

Benedict de Spinoza

Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order

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Objectives

1. To understand Spinoza's broad philosophical project, showing the way to ultimate freedom or blessedness.
2. To grasp Spinoza's unique and idiosyncratic idea of God.
3. To be able to explain Spinoza's theory of mind and its role in his broad project.
4. To be able to account for Spinoza's notion of "servitude to the emotions" in terms of his theory of action and passion.
5. To speculate knowledgeably on how the "intellectual love of God" could free the mind from servitude to the emotions and lead it towards eternal blessedness.

Reading Assignment

Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order*. Translated by Michael Silverthorne and Matther J. Kisner.

Commentary

Introduction

[Benedict de Spinoza's](#) *Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order* is regarded as his philosophical masterpiece. Published in 1677, it includes his most developed arguments for his most radical philosophical views: [substance monism](#), the denial of [teleology](#) in nature and [free will](#), and the theory of the intellectual [love of God](#) as the supreme human good.

The book is presented in "geometrical order", meaning that it emulates the [formal presentation of geometry](#) used in works such as Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* (c.300 B.C.), where everything is demonstrated from a limited stock of assumed definitions and axioms. Spinoza's demonstrations are not mathematical proofs in [the modern sense](#). They are not more logically certain than ordinary philosophical arguments. Scholars have different theories about what the purpose of the geometrical method is (Steenbakkers, 2009).

By looking at the titles of the parts of the *Ethics*, you can see the outline of the intellectual journey on which it takes the reader. From an understanding of God and the human mind, it develops a theory of how we are bound by our [emotions](#) – the condition of "human servitude". It then shows how the intellect can liberate us from this condition.

History of the Text

We have no authoritative version of the *Ethics*, since Spinoza decided not to publish it (2016, letter 68: 459). What we have instead are three different imperfect versions, one only discovered in 2010 (details can be found in the “Note on the text and translation” of the reading assignment).

Part One: Of God

The first part of the *Ethics* has received disproportionate attention, because its implications appear so heretical for Spinoza’s time. To understand it, we need to think about the theory of [substances and modes](#), which Spinoza inherited largely from [René Descartes](#).

Roughly speaking, a **substance** is a thing in its own right, whereas a **mode** is an accident, quality, or property of a thing. Descartes [had proposed](#) that what distinguishes a substance from a mode is its independence. A substance, for instance a table, exists in its own right, whereas a mode, for instance the shape of the table, is just a way in which a substance exists.

Spinoza’s radical view is that God is the only real substance. Descartes had admitted that in the strictest sense God is the only substance, since other things are dependent on God (Principles, Part I §51; Descartes 1985-91, vol.1: 210). But he regarded ordinary things as substances in a less strict sense. Spinoza, by contrast, regarded ordinary things, including ourselves, not as substances at all but rather as *modes* of God. This seems to imply that we are just *ways that God is*, though it is difficult to know what precisely this means.

Spinoza’s notion of God is strange in other ways. For example, he states that God has no will or intellect of his own, besides those of his modes (*Ethics* 1p31). How then does God decide what sort of world to create? According to Spinoza, God does not decide. He (we should rather say “it”, since there is nothing personal about this God) simply realizes every possibility, causing *everything that can possibly exist* to exist (1p16).

In the Appendix to Part 1, Spinoza tries to take stock of the consequences of this radical view. Spinoza’s answer to why there is evil and ugliness in our universe is that these things are possible, so God realizes them indiscriminately. The philosophical problem is now: how should we live in a reality whose only driving principle is to realize every possibility, regardless of our interests?

Part Two: Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind

Spinoza wants to show the way towards a sort of mental liberation, so it is important for him to explain the human mind. The mind is constituted, he says, by an idea of the human body (2p11, 13). It knows about the world by knowing how the body has been affected, for example in its sense organs. This does not make Spinoza a strict [empiricist](#), however, since he believes that the mind can also have non-sensory knowledge through the body, understanding very general principles that apply to the body and to other things (2p28). It can also know the essence of God, because the body’s existence implies God as a cause (2p45d).

