Instead, *it teaches us to preserve or destroy it according to its use, or to adapt it to our use in any way whatever*. (E4app26 G II/273/16–24; italics added)

Spinoza repeatedly claims that nothing is more *useful* to men than other human beings.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for the sake of our own advantage, we better strive to preserve them and use them most advantageously. The best use we can have of another

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human being is through friendship. Friendship with a human being who is guided to reason is especially useful and empowering. Thus, in the same appendix, Spinoza writes:

Nothing can agree more with the nature of any thing than other individuals of the same species. And so (by VII) nothing is more *useful* to man in preserving his being and enjoying a rational life than a man who is guided by reason. (E4app9 / G II/268–269/20–23; italics added. Cf. E4p35c1 / G II/233/16–17)

Spinoza's reasoning in rejecting vegetarianism is quite simple. We do not share the same nature with other animals. Since the affects (emotions) of animals are grounded in their natures, our affects are also significantly different from the affects of other animals.<sup>29</sup> The fact that we do not share the nature and affects of other animals prevents us from joining them to ourselves in friendship (E4app26 / G II/273/16).<sup>30</sup> *Friendship is the most valuable thing we can find in other creatures insofar as it empowers us significantly* (E4p18s / G II/223/8). Since we cannot use animals as friends, we are allowed to use, preserve, and destroy them according to our other interests (E4app26 / G II/273/16).<sup>31</sup>

There are quite a few problems with this argument. Spinoza's categorical assertion that two entities that do not share the same nature and affects cannot join in friendship can be attacked from various angles. First, consider the relationship between a blind person and her guide dog. No doubt the nature and affects of the two entities are significantly different. Still, it seems that frequently there is a close emotional bond between a blind person and her guide dog, a bond that is closer than the one the blind person has with many (human) friends. Spinoza obviously might reply that such a bond might be exceptional in some other respects but does not constitute genuine friendship. Nevertheless, given the fact that for Spinoza at least part of the value of friendship is mutual<sup>32</sup> empowerment,<sup>33</sup> it would seem that such genuine relations of mutual empowerment between animals belonging to different species are at least possible.

From a different angle, we might raise doubts about Spinoza's commitment to the claim that "all men share the same common nature" (TP chap. 7 / G III/319).<sup>34</sup> In the *Theological Political Treatise*, Spinoza mocks the view that there are different species of men—presciently denouncing the basis of various forms of modern racism (TTP chap. 3 / G III/47/2), yet in the *Ethics*, immediately following his explanation of the difference in affects between humans and lower animals, Spinoza notes, "Finally, from P57 it follows that there is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a Philosopher possesses. I wished to mention this in passing" (E3p57s / G II/187/18–20). E3p57, to which the last quote refers, states, "Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one differs

from the essence of the other.” Spinoza’s appeal to E3p57 in order to explain the difference between the gladness of the drunk and that of the philosopher clearly implies that he considers the essence, or nature, of the two types of people to be distinct as well. Obviously, the difference in nature between the philosopher and the drunk may well be more modest than the difference in nature between the drunk person and his dog. Yet these differences seem to be a matter of degree rather than a clear-cut dichotomy between human and nonhuman animals.<sup>35</sup>

Before we conclude our discussion of the value of human friendship for Spinoza, let me stress three important points. First, the fact that we share the same nature with other human beings is important for Spinoza as a condition for cultivating *friendship*. Issues of procreation—which is presumably restricted to members of the same species—seem to be of little, if any, concern for Spinoza.

Second, the importance of friendship is confined to the perspective of the entity which seeks friendship. We cannot *use a wolf as our friend*, and hence we may use it in whatever way we see fit. Along the same lines, the wolf cannot use us as friends, and therefore she may use us “as she pleases.” The perspective of the wolf is just as good and important as ours.

Now we can address our third and final point. For Spinoza, not all perspectives are equal, since beyond the perspectives of the myriad creatures of Spinoza’s universe there is one objective perspective. That is *God’s* perspective on the world.<sup>36</sup> Our nature and God’s nature are utterly different,<sup>37</sup> and thus we have different affects<sup>38</sup> and cannot join in friendship with God. Moreover, God’s existence, omnipotence, and omniscience are strictly guaranteed by his essence,<sup>39</sup> and he does not seem to need my friendship. Thus, from the ultimate objective perspective, human friendship is not valuable, or at most it is valuable among certain entities as they are perceived from God’s point of view,<sup>40</sup> but it is not valuable *for* God himself.<sup>41</sup>

One might perhaps be tempted to challenge this conclusion by pointing out that Spinoza allows God to love human beings.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in E5p36, Spinoza writes:

From this<sup>43</sup> it follows that insofar as God loves himself, he loves men, and consequently that God’s love of men and the Mind’s intellectual Love of God are one and the same [*Hinc sequitur, quod Deus, quatenus seipsum amat, homines amat, et consequenter quod amor Dei erga homines et mentis erga Deum amor intellectualis unum et idem sit*].

