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**Weakness of Will in Spinoza's
Theory of Human Motivation**

Olli Koistinen
University of Turku

**Comments on Olli Koistinen,
“Weakness of Will in Spinoza’s
Theory of Human Motivation”**

Charles Huenemann
Utah State University

**The Conatus, the Social and
“Self-Sacrifice” in Spinoza**

Viren Murthy
University of Hawaii at Manoa

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Weakness of Will in Spinoza's Theory of Human Motivation

Olli Koistinen
University of Turku

Abstract

I suggest that, though the existence of weak-willed actions is common, theories which deny the possibility of their existence are worthy of attention. The central philosophical problem is that of finding a principle which is similar to and easily confused with the principle that it is not possible to go against one's best judgement. I argue Spinoza provides just such an explanation which is both coherent and satisfactory.

1. Introduction to the Problem

S's action A manifests weakness of will iff (i) in doing A S goes intentionally against his better judgment and (ii) S believes that he is free to choose the better alternative. Experience seems to provide abundant evidence for the existence of such actions. Yesterday evening I should have washed the dishes; I thought it was better to wash them than to go to bed. But I went to bed and fell asleep. Just now I believe that it would be better to phone one of my colleagues than to write this. It would be better for me to interrupt the work for a while and pose a question to my colleague. However, I continue writing.

In spite of the fact that the existence of weak-willed actions seems crystal clear, some philosophers have found that their principles, ethical and action theoretical, lead to the denial of weak-willed actions. E.J. Lemmon writes of the those theories in which weak-willed actions are impossible as follows:

It is so notorious a fact about human agents that they are often subject to akrasia that any ethical position that makes this seem queer or paradoxical is automatically suspect for just this reason. Of Socrates we can say that as a plain matter of fact he was just wrong - akrasia does occur, or in Aristotle's phrase, knowledge just is, however sad this may be, frequently dragged about by desire.¹

I share Lemmon's view that the existence of weak-willed actions is common. However, I am not convinced that the theories in which the existence of weak-willed actions are denied are not worthy of serious attention. The view that there are no weak-willed actions seems to make sense even without any grandiose philosophical commitments. This is well expressed by R.M. Hare. He writes as follows:

If a man does what he says he ought not to, though perfectly able to resist the temptation to do it, then there is something wrong with what he says, as well as with what he does. In the simplest case it is insincerity; he is not saying what he really thinks. In other cases it is self-deception; he thinks that he thinks that he ought, but he has escaped his own notice using 'ought' in an off-colour way.²

According to Hare sincere acceptance of the best judgment must be matched by corresponding behaviour. If I sincerely accept the judgment that it is best for me to phone my colleague, then I phone my colleague (or I must do something that I believe leads to my phoning my colleague).

It seems to me that in a sense both Hare and Lemmon are right and that their positions should be reformulated so that they cease to be inconsistent with each other. What I find to be the philosophical problem in weakness of the will is that of finding a principle which is similar to and easy to confuse with the principle that it is not possible to go against one's best judgment. In other words: it seems that the principle

(P) It is not possible to go intentionally against one's better judgment

is false (see the quotation from Lemmon); but it also seems that there are good reasons for accepting (P) (see the quotation from Hare). Now, this conflict of intuitions poses a philosophical problem whose solution must lie, I claim, in a principle that explains why we are prone to believe (P).

In addition to being a pre-theoretical problem, the problem of weakness of will is also generated by certain theoretical assumptions; some plausible views on human motivation and on the meaning of moral terms

1. E. J. Lemmon, "Moral Dilemmas," *Philosophical Review* 71 (1961), 144.

2. R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 83.

seem to lead to the impossibility of weak-willed actions. In fact, I am inclined to think that a very important test in evaluating philosophical theories of human motivation is to examine how well they succeed in explaining weakness. Both theories which deny the existence of weak-willed actions and theories which fail to explain why we are inclined to believe in their nonexistence should be rejected.

In this paper I will first give a brief survey of what I take to be the main theoretical reasons for the denial of the existence of weak-willed actions. After that I will show that Spinoza shared several of those theoretical reasons, even though he did not deny weakness of will. My conclusion is that the problem of the weakness of the will gets a plausible solution in Spinoza's theory of human motivation.

2. Reasons for the Denial of Weakness

2.1. Hedonisms and One-Goal Theories

In Plato's *Protagoras* Socrates argues that all weakness is due to ignorance. Ignorance also entails nonintentionality; if I am ignorant of what I am doing, then what I am doing is not intentional. If I do not know that by pressing these buttons I am watering some flowers, then it is not true that I am intentionally watering those flowers. Socrates' view, then, is that weak agents do not act intentionally.

