

Spinoza, Benedict de (1632-77)

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Biography

A Dutch philosopher of Jewish origin, Spinoza was born Baruch de Spinoza in Amsterdam. Initially given a traditional Talmudic education, he was encouraged by some of his teachers to study secular subjects as well, including Latin and modern philosophy. Perhaps as a result of this study, he abandoned Jewish practices and beliefs and, after receiving stern warnings, he was excommunicated from the synagogue in 1656. Alone and without means of support, he Latinized his name and took up the trade of lens grinder with the intention of devoting his life to philosophy. He remained in Amsterdam until 1660, lived for the next decade in nearby villages, and in The Hague from 1670 until his death from consumption in 1677. During these years he worked continuously on his philosophy and discussed it with a small circle of friends and correspondents. His masterpiece, *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics Demonstrated in a Geometrical Manner), was completed in 1675; but because of its radical doctrines, it was only published after his death.

The full scope of Spinoza's Ethics is not indicated by its title. It begins with a highly abstract account of the nature of substance, which is identified with God, and culminates in an analysis of human beings, their nature and place in the universe, and the conditions of their true happiness. Written in a geometrical form modelled after Euclid, each of its five parts contains a set of definitions, axioms and propositions which are followed by their demonstrations and frequently by explanatory scholia.

The defining feature of Spinoza's thought is its uncompromising rationalism. Like other philosophers of the time, Spinoza is a rationalist in at least three distinct senses: metaphysical, epistemological and ethical. That is to say, he maintains that the universe embodies a necessary rational order; that, in principle, this order is knowable by the human mind; and that the true good for human beings consists in the knowledge of this order and a life governed by this knowledge. What is distinctive of Spinoza's brand of rationalism, however, is that it allows no place for an inscrutable creator-God distinct from his creation, who acts according to hidden purposes. Instead, Spinoza boldly identifies God with nature, albeit with nature regarded as this necessary rational order rather than as the sum-total of particular things.

In its identification of God with nature, Spinoza's philosophy is also thoroughly naturalistic and deterministic. Since nature (as infinite and eternal) is all-inclusive and all-powerful, it follows that nothing can be or even be conceived apart from it: this means that everything, including human actions and emotions, must be explicable in terms of nature's universal and necessary laws. Moreover, given this identification, it also follows that knowledge of the order of nature specified through these laws is equivalent to the knowledge of God. Thus, in sharp opposition to the entire Judaeo-Christian tradition, Spinoza claims that the human mind is capable of adequate knowledge of God.

The attainment of such knowledge is, however, dependent on the use of the correct method. In agreement with Descartes and Thomas Hobbes (the two modern philosophers who exerted the greatest influence on his thought) and thoroughly in the spirit of the scientific revolution, Spinoza held that the key to this method lies in mathematics. This conviction is obviously reflected in the geometrical form of the *Ethics*; but it actually runs much deeper, determining what for Spinoza counts as genuine knowledge as opposed to spurious belief. More precisely, it means that an adequate understanding of anything consists in seeing it as the logical consequence of its cause, just as the properties of a geometrical figure are understood by seeing them as the logical consequence of its definition. This, in turn, leads directly to the complete rejection of final causes, that is, the idea that things in nature (or nature as a whole) serve or have an end, and that understanding them involves understanding their end. Not only did Spinoza reject final causes as unscientific, a view which he shared with most proponents of the new science, he also regarded it as the source of superstition and a major obstacle to the attainment of genuine knowledge.

The same spirit underlies Spinoza's practical philosophy, which is marked by his clinical, dispassionate analysis of human nature and behaviour. In contrast to traditional moralists (both religious and secular), he rejects any appeal to a set of absolute values that are independent of human desire. Since the basic desire of every being is self-preservation, virtue is identified with the capacity to preserve one's being, the good with what is truly useful in this regard and the bad with what is truly harmful. In the case of human beings, however, what is truly useful is knowledge; so virtue consists essentially in knowledge. This is because knowledge is both the major weapon against the passions (which are the chief sources of human misery) and, in so far as it is directed to God or the necessary order of nature, the source of the highest satisfaction.

Apart from the *Ethics*, Spinoza is best known for his contributions to the development of an historical approach to the Bible and to liberal political theory. The former is contained in the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* (Theological-Political Treatise), which he published anonymously in 1670 as a plea for religious toleration and freedom of thought. The latter is contained both in that work and in the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* (Political Treatise) of 1677, in which Spinoza attempts to extend his scientific approach to questions in political philosophy.

1. The geometrical method

Although Spinoza uses the geometrical method in the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (*Ethics Demonstrated in a Geometrical Manner*) (1677a), he does not attempt to justify or even explain it. This has led many readers to view its argument as an intricate and fascinating chain of reasoning from arbitrary premises, which, as such, never touches reality. Nevertheless, Spinoza was very much aware of this problem and dealt with it both in an important early and unfinished work on method, *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect) (1677b) and in some of his correspondence.

At the heart of the problem is the nature of the definitions (and to a lesser extent the axioms) on the basis of which Spinoza attempts to demonstrate the propositions of the *Ethics*. In a 1663 letter to a young friend, Simon De Vries, who queried him about this very problem, Spinoza

offers his version of the traditional distinction between nominal and real definitions. The former kind stipulates what is meant by a word or thought in a concept. Such a definition can be conceivable or inconceivable, clear or obscure; but, as arbitrarily invented, it cannot, strictly speaking, be either true or false. By contrast, the real definition, which supposedly ‘explains a thing as it exists outside of the understanding’, defines a thing rather than a term (Leibniz 1966 letter 9: 106–7). Consequently, it can be either true or false.

Since the definitions of the Ethics are typically introduced by expressions such as ‘by... I mean that’, or ‘a thing is called’, it would seem that they are of the nominal type, which gives rise to the charge of arbitrariness. It is clear from their use, however, that Spinoza regards them as real definitions. Like the definitions of geometrical figures in Euclid, they are intended to express not merely the names used, but the objects named.

The question, then, is how can one know that one has arrived at a true definition. Spinoza’s answer reveals the depth of his commitment to the geometrical way of thinking, especially to the method of analytic geometry developed by Descartes. He appeals to the example of the mathematician, who knows that one has a real definition of a figure when one is able to construct it. The definition of a figure is thus a rule for its construction, what is usually called a ‘genetic definition’. Spinoza develops this point in *On the Emendation of the Intellect* ([1677b] 1985 vol.1: 39–40) by contrasting the nominal definition of a circle as ‘a figure in which the lines drawn from the centre to the circumference are equal’ with the genetic definition as ‘the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other movable’. The point is that the latter definition, but not the former, tells us how such a figure can be constructed and from this rule of construction we can deduce all its essential properties.

Spinoza’s claim, then, is that the principles that apply to mathematical objects and perhaps other abstract entities also apply to reality as such. Thus, we have a real definition, an adequate, true or clear and distinct idea of a thing (all of these terms being more or less interchangeable) in so far as we know its ‘proximate cause’ and can see how its properties necessarily follow from this cause.

But if knowledge of a thing reduces to knowledge of its proximate cause, then either we find ourselves involved in an infinite regress, which would lead to a hopeless scepticism, or the chain of reasoning must be grounded in a single first principle. Furthermore, this first principle must have a unique status: if it is to provide the ultimate ground in terms of which everything else is to be explained, it must somehow be self-grounded or have the reason for its existence in itself. In the scholastic terminology which Spinoza adopts, it must be *causa sui* (self-caused). Thus, Spinoza’s rationalist method leads necessarily to the concept of God, which he defines as ‘a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence’ (Ethics: I, def. 6).

Given this concept, together with other essential concepts such as substance, attribute and mode (which are treated in the definitions of part one), the argument of the Ethics proceeds in a deductive manner. Its goal is to enable us to understand reality as a whole in light of this concept in just the same way that the mathematician can understand all the essential properties of a

geometrical figure in terms of its concept or genetic definition. At least this is the project of part one of the Ethics (On God). The remainder of the work is devoted to the demonstration of the most important consequences of this result in so far as they concern the human condition.

