

Baruch Spinoza on Evil
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Introduction

The seventeenth Century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza held several views that his contemporaries found heretical, his beliefs about the nature of good and evil among them. According to Spinoza, nothing at all is either good or evil, from the perspective of God or the natural world. Instead, he argues, good and evil are merely words that humans employ to label things we find pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable. We only ascribe intrinsic goodness or evil to things because we falsely believe the world to have been created for our benefit.

This may sound like moral nihilism, but Spinoza is not properly understood this way.¹ Spinoza does claim that people generally call things good and evil only because they find them to be pleasant and desirable or unpleasant and undesirable. When we speak more carefully, however, these words are best used to pick out what is really useful or harmful for us; so, we should not do away with concepts of good and evil. Rather, he argues, we should retain these concepts and use them to pick out what can really benefit or harm us. In short, then, Spinoza is not a nihilist about good and evil, but a kind of reductive relativist. What's more, he is not a simple subjectivist, taking good and evil to be whatever anyone happens to like or dislike, because, he argues, human beings have a real and fixed nature that determines our good. Those things that consistently benefit or hinder our advancement towards that good are, in that instance, rightly called good or evil for us. More precisely, Spinoza argues, because the true human good resides in a life guided by rationality, evil is thus anything that hinders our living lives guided by reason.

Finally, Spinoza argues that, because human beings are fragile and dependent creatures, the best way to live a life guided by reason is to live in

¹ Gilles Deleuze reads Spinoza as a moral nihilist. (Deleuze 1988, 31)

a relatively harmonious society of others with such interests. Thus, anything that prevents the operations of a harmonious society is also rightly called evil for us.

In short, then, Spinoza denies the objective reality of good and evil but argues for the usefulness of retaining the words to identify what is beneficial or a hindrance to our living a life guided by reason, which can only occur in a well-ordered society. Thus, evil is nothing intrinsically real in things, but we can still use the term to describe what helps us to live rationally with others.

The next four sections contain an analysis of his views on good and evil. They shall establish the following four claims, respectively: that neither good nor evil are intrinsically real; that good and evil are terms we should retain to describe what we know to be truly useful or a hindrance to our good; that a life guided by reason is our true good and, thus, anything that aids this is rightly called good and anything that hinders it evil for us; and, finally, that our true good is only achievable in a relatively harmonious, rational society, so that anything that prevents us from doing so is also rightly called evil.

Neither good nor evil are intrinsically real

Spinoza's perhaps best-known statement of the view that good and evil are not intrinsically real is found in the following passage:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also [like the concept of perfection he had just discussed] 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. For example, music is good for one who

is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 4, Preface)²

Neither good nor evil are real, intrinsic properties.³ Instead, goodness or evil are concepts we employ when we compare things. But compare what to what? Spinoza suggests an answer in the next few sentences, when he notes that music can be good for the melancholy, bad for the mourner, and neither to the deaf person. This implies that we employ our concepts of goodness and evil when we compare something – the effects of music, in this case – to the needs or capabilities of the listener. We shall return to this aspect of Spinoza’s thought in the next section.

In this passage, Spinoza implicitly defends the view that goodness and evil cannot be real, intrinsic properties of things, but rather must be the product of judgments we make, by relying on the law of non-contradiction. He reasons that goodness and evil cannot be intrinsic properties because the

² Translations generally follow (Spinoza 1985) For Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, translations follow (Spinoza 2002) Passages in the *Ethics* will be abbreviated by Arabic numerals referring to the parts of the *Ethics* in which they occur and one or more of the following letters:

app = appendix
c = corollary
d = demonstration
def = definition
p = proposition
s = scholium

Thus, 2p49d = *Ethics*, Part 2, proposition 49, demonstration. Passages from the Morgan and Shirley volume will cite the page number.