Why does Socrates hold a thesis that seems *prima facie* odd? The argument which he appears to present for his thesis seems to be build on the conjunction of psychological and ethical hedonism. According to psychological hedonism each desire is ultimately a desire for pleasure. According to ethical hedonism goodness just means pleasure. The conjunction of ethical hedonism and psychological hedonism entails the claim that the only thing we strive for is goodness.³ But this striving for goodness makes it impossible to choose of two alternatives the one that is worse. Socrates says the following:

If the pleasant is the good, no one who either knows or believes

3. For more detail on the concepts of 'ethical hedonism' and 'psychological hedonism', see Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 307-318.

that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course when he might choose the better. . . [N]o one willingly goes to meet evil or what he thinks to be evil. To make for what one believes to be evil, instead of making for the good, is not, it seems, in human nature, and when faced with the choice of two evils no one will choose the greater when he might choose the less. [*Protagoras*, 358b-d]

Even though there is some controversy both about whether Socrates adopted hedonism and about the exact nature of this argument in the *Protagoras*, it is undoubtedly clear that *Protagoras* teaches us that the conjunction of psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism implies the nonexistence of weak-willed actions. The first assumption that leads to the denial of weakness is, then, the following:

- (A) psychological hedonism (= the only thing people strive for is pleasure) + ethical hedonism (= good is pleasant).

According to David Wiggins the considerations in the *Protagoras* lead to a general thesis according to which weakness becomes impossible in all those theories which assume that there is some one thing that people always and invariably try to maximize (hereafter I will call these theories ‘one-goal theories’). Wiggins writes as follows:

Let F be the universal or all-purposive predicate of favorable assessment. A man will only be incontinent if he knows or believes the thing he doesn’t do is the thing with most F to it. But if that is the alternative that has most F to it, and if nothing else besides F-ness counts positively for anything, there is nothing to commend any other course of action over the one that is most F. He could have no reason, however bad, for choosing the other. The choice of a smaller amount of pleasure now against a larger amount of pleasure later is explicitly described as a form of ignorance in the supposedly single dimension F. . . . If everything with any relevance to choice is comprehended in the question how F a given course of action is, and how F its competitors are, then no rational sense can be made of weakness of will. This is the *Protagoras* argument.⁴

Wiggins point is the following. Let us endorse some one-goal theory of human motivation. This means that there is only one feature, say F, that has relevance to our choices and thus F is the only feature we value. In this theory to say that a is better than b is to say that a has more F to it than b. Suppose that S acts weak-willedly in doing b. Now, S must believe that there is some alternative action that has more F to it than b. But why did S perform b? It seems that he must see in b something valuable that is not reducible to F. However, that is impossible because it has been assumed that F is the only feature that has relevance to our choices. Thus, the second theoretical assumption that seems to lead to the denial of weakness is (B) one-goal theory of human motivation.

2.2. The disappearance of acts of will & emotivism

The interest in weakness of the will has revived during the latter half of this century. The reasons for this revival can be explicated as follows:

(i) In his influential book, *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle argued against the existence of acts of will.⁵ Roughly put, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition acts of will are seen as intermediaries between desires and actions; and they are not determined by our desires. According to Ryle acts of will are part of the Cartesian myth. There is no need to postulate the existence of such mysterious entities which give rise to serious conceptual problems. If the criticism directed against acts of will is accepted, then it seems that desires are the only motivational elements. But if desires are the only motivational elements, then it is incomprehensible how someone could (intentionally) go against his strongest desire. Thus, the following principle has to be accepted:

desire-action principle

If S's desire for a is stronger than his desire for b, then S does not choose b.⁶

(ii) In the present century some versions of emotivism have been influential

4. David Wiggins, "Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire," in David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 257.

5. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

in their metaethical views. To put it bluntly, emotivists claim that value judgments express desires. If I call an action x good, this means according to the emotivists that I desire x. But if this is true, then it seems natural to accept the following principle:

value-strength principle

If S judges that it is better to do a than to do b, then S's desire for a is stronger than his desire for b.

However, the conjunction of the desire action principle and the value-strength -principle logically implies the denial of weakness:

denial of weakness

If S judges that it is better to do a than to b, then S does not choose b.

On the basis of these considerations we may add the following to our list of assumptions that make weakness impossible:

(C) The conjunction of value-strength principle and the desire action principle.

3. Spinoza

3.1. Is weakness of the will a problem for Spinoza?

Spinoza commentators and researchers dealing with the problem of the weakness of will seem to believe that in Spinoza's philosophy weakness of will is no problem. For example, William Charlton says that Spinoza adopted a grandfather clock view of human beings. He characterizes this view as follows:

Since the seventeenth century philosophers have been attracted to what might be described as a grandfather clock view of human beings. Just as an old-fashioned clock is so constructed that the

6. For example Donald Davidson, who rejects acts of will, accepts this principle. See his essay, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). See also William Charlton, *Weakness of Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 10.

simple downward pull of its weights causes its hand to rotate, its bell to chime, and sometimes other spectacular effects, so (it was thought) our brains, nerves and bones are so constructed that when our eyes and ears are stimulated by light and sound, our limbs move in so-called voluntary actions.⁷

According to Charlton, a philosopher equipped with this view of human beings hardly finds any deep philosophical problem in actions that are contrary to the agent's best judgment.⁸ After citing a passage from Spinoza's correspondence, Charlton goes on to say that for Spinoza weakness of will is as unperplexing as gall-stones. Justin Gosling, in his *Weakness of the Will*, is also of the opinion that in Spinoza's system weakness of will poses no problem. In commenting Spinoza's views, Gosling writes as follows:

[Spinoza's] intellectualized view of the passions and the rejection of a separate faculty of will, which constitute a total rejection of Descartes, also make it impossible for Spinoza to develop anything like the traditional problems.⁹

I believe that Charlton and Gosling are mistaken. It is true that Spinoza accepted the existence of weak-willed actions, as the following passage from the Ethics (E4P17Sch) quite clearly shows:

With this I believe I have shown the cause why men are moved more by opinion than by true reason, and why the true knowledge of good and evil arouses disturbances in the mind, and often yields to lust of every kind. Hence that verse of the poet: "video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor." Ecclesiastes also seems to have had the same point in mind when he said: "He who increases knowledge increases sorrow."¹⁰

But what is problematic is how weakness is possible in Spinoza's philosophical system. Charlton and Gosling fail to realize that Spinoza's

7. William Charlton, *Weakness of Will*, 10.

8. I am not using the term 'action' in Spinoza's technical sense of it (*actus*).

9. Justin Gosling, *Weakness of the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), 92.

10. I use Curley's translation of the *Ethics*. Cf. Edwin Curley, tr. & ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

commitments in the theory of human motivation likewise appear to make weakness impossible.

As we have seen above each of the following three principles seems to lead to the denial of weak-willed actions.

- (A) psychological hedonism + ethical hedonism
- (B) one goal theory
- (C) the denial of acts of will + emotivism.

In what follows I will show that Spinoza clearly accepted both (B) and (C). He also accepted (A) even though it may be somewhat crude to characterize Spinoza as a hedonist.

Spinoza's denial of the acts of will and his emotivism

Spinoza's basic metaphysics includes causal determinism (E1P28) which leads to the denial of free mental decisions. However, it seems that causal determinism cannot be correct because sometimes at least our inner experience suggests otherwise; there are occasions when I understand that my actions flow from mental decisions which have no sufficient causal conditions. Thus experience seems to tell that Spinoza cannot be right in his causal determinism. Spinoza tackles with this issue in the long scholium to E3P2. Spinoza's argument against the trustworthiness of inner experience is similar to one of Descartes' arguments which purport to show that outer senses may deceive. In the first Meditation Descartes writes as follows:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.¹¹

And in E3P2Sch (GII/143/20-35) Spinoza wants to show that the inner experience of freedom is not a reliable sign of the absence of causes:

But if they had not found by experience that we do many things

11. In John Cottingham et. al., eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 12.

we afterwards repent, and that often we see the better and follow the worse (viz. when we are torn by contrary affects), nothing would prevent them from believing that we do all things freely.

So the infant believes he freely wants the milk; the angry child he wants vengeance; and the timid, flight. So the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the mind that he speaks the things he later, when sober, wishes he had not said. So the madman, the chatterbox, the child, and a great many people of this kind believe they speak from a free decision of the mind, when really they cannot contain their impulse to speak.

So experience itself, no less clearly than reason, teaches that men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.

Here Spinoza seems to say that, after having acted, we often think that our experience of freedom was illusory. If Jones has been drunk and offended the host and at the same time thought that he did it freely, then afterwards he may be quite happy to deny the freedom of the action. It was drunkenness that made him do it. This argument purports, then, to say that there are reasons for doubting the inner experience of freedom, and this makes Spinoza's determinism easier to swallow.

After arguing against the reliability of the inner experience for the existence of free mental decisions Spinoza goes on to present his substitute for mental decisions. According to Spinoza mental decisions:

are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies.

This passage says that

(i) mental decisions are identical with appetites

and because appetites of which we are conscious (E3P9Sch) are desires, the message of the passage just quoted is that

(ii) mental decisions are desires.

Thus, for Spinoza the proximate causes of human actions are desires. And as we have seen if there are no intermediate motivational elements between desires and actions then it seems unintelligible that agents could act against

a stronger desire. Thus, it seems that Spinoza has to accept our *desire-action principle*.

In addition to identifying mental decisions with desires Spinoza accepts the view that value judgments express desires. In E3P9Sch he writes:

From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.

But if it is true that value judgments express desires, then comparative value judgments reflect the strength of desires. Thus Spinoza has to accept our value strength principle. But, as we have seen, the conjunction of desire-action principle and value strength principle logically implies the impossibility of weakness.

Spinoza's one-goal theory and his hedonism

If a philosopher supports a one-goal theory of human motivation, then, to make his position plausible, he must provide an argument for it. Any such argument should show that there is a conceptual connection between the proposed goal and motivation. In the third part of the Ethics Spinoza seems to be engaged in the construction of such an argument. In this section I will try locate and make explicit Spinoza's one-goal argument.

In the preceding section we saw that according to Spinoza there are no free acts of will. According to him all mental decisions are reducible to desires. Spinoza is also of the opinion that mental decisions are nothing but ideas, and ideas are propositional affirmations and denials. Spinoza writes (E3P2Sch; GII/144/24-29) as follows:

it must be granted that this decision of the mind which is believed to be free is not distinguished by the imagination itself, or the memory, nor is it anything beyond that affirmation which the idea, in so far as it is an idea, necessarily involves.