2. Substance-monism

The first fourteen propositions of the Ethics contain an argument intended to show that ‘Except God, no substance can be or be conceived’ (Ethics: I, prop. 14). Since it follows from an analysis of the concept of substance that whatever is not itself substance must be a modification thereof, Spinoza concludes in the next proposition that ‘Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God’. Together they express Spinoza’s substance-monism, which can be defined as the complex thesis that there is only one substance in the universe; that this substance is to be identified with God; and that all things, as modes of this one substance are, in some sense ‘in God’.

The argument for this thesis is based largely on the analysis of the concept of substance, defined as ‘what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed’ (Ethics: I, def. 3). This definition is quite close to Descartes who likewise made a capacity for independent existence the criterion of substance; but the two philosophers drew diametrically opposed conclusions from their similar definitions. Although Descartes held that God is substance in a pre-eminent sense, he also maintained that there are two kinds of created substance – thinking things or minds, and extended things, both of which depend for their existence on God but not on each other. For Spinoza, by contrast, there is only the one substance – God – and thought and extension are among its attributes.

Spinoza argues indirectly for his monism by criticizing the two major alternatives that a substance-based metaphysics can provide: that there is a plurality of substances of the same nature or attribute and that there is a plurality of substances with different natures or attributes. Since Descartes is committed to both forms of pluralism, both parts of the argument cut against his views. In considering Spinoza’s position, however, it should be kept in mind that his target is not merely Descartes, but an entire philosophical and theological tradition which conceived of the universe as composed of a number of finite substances created by God (see Medieval philosophy). In spite of his radical critique of scholastic ways of thinking and his appeal to mathematics as the ideal of knowledge, Descartes remained in many ways a part of that tradition.

The argument against the first form of pluralism turns on the claim that ‘In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or kind’ (Ethics: I, prop. 5). This is at once one of the most important and controversial propositions in the Ethics. It is important because of its pivotal role in the overall argument for monism, controversial because of the demonstration offered in its support which is based on a consideration of the grounds on which two or more substances might be distinguished. This could be done either on the basis of their attributes, if they are substances of different types (for example, Descartes’ thinking and extended substances), or on the basis of their modifications, if they are distinct substances of the same kind (for example, particular minds or bodies). The claim is that neither procedure can distinguish two

or more substances of the same kind; and since these are the only possible ways of distinguishing substances, it follows that such substances could not be distinguished from one another.

The unsuitability of the first alternative seems obvious and would be recognized as such by Descartes. Since a substance-type for Descartes is defined in terms of its attribute, it follows that two or more substances of the same kind could not be distinguished on the basis of their attributes. As obvious as this seems, however, it was criticized by Leibniz on the grounds that two substances might have some attributes in common and others that were distinct. For example, substance *A* might have attributes *x* and *y*, and substance *B* attributes *y* and *z*. Although a Cartesian would reject this analysis on the grounds that a substance cannot have more than one attribute, Spinoza (for whom God is a substance with infinite attributes) could hardly accept this Cartesian principle. Moreover, we shall see that it is essential to the overall argument for monism to eliminate the possibility suggested by Leibniz (see Leibniz, G.W. §§4–7).

Various strategies for dealing with this problem have been suggested in the literature, perhaps the most plausible of which turns on the principle that if two or more substances were to share a single attribute, they would have to share all, and would, therefore, be numerically identical. Although Spinoza never argues explicitly in this way, it seems a reasonable inference from his conception of attribute as ‘what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence’ (Ethics: I, def. 4). This entails that attribute *y* of substance *A* is identical to attribute *y* of substance *B* just in case they express the same nature or essence – that is, are descriptions of the same kind of thing. But if they are things of the same kind, then any attribute *A* has will be possessed by *B* as well.

Against the second alternative Spinoza argues that, since by definition substance is prior to its modifications, if we consider substance as it is in itself then we cannot distinguish one substance from another. Although the claim is surely correct, the suggestion that we set the modifications aside seems to beg the question against Descartes. After all, two Cartesian thinking substances share the same nature or attribute and are distinguished precisely by their different modifications (thoughts).

Spinoza’s reasoning at this point is unclear, but one could respond that, on the hypothesis under consideration, the substances must be assumed to be indistinguishable prior to the assignment of modifications. Moreover, it follows from this that the assignment of modifications could not serve to distinguish otherwise indistinguishable substances unless it is already assumed that they are numerically distinct. In other words, while we can distinguish two Cartesian substances by means of their modifications, we can only do so by presupposing that the distinct modifications belong to numerically distinct substances. But it is just this assumption to which the Cartesian is not entitled.

3. Substance-monism (cont.)

This, however, is only the first step in the argument for monism. It is also necessary to rule out the possibility of a plurality of substances of different kinds. Essential to this project is the demonstration that substance is infinite not merely ‘in its own kind’, that is, unlimited by anything of the same kind, but ‘absolutely infinite’, that is, all-inclusive or possessing all reality,

which, for Spinoza, means infinite attributes. For example, Descartes' extended substance is infinite in the first sense because it is not limited or determined by anything outside itself (for example, empty space); but it is not infinite in the second and decisive sense because it does not constitute all reality. Moreover, this is precisely why the first sense of infinity is not sufficient to preclude a plurality of substances.

The basis of the argument for the absolute infinity of substance is the claim that 'The more reality or being each thing has the more attributes belong to it' (Ethics: I, prop. 9). This is a direct challenge to the Cartesian conception of substance as defined in terms of a single attribute, resting on the dual assumption that some things can possess more reality than others and that this superior degree of reality is manifested in a greater number of attributes. Unfortunately, in defence of this claim Spinoza merely refers to the definition of attribute as 'what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence' (Ethics: I, def. 4). Nevertheless, it does seem possible to understand Spinoza's point if we interpret attributes as something like distinct descriptions under which substance or reality can be taken. Consider, for example, a simple human action such as raising an arm. Although it may be possible to give a complete neurophysiological account of such an action in terms of impulses sent to the brain, the contraction of muscles and the like, one could still argue that no such account, no matter how detailed, is adequate to understanding it as an action. This requires reference to psychological factors such as the beliefs and intentions of an agent, which in Spinoza's metaphysics belong to the attribute of thought. Thus, we might say both that there is 'more reality' to an action than is given in a purely neurophysiological account and that this 'greater reality' can be understood as the possession of a greater number of attributes.

It follows from this that a being possessing all reality – that is, God, or the *ens realissimum* (most real being) of the tradition – may be described as possessing infinite attributes. It also follows that the Cartesian must either accept the possibility of a substance with infinite attributes or deny the possibility of God. And since the orthodox Cartesian could hardly do the latter, the former must be admitted.

Even granting this, however, at least two problems remain. One is how to understand the infinity of attributes. This might mean either that substance possesses infinitely many attributes, of which the human mind knows only two (thought and extension), or that it possesses all possible attributes, which is compatible with there being only two. Although scholars are divided on the point and there are indications from Spinoza's correspondence that he held the former view, it is important to realize that the argument for monism requires only the latter. This argument turns on the claim that God is a substance that possesses all the attributes there are and, therefore, that there are none left for any other conceivable substance. Combining this with the proposition that two substances cannot share an attribute, it follows that there can be no substance apart from God.

The second problem is that the argument up to this point is completely hypothetical. It shows that *if* we assume the existence of God, defined as a substance possessing infinite attributes, then it follows that no substance apart from God is possible; but it has not yet established the existence of substance so conceived. Spinoza had, however, laid the foundation for this claim

in Ethics (I, prop. 7) with the demonstration that existence pertains to the nature of substance; so it remains merely to apply this result to God. This is the task of proposition eleven, which contains Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God. Spinoza offers three separate proofs, the major one being his version of the ontological argument, which was first developed by Anselm and later reformulated by Descartes (see Anselm §4; Descartes, R. §6). Like his predecessors, Spinoza attempts to derive God's existence from the mere concept; but unlike them he makes no reference to God's perfection. Instead he appeals merely to the definition of God as a substance, from which it follows (by proposition seven) that God necessarily exists.