³ The relationship in Spinoza between concepts of being intrinsic, necessary, or real versus being relational, extrinsic, or a mode of thought is complex. For an overview, see (Newlands 2008) We might say that the former list picks out those things knowable *sub specie aeternitatis* and the latter are inadequate ideas.

same thing at the same time can rightly be described as both good and evil, so the thing being described must by itself be neither but only good or evil in relation to different things. The “for” (*nam*, in Latin) at the beginning of the quote above suggests that he takes this relativity to support his denial of the intrinsic reality of goodness and evil.

Throughout his writings, from the mature work of the *Ethics* to his early work, Spinoza denies the independent or intrinsic reality of good and evil, instead taking them to be relative to human interests and judgment. In one of Spinoza’s earliest extant written works, his unpublished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, we find him saying, “...all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or evil [*malus*] in themselves, except insofar as my mind was moved by them.”⁴ Again we see that goodness and evil are not intrinsic properties, but should be understood only as ways we might think of things with regard to their usefulness, or in terms of their effect on us.

We can understand Spinoza’s denial of the intrinsic goodness or evil by situating it in his larger system of thought. Specifically, he claims that our common conceptions of good and evil largely result from a mistaken belief that the universe was created *for us*. Were we to realize the truth, that the universe lacks a purpose and, so, our goods could not be its purpose, then we would see that our conception of things as good or evil does not correspond to any reality independent of us, but only reflect our own desires and needs. In short, Spinoza’s thoughts on good and evil must be understood as an extension of his denial of teleology in nature.

In the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*, he says, “all the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as

⁴ *TdIE*, section 1. The word ‘evil’ is the Latin *malus*. Curley translates it here as ‘bad,’ though he usually translates *malus* as evil. For example, in the Preface to Part 4, quoted above, the word ‘evil’ translates the Latin *malus*. Indeed, the only word for evil that Spinoza seems to use is *malus*, though he occasionally refers to *improbi*, or evildoers.

certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God.” Spinoza denies that the universe has a purpose at all, much less that its purpose might be to promote the human worship of God.

To support this claim – that nature is *not* created with our well being or the worship of God as its purpose – Spinoza relies on his doctrine of *monism*, which is the view that there is exactly one thing, or substance, in existence and everything else is a mode of that one substance. Spinoza calls this one substance God or Nature. What’s more, he argues, “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes,” which means that everything that happens in nature follows necessarily from the nature of substance.⁵ Spinoza elaborates on what that might mean, noting, “God does not produce any effect by freedom of the will.”⁶ In short, all things that happen occur because they must, not because a providential God has chosen them with us in mind.

Spinoza takes natural phenomena to occur because they have been determined to do so by the fixed laws of nature. According to Spinoza, the blindness with which natural phenomena occur results in events we call good or evil, but these events themselves are neither good nor evil. He attributes this human insistence to attribute real goodness or evil to such events as willful ignorance and, perhaps, fear. He says, “And though their daily experience contradicted this, and though infinitely many examples showed that conveniences and inconveniences happen indiscriminately to the pious and impious alike, they did not on that account give up their longstanding prejudice. It was easier for them to put this among the other unknown things...than to destroy that whole construction, and think up a new one.”⁷ In other words, we often would rather explain events in terms of

⁵ *Ethics*, 1p16.

⁶ 1p32c1. Humans also lack free will, for Spinoza.

⁷ 1 Appendix. Spinoza has no problem of evil, because he denies the goodness of God. Wolfson too sees Spinoza’s view on good and evil as a product of his denial of natural teleology. See (Wolfson 1934, Vol.1 p, 430)

purposes and divine providence than accept that benefits and harms can befall us indiscriminately.