But because Spinoza believes (i) that mental decisions are desires and (ii) that mental decisions are ideas, he has to believe (iii) that desires are ideas.

At first sight Spinoza's view of desires as ideas seems odd. That I have in mind the idea of eating a rotten apple seems not to entail that I desire or want to eat it. What this example tells is that ideas are not type identical with desires. It is not the case that every idea is identical with some desire. But in spite of this, it is possible that desires are token identical with ideas. This means that even if each idea is not identical with some desire it may be the case that each desire is identical with some idea. What, then, determines whether an idea constitutes a desire?

One of Spinoza's most important principles about desiring is expressed by E3P28. In this proposition he writes as follows:

We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to pleasure, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to pain.¹²

In the first half of this proposition Spinoza claims that if S imagines some action as leading to pleasure, then S desires it. The second half does not add anything substantial to the first half. In it Spinoza says that if S imagines that x causes pain, then S strives to destroy it. But this striving to destroy x arises from the fact that when one imagines the thing causing pain as being destroyed, one feels pleasure. It seems, then, that for Spinoza the idea of doing x is a desire for doing x just in case the idea (imagination) of doing x gives pleasure to the agent. But from the proposition that desires are pleasure giving ideas, it is natural to infer that what someone desires is what he imagines to be pleasant.¹³

12. Here I follow the Shirley translation translation of the *Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).

13. The proof of E3P28, when its deductive ancestry is taken into account, is presentable as follows. One desires to have those ideas which give pleasure to the agent (E3P12). The conatus of the mind is identical with the conatus of the body (parallelism and identity in E2P7Sch). Therefore, if S imagines that doing x gives pleasure to him, then S desires to do x. There are two difficult problems which arise from his demonstration. (1) E3P12 deals with those ideas which we strive to have, whereas E3P28 deals with those overt actions which we strive to perform. It appears that Spinoza tries to bridge the gap between E3P12 and E3P28 by appealing to the identity thesis (or parallelism). But it is difficult to see the exact role which the identity thesis is here supposed to play. (2) The demonstration of E3P28 relies on the following implicit principle: if the imagination of x gives pleasure to S, then S imagines that x gives pleasure to him. Though this principle seems plausible, I do not believe that it is self-evident.

Thus Spinoza seems to accept the following principle:

desire-imagination principle

(DIP) S desires to do x if and only if S imagines that the doing of x gives pleasure to him.¹⁴

But (DIP) resembles closely the view that pleasure is the only ultimate goal; i.e. the only thing that has any bearing to our choices is pleasure. This means that of the assumptions that lead to the denial of weakness Spinoza accepts also (B): one-goal theory of human motivation.

Spinoza also defined good and bad with concepts that are closely linked to pleasure and pain:

E4Def1: By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us.

E4Def2 By evil, however, I shall understand what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good.

But because Spinoza holds that everything that is useful to us gives pleasure to us and everything that is bad for us leads to pain, he seems to accept also a form of ethical hedonism according to which good and pleasure are conceptually linked to each other. Thus, Spinoza accepts also a version of the assumption (A) which was a conjunction of ethical and psychological hedonism.

14. Perhaps the following example is a counterexample to this view. Suppose that S is faced with (i.e., has to choose between) two alternatives both of which he believes to be unpleasant. It seems that in this case S desires to choose the one which is less unpleasant. In this case, then, S does desire something whose idea is painful. I do not believe, however, that this is a telling counterexample to the principle that desires are ideas which give pleasure to the agent. Suppose that the alternatives are a and b. Suppose that I(M) is S's mind just prior to that choice. It is undoubtedly true that when I(a) is added to I(M), S feels pain; and that when I(b) is added to I(M) S feels pain. In this case, however, it would be rather difficult to see how S could desire either a or b. But there is a drastic change in the situation when S has to choose between a and b. It seems to me that in this situation S chooses a iff S feels pleasure when the I(a) is replaced by I(b).

3.2. How is weakness of will possible in Spinoza's philosophy?

On the basis of Spinoza's definitions of good and bad, E3P28 leads to the following principle:

We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine is good and we strive to avert or destroy what we imagine is bad.

Moreover, given Spinoza's considerations of the meaning of the phrase 'S imagines x' (see also E2P17), E3P28 can be further modified as saying that:

We desire to do what appears good to us and we desire to avoid what appears bad to us.¹⁵

But it seems that if our desires are aimed by necessity to what appears good to us, then we have to accept (SA):

(SA) If doing a appears to S better than doing b, then S's desire for a is stronger than his desire for b.

But, (SA) together with the desire-action principle (see above) entails that:

(XA) If doing a appears to S better than doing b, then S does not choose b.

Now, weakness becomes impossible if (XA) implies the following principle:

(DA) If S judges that a is better than b, then S does not choose b.

My suggestion is that Spinoza made room for weak-willed actions by making a distinction between (XA) and (DA).