The nerve of the overall argument is, therefore, the proposition that existence pertains to the nature of substance or, equivalently, that its essence necessarily involves existence. Moreover, Spinoza's argument for this claim reveals the extent of his rationalism. From the premise that substance cannot be produced by anything external to itself (since such a cause would have to be another substance of the same nature, which has already been ruled out), he concludes that it must be the cause of itself, which is just to say that existence necessarily follows from its essence. Underlying this reasoning is what, at least since Leibniz, is usually termed the principle of sufficient reason, that is, the principle that everything must have a ground, reason or cause (these terms often being used interchangeably) why it is so and not otherwise. Although followers of Leibniz such as Christian Wolff attempted to demonstrate this principle, Spinoza, like most rationalists before Kant (including Leibniz), seems to have regarded it as self-evident (see Wolff, C. §6).

This characterization of substance as self-caused or self-sufficient being anticipates its identification with God. Quite apart from the question of its validity, however, perhaps the most interesting feature of Spinoza's argument for the necessary existence of his God-substance is that it is at the same time an argument for the non-existence of God the creator. Nevertheless, it should not be inferred from this that the result is purely negative or that Spinoza is concerned to deny the existence of God in every sense. On the contrary, his real concern in the opening propositions of the Ethics is to show that necessary existence and, therefore, the property of being a self-contained, self-explicated reality, is to be predicated of the order of nature as a whole rather than of some distinct and inscrutable ground of this order. And this also expresses the deepest meaning of his monism.

4. God and the world

Spinoza's monism does not, however, mean the end of all dualities. In fact, the identification of God with nature leads immediately to the distinction between two aspects of nature, which he terms *natura naturans* (active or generating nature), and *natura naturata* (passive or generated nature). The former refers to God as conceived through himself, that is, substance with infinite attributes, and the latter to the modal system conceived through these attributes (which includes, but is not identical to, the totality of particular things). Consequently, the task is to explain the connection between these two aspects of nature, a task which is the Spinozistic analogue to the traditional problem of explaining the relationship between God and creation.

Like the theologians, whose procedure he adopts even while subverting their claims, Spinoza divides his analysis into two parts: a consideration of the divine causality as it is in itself (or as *natura naturans*) and a consideration of it as expressed in the modal system (or as *natura naturata*). Given what we have already seen, the former holds few surprises. The basic claim is that 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways, (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)' (Ethics: I, prop. 16). Spinoza here characterizes both the nature and extent of the divine causality or power. By locating this power in the 'necessity of the divine nature' rather than creative will and by identifying its extent with 'everything which can fall under an infinite intellect', that is, everything conceivable, Spinoza might seem to be denying freedom to God. Certainly he is denying anything like freedom of choice. To object on these grounds, however, is to ignore the conception of freedom which Spinoza does affirm and to appeal to the very anthropomorphic conception of the deity against which his whole analysis is directed. To be free for Spinoza is not to be undetermined but to be self-determined (Ethics: I, def. 7); and God, precisely because he acts from the necessity of his own nature, is completely self-determined and, therefore, completely free.

The question of the relationship between God, so construed, and the 'infinitely many things' or modes that supposedly follow from God in 'infinitely many ways', which is perhaps the central question in Spinoza's metaphysics, is greatly complicated by the fact that Spinoza distinguishes between two radically distinct types of modes. As modifications of the one substance, both types are dependent on and in a sense 'follow from' God, but they do so in quite different ways.

First, there are those modes that either follow directly from an attribute of substance or follow from one that does directly follow. These are termed respectively 'immediate' and 'mediate eternal and infinite modes'. They are eternal and infinite because they follow (logically) from an attribute of substance, but they are not eternal and infinite in the same manner as substance and its attributes. Although Spinoza tells us very little about these modes in the Ethics, we know from his correspondence and the Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being (c.1660–5)) which contains the earliest statement of his system, that he regarded 'motion' or 'motion and rest', and 'intellect' or 'infinite intellect', as immediate eternal and infinite modes in the attributes of extension and thought respectively. As an example of a mediate eternal and infinite mode, he mentions only the 'face of the whole universe' (*facies totius universi*) which pertains to extension.

Given the highly schematic and fragmentary nature of the surviving accounts of these eternal and infinite modes, any interpretation is hazardous. Nevertheless, both their systematic function as mediators between God or substance and the particular things in nature (finite modes), and the names chosen for the modes of extension, suggest that the latter are best construed as the fundamental laws of physics. In fact, Spinoza's characterization of motion and rest as an eternal and infinite mode may be seen as his attempt to overcome a basic difficulty in Cartesian physics. Having identified matter with extension, Descartes could not account for either motion or the division of matter into distinct bodies without appealing to divine intervention. On Spinoza's view, however, this is not necessary, since extended substance has its principle within itself.

Otherwise expressed, matter is inherently dynamical, a property which cannot be explained in terms of Descartes' purely geometrical physics.

The 'face of the whole universe', which is identified with corporeal nature as a whole, may be understood in a similar fashion. By claiming that this is a mediate eternal and infinite mode of extension following directly from motion and rest, Spinoza is implying that the proportion of motion and rest in corporeal nature as a whole remains constant, even though it may be in continual flux in any given region. Moreover, this is equivalent to affirming the principle of the conservation of motion, which is a basic principle of Cartesian physics.

Viewing Spinoza's account in the light of seventeenth-century physics also helps to understand his doctrine of finite modes, or the series of particular things, which is usually regarded as one of the more problematic aspects of his metaphysics. The problem is how to conceive the relationship between the series of these modes and God. If one assumes that, like the mediate eternal and infinite modes, they follow mediately from the attributes of God, then they too become eternal and infinite; but this is absurd, since it is of the essence of such modes to be transitory. If, however, one denies that they follow from God at all, then the dependence of all things on God, and with it Spinoza's monism, is negated. Accordingly, it must be explained how, in spite of their finitude, particular things and occurrences depend on God and participate in the divine necessity.

Spinoza's solution to this dilemma consists in claiming that the series of finite modes constitutes an infinite causal chain, wherein each finite mode is both cause and effect of others, *ad infinitum*, while the entire series (viewed as a totality) is dependent on the attributes of God and the eternal and infinite modes. Expressed in scientific terms, this means that every occurrence in nature is to be understood in terms of two intersecting lines of explanation. On the one hand, there is a set of general laws which for Spinoza are logically necessary (since they follow from the divine attributes); on the other hand, there must be a set of antecedent conditions. Both are required to explain a given phenomenon, say a clap of thunder. Clearly, no such explanation is possible without appealing to the relevant physical laws; but of themselves these laws are not sufficient to explain anything. It is also necessary to refer to the relevant antecedent conditions: in this case the state of the atmosphere. But, given these laws and the atmospheric state at t_1 , it is possible to deduce the occurrence of thunder at t_2 . And this means that nature is to be conceived as a thoroughly deterministic system.

Spinoza concludes from this that 'In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and to produce an effect in a certain way' (Ethics: I, prop. 29). But because of this denial of contingency, he is sometimes accused of conflating determinism with the stronger thesis (usually termed 'necessitarianism') according to which the entire order of nature, that is, the infinite series of finite modes, could not have been different. The point is that determinism entails merely that, given the laws of nature and the set of appropriate antecedent conditions, any particular occurrence is necessary; but this leaves room for contingency, since it leaves open the possibility of a different set of antecedent conditions.