What's more, Spinoza takes this to explain the origin of the human concepts of good and evil. He says:

After men persuaded themselves that everything that happens, happens on their account, they had to judge that what is most important in each thing is what is most useful to them, and to rate as most excellent all those things by which they were most pleased. Hence, they had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness... (1 Appendix)

Because humans mistakenly believe that nature and natural phenomena are guided by a divine and human centered providence, we ascribe objective goodness to those things that we humans find pleasant and evil to those that we find unpleasant. Spinoza continues, saying:

Whatever conduces to health and the worship of God, they have called good; but whatever is contrary to these, evil...All of these things show sufficiently that each one has judged things according to the disposition of his brain; or rather, has accepted affections of the imagination as things...For although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason what seems good to one, seems evil [*malus*] to another...

We call 'evil' whatever runs counter to our false view of the universe as guided by divine providence. Instead, we end up calling evil whatever upsets us, or whatever we find unpleasant, or harmful.

For Spinoza, the universe is not governed by a divine plan, but only by necessary laws of physics. When events occur, they are not objectively or intrinsically good or evil; they simply are a necessary consequence of those laws. We might conceive of things to be good or evil, but, when we do so, we are only judging them to be pleasant or helpful or desirable, or the

Steven Nadler, on the hand, argues that Spinoza is unconcerned with the traditional problem of evil. See (Nadler 2001)

opposite. Thus, for Spinoza, nothing is really good or evil, but only judged to be so by human opinion.

Before considering the extent to which our concepts of good and evil are humanly relative, one question should be addressed. So far we have seen that nature is neither good nor evil in itself. What about God? After all, if God's nature can antecedently be called good, then why cannot those things that follow necessarily from it also be called so?

Spinoza considers this question in another early work of his. In a text titled, "Metaphysical Thoughts," which was appended to his first published work, *the Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza says, "No thing is said to be either good or evil considered alone, but only in respect to another [thing], to which it is advantageous in acquiring what it loves, or the contrary. So each thing can be said at the same time to be both good and evil in different respects."⁸ Here he notes that the nature of good and evil is such that the same thing at the same time can be considered both good and bad, because these properties are relative. So far this sounds very much like the view we see in the *Ethics*.

Shortly after this, though, he considers the question of whether God can rightly be called good and, if so, in what sense. He says, "To be sure, God is called supremely good, because he acts to the advantage of all, preserving, by his concurrence, each one's being, than which nothing is dearer. But there is no absolute evil, as is evident through itself."⁹ First of all, the only sense in which we can say that God is supremely good is that he is good *for us*. Second, evil, considered by itself or absolutely, does not exist; things are evil for us only to the extent that they are disadvantageous to us.

⁸ *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Part 1, Chapter 6, in (Spinoza 1985, 313)

⁹ *Ibid.*

This seems to suggest that God's goodness is still determined by the fact that he is useful to his creation.¹⁰ What about God before creation or considered by himself? Is God, considered in this sense, good? No. Spinoza says, "it is asked whether God could be called good before he created things. It seems to follow from our definition [of goodness] that God had no such attribute, because we say that a thing can be called neither good nor evil, if it is considered in itself alone."¹¹ God is not intrinsically good, but only good for us, in the sense of being useful or beneficial to us. And all those things that follow necessarily from his nature, according to natural laws, are neither good nor bad in themselves either.

Spinoza later engaged in an extended correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh, in which Blijenbergh worried that Spinoza's metaphysics made God the author of evil. In response, Spinoza returns to his denial of the reality of evil. Speaking in terms that Blijenbergh had introduced and that philosophers of the 17th Century would find familiar, Spinoza raises the question of whether evil is a privation of some real and positive good. Spinoza explicitly denies this account of evil, instead arguing that neither good nor evil are real and that evil is a mere negation of some property we judge to be good. He says, "Privation is, not an act of depriving, but only the pure and simple lack, which in itself is nothing. Indeed, it is only a being of reason, or mode of thinking, which we form when we compare things with one another."¹² Neither good nor evil are absolutely, or positively, or intrinsically real, but are, instead, only the products of judgments we make about things. Things are only good or evil relative to us.

