

Spinoza on the Highest Good

- Gary Zabel

Like Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and most other ancient philosophers, Spinoza sets for philosophy a very elevated goal, namely to guide human beings to the realization of their highest good, or as Spinoza also puts it, the ultimate human perfection. Though Spinoza follows the ancients in calling this goal happiness (*felicitas*), he also follows thinkers of the medieval Jewish and Christian traditions in naming it salvation (*salus*), joy (*gaudio*), blessedness (*beatitudo*), acquiescence of spirit (*animi acquiescentia*), glory (*gloria*), and love (*amore*). Finally, in an expression that gives the ultimate good a modern political significance as well as one pertaining to the life of the individual person, Spinoza calls it freedom (*libertas*). One of the keys to grasping Spinoza's conception of the highest good is to see how these various strains (ancient, medieval, and modern) enter into a combination in his work that is radical in its significance, and that brings down upon him, not only the wrath of the conservative religious and political forces of his day, but also the consternation of his liberal friends.

Let's proceed by examining the three historical strains that enter into Spinoza's conception of the highest good and the transformations he works on each of them.

The most important treatment of ancient moral philosophy is undoubtedly the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle. This is because it both is the culmination in classical Athens of the philosophical inquiry into the good begun by Socrates and carried further by Plato, and poses the question and terms in which most philosophers would continue to discuss ethics in the Alexandrian and Roman empires,

and then in Northern Europe and the Arab World right down through the Middle Ages. The central questions that Aristotle raises are: What is the good that is unique to human beings? And how is it possible to achieve it?

According to Aristotle, every entity has a good that is unique to its kind and that represents the completion of its nature. The good is a *telos*, a goal or end that the entity in question seeks to achieve by performing the functions specifically appropriate to the sort of thing it is. So, for example, while human beings are capable of taking in nutrients and growing, the human good cannot lie in the perfected exercise of these functions, because plants and other animals engage in them as well. But neither can it lie in the capacity to move, sense, or desire, since these activities are common to the entire animal kingdom, not just to its human members. Since the only activity unique to human beings is the exercise of rationality, for Aristotle the human good must lie in the full development of reason. This is the same thing as attaining the state of happiness (*eudaimonia*). Happiness is that end for the sake of which we engage in all other activities, but which is not itself the means to any further goal. Since the full development of rationality is the specifically human good, it alone can serve as the ultimate end of human life, and so must be identical with happiness.

Spinoza adopts a great deal from Aristotle's treatment. For him too the purpose of moral philosophy is to enable people to achieve happiness, and happiness lies in the full development of reason. But, unlike Aristotle, Spinoza refuses to call happiness the perfection of human nature, or the good that is natural to human beings. This is because he rejects the idea that anything in nature, i.e. in reality as a whole, lacks perfection or fulfillment. The concepts good and bad, perfect and imperfect do not apply to things as they are in themselves, but only to things as they are evaluated from given perspectives. The venom of a snake for example is bad for me, but good for the snake that bites me. A house that conforms to my idea of what a house should be is a perfect house, but it is an imperfect one for you who have a different idea in mind. For Spinoza, since anything that exists has its cause in the power of God, nothing in the universe

is lacking in something it ought to possess; in other words, nothing is more or less perfect, more or less good than anything else that has being. Good and bad, perfection and imperfection are not aspects of reality, but rather ways of thinking, modes of assessing things, what Spinoza calls "beings of reason." They are concepts that we introduce in order to evaluate the contribution made by other entities and processes to the advance of our own interests. The development of rationality is good for Spinoza, not because it is the completion of our nature - our nature is always complete - but rather because it increases our *conatus*, the power to persist in our being. We are able to speak of the perfection of human nature, or of its imperfection, only from this vantage point as well, namely from the perspective of the increase or decrease of power. By rejecting Aristotle's teleological conception of nature, Spinoza abandons the idea that there is an ontological hierarchy in which some kinds of being are superior to others (for example, living beings to nonliving ones, man to animals, and so on), and therefore gives a radically different meaning to the notion of the highest good.

In spite of the fact that his critics accused him of atheism, in his early years Spinoza was steeped in religious activity, both as a gifted student of Torah in the Portuguese Synagogue School in Amsterdam, and, after his excommunication, as a participant in meetings of the Collegiants (a sect without ministers, somewhat similar to the Quakers) and other unorthodox Christian sects in Rijnsburg. His use of such terms as salvation, blessedness, glory and so on for the highest good is obviously connected with his religious past. But just as in the case of his appropriation of ancient philosophical concepts of the highest good, Spinoza's use of religious terminology in characterizing the ultimate human perfection profoundly alters the meaning of the traditional ideas. This is because Spinoza rejects both anthropomorphic views of God, especially the idea of God as King or Judge, and the usual idea of sin, which involves that of freedom of the will and its misuse. But if Spinoza is right that there is no sin in the accepted sense because there is no freedom of the will, since all events unfold in accordance with inexorable natural laws, then what can salvation mean? And if he is correct that God is not a King or Judge, then what can glory and blessedness mean? More broadly,

what content can any religious language have given Spinoza's rejection of ideas deeply embedded in what most people understand as religion?