In response, one might distinguish between a consideration of finite modes, or a subset thereof, taken individually and a consideration of the series of such modes as a whole. The former fails to eliminate contingency, since any particular mode or subset of modes, viewed in abstraction from the whole, can easily be thought (or imagined) to be different. But the same cannot be said of the series taken as a whole. Since this series (considered as a totality) depends on God, it could not be different without God being different (which is impossible). The problem here is with the idea that the set of modes as a whole requires an explanation or grounding distinct from that of its constituent elements. Such a move is usually dismissed as a 'category mistake' (treating a collection as if it were a higher-order individual). But if it is a mistake, it is one to which Spinoza is prone in virtue of his rationalism; for nothing could be less Spinozistic than the idea that while particular events may be intelligible, the order of nature as a whole is not. And since for Spinoza making something intelligible involves demonstrating its necessity, this commits him to necessitarianism.

5. The human mind

Just as the target of part one of the *Ethics* is the dualism of God and created nature, so that of part two is the dualism of mind and body. Rather than holding with Descartes that the mind and the body are two distinct substances that somehow come together to constitute a human being, Spinoza maintains that they constitute a single individual expressed in the attributes of thought and extension. Since the fundamental modifications of thought are ideas (other modifications, such as desires and volitions, presuppose an idea of their object), while those of extension are bodies, this means that the human mind is an idea of a rather complex sort and that together with its correlate or object in extension (the body), it constitutes a single thing or individual. The great attractiveness of this view, particularly when contrasted with both Descartes' dualism and Hobbes' reductive materialism, is that it allows for the conception of persons as unified beings with correlative and irreducible mental and physical aspects (see Hobbes, T.). Unfortunately, this attractiveness is diminished considerably by its inherent obscurity. How can the mind be identified with an idea (even a very complex one)? And how can such an idea constitute a single thing with its object?

The place to begin a consideration of these questions is with Spinoza's elusive conception of an idea, which he defines as 'a conception of the mind that the mind forms because it is a thinking being' (*Ethics*: II, def. 3). As he makes clear in his explication of this definition through the distinction between conception and perception, the emphasis falls on the activity of thought. To say that the mind has the idea of x is to say that it is engaged in the activity of conceiving x , not merely passively perceiving its mental image. Indeed, in one sense of the term, an idea for Spinoza just is the act of thinking. Moreover, this helps to remove at least some of the mystery in the identification of the mind with an idea. On the Spinozistic view, this means that the mind is identified with its characteristic activity, thinking; that its unity is the unity of this activity.

As acts of thinking, ideas may be identified with beliefs or 'believings'; but this reflects only one dimension of Spinoza's conception of an idea. For beliefs have propositional content and this, too, is an essential aspect of every idea. In short, ideas have both psychological and logical (or epistemological) properties. Moreover, although Spinoza is often charged with conflating these,

he was well aware of the difference and of the importance of keeping them apart. This is evident from his appeal to the scholastic distinction, also invoked by Descartes, between the 'formal' and the 'objective reality' of ideas. The former refers to the psychological side of ideas as acts of thinking or mental events, the latter to their logical side or propositional content. Construed in the former way, ideas have causes which, in view of the self-contained nature of each attribute, are always other ideas. Construed in the latter way, they have rational grounds which likewise are always other ideas.

Spinoza differs from Descartes, however, in his understanding of the objective reality of ideas. For Descartes, talk about the objective reality of an idea as it exists in someone's mind refers to that idea *qua* intentional object to which a 'real' (extra-mental) object may or may not correspond. For Spinoza, by contrast, the idea viewed objectively just is its object (a corresponding mode of extension) as it exists in thought. This is a direct consequence of Spinoza's mind-body monism and we shall see that it has important implications for his epistemology.

6. The human mind (cont.)

Our immediate concern, however, is with the implications of this conception of ideas for Spinoza's account of the mind-body relationship. Unquestionably, the key feature in this account is the principle that 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (Ethics: II, prop. 7). Taken by itself, this might be viewed as the assertion of a parallelism or isomorphism between the two orders, thereby leaving open the possibility that the elements contained in these orders might be ontologically distinct, as, for example, in Leibniz's pre-established harmony (see Leibniz, G.W. §§4–7). In the scholium attached to this proposition, however, Spinoza indicates that he takes it to entail something more. Thus, he explains that just as thinking and extended substance are 'one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute and now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways' (Ethics: II, prop. 7). In other words, rather than there being two series, one of extended things and the other of ideas, there is only a single series of finite modes, which may be regarded from two points of view, or taken under two descriptions. This also defines the sense in which Spinoza affirms an identity between mind and body. In claiming that mind and body constitute the same thing, he is not asserting that ultimately there is only one set of properties (which would make him a reductionist like Hobbes); rather, he is denying that the two sets of properties or, better, the two descriptions, can be assigned to two ontologically distinct things (as they are for Descartes).

Although the proposition makes a completely general claim about the relationship between the attributes of thought and extension, and their respective modifications, it also provides the metaphysical foundation for Spinoza's descent from the attribute of thought to its most interesting finite modification – the human mind. The descent is somewhat circuitous, however, since in subsequent propositions Spinoza stops to dwell on some topics that do not seem directly germane, such as the status of ideas of non-existent things; but the main line of the argument is clear enough. As a finite mode of thought, the essence of the mind must be constituted by an idea. Since the mind itself is something actual (an actual power of thinking), it must be the idea

of an actually existing thing. And since this actually existing thing can only be a corresponding modification of extension, that is, a body, Spinoza concludes that 'The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else' (Ethics: II, prop 13).

Even if one accepts Spinoza's premises and the chain of reasoning leading to the conclusion, this 'deduction' of the human mind as the idea of the body raises at least two major questions. One is how to reconcile the identification of the body as the unique object of the mind with the capacity of the mind to know and, therefore, presumably, to have ideas of things quite distinct from the body with which it is identified. This will be discussed in the next section in connection with Spinoza's epistemology. The other question concerns how this enables us to understand what is distinctive about the human mind. As Spinoza himself remarks in the scholium to proposition thirteen, this result is perfectly general, applying no more to human beings than to other individuals. And, by way of accentuating the point, he adds that these other individuals are 'all animate [*animata*], albeit in different degrees'. Now, given the principles of Spinoza's metaphysics, it certainly follows that there must be 'in God' an idea corresponding to every mode of extension in the same way as an idea of a human body corresponds to that body. Thus, the claim that the human mind is the idea of the body may serve to determine its ontological status, but it does not enable us to understand its specific nature and activity. But unless Spinoza's deduction of the mind can accomplish this result, it cannot be judged a success, even on his own terms. Moreover, by suggesting that all individuals in nature are to some extent *animata*, he introduces a fresh element of paradox into his discussion. Indeed, this is particularly so if we take Spinoza to be claiming that something like a soul, or a rudimentary mind, must be attributed to all individuals.

Since the Latin '*animatus*' is cognate with the English 'animate', the sense of paradox can be lessened somewhat if we take the claim to be merely that all individuals are alive. Although this itself might seem bizarre, it becomes more plausible when one considers Spinoza's conception of life which, in the appendix to his early work Descartes's 'Principles of Philosophy', he defines as 'the force through which things persevere in their being'. Since, as we shall see, Spinoza's conatus doctrine consists in the claim that each thing, in so far as it can, strives to preserve its being, it follows that every thing is in this sense 'alive'. And from this it is perhaps not too large a step to the conclusion that every thing has a 'soul' in the sense of an animating principle. But, of course, it does not follow from this that everything has a mental life that is even remotely analogous to that enjoyed by the human mind.