'Good' and 'evil' are best used to describe what aids or hinders us

¹⁰ Spinoza speaks in what superficially looks to be an asymmetric way about good and evil here, though that that discussion ultimately denies the reality of good as well.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Letter 21, 28 January 1665. (Spinoza 1985, 377) For a discussion of privation, negation and evil in the 17th Century, see (Newlands 2014)

In the passage from the Preface to Part 4, quoted above, we saw Spinoza claim that good and evil are not real. Nevertheless, Spinoza continues in the next paragraph, saying:

But though this is so, still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. (4 Preface)

Even though the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ refer to nothing real in things considered in themselves, Spinoza still insists that we keep the terms, because they are useful to us. Because we wish to live a certain kind of life, these words can help us by guiding us to what will be useful in that endeavor and helping us to avoid those things that will hinder us.

Spinoza does not take goodness and evil to be properties of things on their own. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to say that good and evil are entirely eliminated from Spinoza’s philosophy. Rather, we should say that they are defined relationally; they must necessarily be defined not as a property or mode that a subject possesses, but as a relation between two things. Nothing is evil in the sense of saying, without further explanation, *X is evil*. But if we consider evil as a two-place relation, such that we might say *X is evil for Y*, then there are indeed goods and evils in the world, though nothing is therefore good or evil *simpliciter*.¹³ In other words, *X is evil for Y*, but the *Y* here can never be God or Nature, but must always be some finite, created being.

Spinoza provides definitions for good and evil shortly after the above quote, saying, “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us” and “By evil, however, I shall understand what we certainly know

¹³ For an analysis of the different ways Spinoza claims good and evil can be relative, see (Jarrett 2002)

prevents us from being masters of some good.”¹⁴ Here Spinoza states that the good is not only whatever is useful to us and evil whatever keeps us from this good, but they are “what we certainly know” to do these things. Good and evil may not exist in themselves, but we can still retain the concepts as handy guides to what we know is useful or a hindrance to our true goods. Thus, good and evil, though not absolutely real, are nevertheless retained as useful relational concepts.

Contrast this way of talking with an earlier passage, in which he says, “we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.”¹⁵ Other passages in Part 3 of the *Ethics* present an entirely subjective view of good and evil, according to which evil is, simply, whatever we happen to find unpleasant. Indeed, this subjective reading of good and evil can be seen several of the quotes above from the Appendix to Part 1, as well as those from the earlier works. These passages suggest that the concepts of good and evil are arbitrary – whatever happens to offend me now I call evil, though I might call it good tomorrow and you might call it neither.

It may now appear as though there are two distinct usages of good and evil in Spinoza, neither of which are an objective or absolute sense, and both of which are relative to human judgment. Nevertheless, this is not strictly correct; there is only one account of good and evil here. Instead, these two usages arise because Parts 1-3 of the *Ethics* is largely a descriptive endeavor, in which Spinoza explains metaphysical facts, while Parts 4 and 5 are hortatory, in which he provides a guide to living a certain kind of life.¹⁶

We judge things to be useful or good based on our subjective opinion and judgment, but we are better served by recognizing that some things really do

¹⁴ 4def1 and 4def2.

¹⁵ 3p9s. For more on Spinoza’s use of good and evil, see (Garrett 1996) For a discussion of how Spinoza’s use of good and evil in Part 3 differs from that of Parts 4 and 5, see (Delahunty 1985, 227–230)

¹⁶ For a discussion of Spinoza’s transition from descriptive psychology in Part 3 to his prescriptive project in Part 4, see (Yovel 1999)

benefit or harm us, given the sorts of being that we are. This is the view that Spinoza holds throughout his writing; the appearance of there being two different views on good/evil is only an illusion. For example, in the early work the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza says that things are not “good or evil in themselves, except insofar as my mind was moved by them...” and that “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, and sensual pleasure.”¹⁷ This seems to be the subjective view I have just described.