Spinoza’s God may perhaps love human beings,<sup>44</sup> but given Spinoza’s scathing critique of those who think that human beings are more important, or closer to, God than any other creatures,<sup>45</sup> it would seem that if God loves any finite beings, he should love them all:<sup>46</sup> porcupines, rhinos, and humans included. In the *Theological Political Treatise*, Spinoza pointedly criticizes the Hebrews’ view



of themselves as God's beloved, chosen people.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of miracles, Spinoza criticizes those who take humanity to be the chief part of nature, and the end toward which the whole of nature works.<sup>48</sup> Thus, if we are to avoid the claim that human beings are God's *chosen species*,<sup>49</sup> we must admit that *if God loves anyone*, God loves donkeys and porcupines just as much as he loves humans.

## 2. Human Dignity?

We have seen in Section 1 that human beings *are valuable* to each other by virtue of their ability to join together in friendship, that human beings do not seem to be valuable to God (nor God to human beings) qua friends, and that if God loves anyone, human beings are not the preferred object of his love.<sup>50</sup> Let us turn now to the question of human *dignity*.

Spinoza begins his early work, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, with the simple confession that experience taught him “that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile [*vana, & futilia esse*]” (TIE §1 / G II/5/8–9). He then turns to examining the things that people normally seek in life:

For most things which present themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men think to be the highest good, may be reduced to these three: wealth, honor [*honor*], and sensual pleasure. The mind is so distracted by these three that it cannot give the slightest thought to any other good. (TIE §3 / G II/5/26–6/3)<sup>51</sup>

After noting the vanity of sensual pleasure, Spinoza scrutinizes two other apparent “highest goods”:

The mind is also distracted not a little by the pursuit of honors [*honores*] and wealth, particularly when the latter is sought only for its own sake, because it is assumed to be the highest good. [5] *But the mind is far more distracted by honor. For this is always assumed to be good through itself [bonum esse per se] and the ultimate end [finis ultimus] toward which everything is directed.* Nor do honor and wealth have, as sensual pleasure does, repentance as a natural consequence. The more each of these is possessed, the more joy is increased, and hence the more we are spurred on to increase them. But if our hopes should chance to be frustrated, we experience the greatest sadness. And finally, honor has this great disadvantage: to pursue it, we must direct our lives according to other men's

powers of understanding—fleeing what they commonly flee and seeking what they commonly seek. (TIE §§4–5 / G II/6/2–20; italics added)

These considerations—the distraction of the mind, the insatiable urge to pursue more honor, and the dependence on the recognition of others—lead Spinoza to *reject* honor—along with wealth and sensual pleasure—as the ultimate goods he should seek in life. We may use all three as limited means for achieving our true good,<sup>52</sup> but this is the only positive use we may make of them, and we should be constantly alerted to the danger of pursuing these means as ends in themselves (cf. TIE §11 / G II/7/31).

Whatever is true about the honor of individual human beings should also be true about collectives of human beings. The concept of national honor might be a useful political device, and for the most part, Spinoza accepts the use of deception in politics. Thus, for example, he praises Alexander the Great for presenting himself as the son of Jupiter. Having the sovereign considered as being of divine origin yields sweeping political benefits, and Spinoza praises Alexander for his shrewdness (TTP chap. 19 / G III/258–259; cf. Melamed 2013c, 180–181). Accordingly, the use of the notion of national honor as a political tool for a worthy aim<sup>53</sup> might be accepted by Spinoza, especially if all the required precautions are taken to avoid turning this nationalist cult into an end in itself. (A more prudent Spinozist may well object that no such precautions can ever assure us that the cult of national honor would not turn into an end in itself, and that therefore we should avoid the cult of national honor by any means.)

If the Spinozist allows for the prudent political use of the (rather vain) notion of *national honor* for worthy aims, she should just as well allow for a similar use of the notion of *human honor* for worthy aims. But would it make sense for Spinoza to genuinely recognize (rather than merely employ as a political tool) the notion of humanity as having *dignity* and noninstrumental worthiness?<sup>54</sup>

The notion of dignity (*dignitas*) does not appear in the *Ethics*. The closest Latin terms in the *Ethics* are *honor* and *gloria*. Can we retrieve from Spinoza's text any notion of honor or glory that is unique to humanity as a species?

