**Comments on Youpa’s “Spinoza’s Ethical Objectivism”**

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*Joint Meeting of the Indiana Philosophical Association and the Midwest Study Group of the North American Kant Society, 3/8/2013*

**0. Opening**

I enjoyed reading this paper; I think that it’s a very interesting and worthwhile project especially since it contributes to our understanding of a neglected aspect of early modern philosophy, namely, the moral philosophy of the rationalists. Overall, I think that Youpa’s thesis is probably correct, that is, that Spinoza is an ethical objectivist. However, I will raise some natural concerns and questions about the paper that I think once dealt with will make the paper more clear and the argument more convincing.

**1. ‘Objectivism’: a misleading term**

Youpa begins by claiming that Spinoza is an ethical objectivist; he defines ‘objective property’ as a “property whose instance(s) does (do) not directly depend on anyone’s attitudes, emotions, or beliefs about its existence and nature” (1). I have some concerns about Youpa’s use of ‘objective’:

Near the end of the paper Youpa suggests that Spinoza is a moral realist: “it is our corrigible messiness that is reflected in the complexity of Spinoza’s objectivist, or realist, theory of natural goodness and natural badness” (13). Here, Youpa seems to conflate moral objectivism, in his sense, and moral realism (presumably in the standard sense, i.e. roughly, moral judgments are true due to moral facts). I think that Spinoza can be interpreted as a moral realist, but it’s not clear to me that this is what Youpa is doing, primarily because his definition of ‘objective property’ doesn’t quite fit the realist bill. If he is arguing that Spinoza is a moral realist, then why does he label Spinoza’s position “ethical objectivism?” Is there some dimension to Youpa’s
notion of objectivism that separates Spinoza from standard brands of moral realism? If not, then I suggest that Youpa present Spinoza as a moral realist and consequently adjust his notion of moral properties because, as it stands, his definition of ‘objectivity property’ is amenable to some forms of anti-realism. This is because claiming that a property is ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ does not tell us much about its ontological status. For example, an anti-realist like Sharon Street (specifically, she holds formalist metaethical constructivism) argues that our normative practices are objective in the sense that moral judgments can be true (or “successful”) regardless of how we (directly) feel about them. Nevertheless, she doesn’t admit natural moral properties into her ontology (which is the primary reason why she counts as an anti-realist). Instead, she tells us an evolutionary story about how our non-human ancestors (some creatures like amoebas) evolved into the types of beings that value things or rather brought value to things – On her story, this occurred because it helped them survive. On this view, then, normative practices began with the way in which these creatures came to value things, but once these practices were set in place they became objective relative to our evolutionary past (in this sense, they indirectly depend on our ancestor’s attitudes, emotions, or beliefs). Essentially, what I am suggesting is this: the term ‘objective’ is misleading in that it fails to fully capture the ontological status of moral properties (in the realist’s sense) because it is more of an epistemological term (at least as Youpa is using it in the present context). In other words, mind-independence is not a sufficient condition for realism. This is problematic because (I think) some anti-realists, specifically constructivists, might be perfectly fine with Youpa's definition of ‘objective property’. But given Youpa’s analysis of the text, it seems to me that Spinoza can be interpreted as a thoroughgoing moral realist (and I think that this is what Youpa is trying to show), and so it might be best to make some adjustments to this definition.
2. **Youpa’s account of ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’**

In regard to what constitutes good and bad, Youpa claims “goodness is identical to the property of power enhancement and badness is identical to the property of power impairment” (6). I have a few concerns about this criterion.

a. **What about the causes of indefeasibly good/bad emotions?** Youpa argues that various emotions such as cheerfulness or melancholy satisfy the above criterion for goodness/badness. However, at P30, Spinoza seems to suggest that it’s not the emotions as such that are good or bad; rather, it’s the cause of these emotions that are good or bad: “We call evil what is the cause of Sadness” (emphasis mine). At certain points in the paper, Youpa does acknowledge that the causes of emotions can be good or bad. To use his example, a shot of whiskey can increase my power to act (albeit in one part of the moral agent), and thus can be good (note: it’s a defeasible good because it can also make me drunk and belligerent, which effectively decreases my power to act virtuously). Nevertheless, Youpa places more emphasis on the underivative goodness or badness of the emotions. But it seems that the causes of these emotions deserve more attention. Specifically, are there indefeasibly good properties that cause, for example, cheerfulness? Indefeasibly bad properties that cause, for example, pride? (I take it that the indefeasible varieties of goodness/badness are the metaphysically interesting ones).

b. **Why does Spinoza use the locution “we call” in his explanation of good and evil?** Returning to P30, notice that Spinoza uses the phrase “we call” [vocamus] in his description of good and evil: “We call evil what is the cause of Sadness. Also, at 4p8 he says: “We call good, or evil, what is useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being (by D1 and D2), that is (by IIIP7), what increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our power of acting.” Such passages suggest that moral agents
aren’t merely tracking what is good or bad, but that they play some role in determining what is
good or bad. I might be over-sensitive to this locution, but I think that it’s flagging something
that requires further attention. To further motivate this worry consider the following passage: “as
far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in
themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we
compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and
bad, and also indifferent” (preface, IV: 5-10; emphasis mine).

c. What is the ontological status of goodness/badness? I think the following claim by Youpa
requires further explanation: “apart from particular enhancements to a single things’ power, there
is no such thing as goodness. There is no unique property of goodness over and above the
increases in power that single things undergo. Likewise, apart from particular impairments, there
is no such thing as badness” (6). Just to be clear: is Youpa providing a reductive account of
goodness and badness, that is, are these properties reduced to particular power enhancements and
power impairments?

3. In what sense are emotions not mind-dependent?

Youpa defines ‘objective property’ as properties that are mind-independent, that is, they do not
“directly depend on anyone’s attitudes, emotions, or beliefs about its existence and nature” (1).
But it is puzzling that Youpa ends up claiming that these properties are emotions, e.g. rational
self-esteem (an indefeasibly good emotion) and pride (an indefeasibly bad emotion). It seems
that emotions are the types of things that are mind-dependent, that is, they wouldn’t exist apart
from minds. Youpa could respond to this concern by saying this: whether a certain emotion is
good/bad doesn’t depend on second-order attitudes, emotions, or beliefs about that emotion. But
here’s a response: if we identify (or reduce?) goodness and badness with (to) emotions of moral
agents, then, strictly speaking, if human beings didn’t exist, then goodness/badness wouldn’t exist. This might be an oversimplification, but as I understand it, according to Spinoza, though humans are modes of the infinite substance they do not exist necessarily (unlike God, their essence doesn’t involve necessary existence). Thus, goodness and badness might ontologically depend on the existence of human beings, which gets us dangerously close to anti-realism. This is a problem because as Spinoza states at P31 “insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good.” Thus, it seems like Spinoza wants to say that moral properties are necessary, and so we need to explain away this tension, that is, the contingency of moral agents with the necessity of moral properties. (Note: to illustrate his definition, Youpa explains that “goodness and badness are objective properties in the same sense that diabetes and dropsy are objective properties” (2). Dropsy and diabetes aren’t necessary properties. Rather, they are contingent. In this sense, then, this analogy is not helpful).

4. What about the intellectual life of the moral agent?

I take it that, for Spinoza, another aspect of power is virtue. In fact, Spinoza suggests that power is identical with virtue. 4D8: “By virtue and power I understand the same thing, i.e. (by Iiip7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone.” As I understand it, for Spinoza, there is an intellectual dimension to well-being that is connected with his conception of virtue. So, can things besides emotions, e.g. intellectual beliefs/activities, register increases or decreases in power?