But Spinoza explains his meaning, saying, “I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the *true* good...whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.”¹⁸ Here we see a distinction among goods. On the one hand, we call things good just when they affect us in a certain way; if they cause us pleasure, or we think of them as bringing us wealth or honor, we call them goods. On the other hand, there are *true* goods that bring us lasting benefits. Both senses of good take the good to be relative to human beings, and both describe goods as things that bring us pleasure or joy, but some things are better candidates for being called ‘good’ and ‘evil’ than others.

Spinoza develops this distinction among goods, noting that wealth, honor, and pleasure are fleeting and uncertain, whereas true goods, if there are any, would not be so fleeting and uncertain. He continues, saying, “[when] man conceives a human nature much stronger and more enduring than his own, and at the same time sees that nothing prevents his acquiring such a nature, he is spurred to seek means that will lead him to such perfection. Whatever can be a mean to his attaining it is called a true good.”¹⁹ The true good is whatever can bring us towards a more perfect state, that is, whatever can bring us closer to the ideal of human nature that we imagine. This language exactly mirrors what we saw in the Preface to Part 4, where Spinoza claims

¹⁷ *TdIE*, section 1 and 3.

¹⁸ *TdIE*, section 1. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *TdIE*, section 13.

that we ought to retain the language of good and evil because such language can help us to approach the model of human nature we set before ourselves.

Thus, when Spinoza discusses good and evil, he can mean one of two things. First, anything we take to be useful or pleasant we call good, and those things that we believe to harm us, or hinder our achievement of a good, we call evil. If we wish to live better lives and achieve more lasting, reliable, and certain goods, however, we ought to make sure to pursue only those things that are in fact useful to us. Thus we call many things good and evil when we believe them to benefit or harm us, but only some are true goods and true evils, namely, those things that in fact benefit or harm us.

We see the same distinction in the *Ethics* that we found in the earlier *Emendation*. After affirming that he will be using the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ to refer to those things we know to be useful or harmful, he proceeds in Parts 4 to explore the way in which we do use and should use the concepts, if we wish to live a life guided by reason.

Our true evil is whatever hinders us from living a life guided by reason

To recap what has been said so far: neither good nor evil are objectively real or intrinsic properties of things, for Spinoza. Rather, they are merely judgments that humans make about what is in our interest and what is not. We can distinguish between better and worse judgments of good and evil, in the sense that some things really are beneficial or really hindrances. From here on, when I say that Spinoza takes something to be good or evil, I shall mean that he takes it to be so in the reductive, relational sense established above.²⁰

²⁰ I say “reductive” because Spinoza takes these concepts to be explicable in terms of usefulness and hindrance. Curley calls this aspect of Spinoza’s thought “deflationary.” (Spinoza 1985, 636) LeBuffe takes up what he calls the Humean challenge to this doctrine, which he frames as deriving an ought from an is, in Chapter 8 of (LeBuffe 2010, 143–159)

Nothing here establishes yet what sorts of things might be good and evil, however. What is really useful to us? Spinoza tells us, “the mind, insofar as it uses reason, [does not] judge anything else useful to itself except what leads to understanding.” (4p26) In other words, that which leads us to understanding is useful and thus good – which means that whatever hinders understanding is evil, in Spinoza’s relative sense. He says this explicitly in 4p27, saying, “We know nothing to be certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding.” The only things that we should take to be good and evil, then, is what truly and reliably leads to understanding and what prevents it. We might find many things helpful or harmful and thus consider them good or evil, but, if we wish to live the best human life, we ought to take only these things to be truly good or evil.