One interesting text which may help us address the question is E3p55s2:

So when we said above (in P52S)<sup>55</sup> that we venerate [*venerari*] a man because we wonder at his prudence, strength of character, etc., that happens (as is evident from the proposition itself) because we *imagine* these virtues to be peculiarly in him, and not as common to our nature. Therefore, we shall not envy him these virtues any more than we envy trees their height, or lions their strength. (G II/184/9–14; italics added)

Spinoza seems to state here that we venerate excellent individuals, but not qualities which are typical of an *entire species* such as humanity. Still, insofar as this veneration of individuals is the result of the activity of our *imagination* (the lowest kind of cognition and the only source of error in Spinoza's epistemology), rather than the *intellect* (Spinoza's second kind of cognition which is immune from error),<sup>56</sup> we have no reason to assume that this psychological mechanism (i.e., our tendency to venerate individuals rather than species) is a *reliable* source for value judgments, and to that extent cannot prove that Spinoza would avoid ascribing dignity to the human species.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps a Spinozist could defend a notion of human dignity that is grounded in the activity of reason and the intellect? Let us consider another possible path for retrieving human dignity from Spinoza's claims.

In a recent compelling article on Spinoza's key notion of *acquiescentia* (self-esteem), Clare Carlisle (2017) has argued that Spinoza distinguishes between three kinds of *acquiescentia*, each grounded in one of Spinoza's three kinds of cognition: imagination, intellect/reason, and *scientia intuitiva*. As one can expect, *acquiescentia* (or self-esteem) resulting from the activity of the imagination (Spinoza's lowest and least reliable kind of cognition) is much less valuable than *acquiescentia* resulting from the activity of reason (the second kind of cognition) and *scientia intuitiva* (the third kind of cognition). For Spinoza, both the second and third kinds of cognition provide us with adequate and true ideas. The emotions resulting from these two higher kinds of cognition are stable and not self-centered:

When *acquiescentia* is based on imagination, it is a hollow, volatile, egotistical satisfaction; when it is rooted in the second, rational kind of cognition, it becomes a stable joy that can be shared with others; within the third kind of cognition, *acquiescentia* signifies the feeling-quality of participation in God's eternity. (Carlisle 2017, 218)

As Carlisle points out, in E3p35s1 Spinoza defines self-love or self-esteem (*Philautia, vel Acquiescentia in se ipso*) as "Joy arising from considering ourselves." He then elaborates:

And since this [self-esteem] is renewed as often as a man considers his virtues, or his power of acting, it also happens that everyone is anxious to tell his own deeds, and show off his powers, both of body and of mind—and that men, for this reason, are troublesome to one another.

... For whenever anyone imagines his own actions, he is affected with Joy (by P53), and with a greater Joy, the more his actions express perfection, and the more distinctly he imagines them, i.e. (by IIP40S1), the more he can distinguish

them from others, and consider them as singular things. . . . *But if he relates what he affirms of himself to the universal idea of man or animal, he will not be so greatly gladdened.* (E3p55s1 / G II/183/1–18; italics added)

In the very last sentence of the passage, Spinoza notes that our recognition of human (or animal) worthiness is not as powerful an affect (i.e., does not elicit as much joy) as the (imaginary) recognition of our unique capabilities as individuals. On the other hand, our imaginary self-esteem as unique individuals is heavily dependent on the recognition of others (“everyone is anxious to tell his own deeds, and show off his powers”) and is subject to the great vicissitudes and instability Spinoza associates with the imagination. As a result, it would seem that neither individual nor group pride provides us with powerful and stable self-esteem and joy.

In contrast to our individual or human pride, the *acquiescentia* that is grounded in *scientia intuitiva*—Spinoza’s third and highest kind of cognition—is stable and equanimous. This kind of *acquiescentia* is “constituted by our consciousness of Being-in-God” (Carlisle 2017, 226), which is stable and permanent:

Whatever we understand by the third kind of cognition we take pleasure in, and our pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as cause.

Demonstration: From this kind of cognition there *arises the greatest satisfaction of Mind* [*Mentis acquiescentia*] there can be (by P27), i.e. (by Def. Aff. XXV), Joy; this Joy is accompanied by the idea of oneself, and consequently (by P30) it is also accompanied by the idea of God, as its cause, q.e.d. (E5p32; italics added. Cf. Carlisle 2017, 226–231)

*Scientia intuitiva*, Spinoza’s third kind of cognition, is a cognition which proceeds from the adequate idea of one of God’s attributes to the adequate cognition of the essence of things (such as your essence, my essence, or the essence of a certain porcupine).<sup>58</sup> In a sense, when we think through the third kind of cognition, we think like God. I cannot elaborate here on many of the details of Spinoza’s demonstration of E5p32 since they assume much of his theory of the affects in Parts 3 and 5 of the *Ethics*. Still, in a nutshell, Spinoza’s main point here is that when we are able to think through *scientia intuitiva* we rejoice and are greatly satisfied by the activity and advancement of our mind.<sup>59</sup>