Spinoza used optical illusions as examples to clarify the distinction

15. In fact this principle was considered by Aristotle as unfolding the conceptual link between goodness and desire. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1113a15-18, tr. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), Aristotle writes: "Wish, we have said, is for the end. But to some it seems that wish is for the good, to others that it is for the apparent good."

between the following sentences:

- (1) It appears to S that x is F;
- and
- (2) S believes that x is F.

In the scholium to E4P1 Spinoza writes as follows:

For example, when we look at the sun, we imagine it to be about 200 feet away from us. In this we are deceived so long as we are ignorant of its true distance; but when its distance is known, the error is removed, not the imagination [*imaginatio*], i.e., the idea of the sun, which explains its nature only so far as the body is affected by it. And so, although we come to know the true distance, we shall nevertheless imagine it as near us. . . And so it is with the other imaginations by which the mind is deceived, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the body, or *that its power of acting is increased or diminished*: they are not contrary to the true, and do not disappear on its presence. [emphases mine]

In this passage Spinoza first shows that it is possible that (1) is true and (2) false. It may even be that (1) is true and S believes that x is not F. His second concern is to claim that those ideas that indicate the increase or diminution of body's power of activity may deceive the one who has those ideas and that they do not disappear in the presence of truth. Now, the ideas that indicate the diminution or increase of the body's power of activity are just those ideas that give pain or pleasure to the one who has them. Thus, they are ideas which make things appear bad or good to us. But even they do not disappear at the presence of truth. Thus, it may be that it appears to S that a is better than b, even though S believes that b is better than a.

Spinoza is not committed to the denial of weakness because his principles do not involve (DA) even though they lead to (XA). When an agent's action exhibits weakness of will, his value appearances are not in harmony with his value judgments. However, in Spinoza's theory of motivation it is value appearances, not value judgments, that have motivational force.

In the beginning of this paper I suggested that a solution to the problem of the weakness of the will must be found in a principle which is easy to confuse with the principle that it is impossible to choose the alternative

that is judged worse. Thus, the recalcitrant intuition that weakness is impossible would have a natural explanation. Spinoza's (XA) fulfills this requirement perfectly: normally our value judgments are in line with our value appearances. The thing that appears best to us is also the action we judge to be the best one. And this may cause some to think that there cannot be weakness of will. Thus, Spinoza's substitute for the principle (P) according to which it is not possible to choose the worse alternative is that it is not possible to choose the alternative that appears worse. Or more exactly:

(SP) If S believes that a and b are alternative actions and it appears to S that a is better than b, then S does a intentionally if he does either a or b intentionally.

I believe that this spinozistic solution to the problem of weakness of will is rather plausible. Let us, however, further elucidate it with the help of an example: suppose that Jones orders a fourth beer when he judges that instead of ordering the beer it would be better to go home. Jones acts weak-willedly because he goes against his better judgment and he believes that it is in his power to act otherwise. Now, Jones judges that it is best not to order the beer because he has learned from experience that drinking so much ruins the next day and that is what Jones does not want to do. However, the situation is such that the beer tastes fine, the music sounds good and the discussion is exciting. These things, beer, music and discussion deceive Jones' value-eye: it appears to him that it is better to order a new beer than to leave, even though he simultaneously judges that it would be better to leave the restaurant than to stay there.

The principle (SP) explains why several eminent philosophers have been inclined to accept the denial of weakness: I believe that it is typical of our value judgments that they are in line with our value appearances; what appears to us to be the best alternative is also what we judge to be the best alternative. However, when we act weak-willedly *what appears to us to be the best alternative is not the alternative that we judge to be the best*.

4. Conclusion: Socrates and Spinoza

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates wants to say that all behaviour that appears weak from the third-person view is not akratic from the first-person view. Socrates' view resembles Spinoza's view in that the weak agent is subject to an value illusion that closely resembles optical illusion. Socrates believes that the following principle of value illusion holds:

(PVI) The nearer more immediate goods look greater than those in the future.

According to Socrates the weak agent is under a value illusion and judges in conformity with the illusion. Thus, he does what he believes to be the best alternative available. Moreover, Socrates is of the opinion that if the weak agent knew (PVI) and had some information how to correct his value judgments, then he would not go against what is the best available alternative. Gary Watson writes of Socrates' views as follows:

The so-called weak agent lacks the art of measurement, the art of correctly weighing nearer and farther goods, and to have this art is to have knowledge of good and evil.¹⁶

For Socrates the weakness of the weak agents lies in an intellectual failure that has its origin in the ignorance of (PVI). If there were no such ignorance, there would be no such weakness.

Spinoza's point is that illusions do not disappear even though the agent knew the facts. The appearance of a crooked oar does not disappear, even though we knew that oars in water do not bend. In the same way, value illusions do not disappear and do not lose their motivational force, even though we knew that we are being deceived.¹⁷

16. Gary Watson, "Skepticism about Weakness of Will," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977), 319.

17. Earlier versions of this paper were read at bo Akademi and at the University of Jyväskylä. I am grateful to Lee C. Rice for his help. I am also indebted to Lars Hertzberg, Charles Huenemann, Charles Jarrett, and Juhani Pietarinen for their illuminating comments.

