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CHEERFULNESS (*HILARITAS*)

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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*) (E3p11s). 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” (E3p11s). Given that maintaining a certain ratio of motion and rest is essential to humans who consist of many different parts, 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).

More specific textual evidence on cheerfulness is admittedly quite scarce. In E3p11s, Spinoza treats it as a passion; in E4p42, he discusses it in the same register as melancholy. These passages suggest that cheerfulness is, at least first and foremost, a passion—a joy only partly caused by us. Moreover, it has a special relationship to the body: “[C]heerfulness, pleasure, melancholy, and pain [...] are chiefly [potissimum] related to the body” (Edefaff3, emphasis added). So there are forms of cheerfulness that are passive and predominantly body-related.

Spinoza explicitly admits that cheerfulness “is more easily conceived than observed” and that our joys are usually different types of pleasure (*titillatio*) (E4p44s). Moreover, when considering potential candidates for cheerfulness, certain predominantly mental phenomena come to mind. For instance, one might think that doing mathematics or obtaining philosophical insight into the very nature of the universe results in a pervasive mental joy—an increase in one’s overall power of thinking—and hence in cheerfulness. In the same vein, when unhindered by negative passions, our intellect deduces adequate ideas from other adequate ideas; ultimately, this may produce a desirable overall disposition Spinoza

calls the “order of the intellect” (E5p10). Thus, intellectual life—arguably involving joy equally related to all parts of the mind—seems well-placed to contain a notable amount of cheerfulness.

Whether or not one is willing to accept active forms of cheerfulness, there remains the thorny demand to obtain a more robust grasp of passive and body-based emotions that qualify as cheerfulness. Perhaps the following passage can give us a lead: “It is the part of a wise man [...] to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food or drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind” (E4p45s). Indeed, it is plausible that such arguably passive things as relaxing in a cozy room, listening to music, or spending time in a beautiful garden can enhance our overall bodily disposition, thus giving rise to different types of cheerfulness—at least as long as excess is kept at bay so that they do not turn into harmful pleasures.

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.