The *acquiescentia* resulting from the third kind of cognition is not related to my belonging to any group or species *unless* one holds that only humans are capable of such cognition, and that human beings should be respected by virtue of their unique capacity to achieve the third kind of cognition. For all I can tell, Spinoza does not consider the ability to conceive things through *scientia intuitiva* as unique to human minds. The porcupine’s mind takes part in *scientia intuitiva* at least to a rudimentary degree.<sup>60</sup>

So far, our attempts to rescue a notion of a unique human dignity in Spinoza were not crowned with success. He does not seem to have much appreciation for the cults of honor and dignity, and even less so for individuals and species claiming to be chosen or elevated above the rest of nature. Yet, in order to properly address the question of humanity's alleged intellectual uniqueness (as affirmed within the humanist tradition) we must also examine Spinoza's take on the value of reason, rationality, and specifically human rationality.

### 3. Reason and Knowledge

Unlike his older contemporary Thomas Hobbes, who rejected the very notion of the Highest Good,<sup>61</sup> Spinoza employed this notion habitually in almost all of his writings,<sup>62</sup> and it plays a central role in his ethical theory. In spite of some slight variances of stress from one text to another, the core of Spinoza's account identifies the human *summum bonum* with *understanding (intelligere)* and *knowledge*.<sup>63</sup> Understanding, or knowledge,<sup>64</sup> should be the ultimate aim of all our actions, and they should be sought for their own sake. A typical statement of this view appears at the end of Part 4 of the *Ethics*:

[B]lessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive cognition 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.* (E4app4 / G II/267/5–14; italics added)

Given Spinoza's limitless appreciation for understanding and knowledge, one might be tempted to think that on his view the inherent rationality of human beings grants them a unique value above all other things.

Spinoza, however, could hardly accept this argument, at least not without some significant amendments. In spite of his appreciation for the excellence of the human mind,<sup>65</sup> Spinoza is deeply aware of the very limited nature of human rationality. Thus, on one occasion Spinoza reminds his readers that "nature is not constrained by the laws of *human reason*" (TTP chap. 16 / III/190/35; italics added) and that therefore it would be just wishful thinking to "want everything to be directed according to the usage of *our reason*" (TTP chap. 16 / III/191/8; italics added).

Next to his sober recognition of the very restricted nature of human reason, Spinoza also rejects any claim about the exclusivity of human beings as rational

agents. As we have seen before, Spinoza ascribes rationality to other animals as well.<sup>66</sup> In another study, I argued that Spinoza ascribes knowledge of God—in a rudimentary or infinitesimal degree—not only to animals, such as fish, but even to the waves of the sea (cf. Melamed, n.d).

For Spinoza, there is nothing we should value more than understanding and reason. To the extent that various individuals—drunkards, philosophers, porcupines, and worms—instantiate reason, they are valuable.<sup>67</sup> Thus, for Spinoza, human beings are not devoid of value, but their value is limited and proportional to their exhibition of understanding.<sup>68</sup> This moderate assessment of human value is indeed a far cry from the grandiose appraisal of human dignity one may find in some other modern philosophers, but such a sober evaluation of things is Spinoza's trademark.

### Conclusion

Sarah Buss (2012, 343) has convincingly argued that the value of humanity cannot be posited as a brute fact. No doubt, given Spinoza's commitment to thoroughgoing explicability,<sup>69</sup> he would be averse to such a brute fact. In the current paper, we have considered several attempts to provide Spinozistic grounds to human value.<sup>70</sup> Our study showed that Spinoza assigns a limited value to human beings, primarily because he values friendship (which—Spinoza believed—we can have only with humans) and by virtue of humans' (limited) instantiation of rationality. Human rank, dignity and honor, just like most other forms of honor, seem to be vain for Spinoza. The genuine self-esteem Spinoza believed we should have is grounded in our being-in-God, a characteristic we share with everything that is (sea waves and porcupines included).

