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Please do not quote, but comments are welcome.*

CHEERFULNESS (*HILARITAS*)

Valtteri Viljanen

According to Spinoza, there are three primary affects: *joy*, *sadness*, and *desire*, from which “the rest arise” (E3p11s). We feel joy when our intrinsic power is increased or aided (E3p11). There are two basic kinds of joy: pleasure (*titillatio*) and cheerfulness (*hilaritas*). While “pleasure [is] ascribed to a man when one part [...] is affected more than the rest, [...] cheerfulness [is] ascribed to him when all are equally affected.” Given that as complex individuals, humans consist of many different parts in a certain ratio, pleasures affecting only some parts—even by increasing their power—may prove to be harmful for the whole (think of, e.g., eating delicious but unhealthy food). But since cheerfulness affects all parts of our bodies and minds equally, thus helping us to maintain our ratio, it “cannot be excessive, but is always good” (E4p42). Scholars seem to disagree about whether cheerfulness should be conceived of as a passion or an action. Some if not most (for instance Michael LeBuffe) consider it a species of passive joy, and Spinoza explicitly refers to it as a passion (E3p11s, E3p42). However, Andrew Youpa sees cheerfulness as an active affect, which sounds quite intuitive as well, as I will explain below. Still, as far as (the admittedly scarce) textual evidence is considered, it is more contentious to regard cheerfulness as an action than as a passion.

Edefaff3 ends with an intriguing remark: “[C]heerfulness, pleasure, melancholy, and pain [...] *are chiefly [potissimum] related to the body*” (emphasis added). Now although doing mathematics or obtaining philosophical insight arguably result in pervasive mental joy, it is difficult to pinpoint their *bodily* counterpart. In the same vein, life according to what Spinoza calls *the order of the intellect* inevitably results, given parallelism (E2p7), in a body ordered in an isomorphic fashion (E5p10); thus, intellectual life—clearly involving joy equally related to all parts of the mind—cannot but contain a notable amount of cheerfulness. The problem is not only that it is difficult to see how this “ordering of

the body” could be *chiefly* related to it but also that this cannot account for *passive* cheerfulness, for everything intellectual is decidedly active.

In line with these problems, Spinoza admits that cheerfulness “is more easily conceived than observed” and that our emotions are usually different types of pleasure (*titillatio*) (E4p44s). Accordingly, examples of cheerfulness are hard to find, but three possible examples come to mind. First, spending time in nature, for instance in a forest, or going out for a hike in a beautiful place are widely acknowledged to increase one’s overall well-being. Second, engaging in social activities in good-humored company is likely to have a positive overall effect on us. Third, listening to (which is arguably passive) or playing (which is arguably active) music, or going to the movies or theater, seem promising candidates for endeavors that could give rise to cheerfulness. In fact, E4p45s suggests that activities such as these are prone to make us cheerful, at least when enjoyed in moderation.

Key passages

E3p11s; Edefaff3; E4p42; E4p44s; E4p45s.

Secondary literature

James, Susan. 2014. “Spinoza, the Body, and the Good Life.” – *Essays on Spinoza’s Ethical Theory*, edited by Matthew J. Kisner and Andrew Youpa, 143–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kisner, Matthew J. 2011. *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LeBuffe, Michael. 2009. “The Anatomy of the Passions.” – *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, edited by Olli Koistinen, 188–222. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Youpa, Andrew. 2020. *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Related entries

Action and passion; affect; blessedness; cause; desire; essence; individual; intuitive knowledge; joy; parallelism; perfection; pleasure; virtue.