This makes it incumbent on Spinoza to account for the different degrees of animation and to explain thereby the superiority of the human mind to the 'minds' of other things in the order of nature. And he proceeds to do so by focusing on the nature of body. In essence, Spinoza's view is that 'mindedness' is a function of organic complexity; so the greater the capacity of a body (that is, brain and central nervous system) to interact with its environment, the greater the capacity of the mind to comprehend it. Thus, in a kind of speculative biophysics, Spinoza attempts to demonstrate that the human body is, indeed, a highly complex individual, which stands in a complex and reciprocal relationship with its environment. Although this account is

extremely cryptic, it is also highly suggestive and points in the direction of an analysis of the phenomenon of life that goes far beyond the crude mechanism of the Cartesians (for whom the body is merely a machine). Perhaps more to the point, it also provides a theoretical basis for locating conscious awareness and rational insight on a continuum of mental powers, all of which are strictly correlated with physical capacities, rather than viewing them with Descartes as unique properties of a distinct mental substance.

7. Theory of knowledge

Although Spinoza does not assign to epistemological questions the priority given them by Descartes and the British empiricists, he certainly does not neglect them. In fact, his analysis of human knowledge, which follows directly upon his account of the mind, may be viewed as an attempt to show how the human mind, so conceived, is capable of the kind of knowledge presupposed by the geometrical method of the *Ethics*. In Spinoza's own terms, this means that what must be shown is nothing less than that the human mind is capable of adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.

Since adequate knowledge rests on adequate ideas, Spinoza must demonstrate that the human mind possesses such ideas. He defines an adequate idea as one which 'considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties or intrinsic denominations of a true idea' (*Ethics*: II, def. 4). The term 'intrinsic' functions to rule out the extrinsic feature of a true idea: namely, agreement with its object. Thus, Spinoza's view is that truth and adequacy are reciprocal concepts: all adequate ideas are true (agree with their object) and all true ideas are adequate. Moreover, this enables him to dismiss the radical doubt regarding even our most evident conceptions envisaged by Descartes, which is supposedly overcome only by the manifestly circular appeal to God as the guarantor of truth. Since adequacy is an intrinsic feature of all true ideas, it serves as the criterion of truth. Consequently, someone who has a true idea immediately recognizes it as such and there is no longer room for Cartesian doubt. As Spinoza puts it with uncharacteristic elegance: 'As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false' (*Ethics*: II, prop. 43, scholium).

The intrinsic property through which truth manifests itself is explanatory completeness. An idea of x is adequate and, therefore, true just in case it suffices for the determination of all of the essential properties of x . For example, the mathematician's idea of a triangle is adequate because all of the mathematically relevant properties of the figure can be deduced from it. Conversely, the conception of a triangle by someone ignorant of mathematics is inadequate because it is incapable of yielding any such consequences.

It does not follow from this, however, that inadequate ideas are simply false. On the contrary, since every idea agrees with its object, every idea must in some sense be true. Specifically, 'All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true' (*Ethics*: II, prop. 32). Error or falsity arises because not every idea possessed by the human intellect is related by that intellect to God, that is, viewed as a determinate member of the total system of ideas. In other words, error or falsity is a function of incomplete comprehension, of partial truth being taken as complete. Spinoza illustrates the point by an example also used by Descartes: the imaginative, non-scientific idea of

the sun as a disk in the sky located a few hundred feet above the earth. This idea is 'true' in so far as it is taken as an accurate representation of how the sun appears to us under certain conditions; but since it is not understood in this way by someone ignorant of optics and astronomy, such a person's idea is false in the sense of being inadequate or incomplete. It is not, however, 'materially false' in the Cartesian sense that there is nothing in the realm of extension corresponding to it.

Correlative with the distinction between inadequate and adequate ideas is a contrast between two mutually exclusive ways in which ideas can be connected in the mind: either according to the 'common order of nature' or the 'order of the intellect'. The former refers to the order in which the human mind receives its ideas in sense perception or through imaginative association. Since these correspond exactly to the order in which the body is affected by the objects of these ideas, it reflects the condition of the body in its interaction with its environment rather than the true nature of an independent reality. And from this Spinoza concludes that all such ideas are inadequate. In fact, he argues that, in so far as its ideas reflect this order or, equivalently, are based on sense perception or imagination, the mind is incapable of adequate knowledge of either external objects in nature, its own body or even of itself. Spinoza also contends, however, that adequate knowledge of all three is possible in so far as the mind conceives things according to the order of the intellect, that is, the true order of logical and causal dependence, which, once again, is precisely why the correct method is so essential.

8. Theory of knowledge (cont.)

The central problem of Spinozistic epistemology is thus to explain how conception according to the order of the intellect is possible for the human mind. This is a problem because the possibility of such conception seems to be ruled out by the ontological status of the mind as the idea of the body. For how could a mind, so conceived, have any ideas that do not reflect the condition of its body? The gist of Spinoza's answer is that there are certain ideas that the human mind possesses completely and hence can conceive adequately because, unlike ideas derived from sense perception or imagination, they do not 'involve', or logically depend on, ideas of particular modifications of the body.

Spinoza's doctrine is particularly obscure at this point; but it is perhaps best approached by comparing it to the doctrine of innate ideas, which was appealed to by Descartes and later Leibniz to deal with a similar problem. Like Spinoza, they held that sensory experience cannot account for the possibility of knowledge of necessary and universal truth. Instead, they claimed that the source of such knowledge must lie in the mind and reflect its very structure. This was not understood in a naïve psychological sense, however, as if an infant were born with knowledge of the basic principles of mathematics. Rather, innate ideas were viewed more as dispositions that pertain essentially to the human mind, but of which individuals are not necessarily conscious (see Innate knowledge).

Although Spinoza's account of the mind as the idea of the body precludes the distinction drawn by Descartes between innate and adventitious ideas (that is, those that come from the mind and those that come from sensory experience), it does allow for an analogous distinction, which leads

to much the same result. This is the distinction between ideas that are correlated with specific features of particular bodies and those whose correlates are common to all bodies or a large proportion thereof. The latter fall into two classes, corresponding to two levels of generality, which Spinoza terms respectively 'common notions' and 'adequate ideas of the common properties of things'. Their distinctive feature is that they do not arise in connection with an encounter with any particular kind of thing; and this enables Spinoza to claim that the mind possesses them in their totality and comprehends them adequately. Unfortunately, he does not provide examples of either class of these adequate ideas; but it seems reasonable to assume that the common notions include the axioms of geometry and first principles of physics (which are common to all bodies). Correlatively, since the adequate ideas of common properties of things correspond to properties that are common and peculiar to the human body and to other bodies by which it is affected (Ethics: II, prop. 39), it is likely that Spinoza was here referring to the basic principles of biology (or perhaps physiology). In any event, the crucial point is that the commonality of these ideas enables the human mind to grasp them completely, which is what is required for adequate knowledge.

The epistemological teaching of the Ethics culminates in the distinction between three kinds of knowledge (Ethics: II, prop. 40, scholium 2). The first is an experientially determined knowledge, which can be based either on the perception of particular things or on signs, which for Spinoza includes both sensory and memory images. The second is knowledge through reason, which is based on common notions and ideas of the common properties of things. Since the former mode of knowledge involves inadequate ideas and the latter adequate ones, this is just the contrast one would expect. At this point, however, Spinoza unexpectedly introduces a third kind of knowledge, termed 'intuitive knowledge' (*scientia intuitiva*), which supposedly 'proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things'. He also attempts to clarify the difference between all three by comparing their respective treatments of the problem of finding a fourth proportional. Someone with the first kind of knowledge proceeds by rule of thumb, multiplying the second by the third and dividing the product by the first, thereby arriving at the correct answer without really understanding the principle at work. Someone with the second kind understands the principle and is, therefore, able to derive the result from the common property of proportionals as established by Euclid. Someone who possesses the third kind of knowledge, however, immediately grasps the result, without applying a rule or relying on a process of ratiocination.

Although both reason and intuition are sources of adequate knowledge, Spinoza recognizes two senses in which intuition is superior. First, whereas the province of reason concerns general truths based on common notions and consequently is abstract and general, that of intuition concerns the individual case and consequently is concrete and particular. This difference is not directly germane to Spinoza's epistemology, but it plays a significant role in his practical philosophy. Second, and of more immediate relevance, knowledge from general principles alone remains ultimately ungrounded. Accordingly, as in Spinoza's example, while the conclusion is inferred correctly from the principle, the status of the principle itself remains in question. Within the framework of Spinoza's metaphysics, this question can be resolved only by grounding the

principle in the nature of God, which is supposedly what is accomplished by intuitive knowledge.