In his discussion of Spinoza in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel scolds Spinoza for “utterly blotting out the principle of subjectivity, individuality, and personality” (Vol. III, 287). Earlier, in the same lectures, Hegel criticizes the suggestion that Spinoza was an atheist, arguing that Spinoza's view is the precise *opposite* of atheism, since in Spinoza's philosophy *only God* truly exists while finite things (such as human beings) are mere evanescent appearances (Vol. III, 280–281; cf. Melamed 2010a). At this point, Hegel cynically notes, “Those who speak against Spinoza do so as if it were on God's account that they were interested; *but what these opponents are really concerned about is not God, but the finite—themselves*” (Vol. III, 280; italics added). Hegel's quip notwithstanding, Spinoza is not in the business of eliminating human beings, as most of the *Ethics* is dedicated to a painstaking study of the human mind, its emotions, its frequent illusions, and its path toward a blessed life. Still, Hegel is right that Spinoza is striving to undermine our common myths about the nature and value

of humanity, and this critique is arguably as deep and devastating as Spinoza's better-known critique of traditional religion.<sup>71</sup>

### Notes

1. All references to Kant's works are to the volume and page of the Akademie edition. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza's works and letters are to Curley's translation (Spinoza 1985–2016). I rely on Gebhardt's critical edition (Spinoza 1925) for the Latin text of Spinoza and cite the texts in this edition by "G" followed by volume/page/line number. Hence III/82/7–10 refers to lines 7–10 of page 82 of volume III of Gebhardt. I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: TIE—*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*], CM—*Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], TTP—*Theological-Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], TP—*Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Politicus*], Ep.—*Letters*. Passages in the *Ethics* 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. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Descartes are to Descartes 1985 (CSM, cited by volume and page number, thus: CSM II 231). I rely on Adam's and Tannery's critical edition (Descartes 1964–1976) for the original language text of Descartes and cite the texts in this edition by "AT" followed by volume and page. Thus "AT VII 23" stands for page 23 of volume 7 of this edition. This essay has benefited greatly from discussions with, and comments by Arash Abazari, Eckart Förster, Don Garrett, Zach Gartenberg, Sarah Buss, and Nandi Theunissen.
2. For more on Kant's unambiguous bifurcation between persons and things, see Bader 2022, §§ 2.3, 3.2, 3.3.
3. See, for example, Descartes's Second Set of Replies (AT VII 134 / CSM II 96); *Discourse on Method* (AT VI 2; 57–58 / CSM I 112; 140); French preface to the *Principles of Philosophy* (AT IXB 4 / CSM I 192), and *Principles of Philosophy*, I 37 (AT VIII 19–20 / CSM I 205); and Descartes's June 11, 1640, letter to Mersenne (AT III 85 / CSM 148).
4. See Descartes's Third (AT VII 51 / CSM II 35) and Fourth (AT VII 57 / CSM II 40) Meditations.
5. I have amended here Ariew and Garber's translation, rendering *espirits* as "sprints" rather than "minds." For Leibniz, animals have souls (*âmes*), but not *espirits*.
6. Heidegger, Althusser, and Foucault are probably the most prominent figures associated with anti-humanism, though at least in the case of Heidegger, the appropriateness of this association is, to my mind, highly questionable. In his "Letter on Humanism" (1947)—itself a critical response to Sartre's 1946 *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*—Heidegger criticizes the traditional understanding of the essence of man as *animal rationale*. According to Heidegger, this definition fails to recognize man's *unique* relationship with language and Being. "Only man is admitted to the destiny of ek-sistence.

Therefore ek-sistence can also never be thought of as a specific kind of creature among others" ("Letter on Humanism," in Heidegger 1977, 204). Given the working definition I will shortly suggest, Heidegger should be considered an *arch*-humanist.

7. For example, by adding the premise that a subject is bestowed with unique value by virtue of having the right, constitutive, perspective on the world, we can infer (1) from (2). Protagoras's dictum which I shall discuss shortly seems to follow this path.
8. It is easy to detect the Kantian undertones of my characterization of humanism, though a similar view is expressed by Max Black (1983, 99): "[I]n calling human beings *persons*, we are rightfully ascribing to them important properties that cannot, even in principle, apply to other animals or to inanimate material beings." According to Black, self-consciousness is one such distinctive characteristic of human beings (104). *Philosophical* humanism—as characterized above—has only little in common with the *historical* notion of Renaissance humanism. The Renaissance humanism of Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus, and Reuchlin has much more to do with the revival of the *studia humanitatis* than with the veneration of humanity (though admittedly, these were not completely separate). Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (see his *De hominis dignitate*) is almost the only figure of Renaissance humanism who is clearly a champion of the philosophical humanism I characterize above. Let me also note that my characterization of philosophical humanism matches quite well common understandings of the notion suggested by philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias. See, for example, "humanism" in Robert Audi 1995.
9. In the case of Kant this gulf is expressed most sharply in the bifurcation of humanity into the *homo noumenon* and *homo phaenomenon* (6:335). The former is free but not part of nature; the latter is part of nature, but not free.
10. Some famous proponents of the latter view were Wilhelm Dilthey and the Neo-Kantian philosophers Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. Here again, Max Black (1983, 99) provides a clear statement of this position: "I believe that there are features of human personality that are outside the purview of any of the natural or social sciences, and that there is something therefore conceptually—or, if you like, ontologically—special about human beings." As we are about to see shortly, on this issue, too, Spinoza provides a sharp contrast to the humanist stand. In the preface to the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes an assertion that is the *precise* opposite of the Dilthey, Windelband, and Rickert view: "[In this part] I shall treat the nature and powers of the Affects, and the power of the Mind over them, by the same Method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the Mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies" (EIIIpref / G II/138/24–27).
11. Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a. For the "Ode to Man," see Sophocles's *Antigone* (lines 332–375). For a somewhat different assessment of the presence of humanism (in the sense spelled out above) in Ancient Greek culture, see Richard Bett's contribution to this volume. Cf. Vogt 2017, 92–94.
12. See CM II / G I/249/20 and CM II, 3 / G I/254/35.
13. In the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, the appendix to Spinoza's earliest work in which he presented Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* in geometrical order, Spinoza accepts