Comment on Olli Koistinen, “Weakness of Will in Spinoza’s Theory of Human Motivation”

Charles Huenemann
Utah State University

Olli Koistinen provides a vividly clear discussion of the controversy over weak-willed actions and Spinoza’s resolution of the controversy. I think what Koistinen says is accurate and right. In these comments I will first simply summarize his argument for ease of our discussion; then I want to point out how getting Spinoza right on this point leads to a grander problem in Spinoza’s philosophy of action.

Do we ever do things against our better judgment? Of course it seems as if we often do. But Koistinen points out three considerations that suggest otherwise. First, many philosophers believe we are determined to do what is most pleasant, and some go so far as to claim that whatever is most pleasant is good. And so any defender of *psychological/ethical hedonism* has reason to deny that we ever act against our better judgment. Second, some philosophers believe that there is a single goal all humans pursue and that we always prefer whatever gets us closer to that goal to anything else. Thus defenders of a *one-goal theory of human motivation* deny weak-willed actions. Finally, if one believes that our desires automatically line up with what we think is best to do (*value-strength principle*) and that we always do what we desire most to do (*desire-action principle*), then one has more reason for denying weak-willed actions.

Koistinen believes that Spinoza buys psychological/ethical hedonism (with an important qualification), a one-goal theory of human motivation, the value-strength principle, and the desire-action principle. One would suppose, then, that Spinoza triply denies weak-willed actions. But not so; Spinoza thinks that there are so-called weak-willed actions, citing Ovid and Ecclesiastes with approval, though he denies that the will is distinct from intellect. How can this be? Koistinen explains: Spinoza does indeed believe that if doing **a** appears to S better than doing **b**, then S does **a**. But Spinoza denies that if S judges **a** to be better than **b**, then S does **a**. The difference is between appearance and judgment. I will do (indeed, *am*

determined to do) what appears to me to be best; but that does not mean that I will do what I judge to be best. Sometimes I am under what Koistinen calls a “value illusion,” much like an optical illusion. I know that the magician cannot really be levitating, but that knowledge does not change the appearance before me. And, similarly, I know that stopping at three beers is the better thing to do, but that knowledge does not change the appearance of desirability of the fourth, frothy, frosty mug before me. And so I see and approve the better, but follow the worse.

Thus Koistinen’s Spinoza not only has a full account to explain how our actions are determined by our desires; he also explains why it is that we can see what we *should* do instead. As I say, I think Koistinen has a correct construal of Spinoza’s position on this matter. But if Koistinen and I are right, we have just come across a larger problem in Spinoza’s philosophy.

A central goal of the *Ethics* is to show us how to gain some measure of control over our passions. No doubt complete control is impossible, but by enlisting in Spinoza’s program we can gain the greatest control possible, he thinks. How do we do this? We do this mostly by gaining adequate ideas of ourselves, of the things around us, and the ways in which we are determined by them to suffer passions. These adequate ideas do more than inform us, however; to some extent they *reform* us, enabling us to reduce our hopes and fears and face our fates squarely and with equanimity. Spinoza thinks that we are able to thus reform ourselves through some limited ability to redirect our minds, associating one set of ideas with a greater pain than normal appearances would otherwise suggest. This, indeed, seems to be the whole point in acquiring an intellectual love of God; for when we do, we will recognize many merely-apparent pleasures (drunkenness, lust, pride, etc.) to be obstacles to this greater good. But this self-help program presupposes that we can, in at least some circumstances, find within ourselves some means of overriding what merely *appears* to us as desirable in order to do what we *know* to be desirable.

For example, consider the fourth glass of beer once again. If I am Spinoza’s pupil, I will train myself to associate that fourth beer with certain physiological details that will lead to my expectation of not being able to think so clearly tomorrow; and I will associate that consequence with losing out on another day spent absorbed in the intellectual love of God, and so losing out on a greater pleasure. A thorough training will lead me to regard that fourth beer with indifference, perhaps even with disdain. The ostensible goal of this training is to enable myself to override immediate

desires with the thought of greater pleasures. And this means not only judging what is best in opposition to what appears to be best; it also means actively forcing what appears to be best to appear to be not so good after all.

Spinoza tries to walk a fine line. He wants to maintain that all our actions are determined. He denies that we can influence our behavior through acts of will; this is why he thinks it takes considerable *training* (or even behavioral conditioning) to overcome some passions, and even then he thinks our success will be mixed. Thus we get ourselves into such a state that we will henceforth be determined, through our training, to do the better thing. But to engage in this effort, to embark on this training, requires an ability to recognize merely-apparent pleasures and associate them with greater pains. And this apparently compromises the determination of our actions by what appears to be best — our judgement steps in to fix things. For a sharper picture, contrast Spinoza's exhortations in part V of the *Ethics* to someone who writes merely that we are doomed to do whatever it is that we do; to someone, in other words, who claims "I see and approve the better, but watch it slip by as something absolutely impossible." Spinoza thinks that our behavior can be reformed in some measure; but it is difficult to see how this can be, given the account quite fairly and accurately presented in Koistinen's paper.