Thus far, the relativity of good and evil has first been defined subjectively, by whatever we take to be good or bad for us, and, later and more precisely, by whatever is in fact good or bad for us. We now see that the only things truly good or bad for us are those things that promote or prevent understanding.²¹

Thus, though he denies the objective reality of evil, the closest things Spinoza countenances to real evil are ignorance, superstition, and irrationality! Of these, Spinoza discusses two categories that cause human ignorance and irrationality. First of all, human beings naturally form passive affects of fear, hatred, excessive love, and so on, all of which involve some kind of ignorance and many of which lead us away from living a rational life. Most of Parts 3 and 4 of the *Ethics* is concerned to explore these human

²¹ Spinoza’s claims here depend upon his *conatus* doctrine, that our nature is, ultimately, a striving to persevere in our being and increase our power of acting or, in this case, of understanding. For a good discussion of this doctrine, see (Garrett 2002) For a discussion of how the nature of the *conatus* determines the human good, see the third sections of chapter three and chapter six of my forthcoming book – (Marshall forthcoming)

frailties in a systematic way, so that we might know how to live a life with more human good than evil in it.²²

After having provided a taxonomy of passive affects in Part 3, he turns in Part 4 to establishing the principles of human psychology that will explain “human bondage, or the powers of the affects.” It is in the Preface to this Part that we encounter his famous claim that good and evil are nothing real, but that we should retain these words. At one point, he claims, “a desire which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil can be extinguished by many other desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented.” (4p15) That is, we may know what is good and what is evil for us, but we might nevertheless fail to act accordingly. After having discussed these and related issues, he concludes, “With these few words I have explained the causes of man’s lack of power and inconstancy, and why men do not observe the precepts of reason.” (4p18s) The affects, which function in the mind like emotions, as well as directing our actions, often lead us away from what we know to be good. This is what Spinoza calls human bondage and it is one of the two ways in which we can be prevented from living rationally. Human bondage, in other words, is one of the primary causes and explanations of evil.

Before we consider the other cause, which is social and applies to human beings insofar as they come together in communities, we should address one peculiarity of Spinoza’s thought on evil. Later in Part 4, Spinoza introduces the notion of the free human being, which is a heuristic, an impossible ideal that he introduces to describe one maximum of a continuum along which we might find ourselves. I shall set aside several other puzzles that this discussion might raise and focus on what he says there about evil.²³

²² For some discussion of those psychological mechanisms that inhibit our pursuit of understanding, with a focus on ignorance and akrasia, see Chapter Five of (Marshall forthcoming)

²³ I shall not discuss the details of Spinoza’s “free human being,” nor his “model of human nature,” from the Preface to Part 4, around which there is some scholarly disagreement. For a good recent discussion of the issue, see (Kisner 2011, 162–178)

He says, “If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free” (4p68). A person born free in Spinoza’s sense would be, *per impossibile*, a human being that has only adequate ideas, that only ever acts and is never acted upon and, thus, not subject to the passions or ever to find something in nature whose power exceeds her own. The person born free, however, has no need for anything, so she would not find anything useful, nor would anything be able to harm her. Thus she would never have the opportunity to form such ideas.

It is likely that Spinoza intended the discussion of the free human being to do some work in laying out an aspect of his moral theory. Be that as it may, one might ask whether Spinoza is committed to the view that God has no concept of good or evil either. To be clear, Spinoza’s mature view is that God is not a person and God is only said to know something in the sense that God or Nature includes a mind that knows something. Even so, we might imagine a God – or a free human being, if you prefer – taking up anthropology and wishing to understand why those strange mortals do the things they do. Could such a divine anthropologist understand human bondage, say?²⁴

Spinoza takes up this question, or one very like it, in one of his early works. He says:

The question now arises whether God knows evils, or sins, and beings of reason, and the like. We reply that God must understand those things of which he is the cause, particularly since they could not even exist for a moment without his concurrence. Therefore, since evils and sins are nothing in things, but are only in the human mind, which compares things with one another, it follows that God does not know them outside human minds. We have said that beings of reason [incl. good and evil] are modes of thinking, and in this way must be

²⁴ Though I have framed the discussion playfully here with my divine anthropologist, the question of how – or whether – God knows of evil and sin is an old one. For example, Spinoza would assuredly have known of Maimonides’ and Gersonides’ differing opinions on the issue.