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- the Cartesian claim that only human minds are thinking substances (CM II, 12 / G I/275/12, though see CM II, 4 (G I/260/11), where Spinoza suggests that *perhaps* animals too are constituted by a union of a soul and a body). In his late philosophy, Spinoza will explicitly criticize the view of the human mind as a substance (see E2p10 and E2p11) and fully reject the Cartesian (and humanist) notion that only human beings are endowed with mental capacities (see E2p13s / G II/96/23–32).
14. TTP, chap. 6 / G III/82. Cf. TTP chap. 16 / G III/190–191.
  15. See E3pref (G II/137/11), and TP chap. 2 (G III/277). For Leibniz’s critical response to this claim of Spinoza, see AG 280.
  16. See E3pref / G II/137/14, and TP chap. 2 / G III/277–278.
  17. See, for example, Blijenbegh’s protest to Spinoza that his claims “make man dependent on God in the *way the elements, stones, and plants are*” (Ep. 20 / G IV/103/15; italics added), and that according to Spinoza’s views “we men would be made like beasts” (Ep. 20 / G IV/109/15). Leibniz’s *Discours de métaphysique* is, in part, a response to Spinoza’s vehement and notorious attack on anthropocentric and anthropomorphic thinking in the appendix to part 1 of the *Ethics*.
  18. See Nietzsche’s July 30, 1881, letter to Franz Overbeck in Nietzsche 1977, 92. Cf. Yonover 2021.
  19. Cf. E4app15; G II/269/26–270/3: “[M]any, from too great an impatience of mind, and a false zeal for religion, have preferred to live among the lower animals rather than among men. They are like boys or young men who cannot bear calmly the scolding of their parents, and take refuge in the army.”
  20. Following the first part of the *Ethics* (*De Deo*) in which Spinoza presents the foundation of his metaphysics, the preface to the second part of the book tells the readers that the rest of the book will zoom in on the issues “that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the *knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness*” (E2pref / G II/84/11–12; italics added).
  21. “E4p37 / G II/235/12–14: The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater.”
  22. Compare this claim with Kant’s assertion in the opening paragraph of the *Anthropology* that “with the irrational animals one can do as one likes” (7:127).
  23. See E2p13s / G II/96/26–97/16. In Ep. 32 / G IV/171/11–12 Spinoza ascribes reasoning to a worm.
  24. E3p57s / G II/187/5; italics added.
  25. For a helpful explanation of this part of Spinoza’s epistemology, see Della Rocca 1996, 20–22.
  26. Notice Spinoza’s formulation: “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 than others of perceiving many things at once” (E2p13s / G II/97/7–10). The last sentence presents the capabilities of both minds and bodies as coming in *degrees*.
  27. See, for example, TTP chap. 16 / G III/189/24 and Ep. 50 / G IV/240/20–24. This view of rights as socially and legally recognized privileges, or as mere social

institutionalization of one's political powers is the historical—medieval and early modern—source of the notion of rights. The much more recent inventions of the notions of civil and human rights should be seen as attempts to annul the exclusivity that was originally built into the notion of rights.