In his earliest philosophical work, the unfinished *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*, Spinoza gives his motive for pursuing philosophy:

After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile; seeing that none of the objects of my hopes and fears contained in themselves anything either good or bad, except in so far as the mind is affected by them, I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good having power to communicate itself, which would affect the mind singly, to the exclusion of all else: whether, in fact, there might be anything of which the discovery and attainment would enable me to enjoy continuous, supreme, and eternal joy.

We should note here the basically religious character of this passage, which is essentially an account of the search for salvation in terms that Spinoza's contemporaries, and indeed religious seekers of all generations, would have had no trouble recognizing. According to Spinoza, most people devote their lives to the pursuit of goals that are not genuinely capable of satisfying them. In particular, wealth, fame, and sensuous pleasure must end by disappointing us because these supposed goods are perishable. Love of such things must ultimately result in sadness when they cease to exist. In addition, since ordinary goods are finite as well as impermanent, one person's enjoyment of them means that other people are excluded from such enjoyment. They are, therefore, causes of envy and other forms of conflict. Only something eternal can satisfy my love in such a way that it will never be disappointed, and only something infinite can fulfill the desires of all who seek to enjoy it. Eternity and infinity of course are characteristics that the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions attribute to God. For Spinoza, as for the traditional religious believer, achievement of the highest human end demands that we direct our

love, not to the usual objects of human endeavor, but rather to the eternal and infinite Being.

However, for Spinoza, that eternal and infinite Being is properly called "Nature" as well as "God." The expression he uses in the *Ethics* is *Deus sive Natura*, "God, or Nature," where the "or" introduces, not an alternative possibility, but rather an equivalent meaning. But what do we gain by using the word "Nature" as an equivalent for "God?"

In answering this question, it is important to remember that Spinoza's lifetime overlapped those of both Galileo and Newton, that he developed contacts with scientists he met through his father's business as well as through his teacher, Franciscus van den Enden, and that he was himself, not only a lens grinder, but also a researcher in optics. It should come as no surprise then that Spinoza conceives of Nature in a way that is basically in agreement with the modern science that is emerging in his era.

From the vantage point of science, Nature is an intelligible nexus of laws or regularities in accordance with which events unfold. We understand things when we grasp them as the effects of causes to which they are connected by law-governed relationships. In Spinoza's own words "... all things which come to pass, come to pass according to the eternal order and fixed laws of Nature." Since "God" and "Nature" are words for the same Being, to the extent that we know natural laws and regularities, we know the ways of God. (Spinoza does indeed distinguish between ordinary scientific knowledge, which proceeds through laborious step-by-step reasoning, and the highest form of knowledge, which grasps the essential patterns of Nature intuitively, but he adds that intuitive knowledge emerges from the prior accumulation of more pedestrian forms of scientific learning.)

Because of the fundamental identity of God and Nature, knowledge of Nature and love of God are also identical. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes this clear when he identifies the highest form of knowledge with *amor Dei intellectualis*, "intellectual love of God." God in Spinoza's sense, then, is not a Divine Person who loves us just as we love Him, nor a Judge who ultimately determines our fate on the basis

of the supposedly free decisions we have made. God is identical with Nature, both as an infinite productive power that brings finite things into being (*natura naturans*), and as the realized system of finite things in their law-governed activities and relations with one another (*natura naturata*). Yet knowledge of Nature as knowledge of the eternal and infinite Being results in a condition similar to that which the religious call salvation. By cultivating such knowledge, we experience a "continuous, supreme, and eternal joy," the result of a love that finally discovers the only thing genuinely capable of satisfying it. It is a joy that no one can monopolize because knowledge is not a scarce or finite resource, and therefore is not exclusionary. In Spinoza's words in the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*, God, or Nature has "the power to communicate itself," not only to me but to all others as well. That communication is to be found neither in miracles nor in visions nor in scripture, but rather in an exercise of the intellect that is augmented by being shared with others, in what we might call the collective life of the mind.

This universal communicability of the highest good lies at the foundation of Spinoza's approach to the idea of freedom as a political as well as personal goal. Of course freedom cannot mean for Spinoza freedom of the will. For him, human beings are not a "kingdom within a kingdom;" they are subject to the same laws as the rest of Nature. Freedom of the will is an illusion that stems from the fact that we experience our actions, but not the complex causal sequences of which our actions are effects. Still the remarkable final book of the *Ethics*, Book V, is titled *De Potentia Intellectus Seu De Libertate Humana* ("On the Power of the Intellect, or On Human Freedom"). Freedom is another name for the highest good, the state of ultimate human perfection that Spinoza set out to discover in his first work, *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*. But freedom in what sense?

