

# Spinoza, Baruch

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Baruch, or Benedictus, Spinoza (1632–77) is the author of works, especially the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that are a major source of the ideas of the European Enlightenment. The *Ethics* is a dense series of arguments on progressively narrower subjects – metaphysics, mind, the human affects, human bondage to passion, and human blessedness – presented in a geometrical order modeled on that of Euclid. In it, Spinoza begins by defending a metaphysics on which God is the only substance and is bound by the laws of his own nature. Spinoza then builds a naturalistic ethics that is constrained by, and to some extent is a product of, his strong metaphysics. Human beings are individuals that causally interact with other individuals and are extremely vulnerable to external influence. They are not substances. Moreover, human beings are bound by the same laws that bind all other individuals in nature, so Spinoza presents accounts of goodness, virtue, and perfection that are consistent with these perfectly general laws. Spinoza's principal influences include René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes (*see* HOBBS, THOMAS), Moses Maimonides (*see* MAIMONIDES, MOSES), the Roman Stoics (*see* STOICISM), and Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE). Although his innovative philosophical views undoubtedly contributed to the strong writ of *cherem*, or ostracism, that Spinoza received from the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam in 1656, his work nevertheless also shows the influence of the study of Scripture and of Jewish law.

## Metaphysics as a Constraint on Ethics

In his metaphysics, Spinoza defines a *substance* as a thing that is in itself (or, roughly, that is wholly causally independent) and that can be understood without understanding anything else (E1d3). Only God, Spinoza argues, fits this description: “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived” (E1p14). All other things, then, Spinoza calls *modes* of substance, entities that cannot exist apart from other things or be understood without an understanding of other things (E1d5). Spinoza makes thought and extension *attributes* of substance, or “what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence” (E1d4). Just as the one substance, God, may be understood to be essentially either thought or extension, so Spinoza argues any one mode of extension is identical with a mode of thought (E2p7s). A human being, for example, is well understood as a body or a mind.

Spinoza defends both *determinism*, the view that prior conditions in uniform ways determine every change in the world (E1p28), and *necessitarianism*, the view that things could not be other than the way they are. His metaphysics is thus different from that of his successor, Leibniz, who rejects necessitarianism and famously

argues that God has chosen the best of all possible worlds. For Spinoza, “Things could have been produced by God in no other way and in no other order than they have been produced” (E1p33).

Spinoza takes his claim that God is bound by necessity to have the further important negative implication that God does not act with a purpose: “To show now that nature has no end set for it and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions will not be much work. Indeed I believe that this is already well-established ... from all of those propositions by which I have shown that all things proceed by eternal necessity and with the highest perfection” (E1, Appendix). God’s causal power is to be understood rather in terms of uniform natural laws and the causal power of each individual mode to bring about effects in accordance with those laws (E1p34, E3p6).

These strong metaphysical views constrain Spinoza’s ethics dramatically. Three constraints are especially noteworthy. First, Spinoza’s conception of God rules out any view on which there exists a providential God who is distinct from the world and creates the world for human beings. Second, his determinism implies that no actions, including human actions (E2p48), are free in the sense of being without an efficient cause. Finally, Spinoza’s commitment to the view that all changes whatever are to be understood in terms of uniform natural laws commits him to *naturalism* (see NATURALISM, ETHICAL). Spinoza expresses his naturalism bluntly in the Preface to Part 3 of the *Ethics*, declaring that man is not “a kingdom within a kingdom” and that his geometrical method will therefore apply to human beings in the same way that it applies to all other things in nature: “I will consider human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation of lines, planes, and bodies.”

## **Bondage to Passion**

On Spinoza’s ethical theory, whatever impedes human beings in their striving to persevere in being is evil, whether it is something outside the body that prevents a person from being able to do what he wants, ignorance of the means to perseverance, or a passion of the mind that causes a person to want something other than perseverance and its means. Whatever helps striving, on the other hand, is good. This section will provide an account of the impediments and aids to striving.

Spinoza defines imagination at E2p17s: “The affections of the human body, the ideas of which represent external bodies as present to us, we shall call the images of things, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.” Ideas of imagination thus include all of our ideas of things that are partially caused by external objects, including sensory ideas, memories, and ideas produced by the experience of written or spoken language (E2p40s2). They also include passions (E3, General Definition of the Affects, E4p1s).

At E2p41, Spinoza argues that ideas of imagination are the only cause of falsity. This point hints at a tendency in Spinoza to associate cognitive error, such as the error that I commit in moving from the sensation of the sun in a pool of water to the conclusion that the sun is in the water, with practical or moral error, such as the error I commit in

moving from the pleasure I take in eating a bite of cake to the action of eating the whole cake. Just as passions are similar in kind to sensations, so practical error that arises from passion is similar in kind to cognitive error that arises from sensation.