28. "To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all" (E4p18s / G II/223/8–14).
29. "Both the horse and the man are driven by a Lust to procreate; but the one is driven by an equine Lust, the other by a human Lust. So also the Lusts and Appetites of insects, fish, and birds must vary. Therefore, though each individual lives content with his own nature, by which he is constituted, and is glad of it, nevertheless that life with which each one is content, and that gladness, are nothing but the idea, or soul, of the individual. And so the gladness of the one differs in nature from the gladness of the other as much as the essence of the one differs from the essence of the other" (E3p57s / G II/187/9–18).
30. It is noteworthy that Spinoza's interpretation of the primordial sin (in E4p68s / G II/262/1–5) ascribes great importance to Adam's ignorance about the difference between him and the lower animals: "But that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see IIIp27) and to lose his freedom." For Spinoza, we only imitate the affects of beings we deem to be like us (E3p27 / G II/160/5–6).
31. Notice that, unlike the views of Kant and other humanists, Spinoza's argument for the impossibility of friendship with animals due to our heterogenic nature need not assume that our nature is in any sense *better* than other animals. I am not useful as a friend for my spider, just as she is not useful as a friend to me.
32. Friendship between rational (or even mostly rational) people should be *mutual*, since (1) the basic condition for the possibility of friendship (sharing the same nature) is symmetric, and (2) the same (or at least, roughly the same) considerations which lead one rational person to pursue the friendship of another rational person should obtain also in the case of the other.
33. "There are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought. Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those that agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of *entirely the same nature* are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one" (E4p18s / G II/223/3–8; italics added).
34. It is not at all clear whether Spinoza's understanding of essence—as stated in E2d2—allows for distinct things to share fully the same essence.
35. Who, then, would be most useful to the drunk person? If usefulness is determined merely by having very similar essence, it would seem that another drunk person would be more useful to the original drunkard than a philosopher. On the other hand,

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- in several other passages Spinoza asserts that no one is more useful to a human being than a *rational* human being (E4app9 / G II/268–269/20–23).
36. This is the perspective partly developed in part 5 of the *Ethics* when we strive to understand things—at least to some extent—“*sub specie aeternitatis*.”
  37. See E1p17s / G II/63/1–2; E2p10 / G II/92/28–29; and Ep. 54 / G IV/253/10–11: “[T]he difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God.”
  38. God has no passions (E5p17 / G II/291/5–6), but he has active affects.
  39. See E1p20 / G II/64/29; E1p34 / G II/76/35; and E2p3 / G II/87/5–6, respectively.
  40. Namely, from God’s objective perspective, human beings are valuable to each other.
  41. In a reciprocal manner, God cannot be valuable for a human being qua friend. As we shall see in Section 3, *knowledge of God* (or, what is the same for Spinoza, *knowledge simpliciter*) is humanity’s *summum bonum*.
  42. If God indeed loves human beings, he should also value them qua object of his love. So might the argument go.
  43. The reference here is to E5p36 / G II/302/13–17: “The Mind’s intellectual Love of God is the very Love of God by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human Mind’s essence, considered under a species of eternity; i.e., the Mind’s intellectual Love of God is part of the infinite Love by which God loves himself.” The same considerations which lead Spinoza to ascribe intellectual love of God to human beings apply, though in a more rudimentary manner, to the minds of all other beings.
  44. For the reasons for my doubtful tone, see E5p17c / G II/291/15 (“Strictly speaking, God loves no one, and hates no one”) and Melamed 2020.
  45. See E1app / G II/77/20.
  46. Because the differences among creatures are negligible in comparison to God’s absolute infinity: “[T]he difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God” (Ep. 54 / G IV/253/10–11).
  47. TTP chap. 3 / G III/44/1.
  48. TTP chap. 6 / G III/82/4–6; III/88/10. Cf. the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*.
  49. Cf. Leibniz’s claim in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* that human beings “are, as it were, of [God’s] race [*quasi de sa race*]” (§36 / AG 67).
  50. Spinoza’s understanding of love goes through several important transformations through his writings. I detect those in Melamed 2020. In the current chapter I have attempted to stick to the features of Spinoza’s understanding of love that are more or less stable throughout his philosophical development.
  51. Compare with the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1095b16–1096a8). Cf. Manzini 2009, 56–57.
  52. Thus, if honor could be conducive for either physical survival or for the acquisition of knowledge, we should use it at need (while making sure not to become addicted).
  53. For example, if one were to invoke the national sentiment of, say, the citizens of Utopia, by claiming that it is unbecoming of “the great moral heritage of Utopians” to treat foreigners in a discriminatory manner, such use of group honor would be a legitimate political instrument in spite of the vanity of group honor.