At the very beginning of Book I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza gives a definition of freedom:

That thing is called free, which exists solely by the

necessity of its own nature, and of which the action is determined by itself alone. On the other hand, that thing is necessary, or rather constrained, which is determined by something external to itself to a fixed and definite mode of existence or action.

It becomes clear very early in Book I that only God, the Infinite Substance, can be free in the full sense of the word, because only God exists and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature; only God is self-caused. Everything else is a “mode,” a modification, or finite expression of God, in other words, a limited aspect of a universe that far exceeds it in power. Whether and how a mode exists depends upon an unimaginably complex concatenation of causes, most of which lie outside that mode itself. So for example, you as a mode, a finite body and mind, exist because your parents happened to meet one another when they did, because sperm and ovum successfully joined, because your mother was able to get to the hospital on time, because the hospital had competent doctors, and so on, and each of these conditions themselves depended upon a prior set of causal circumstances, each of which was the result of another complex confluence of causes, and so on and on, *ad infinitum*. Your decisions and actions similarly are the result of complex chains of causes, including presumably, your genetic makeup, the chemical conditions that govern the transmission of neuronal impulses in your brain, the social norms you have internalized, your psychological drives and conflicts, and so on.

Still, according to Spinoza, although you can never completely free yourself from the determining influence of external causes, you can become the internal cause of at least some of your actions. How?

The primary way in which we are determined by external causes is by acting in accordance with ideas we have passively received. You may decide to study to get in to medical school, for example, because your parents told you from the time you were a young child that being a doctor is a noble and lucrative profession. Or you may decide to join the army because you have grown up in a southern town with an important army base and an ethic of patriotism, and most of your

friends have gone into the army. In the first case you act under the idea of becoming a doctor, and in the second case under the idea of doing your patriotic duty by becoming a soldier but - and here is the important point - in both cases you are acting on the basis of ideas that you have never questioned, ideas you have passively acquired from outside causes. In Spinoza's words, you are "constrained . . . determined by something external" to your own nature. Now let's say that you come across a teacher who encourages you to think for yourself, to examine pre-given ideas critically, submitting them to rational evaluation. You begin to question the notion that being a doctor or being a soldier is the most important goal to which you can aspire. You may choose instead to become a farmer, or a dancer, or to drive a big rig, or whatever. Your actions in such a case would continue to be determined, but no longer by external causes. Instead they would be effects of an internal cause, genuine expressions of your own nature. They would be free actions, even though they would remain (internally) determined.

Now notice in the examples I have given that you did not become free on your own. Your teacher communicated to you the difference between passivity and activity, between unthinking acceptance and critical evaluation, between prejudice in the sense of unreasoning pre-judgment and rationality. For Spinoza, we are not born free. We are born weak, unreasoning beings, at the mercy of natural and social forces much more powerful than ourselves. If we are lucky, we achieve freedom, and we do so in part with the assistance of those who already know what it means to be free. In short, we need others to help us become rationally self-determining, so that even individual freedom demands that we create a free society, a society that supports our own quest for freedom. This is the root of Spinoza's impassioned opposition to all forms of tyranny, whether that of a tyrannical ruler who wants slaves instead of free citizens, or that of a tyrannical religion or other ideology that thrives by suppressing our ability to think freely. By engaging in the process of thinking in the full sense of developing an interconnected system of rational ideas, we come to see ourselves as part of the infinite self-determining universe as a whole. We grasp ourselves as a finite part of God's infinite nature, as an expression, or mode, of the one free, absolutely infinite

Being.

Of course this is a daunting task, and not just because we must free ourselves from ideas that have been implanted in our minds by external sources, from what Spinoza calls passive, fragmentary “inadequate” ideas. Every idea that is inadequate in our minds also finds expression in our bodies as a passive emotion. Spinoza’s theory of the emotions is detailed and complex, but it goes to the heart of his conception of freedom, because slavery, or bondage is, in the last instance, bondage to the emotions. Like all other modes of the infinite substance, human beings are finite entities that persist in existence as long as they are able, and such persistence is an expression of power, or what Spinoza calls in Latin, *conatus*. Only the power of God as the self-creative totality of everything that exists is infinite and eternal. The power that finite entities have to remain in existence is limited, subject to fluxuations, to increases and diminutions, and finally to the disappearance that marks the end of its allotted span of time. In the case of human beings, whose minds and bodies are made up of unimaginably complex parts, increases in the power to persist in existence are registered as active emotions, and decreases in the power to persist in existence are registered as passive emotions.