Thus we are left with an added insight and and added problem: now we see how Spinoza can believe that we are determined by what appears to be best even though we judge that there are better things to do; but now we cannot see how Spinoza can believe we are capable of bettering ourselves.

The Conatus, the Social and “Self-Sacrifice” in Spinoza

Viren Murthy
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Abstract

I argue against both Bennett and Garrett that Spinoza's collaborative morality is consistent, and that it leaves room for ethical sacrifice of one's life even in the extreme case which Bennett claims constitutes a counter-example.

1. Bennett's Problem Posed

The title of Spinoza's major work, *Ethics*,¹ indicates that morality and social philosophy were a central concern for him. In its third and fourth parts, Spinoza deals specifically with the problem of sociality and ethics. This problem, plainly stated, is that of resolving the apparent conflict between one's own interests and the interests of others. We shall see that an essential step in resolving this “conflict” is the cultivation of virtue. As one proceeds along the path of moral cultivation, one becomes more aware of the manner in which fulfilling one's moral obligations to society is really a pursuit of one's own interests. Bennett argues that Spinoza cannot consistently hold this view, since his idea of the conatus (striving to persevere in one's own interests) does not imply any reference to another person's being.² Bennett describes a situation in which two people are forced to fight with one another in order to survive, an example intended to refute Spinoza's attempt to resolve personal and social interests. In a more recent article, Don Garrett has also argued that Spinoza would indeed deem deceptive action to be good in situations of life and death. Moreover, he claims that this does not imply any contradiction within Spinoza's

1. All quotations from the *Ethics* are taken from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Further references to this work will be provided parenthetically specifying the section of the *Ethics* and the proposition number. I would like to thank Mary Tiles, Lee Rice, Lenn Goodman, Steven Barbone and Steven Couthino for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984).

philosophy. I shall argue against both Bennett and Garrett that Spinoza's collaborative morality is consistent, and that it does leave room for ethical sacrifice of one's physical body even in the extreme case that Bennett considers.

It must be admitted that a person's conatus would appear to work against the conatus of others. E3P6 states, "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being." In this proposition there is no reference to the being of another. Bennett argues that it follows from E3P6 that people will be naturally antagonistic in situations where persevering in one's own being conflicts with someone else's being. His description is actually more characteristic of the Hobbesian position in which men in a state of nature are at war:

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such warre, as is of every man. For Warre, consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as it is the nature of Weather. For as nature of Foule weather, lyeth not in a shoure or two of rain; but in inclination thereto of many dayes together. . .³

Hobbes believes that a Sovereign or common Power provides constraints to the pursuit of my being by enforcing laws. These laws limit my nature, insofar as they hinder me from pursuing my own interests. In Hobbes' view it is in pursuit of my own purely selfish interests that I submit to a sovereign. Following a similar assumption, Bennett argues that Spinoza fails in his effort to found a collaborative morality.⁴ When faced with problems such as scarcity it appears that one's own interests would necessarily be served only at the expense of someone else's.

To evaluate any such criticism, one must reexamine what it means to persevere in one's own being. The objection can be answered if 'persevering in one's being' is not vulgarly understood solely as pursuing one's 'selfish' interests. Pursuit of the latter is often linked with passive affects, and so is actually acting contrary to one's interests. All passive emotions,

3. Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1986).

4. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 306.

or passions, are related to an inadequate understanding of oneself, the object, or both. We must therefore distinguish between a conatus that is driven by such passive affects rooted in inadequate ideas and a liberated conatus which stems from adequate ideas. The passion-infested conatus is usually unaware of its own dependence on others and thus tries to pursue its own interests independently of the whole.

There are many passages in which Spinoza underlines the relation between conatus and sociality. I cite what is perhaps the most famous of these before attempting the more challenging task of showing how Spinoza's so called 'egoism' in fact creates a space for a special type of community. E4P18Schol states:

Again, from II post 4 it follows that we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us. Moreover, if we consider our Mind, our intellect would of course be more imperfect if the Mind were alone and did not understand anything except itself. There are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought.

Of these we can think of none more excellent than those that agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of the same nature are joined to one another they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being, and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.

The above shows Spinoza holding that people are dependent on their external environment. This dependence includes both the human and non-human world but the second paragraph reveals the importance that he places on community in human relations. The conatus by its very structure is dependent on things outside it. The most obvious example of this dependence is the way in which humans require food, water, and oxygen to live. But in order to secure these basic necessities they need to cooperate, and thus their conatus undergoes, to varying degrees and often without their explicit knowledge, a socializing process.

Spinoza grants that this socialization process may not occur smoothly, since it is part of human nature to be subject to the passions. He notes that “man is necessarily always subject to passions,” and that “he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires” (E4P4Cor). However, as we remarked above, this would not be an active characteristic according to Spinoza. While the active aspect of human nature is, according to Spinoza, the foundation of morality and virtue, an understanding of the passions is what is essential to his politics. Moreover, such an understanding also develops one’s power and virtue. Spinoza first mentions the normative (active) model of human nature in the preface to E4:

For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words (i.e., good and evil) with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less to this model.