The similarity in kind of sensation and passion is a powerful tool in Spinoza's ethics because it allows him apply Cartesian resources for the avoidance of cognitive error to the case of the passions. Descartes held that we can avoid the cognitive error that typically arises from sensation by arriving at a better understanding of what sensation tells us about the external world. For example, I will not judge external objects to have color once I understand that color is best understood as a feature of my ideas rather than as a feature of things (*Principles of Philosophy* I.68). Alternatively, we may have a sensory idea that gives us a tendency to make a false judgment about some external object, but we may be guided by a different, better idea of the same object, and so avoid error. In *Meditation* III, for example, the meditator avoids error by following an astronomical idea of the sun rather than a sensory idea in judging the sun's size. Spinoza applies versions of both techniques in his discussion of remedies for the passions (5p3, 4p7), and the few explicit unqualified prescriptions in the *Ethics* recommend that we use them. At E5p4s, he recommends a better understanding of our passions:

We should work especially hard in order to know each affect clearly and distinctly, insofar as it can be done, so that thereby the mind may be determined from an affect to thinking those things that it perceives clearly and distinctly and in which it may be completely content; and also so that the affect may be separated from the thought of an external cause and joined to true thoughts.

At E5p10s, Spinoza recommends that we resist harmful passions by cultivating better, opposed passions:

We should think and meditate often about common human wrongs and how and in what way they may best be driven away by nobility ... We should recount in detail and frequently imagine the common dangers of life, and how, by presence of mind and by strength of character, they may best be avoided and overcome.

In addition to being ideas of imagination, passions are also changes in an individual's essence, its striving to persevere in being. Spinoza introduces his theory of striving at the beginning of Part 3 of the *Ethics*. He argues at E3p6 that all individual things strive to persevere in being. This claim serves his naturalism by bringing what appears to be a psychological doctrine on which anything, if it is not impeded, will act to persevere, close to a physical thesis, the principle of inertia, on which any body in motion, if it is not impeded, will continue in that motion. Indeed Spinoza's term for "striving," *conatus*, is a technical term of physics for Descartes, referring to that component of a thing's motion that belongs properly to the thing (*Principles of Philosophy* III.57).

Spinoza begins to build an account of what striving is for the human mind at E3p9: "The mind, both insofar as it has clear and distinct ideas and also insofar as it has

confused ideas, strives to persevere in being; it does so for an indefinite duration; and it is conscious of this, its striving.” Two features of this crucial proposition deserve emphasis. First, Spinoza maintains that we strive insofar as we have confused ideas. Second, we are, in some way, conscious of our striving. The second feature is the basis for Spinoza’s account of desire, which he identifies with striving and, especially, the consciousness of striving (E3p9s). On its basis, one might interpret E3p9 as a very straightforward and obviously false theory of human desire: I strive to persevere; I desire just as I strive; therefore I desire to persevere. The first feature complicates the interpretation of E3p9; it also shows that Spinoza has a more plausible account of conation. As we have seen, Spinoza takes ideas of imagination to be the only source of falsity. We have also seen that they are incomplete, perhaps inaccurate, representations of their objects. Certainly insofar as we strive to persevere from clear and distinct ideas we will consciously desire perseverance. Because we also strive insofar as we have confused ideas, however, it is not clear that our consciousness of striving always reproduces in our conscious experience the object of striving. Although Spinoza holds that I do strive to persevere insofar as I have confused ideas, he does not hold that I consciously desire perseverance insofar as I have such ideas. Indeed, those who are most in the sway of passion may desire other ends exclusively:

When the greedy man thinks of no other thing besides profit or money, and the ambitious man of glory, and so on, they are not believed to be mad, because they are often troublesome and are estimated to deserve hatred. But really greed, ambition, lust and so on are species of madness, even though they are not counted among the diseases. (E4p44s)

So all our conscious desires are, in some way, manifestations in consciousness of a striving to persevere in being, but those that are ideas of imagination are not necessarily, or even ordinarily, conscious desires for perseverance (see EGOISM).

Human affects include passions, which are confused ideas, and also active emotions such as those that Spinoza mentions at E5p10s, nobility and tenacity, which are not confused and cannot lead us to error. At E3p11 and its scholium, Spinoza describes the affects in terms of changes in the power with which a person strives, and he uses terms that suggest what the conscious experience of such changes is like. An increase in a body’s power of acting, or in the power of acting of part of that body, is a form of *laetitia* (roughly, happiness); a decrease, however, is a form of *tristitia* (roughly, sadness). Because Spinoza’s terms for changes in the power with which a person strives at least appear to describe familiar conscious states, these definitions suggest a sense in which, although I do not always consciously desire perseverance in being, my desire may nevertheless always manifest a striving to persevere: if I do always desire ends in which I anticipate *laetitia*, then I am always desiring to experience an increase in the power with which I strive even if I do not recognize the end in question as such a thing. Thus the greedy man, for example, if he anticipates *laetitia* in profit, does strive for perseverance in being also, after a fashion. Spinoza does come close to giving an account of desire like this one at E3p28 (see HEDONISM).