Imagine a situation in which you have a sense of wellbeing, perhaps when a love affair or your work experience or your academic life is going well. You feel joy, confidence in the future, and a surplus of energy that may express itself in all sorts of creative ways, in your studies, at work, in sports, in artistic activity, or in the ordinary details of your personal life. Spinoza would say that you are experiencing active emotions. Now imagine the reverse situation. A love affair has gone bad, or you are not doing well at work or at school. In this case you feel sadness, despair in the face of the future, and a decrease in energy that expresses itself in diminished activity in the various spheres of your life. You are in the grip of passive emotions. In both cases you are under the influence of external forces, say of a lover who accepts or spurns you, but in the first case your power or energy increases, and in the second case it diminishes, a diminution that reaches its ultimate limit in death.

Now only the person who is able to generate ideas from the necessity of his or her own nature is fully in control of his or her powers, in other words, is the internal source of adequate ideas. Such self-created active ideas are expressed on the level of the body as joyful emotions. For Spinoza, the only ideas that are fully adequate, and therefore genuine expressions of our nature, are those that express our understanding of the nature of the universe and the mind's place within it, which is simply to say, the nature of God. We achieve freedom, liberation from the bondage of the passive emotions, by coming to understand, to whatever extent possible, the nature of the one eternal, infinite Being of which we are limited expressions. In this way, we come to share, though always imperfectly, in the infinite power of God. The emotional state that results from this act of sharing in the divine intellect is not merely an active emotion, but one whose source lies entirely within our now expanded nature. As we saw earlier, Spinoza calls it *amor Dei intellectualis*, intellectual love of God. It is in fact that "continuous, supreme, and eternal joy" that Spinoza set out to discover in his first writings.

In his book, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, the 20th century French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze grasps the political significance of Spinozist joy. According to him, Spinoza is an enemy of the "sad passions," of everything that makes us despise, curse, and reject life. Hatred, anger, contempt, envy, indignation, fear, despair, shame, cruelty, revenge, and remorse are passive emotions, and have in common the fact that they weaken our power of existing and acting. The highest good by contrast demands that we master and vanquish these sad passions, and that we substitute for them powerful, active, joyful, affirmative modes of being.

The idea that we need to love life rather than hating it seems like an obvious lesson. According to Deleuze, however, Spinoza goes on to show that the realization of that idea requires measures that are not at all obvious or commonly adopted. Most difficult of all is the fact that such measures place us in radical opposition to our own culture. It is easy to miss this point, since, in his two political works, *Theological-Political Treatise* and the unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza seems

to reject revolution, or even nonconformity, emphasizing instead the benefits we derive from security and the assistance of even the most benighted members of society. But appearances are deceptive here. Spinoza's arguments against revolution are directed principally against the rightwing alliance of monarchists and Calvinist fundamentalists who were attempting to overthrow the liberal Dutch Republic at the time, and nearly succeeded with the assassination of the Chief Pensionary of Holland, Spinoza's friend, Jan De Witt. Spinoza's councils against nonconformity, on the other hand, are warnings against needlessly antagonizing the "multitude," and so extend no further than the surface forms of social interaction. What Spinoza's enemies - and there were many - understood was that at deeper levels his ethics are revolutionary in character. This is because the sad passions are not simply individual foibles; there are the traps that oppressive powers lay for our enslavement. Religious fanatics (and, we must now add, secular ones as well) and tyrants make their careers by cultivating the sad passions, by weakening the multitude, setting its members against themselves and one another. Fear, cruelty, shame, remorse and so on are political and religious obstacles that stand in the way of our freedom. What benefit after all could fanatics and tyrants derive from a genuinely free humanity, a humanity in full possession of its powers, a humanity that loves life rather than despising it? What careers could they make from a community's joyful affirmation of life? That is why every revolution that succeeds in throwing off a tyrant marks the event with an expression of public joy in which the "multitude" celebrates a freedom that unites all those who rejoice. We saw this recently when the crowds in all of their diversity assembled in Liberation Square in Cairo to celebrate Mubarak's ouster - young and old, secular forces and religious ones, men and women, workers and professionals, Coptic Christians and Muslim Brothers - abandoning passive and divisive emotions of hatred and fear for unifying, active ones.

The Calvinist Synod of Dordt understood quite well what it was facing when it recognized the author behind Spinoza's anonymously published *Theological-Political Treatise*, and vilified the book as a "work forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil." Even religious liberals and republicans tried to put distance between themselves and

Spinoza by criticizing the book, so unsparing was his attack against monarchist politics and fundamentalist religion. In the end, Spinoza sacrificed everything – money, reputation, even life itself – for the sake of the joy of freedom, a joy that he felt is alone capable of fulfilling the promise of being human.

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