But grounding our knowledge of things in the eternal and infinite essence of God obviously presupposes a knowledge of that essence; and even for a rationalist such as Descartes, this far transcends the capacity of the human intellect. This is not the case for Spinoza, however, given his unique conception of God. Since ‘it is of the nature of reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent’ (Ethics: II, prop. 44), and since to conceive things in this way is to conceive them in relation to God, Spinoza in effect concludes that in so far as the mind has an adequate idea of anything at all, it must have an adequate idea of God. Moreover, since it presumably has been established that the human mind knows some things (has some adequate ideas), it follows that the mind has an adequate idea of God. Although initially this seems paradoxical in the extreme, it becomes much less so if one keeps in mind the nature of Spinoza’s God.

9. The emotions

Nowhere is Spinoza’s unique combination of rationalism and naturalism more evident than in his doctrine of the emotions, the topic of the third part of the Ethics. Appealing to the conception of the mind as the idea of the body, he defines the emotions or affects (*affectiones*) as ‘affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections’ (Ethics: III, def. 3). Emotions are, therefore, directly related to the body’s capacity for action or level of vitality and have both a physiological and a psychological side. Moreover, given mind-body identity, these are seen as distinct expressions of the same thing. Thus, a conscious desire for some object and a corresponding bodily appetite are the same state considered under the attributes of thought and extension respectively.

Among other things, Spinoza’s conception of mind precludes the assumption of a distinct power of will through which the mind can exert control over the bodily appetites. Strictly speaking, there is nothing pertaining to the mind but ideas, that is, acts of thinking; but these ideas have a conative or volitional and affective as well as a cognitive dimension. In other words, to have an idea of x is to have not only a belief or propositional attitude with respect to x , but also some sort of evaluative attitude (pro or con). Moreover, this enables Spinoza to avoid concluding from his denial of will that the mind is powerless, condemned to being the passive observer of the bodily appetites. The mind, for Spinoza, is active in so far as it is the ‘adequate’, that is sufficient, cause of its states; and it is such in so far as it possesses adequate ideas, that is, in so far as its desires and hence its ‘decisions,’ are grounded in rational considerations – for example, when it desires a particular food because of the knowledge (adequate idea) that it is nutritious. Conversely, it is passive when its desires reflect inadequate ideas connected with sense perception and imagination.

But regardless of whether it is active or passive, the mind’s evaluative attitude is always an expression of its conatus, which is identified with the endeavour of each thing to persist in its own being. This endeavour pertains to the nature of every finite mode; but in human beings, who are conscious of this endeavour, it becomes the desire for self-preservation. Spinoza thus agrees

with Hobbes in regarding this desire as the basic motivating force in human behaviour. But rather than inferring this from observation, he deduces it from the ontological status of human beings as finite modes. This allows him to affirm not merely that this desire is, as a matter of fact, basic to human beings, but that it constitutes their very essence. Accordingly, one can no more help striving to preserve one's being than a stone can help falling when it is dropped.

Perhaps under the influence of Hobbes, Spinoza also identifies this endeavour to preserve one's being with a striving for greater perfection, understood as an increased power of action. Just as Hobbes insisted that individuals continually desire to increase their power because there can never be any assurance that it is sufficient for self-preservation, so Spinoza maintains that the endeavour of an organism to preserve its existence is identical to its effort to increase its power of acting or level of vitality. This is because anything that lessens an organism's power, lessens its ability to preserve its being, while anything that increases this power enhances that ability.

The so-called primary emotions (pleasure, pain and desire) are correlated with the transition from one state of perfection or level of vitality to another. Thus, pleasure or joy (*laetitia*) is defined as the emotion whereby the mind passes to a greater state of perfection, and pain or sorrow (*tristitia*) is that by which it passes to a lesser state. Both reflect changes brought about in the organism through interaction with its environment. Although particular desires are directly related to pleasures, desire is none the less a distinct primary emotion because a desire for a particular object viewed as a source of pleasure is distinct from that pleasure.

The great bulk of part three of the *Ethics* is devoted to showing how the other emotions can be derived from the primary ones by means of combination and association with other ideas. Central to this project is the thesis that pleasure, pain and desire relate to present objects, which cause the affections of the body to which these emotions (as ideas) correspond. Accordingly, the derivative emotions are all species or combinations of pleasure, pain or desire, which are directed in various ways either to objects that do not presently affect the body or to those that are not themselves directly the cause of these affections. For example, love and hatred are defined respectively as pleasure and pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause. Similarly, hope and fear are understood as pleasures and pains that arise under conditions of uncertainty, when the image of some past or future thing is connected with an outcome that is in doubt. This analysis is extended with considerable subtlety, showing, among other things, how ambivalence is possible; and how, through various forms of association, the mind can come to feel love, hatred, hope or fear towards things with regard to which it has no direct desire or aversion. The key point, however, is that, like everything else in nature, these emotions do not arise capriciously, but in accordance with universal and necessary laws.

But these laws concern the mind only in so far as it is passive, that is, in so far as its ideas are inadequate and it is, therefore, only the partial or inadequate cause of its affections. Accordingly, at the end of his lengthy account of the passive emotions or passions, Spinoza turns briefly to the active emotions, which are connected with adequate ideas. Of the three primary emotions, only desire and pleasure have active forms, because only they can be grounded in adequate ideas. Active desire has already been described; it is simply rational desire. Active pleasure is a concomitant of all adequate cognition; for when the mind cognizes anything adequately it is

necessarily aware of this and, therefore, of its own power or activity. And it is the awareness of its activity, not the nature of the object known, that is the source of pleasure. Finally, since pain or sorrow reflects a diminution of the mind's power of activity (adequate ideas), Spinoza concludes that it can never be the result of this activity, but must always result from the mind's inadequate knowledge and determination by external forces.

10. Moral theory

Spinoza's moral theory is based on his analysis of the emotions and is formulated with the same clinical detachment as the remainder of the *Ethics*. In sharp contrast to Judaeo-Christian moralists and their secular counterparts, he proposes neither a set of obligations nor a list of actions, the performance of which make one morally 'good', and their omission or neglect morally 'evil': all such moral systems and concepts are based on inadequate ideas, particularly the ideas of free will and final causes. Instead, he is concerned to determine the means through which and the extent to which human beings, as finite modes, are capable of attaining freedom, understood as the capacity to act rather than to be governed by the passions. Morality in the traditional sense is, therefore, replaced by a kind of therapy, which is one reason why Spinoza is frequently compared with Freud. The concept of virtue is retained; but it is given its original meaning as power, which is itself understood in light of the *conatus* doctrine as the power to preserve one's being. In the same spirit, the good is identified with what is truly useful in this regard and the bad with what is truly harmful.

In spite of his amoralism, Spinoza does not equate virtue with the ability to survive or the good with what is in one's self-interest, narrowly conceived. What matters is not mere living, but living well; and this means being active – that is, being, to the fullest extent possible, the adequate cause of one's condition. And since being an adequate cause is a function of adequate ideas, virtue is directly correlated with knowledge. Knowledge, however, has a dual role in the Spinozistic scheme. It is the major weapon in the struggle against the passions, since it is through understanding our passions and their causes that we are able to gain some measure of control over them. But it is also itself constitutive of the good life, since our freedom is manifested essentially in the exercise of reason.