Perseverance and what increases our power to persevere are good on the account of the *Ethics*, and this brief account of Spinoza's psychological theory shows that there may be several barriers to the good facing a human agent. First, I may be weak. Because, as a finite mode, my power is limited, I may, despite my well-founded desire for perseverance and its means, lack the power to attain them. Second, I may be ignorant. In that case, despite my well-founded desire for perseverance, I may lack knowledge of its means. Finally, I may be overwhelmed by passion. In this case, I may, even despite my knowledge of what helps me to persevere, be influenced by an external object to desire some other end. Although, as we have seen, Spinoza argues that better ideas may overpower worse ideas and so help us to avoid error, he does not hold that they always do (E4p17). So passion may move me to seek some other end even as, at the same time, I also desire perseverance. (Spinoza's admission of the possibility of *akrasia* is an important departure from Descartes; see WEAKNESS OF WILL.) Although the *Ethics* does contain accounts of the means to perseverance (see especially Spinoza's discussion of society at E4p35–7), the great bulk of its argument describes the passions and the ways in which we can resist their influence. Clearly, Spinoza regards the influence of passion as the first and greatest barrier to the attainment of value.

## Good, Virtue, Perfection

We now turn to Spinoza's account of value. The *Ethics* includes formal definitions of a variety of terms associated with moral value:

E2d6: By “reality” and “perfection” I understand the same thing.

E4d1: By “good” I shall understand this, what we certainly know to be useful to us.

E4d8: By “virtue” and “power” I understand the same thing, i.e. (by 3p7) virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the essence or nature of man itself, insofar as he has the power of bringing about those things that can be understood through the laws of his nature alone.

These definitions need to meet the constraints both of Spinoza's metaphysics, especially his naturalism, and also of his psychology.

An account of value poses a challenge for Spinoza's thoroughgoing naturalism because it is not clear whether moral properties are like other properties or whether there is a sense in which moral evaluation can apply to all things in nature alike. Spinoza does clearly attempt to meet these challenges in his definitions by reducing perfection (see PERFECTIONISM) and virtue (see VIRTUE) to properties that, on his metaphysics, any individual thing will have: reality and power. In his definition of his most important term for value at E4d1, Spinoza might appear to meet the challenge similarly well by reducing goodness to usefulness. That definition requires further discussion, however, because, as the discussion of usefulness in the Preface to Part 4 indicates, E4d1 refers to a certain kind of teleology: “By ‘good’ therefore in what follows I shall understand this: what we certainly know to be a means by

which we may move close and closer to the model of human nature that we set before us.” As we have seen, Spinoza rejects the view on which nature itself has ends. Unlike Spinoza’s definitions of “perfection” and “virtue,” then, this sense of “good” will not obviously apply across nature. On the other hand, a rejection of a view on which nature itself has ends does not imply that particular individuals in nature may not have ends.

A discussion of the good in relation to Spinoza’s psychology can inform a discussion of E4d1. In Part 3 Spinoza makes two related claims about the ordinary use of the term “good,” which associate it with something familiar across nature, a change in power.

E3p9s: It is established from all this, then, that we strive for, will, want, or desire nothing because we judge it to be good; rather, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.

E3p39s: By “good” here I understand every kind of *laetitia*, and whatever leads to it, and especially this: what satisfies any kind of longing, whatever that may be ... Indeed we have shown above (E3p9s) that we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call “good” that thing we desire.

The fact that people *find* good what they desire and what they associate with *laetitia* is unqualified: both the ordinary people described in the Appendix to Part 1 and the enlightened philosophers who accept 4d1 will do so (see DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD). Indeed Spinoza’s association of the good with *laetitia*, an increase in striving, gives this association a basis in his account of human nature. The ordinary person, however, *understands* by that term something that is made well by God, and this understanding is both false and harmful (E1 Appendix). Spinoza’s formal definition retains the familiar notion of the good as something that advances an end. In making that end a human rather than a divine creation, however, Spinoza both conforms to regularities of use and also avoids the enshrinement of a false doctrine.

**See also:** ARISTOTLE; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; EGOISM; HEDONISM; HOBBS, THOMAS; MAIMONIDES, MOSES; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; PERFECTIONISM; STOICISM; VIRTUE; WEAKNESS OF WILL

## REFERENCES

All references to Spinoza’s *Ethics* abbreviate Spinoza’s formal apparatus. For example, “E3p9s” stands for *Ethics*, Part 3, Proposition 9, Scholium.

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