Spinoza distinguishes between the mind’s *adequate* and *inadequate* ideas (2def4): adequate ideas are always true; inadequate ideas can be false. Spinoza emphasizes that adequate ideas are true on account of their *intrinsic* characteristics rather than their correspondence to objects, as a [correspondence theorist](#) would say. We can tell that an idea is true simply by reflecting on it, and Spinoza writes that “anyone who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea and cannot have doubts about the truth of the thing” (2p43).

To show how we can arrive at adequate ideas, Spinoza distinguishes three kind of cognition: (i) **opinion or imagination**, (ii) **reason**, and (iii) **intuitive knowledge**. These are explained at 2p40s2. “Opinion or imagination” seems to cover all ideas we receive from either observation or testimony from others. Spinoza argues that this “first kind [of cognition] is the unique cause of falsity, whereas cognition of the second and third kind is necessarily true” (2p41). Although some dispute this (Curley 1973), Spinoza suggests that the way to certain knowledge is to avoid dependence on observation or testimony

altogether and to cognize as much as possible by reason and intuitive knowledge. Since reason deals only in general properties, intuitive knowledge is the only way we might form adequate ideas of particular things. But Spinoza's definition of intuitive knowledge is rather mysterious; it proceeds, he tells us, from "an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (2p40s2). One possible interpretation of this is that once we recognise that God realizes every possibility, we see that we can form ideas of real things simply by considering what could possibly exist – and therefore must exist, given what God is. Thus we can know about particular things without relying on observation at all.

Part Three: Of the Origin and Nature of the Emotions

Spinoza denies that we have [free will](#) (2p48, 49). He cannot define actions as things we voluntarily choose to do. Nevertheless, he does have a theory of action and passion that is an important element in Part 3. According to Spinoza, we *act* "when something follows from our nature, within us or outside of us, which can be clearly understood through it alone" (3def2). We are *acted upon*, or undergo a *passion*, "when something takes place within us or something follows from our nature of which we are only a partial cause".

Spinoza now proposes that the mind and the body are "one and the same thing which is conceived sometimes under the attribute of thought and sometimes under the attribute of extension" (3p2s). This is an [identity theory](#), which is contrasted with Descartes's [dualist](#) theory. It means that Spinoza cannot understand passions the way that [Descartes did](#), namely as actions of the body upon the mind, towards which the mind is passive. Rather, the mind must be active when the body is active and passive when the body is passive.

An important sequence of propositions in this part is 6-9. Spinoza argues that the fundamental essence of a human being is *desire*, which is a conscious "striving to persevere in one's being". This is not a mere striving to survive: to persevere *in one's being* is to realise one's fundamental nature. This suggests a way to interpret Spinoza's theory of action and passion. An event is our action when it can be completely understood in terms of the fundamental nature we strive to realise. It is our passion when it must be partly understood in terms of something else. An example would be when we fall under the spell of some charismatic individual and, wanting to be like her, act to realise her nature instead of our own. This is what Spinoza calls "emulation" (3p27s). It is one emotion that can render individuals passive – drawn away from realising their own nature.

Throughout Part Three, Spinoza attempts to "geometrically" deduce all emotions from three basic ones: desire, joy, and sadness. Joy and sadness are defined as passages to greater and lesser perfection, which we might understand as greater and lesser success in realising our true nature (3p11s).

Part Four: Of Human Servitude, or Of the Strength of the Emotions

In this part, Spinoza explains the power the emotions have over us. His method is first to define "an exemplar of human nature" (4pref, p.159): a picture of what a rational individual, free from servitude to the emotions, would be like. He does not present this exemplar as a model to emulate but rather to show the extent of our "servitude": how far our real behaviour falls short of the ideal. Rational individuals, for example, "necessarily always agree in nature" (4p35) and want for themselves only what they equally want for everyone else (4p36). In fact, they seek only "cognition of God" (4p37) and whatever is necessary for that. The extent to which we often disagree and pursue goals besides the cognition of God reveals the degree of our passive servitude to the emotions.