Nevertheless, Spinoza was under no illusions about the extent of the power of reason. Human virtue or perfection is merely relative and its attainment a rare and difficult feat. Thus, the first eighteen propositions of part four of the *Ethics*, which is significantly entitled 'On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects', are concerned with the limits of the power of reason in its conflict with the passions. The basic point is that, as finite modes, the force through which human beings endeavour to preserve their being is infinitely surpassed by other forces in nature and, therefore, to some extent at least, they will always be subject to the passions. Moreover, knowledge itself has no motivating power simply *qua* knowledge, but only in so far as it is also an affect. Now knowledge is, indeed, an affect for Spinoza, since all ideas have an affective component, that is, possess a certain motivational force. But, as he attempts to demonstrate by means of an elaborate psychodynamics, the affective component of even an adequate idea is strictly limited and can easily be overcome by other (inadequate) ideas, which is why rational

desires, based on a knowledge of what is truly beneficial, all too frequently give way to irrational urges.

After his analysis of human weakness, Spinoza turns to the question of what reason, limited as its power may be, prescribes. The basic answer, of course, is knowledge and, given Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology, this ultimately means knowledge of God. Thus, he concludes that 'Knowledge of God is the mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God' (Ethics: IV, prop. 28). At this point, however, the discussion takes a surprising turn, one which indicates both the complexity of, and the inherent tensions in, Spinoza's thought. For while this austere intellectualism suggests the picture of the isolated, asocial thinker, devoted exclusively to the life of the mind, what is affirmed instead is the essentially social character of human existence. For Spinoza, as for Aristotle, human beings are social animals; and the life lived under the guidance of reason is, at least to some extent, a social life (see Aristotle §22). This is not because human beings are intrinsically altruistic, but rather because, as relatively limited and weak finite modes, they are ineluctably interdependent. Thus, Spinoza argues that those who live under the guidance of reason desire nothing for themselves that they do not also desire for others (Ethics: IV, prop. 37). This reflects his undoubtedly idealized portrait of those devoted to the life of the mind. In so far as this devotion is pure (which it can never be completely), such individuals will not come into conflict because the good which they all seek, knowledge, can be held in common. In fact, not only will genuine seekers after truth not compete, they will cooperate; for in helping others acquire knowledge and the control of the passions that goes with it, one is also helping oneself. Moreover, although only the few capable (to some extent) of living under the guidance of reason may be able to grasp adequately and, therefore, internalize this truth, the need for cooperation applies to all; for all are members of the same human community of interdependent beings.

11. Moral theory (cont.)

Spinoza's account of the specific virtues reflect his general principles. These virtues are identified with certain affects or emotional states and their value is regarded as a function of their capacity to promote an individual's conatus. For this purpose the affects are divided into three classes: those that are intrinsically good and can never become excessive (the virtues); those that are intrinsically bad; and a large group that are good in moderation but bad if they become excessive. In identifying the virtues with affects that can never become excessive, Spinoza differs from Aristotle for whom virtues are regarded as means between two extremes.

Paramount in the group of virtuous affects is pleasure or joy. Since it reflects in the attribute of thought an increase in the body's power of activity, it can never be harmful. This gives Spinoza's thought a strongly anti-ascetic tone which stands in sharp contrast to the Calvinistic austerity of many of his countrymen. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish between genuine pleasure, which reflects the wellbeing of the organism as a whole, and titillation (*titillatio*) or localized pleasure, which merely reflects that of a part. Although the latter can be good, it can also be quite harmful. Other affects in this mixed category include cheerfulness and self-esteem. In the latter case, the crucial factor is whether or not the affect is grounded in reason. Pride, or self-esteem, without any rational basis is obviously harmful and is to be avoided at all costs. But, in so far as self-approval arises from an adequate idea of one's power, it is the highest thing we can hope for,

since it is simply the consciousness of one's virtue. Perhaps even more than his anti-asceticism, this indicates how much closer Spinoza is to the classical ideal of the virtuous life than he is to traditional religious morality.

In addition to pain, Spinoza assigns first place among the intrinsically harmful affects to hate. Closely associated with hate, and rejected in similarly unqualified terms, are affects such as envy, derision, contempt, anger and revenge. These might be termed the social vices, since they serve to alienate human beings from one another. It is also noteworthy that Spinoza here locates many of the traditional religious virtues: hope, fear, humility, repentance and pity. Since they all reflect ignorance and lack of power, they cannot be regarded as beneficial, or assigned any place in the life of reason. Nevertheless, in a concession to human frailty, Spinoza does acknowledge that because human beings rarely live in this manner, these affects have a certain pragmatic value as checks on our more aggressive tendencies.

The affects that can be either good or bad include – besides titillation – desire and love. If directed towards an object that stimulates or gratifies a part of the organism or one of its appetites at the expense of the whole, they can become excessive and hence harmful. And this is precisely what occurs in pathological states such as avarice, ambition, gluttony and above all, lust. In spite of his generally anti-ascetic attitude, Spinoza tended to regard sexual desire as an unmitigated evil. In sharp contrast to it stands the one kind of love that can never become excessive: the love of God.

12. The love of God and human blessedness

Although it does not enter into the account of virtue, the love of God plays a central role in the final part of the Ethics. The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that this part deals with two distinct topics, which may be characterized as mental health and blessedness; and the love of God is crucial to both. The question of health is the subject of the first twenty propositions, which are concerned with reason's unremitting struggle with the passions. Here Spinoza functions explicitly as therapist, providing his alternative not only to the religious tradition, but also to the training of the will advocated by the Stoics and Descartes (see Stoicism). Since what is crucial is that, as far as possible, one be moved by pleasurable thoughts (rather than reactive, negative affects), Spinoza's account amounts to an essay on the power of positive thinking. Moreover, since the ultimate positive thought is the love of God, this love serves as the chief remedy against the passions.

In spite of the religious language in which it is expressed, this claim is readily understandable in Spinozistic terms. Since by 'love' is meant simply pleasure accompanied by the idea of its cause, any pleasure accompanied by God as its cause counts as the love of God. But all adequate cognition is both inherently pleasurable, since it expresses the activity of the mind, and involves the idea of God as cause, since it consists in an idea of the object as following from God (the third kind of knowledge). Thus, the adequate knowledge of anything involves the love of God as its affective dimension. Moreover, since, in principle at least, it is possible to acquire an adequate idea of any modification of substance, it follows that this love can be occasioned by virtually anything. Consequently, it is its potential ubiquity, together with its superior affective force as

expression of pure activity, that qualifies this love-knowledge of God as the supreme remedy against the passions.

In the second half of part five, the love of God is now explicitly characterized as 'intellectual' and paradoxically identified with the love with which God loves himself. And if this were not puzzling enough, Spinoza introduces the new discussion by proclaiming: 'With this I have completed everything which concerns this present life... so it is now time to pass to those things which pertain to the mind's duration without relation to the body' (Ethics: V, prop. 20, scholium). This sets the agenda for the final propositions, the basic concern of which is to show that 'The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal' (Ethics: V, prop. 23). It is within this context that Spinoza refers to the intellectual love of God.

Because of their apparent incompatibility with the central teachings of the Ethics, these final propositions remain a source of perplexity. Nevertheless, it does seem possible to make sense of Spinoza's thought here, if we see it in the context of a shift of focus from the concern with reason (including the love of God) in its struggle with the passions, to a concern with the life of reason as the highest condition of which human beings are capable and, therefore, as constitutive of human blessedness. So construed, the abrupt change of tone is simply Spinoza's way of marking that shift rather than an indication of a lapse into a mysticism that is totally at variance with the spirit of his philosophy. Such a reading leads to an essentially epistemological rather than a metaphysical reading of the doctrine of the eternity of the mind. According to this reading, the human mind is 'eternal' to the extent to which it is capable of grasping eternal truth and ultimately of understanding itself by the third kind of knowledge, which, in turn, leads to the intellectual love of God. To be sure, this is not the eternal life promised by religion; but it is a state of blessedness or perfection in the sense that it involves the full realization of our capacities. Moreover, it is precisely the mode of life to which the Ethics as a whole points the way.