understood by God... But we do not mean that God has such modes of thinking in himself.²⁵

This is an early statement of Spinoza's core view that good and evil are not objectively real, but are, rather, only the products of human judgment about what is beneficial or harmful to us. Interestingly, Spinoza claims here in an uncharacteristically anthropomorphizing moment, God does not make those judgments about himself, but he can know that we make them about ourselves. Later, though, he claims that "knowledge of evil is an inadequate knowledge" (4p64), because "knowledge of evil is sadness itself," (4p64d) and sadness is a decrease in one's power. Thus, despite the room Spinoza makes for God's knowledge of evil in his earlier work, it seems that the later Spinoza cannot allow adequate knowledge of evil.

Regardless, no one can ever become an entirely free human being. Spinoza says, "It is impossible that man should not be a part of nature," (4p4) and "from this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to the passions." (4p4c) In order to cope with this dismal human condition – always and inevitably in bondage to the passions, always at the mercy of nature – human beings form communities together. What's more, because doing so makes our living a life guided by reason possible (because it makes any life at all possible), doing so is a true human good. And this brings us to the other category of human evils, beyond our bondage to the passions.

Our good is social, so what hinders rational society is also evil for us

Recall that whatever prevents us from understanding is evil. Beyond our bondage to the passions, the second category of phenomena that prevent us from pursuing understanding is social. More precisely, certain social phenomena can help us to live a life guided by reason, and thus be good for us, or they can hinder it, and thus be evil for us.

Spinoza explains the basis for these social goods and evils thoroughly in the *Ethics*. Consider 4p34-5, where he says, "Insofar as men are torn by affects which are passions, they can be contrary to one another... Only insofar as

²⁵ *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Part 2, Chapter 7 in (Spinoza 1985, 328)

men live according to the guidance of reason, must they always agree in nature.” Human beings suffer affects of passion, and thus suffer evils, just when they are guided by inadequate ideas, whereas they live according to the guidance of reason to the extent that they act from understanding. As we have seen, Spinoza defines good and evil in relation to things that promote or hinder our living a rational life.

Spinoza expands the scope of human goods and evils beyond what immediately increases or decreases human understanding, however. For he claims:

From this we easily understand that there is nothing in the state of nature which, by the agreement of all, is good or evil; for everyone who is in the state of nature considers only his own advantage, and decides what is good and what is evil from his own temperament, and only insofar as he takes account of his own advantage...But in the civil state, of course, it is decided by common agreement what is good or what is evil.” (4p37s2)

Outside of a civil society, each person judges his or her own goods and evils, based on their particular situation. Once we come together in civil society, however, we come to have certain shared interests. Those things that serve the interests we share in common are, thus, common goods and those that hinder the common goods are evils. This significantly broadens the scope of what is really good or evil for us as we live in a community with others.

Spinoza elaborates, broadening the notion of usefulness that constitutes the good from the individual in the state of nature to the community in the civil state. He says, “Things which are of assistance to the common society of men, or which bring it about that men live harmoniously, are useful; those, on the other hand, are evil which bring discord to the state.” (4p40)

Whatever promotes social harmony is thus a good for us, because people working together make society stronger, which in turn promotes one’s own individual interest. And those things that cause strife or that undermine

social order are contrary to the interests of those in the society. Thus they are evils.²⁶

Spinoza then proceeds to give examples of affects that hinder the rational life (and are thus evil in a narrow, personal sense) as well as things that are obstacles to harmonious society (and are also thus evil in a broader, social sense). The personal evils include: sadness, excessive pleasure, hate, spite, overestimation (as opposed to self-esteem), pity (as opposed to compassion), and humility (as opposed to the lack of overestimation), among others. Several of these might also lead us to act in ways that are contrary not only to our own interest but also to the public good.