Another example that shows how far we fall short of Spinoza's ideal human nature is 4p62: "Insofar as the mind conceives of things by the dictate of reason, it is equally affected whether the idea is of something in the future or in the past or in the present". A rational human being, would, in other

words, feel just the same about a painful experience in the distant past as about one in the present or future. This is what Spinoza elsewhere speaks of as perceiving things “from a certain vantage of eternity” (3p44c2) – that is, without reference to one’s particular temporal perspective (see [Time, metaphysics of](#)). It is very hard for most of us to imagine living our lives in this way.

Part Five: Of the Power of the Intellect, or Of Human Freedom

Having shown how our “servitude” to the emotions pulls us away from the ideal of a free, rational individual, Spinoza goes on to show how the intellect can liberate us. The key is what he calls “the intellectual love of God” (5p33), a kind of joy that arises from understanding the nature of God. As we have seen, Spinoza’s God is an impersonal principle that indifferently realizes every possibility. Why should understanding this liberate us from our emotions?

One explanation is that our most oppressive emotions are tied to a notion of contingency. When I lament my misfortunes, I wish that I could have been more fortunate. But if God really realizes *every possibility* then it must be either that it is impossible for me to have been more fortunate, or that somehow there are other versions of me that are more fortunate (though other versions even less fortunate). Most readers of Spinoza interpret him the first way. But this makes his theory implausible: why should my suffering feel less oppressive simply because it was inevitable? Interpreting him the second way seems no more consoling: *I*, after all, am *this* version of myself – the unfortunate one. But Spinoza could reply that “*I*” here expresses only a perspective on reality. From other equally valid perspectives, *I* am one of the fortunate versions. This seems similar to the idea of viewing things “from the vantage of eternity” – that is, in absolute terms rather than from a particular perspective. Cognition of God allows us to view things from outside of our own limited perspective, thus liberating us from the emotions that derive their oppressiveness from that limitation. There is a striking similarity here to [certain Daoist ideas](#).

This goes some way to explaining how Spinoza can hold that “the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body; but something of it remains, and that is eternal” (5p23). Spinoza’s explanation is that the mind is constituted by the idea of the body, but the body can be conceived of from the vantage of eternity (i.e. outside of any temporal frame). Thus, Spinoza’s theory of the mind’s eternity involves an escape from a limited intellectual perspective. You might object, however, that this does not fully explain the theory. For one thing, if the mind and the body are one and the same thing, then how can something of the mind survive the destruction of the body, unless something of the body also survives its own destruction? This might not seem so implausible, however, if we consider a sense in which objects also exist “from the vantage of eternity”. Bodies that existed in the past but have been destroyed can still be referred to in true statements, for example the statement that such a body has been destroyed. The view that destroyed objects continue to exist in this logical sense is called [eternalism](#).

In any case, what Spinoza calls blessedness – the tranquillity of a mind that has escaped from servitude to the emotions – is closely tied to the broadening beyond a limited perspective, signified by the “vantage of eternity”. The person who is “conscious of himself and of God and of things by some eternal necessity [...] never ceases to be, but always has true contentment of spirit” (5p42s). To explain what Spinoza means by this conclusion, and how he builds up to it, is to grasp the core of the *Ethics*.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Why do you think Spinoza wanted to write his philosophy out “in geometrical order”?

2. How would you explain Spinoza's idea of God, and its consequences for understanding ordinary events in our life?
3. Does it make sense to think of the mind as the "idea of the body"?
4. Give your own example of an emotion you have experienced as a "passion" and how you think you might escape its grip.
5. Is Spinoza's ideal of the reasonable person, or person under the guidance of reason itself reasonable, even as an ideal? Or does it leave out something to fundamental in human nature?
6. Given what Spinoza thinks God is, why would the "intellectual love of God" be enough to liberate us from the emotions? Try to think of a specific example of how this might go.
7. How does Spinoza's path to blessedness compare to other religious or spiritual practices that are familiar to you?

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