Such a reading is also supported by the final proposition in which Spinoza returns to the theme of virtue and links it with both health and blessedness. As he there puts it, 'Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to constrain them' (Ethics: V, prop. 41). There is not a trace of mysticism here, but merely the familiar Spinozistic emphasis on the connection between blessedness and knowledge on the one hand, and knowledge and power on the other. Accordingly, the point is that we do not acquire this knowledge by first controlling our lusts, but that we have the power to control them (virtue) only to the extent to which we already possess adequate knowledge. And it is in this knowledge, also characterized as peace of mind, that blessedness consists.

13. Politics

Spinoza's concern with political theory has its philosophical roots in his conception of human beings as social animals, which entails the necessity of living in a state under a system of laws; but it was also triggered by the political situation in his own time. In the Netherlands, the

monarchist party was intent on overthrowing the republican form of government, and their allies, the Reformed clergy, desired to establish a state church. In spite of his commitment to a life of philosophical contemplation, Spinoza was keenly aware of this situation and the dangers it posed to freedom of thought and expression, which he regarded as essential. His philosophical response to this threat, as well as the statement of his own views about the nature and function of the state, are to be found in the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* (Theological-Political Treatise) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (Political Treatise). The former is a polemical work, intended, at least in part, as a response to the Reformed clergy, while the latter is a dispassionate essay in political science. But despite this difference in tone and some disagreement on substantive matters, both works argue for freedom as the supreme political value and both investigate the conditions under which it can be realized and preserved.

Spinoza's political thought is best approached by way of a comparison with Hobbes. Both thinkers view human beings as thoroughly determined parts of nature and as driven by the desire for self-preservation; both are amorlists in the sense that they hold that everyone has a 'natural right' to do whatever is deemed necessary for self-preservation; as a direct consequence of this view of natural right, both view the state of nature (the pre-political condition) as one of unavoidable conflict and insecurity; and, finally, both maintain that peace and security can be attained only if everyone surrenders all of their natural right to a sovereign power (which takes the form of a social contract). But whereas Hobbes concludes from his account the necessity of an absolute sovereign power, preferably in the form of a monarchy, Spinoza infers from substantially the same premises that the true end of the state is freedom, and, at least in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that democracy is 'the most natural form of state'.

To some extent, these differences can be understood in terms of the different social and political conditions under which the two thinkers lived. There are also important philosophical differences, however, one of which is their respective conceptions of human reason. For Hobbes, reason has a merely instrumental value as a means to the attainment of ends dictated by desire. We have seen, however, that for Spinoza the goal is to transform desire through reason, which naturally leads him to focus on the conditions under which the life of reason can best be lived. Moreover, Spinoza seems to have arrived at his conclusions through a kind of internal critique of Hobbes. As he informed a correspondent in 1674:

With regard to politics, the difference between Hobbes and me... consists in this, that I ever preserve the natural right intact so that the supreme power in a state has no more right over a subject than is proportionate to the power by which it is superior to the subject. This is what always takes place in the state of nature.

(Spinoza 1966 letter 50: 269)

By suggesting that Hobbes did not keep natural right intact, Spinoza is implying that he did not consistently equate right with power. This is indeed true; but it does not explain how the identification of might with right enables Spinoza to arrive at his conclusions. The gist of the answer, as suggested by this passage, is that the identification applies also to sovereign power. In other words, rather than gaining absolute right over its subjects through the social contract, as

Hobbes maintained, the sovereign's right is limited by its power; and since this power is inevitably limited, so too are the things that a sovereign may 'legitimately' demand of its subjects.

Among the things that a sovereign cannot require are acts so contrary to human nature that no threat or promise could lead a person to perform them. These include things such as forcing people to testify against themselves or to make no effort to avoid death. But Spinoza does not stop at such obvious cases. He also emphasizes the limitation of legislative power with respect to private morality; and he finds an argument for freedom of thought in the fact that a government is powerless to prevent it. More importantly, he points out that there are some things which a government can do by brute force, but in doing so inevitably undermines its own authority. And since a government cannot do these things with impunity, it does not have the 'right' to do them at all. Thus, he argues on entirely pragmatic grounds for the limitation of governmental power through the power of public opinion.

Spinoza's main concern as political theorist, however, is not to determine what the state cannot do, but rather what it should do in order to realize the end for which it was established. Moreover, while verbally agreeing with Hobbes in construing this end as peace and security, Spinoza understands these in a much broader sense. Accordingly, peace is not merely an absence of war or the threat thereof, but a positive condition in which people can exercise their virtue. Thus, the goal of the state is to create this condition, which is also the social condition necessary for the life of reason as depicted in the *Ethics*.

But the life of reason is only for the few, and political arrangements must concern the many. Moreover, since it is the many who determine the public opinion to which the government must pay heed if it is to rule effectively, it follows that there can be valid laws, approved at least tacitly by a majority, which are none the less inimical to true virtue. Spinoza was keenly aware of this problem; but his way of dealing with it indicates the tension between his democratic tendencies and his elitism that runs throughout his theory. Thus on the one hand he insists on the right of free expression, including the right to protest against laws deemed unjust, while on the other hand he emphasizes the necessity of total obedience to the existing law, no matter how contrary to reason it may be. The reason for this conservative turn, which is also reflected in the complete rejection of revolution as a political remedy, lies in his profound sense of the irrationality of the multitude. Given this irrationality, which poses a constant threat to the power of reason, Spinoza concludes with Hobbes that even under a tyrannical regime, obedience to the established authority is the lesser evil.

14. Scripture

Spinoza's revolutionary treatment of the Bible in the *Theological-Political Treatise* must also be understood within the framework of his political thought. In line with his concern to secure the freedom to philosophize, he launches a systematic attack on the authority of Scripture: its claim to be the revealed word of God. But rather than offering an external philosophical critique in the manner of the *Ethics*, he attempts, in a somewhat paradoxical fashion, to show from Scripture itself that it makes no such claim to authority. This strategy, in turn, rests on a new method of

Biblical exegesis, one based on the Cartesian principle that nothing should be attributed to the text that is not clearly and distinctly perceived to be contained in it. In light of this principle, he rejects both the Calvinist doctrine that a supernatural faculty is required for interpreting the Bible and the older Jewish rationalism of Maimonides, which held that if the literal reading of a passage conflicts with reason, it must be interpreted in some metaphorical sense (see Maimonides, M.). Both of these approaches he regards as not only useless for interpreting the Bible, but as dangerous politically, since they lead to the establishment of spiritual authorities.

Applying his method, Spinoza argues that neither prophecy nor miracles, the twin pillars of biblical authority, are able to support the orthodox claims. The prophets are shown to differ from other individuals in their superior imaginations, not in their intellects. Similarly, biblical miracles are treated as natural occurrences, which only appeared mysterious to the biblical authors because of their limited understandings and, as such, have no probative value. More generally, the Bible is viewed as a document which reflects the limited understandings of a crude people rather than the dictates of an omniscient deity. And by analysing Scripture in this way, Spinoza laid the foundation for the subsequent historical study of the Bible ('higher criticism'), which endeavours to interpret it by the same methods applicable to any other ancient text.

Spinoza's critique of the Bible is, however, largely directed against its speculative content and claim to be a source of theoretical truth. Thus, he affirms that in moral matters the Bible has a consistent and true teaching, which reduces essentially to the requirement to love one's neighbour. Moreover, precisely because it appeals to the imagination rather than the intellect, it has the great virtue of presenting morality in a form which the multitude can grasp. Such a view of religion as morality for the masses is hardly original to Spinoza. It had already been expressed in the twelfth century by Averroes (see Ibn Rushd §4), and it found expression in many subsequent politically minded thinkers, including Machiavelli (see Machiavelli, N. §6). But, if not original to Spinoza, it is still an integral part of his political thought, since it enables him to 'save' religion while also protecting the autonomy of philosophy. And the latter is, of course, necessary for the life of reason as depicted in the Ethics.

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