Beyond the general claim that whatever is contrary to our shared good is, in that sense, evil, Spinoza leaves the details of which behaviors should be deemed evil and thus outlawed to the (democratic) sovereign. He says, “In the civil state...what is good and what is evil is decided by the right of the whole community...But in a state of nature, ...everyone is his own judge and possesses the perfect right to prescribe and interpret laws for himself.”²⁷ Considered apart from or prior to society, good and evil extend only to what one judges to be useful or a hindrance. In society, each citizen’s own good extends to include the common good of the society from which she benefits. Thus, for Spinoza, what is evil is not only what might be a hindrance to your understanding, but should also include what your community has decided is contrary to the common good – assuming, of course, that this community is in fact operating under a social contract and, therefore, ultimately serving the rational interests of its citizens!

In the end, Spinoza provides a list of evils that may be somewhat more orthodox than one might expect, given that he begins by denying the objective reality of good and evil. Lest we underestimate the radical character of Spinoza’s thought, however, we should consider a final category of social phenomena that Spinoza find to be evil, namely, certain

²⁶ For a good discussion of how Spinoza extends his notions of good and evil into the social realm, see (Kisner 2011, 216–235)

²⁷ Spinoza’s Annotation 32 to Chapter 16 in (Spinoza 2002, 580)

religious and political institutions that tend to promote ignorance, fear, and superstition.

Spinoza claims, “It is fear, then, that engenders, preserves, and fosters superstition.”²⁸ He elaborates on how institutions can promote such evil, saying, “the supreme mystery of [monarchy], its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation.”²⁹ That is, monarchical governments rule through keeping their subjects ignorant which, for Spinoza, means that monarchies rule through evil. As was suggested above, Spinoza takes whatever inhibits democracy as an evil for us.

Monarchy is not the only evil institution, however. Of religious institutions he says,

Little wonder, then, that of the old religion nothing is left but the outward form...piety and religion – O everlasting God – take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt – these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous [*iniquissimum*]) who are believed to possess the divine light!(Spinoza 2002, 391)

When monarchs use superstition and false religion to promote their power, and when religious authorities appeal to mysteries and eschew reason to advance their agendas, it is these behaviors that Spinoza finds to be evil.³⁰

Conclusion

²⁸ *Theological Political Treatise*, Preface, in (Spinoza 2002, 388)

²⁹ *Theological Political Treatise*, Preface, in (Spinoza 2002, 389) I prefer the word ‘monarchy’ for “*regiminis Monarchici*” while Shirley renders it as “despotism.”

³⁰ For a discussion of how Spinoza sees the tension between philosophy (and the human good) and traditional religion, see (James 2012, 215–230) For an excellent overview of Spinoza’s critique of religious institutions, particularly with regard to how can hinder our pursuit of the rational life, see (Nadler 2001)

For Spinoza, evil and good are not objectively or intrinsically real. From the perspective of God or nature (*sub specie aeternitatis*), neither exists. Instead, evil and good are relative to human beings; they are concepts we form when judging things. People necessarily form such concepts whenever they find things to be pleasant or unpleasant, or take them to be useful or a hindrance to achieving some goal.

Even so, we are best served by considering only those things that truly benefit us as good and only those that are real hindrances to our good as evils. And our true good is defined by our natures as a life guided by understanding. Thus, those things that truly aid our living a rational life are truly good; and those things that truly inhibit our doing so are truly evil.

Spinoza finds two kinds of things to be true human goods or evils. The first are features of human bondage; we necessarily experience passions, some of which can and will prevent us from acting rationally. The second are social phenomena; when we come together with others of like mind and form harmonious relationships with them, their natures and ours mutually reinforce each other, so to speak, and we experience mutual benefit. So anything that can promote shared human society – anything that brings us together in a mutually beneficial way – is for that reason a true human good. And anything that prevents us from doing so is a true human evil. Finally, Spinoza also argues that certain political and religious institutions, namely, monarchies and superstitious religions, also do great harm to human beings and, so, are truly evil.

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