54. On the alleged ambiguity of the notion of human dignity—or its being a “multifaceted term”—see Waldron 2015, 15–19. I am using ‘dignity’ as equivalent to ‘non-instrumental worth’ following Kant (4:435) and in agreement with much of the current literature.
55. E3p52 (G II/179/31–33): “If we have previously seen an object together with others, or we imagine it has nothing but what is common to many things, we shall not consider it so long as one which we imagine to have something singular [*aliquid singulare*].”
56. For Spinoza’s taxonomy of the three kinds of cognition—imagination (*imaginatio*), intellect/reason (*ratio*), and *scientia intuitiva*—see E2p40s2 / G II/122/1. For Spinoza’s demonstration that cognitions of the second and third kind must be true, see E2p41 / G II/122/33. For an overview of this taxonomy, its central role in Spinoza’s epistemology, and its development in Spinoza’s writing, see Melamed 2013a.
57. In E3DA27e / G II/197/10, Spinoza also stresses the cultural relativity of what one deems honorable.
58. See E2p40s2 / G II/122/18.
59. For more on *scientia intuitiva*, see Melamed 2013a.
60. Two crucial features of *scientia intuitiva* are its (1) being free from reliance on universals (unlike cognitions of the first and second kind, which employ universals), and (2) its conception of the essential features of things as grounded in God’s essence. I am not aware of any text of Spinoza that shows he believed animals must think only through universals. As to (2), in E2p47s / G II/128/13–14, Spinoza argues that “God’s . . . essence . . . is *known to all*,” and the considerations he employs there seem to be perfectly applicable to the case of nonhuman minds (see Melamed, n.d.). I assume that for Spinoza animal minds would have some rudimentary variant of *scientia intuitiva* by grasping the most trivial causal trajectory between God’s essence and the simplest things.
61. 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” (I 11 1).
62. See, for example, TIE §13 / G II/8/18; CM I 6 / G I/247/31; TTP chap. 4 / G III/60; E4p28d / G II/228/10; E4app4 / G II/267/1; E5p25 / G II/296/23–24; Ep. 21 / IV/127/34; and Ep. 43 / IV/220/31–221/21.
63. Sometimes Spinoza refers specifically to “knowledge of God,” but since for Spinoza everything is in God, a fortiori every knowledge is knowledge of God. See TTP Ch. 4 / G III/59/60. ‘Reason’ (*ratio*) is used by Spinoza in more than one sense (see LeBuffe 2018, xii). In one of these uses, ‘reason’ is virtually equivalent to ‘understanding’ and ‘knowledge.’
64. For Spinoza, understanding and knowledge are intimately related. Genuine understanding cannot result in false belief. His bar for genuine understating is quite high and requires adequate knowledge of the cause of the thing understood.
65. “We ought to reckon human power not so much by the strength of the Body as by the strength of the Mind” (TP chap. 2 / G III/280/19).
66. See Section 1.

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67. In passing, let me note that for Spinoza the function of reason is *not* merely (or even primarily) *instrumental*. Reason and understanding not only allow us to find the proper means for a given end but also tell us what are the proper goals we should pursue in life. For example, by unmasking the irrational elements in our fear and conception of human death, understanding helps us realize that while we should try to avoid danger, we should not fear death (see E4p67; 4p69d / G II/261/1; II/262/14). More important than the length of our lives is the kind of lives we pursue. Understanding the nature of human beings, the nature of God, and the natures of eternity and temporality allows us to scrutinize and revise our common beliefs (and emotions) and set the right goals for our conduct. Ridding ourselves from the various myths of humanism is a crucial step in this process, at the end of which we may realize that there is a continuity between the death of a human being and the death of a tree.
68. Is understanding valuable *for God*? Spinoza defines the good as “what we certainly know to be useful for us” (E4d1 / G II/209/12–13), and shortly afterward he spells out the last definition: “[W]e call good . . . what is useful to . . . preserving our being . . . i.e. . . . what increases . . . our power of acting” (E4p8d / G II/215/23–25). God needs no assistance in preserving its being since God’s being is secured by its very essence (in fact, God’s essence just is existence; E1p20 / G II/64/29). For this reason, it seems that for Spinoza’s God nothing is good or evil (cf. E4p68 / G II/261/13). Still, there is one thread Spinoza develops toward the very conclusion of the *Ethics* which opens the possibility that not only is progress *toward* perfection good, but that even being (permanently) in a state of perfection is good (E5p33d / G II/301/1). In this sense, God’s intellectual perfection, i.e., his permanent and infinite understanding, would be valued as good. I am indebted to Sarah Buss for posing this question.
69. For Spinoza’s assertion that everything must be explainable, see E1a2 / G II/47/22–23. Cf. Melamed and Lin 2020, §2.
70. Of course, one could entertain alternative grounds for human value and then consider to what extent the Spinozist is likely to accept them. Thus, we may, for example, consider Theunissen’s (2018, 369) insightful suggestion that valuers are of value because they are good for themselves. The Spinozist is not likely to follow that path as well, however, since for her everything is “good for itself” insofar as any thing “posits the thing’s essence and does not take it away” (E3p4d / G II/145/25). In other words, it belongs to the nature of every thing to strive to persevere in its existence (as having the specific essence, or nature, it has). For an insightful discussion of this doctrine, see Garrett 2003. Notably, Theunissen (2020, 109) would allow for many animals “to be valuers in the sense that they are able to respond to practically relevant features of the world.”
71. For a preliminary overview of Spinoza’s critique of our humanistic myths, see Melamed 2010b.

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