Whenever the terms ‘good’, ‘evil’ and ‘human nature’ occur in E4, one should keep this meaning in mind. The model sets a practical standard from which to judge human action. At this point Spinoza outlines the process by which one’s own conatus involves the conatus of others. He defines virtue as the striving to persevere in one’s being, but the nature of this striving changes as one understands more clearly what one’s real interests are. Thus when one is truly persevering in one’s being one is also most useful to others:

When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another. For the more each one seeks his own advantage, and strives to preserve himself, the more he is endowed with virtue (by P20), or what is the same (by D8), the greater his power of acting according to the laws of his own nature, i.e. (by IIIP3), of living from the guidance of reason. (E4P35Cor2)

The best way of seeking one’s interest is to live according to reason, which

is the human essence. Many scholars believe that Spinoza is incorrect to infer that either living according to reason, or noticing that humans share the same nature, implies any ethical norms. Bennett, for example, argues that it may be the case that pursuit of my own interests rationally precludes my helping others. For example, there may be situations where I may choose to preserve my life over that of another:

However alike you and I are, the thing in question may relate to us — not to *our natures*, but to us — quite differently, and thus bear differently on our welfare. That one small point brings Spinoza's collaborative edifice tumbling down. Suppose you and I are alike, that x could harm either of us, and that to avoid the harm what is needed is to keep at a distance from x; and suppose that we cannot both do this — the floodwaters are rising in the mine and there is room for only one of us on the elevator which is starting up for the last time. Here the similarity between us is no help at all.⁵

Bennett believes that, if this situation is viewed with Spinoza's presuppositions, the only answer that can be given is that the people in question would struggle violently against each other to get into the elevator. One can generalize this particular example to include any situation that fits the description of a prisoner's dilemma; namely, a situation where two people's interests are pitted against one another — one player's gain implies the other's loss. Bennett's example is more serious than most prisoner's dilemma scenarios, since there is no cooperative option here: the possibility of cooperation is excluded. Arguing against Bennett on his own terms, one might counter that Spinoza would have questioned the validity of Bennett's thought experiment. It could be argued that in such a time of crisis the only way to escape death would be if both the victims thought about the problem together. This possibility is available only because humans share the same nature and are harmed by similar things. The idea of cooperation is probably already involved, since one can assume that there are people who are running the elevator and perhaps waiting at the top. Moreover, given that the two people in the elevator are only finite modes, from a Spinozistic perspective, it would be impossible for either of them to know for certain that the possibility of cooperation were excluded; only God could know this. But nonetheless, all this aside, Bennett's example seems

5. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 301.

to show that in just such a case, pursuing one's own interest excludes the interests of the other.

2. Barbone's Critique of Bennett

In a recent paper,⁶ Steven Barbone counters Bennett by claiming that, while he is correct, his example does not pose a threat to Spinoza's basic theory:

Though all this is true, I sense no great paradox, for Bennett is guilty of what he himself accuses Spinoza — he writes, “(I)n his collaborative morality in E4 [Spinoza] forgets E3p32, and the concept of ‘not enough to go around’ is conspicuously absent” (Bennett, 301). It certainly seems clear to me that in the example offered by Bennett, Spinoza would take into account E3P32 and to the extent that being on the elevator is a good which can be possessed only by one, and so there is no dilemma at all (whichever of us can overcome the other is the one who rides the elevator).⁷

But if one follows Barbone in conceding to Bennett that Spinoza's morality cannot deal with the utmost self-sacrifice, namely the sacrifice of one's life, then we must add a footnote to much of Part 4 saying, “this is true when we are not dealing with situations of life and death.” But this produces a more serious problem, namely, distinguishing between those things that are essential to one's life and those that are not. It may be argued that many goods that we use everyday are essential for our survival, and that since the future availability of such goods is often uncertain, it would not be entirely irrational to struggle for them at present. Thus Bennett's example of the mine shaft can be extended to show that many actions that may well be considered unethical, like fighting for another person's goods, follow from Spinoza's theory of the conatus.

Moreover, if Bennett is correct, we would have to conclude that in Spinoza's opinion people who give their lives for a cause or for the sake of someone else are not virtuous. However, there may be other ways of

6. Steven Barbone, “Virtue and Sociality in Spinoza,” *Iyyun* (The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly) 42 (July 1993), 383-395.

7. Barbone, “Virtue and Sociality,” 391.

resolving the contradiction between E3P32 and Spinoza's "collaborative ethics." E3P32 states, "If we imagine that someone enjoys some thing that only one can possess, we shall strive to bring it about that he does not possess it." The question is, of course, "does this statement apply equally to both the bonded and the free man?" It is important to note that Spinoza is dealing here with imagination and not with reason. Although I agree with both Bennett and Barbone that in most cases Spinoza would correctly claim that the two people would fight for a place on the elevator, I am unconvinced that Spinoza would call the person who acted in this way *free*. Moreover, I believe that there is room in Spinoza's system for someone to sacrifice his/her own life for another. The conclusion that both Bennett and Barbone draw presupposes that one's own conatus is separate from another and that a conatus' main goal is the preservation of physical life. Now, conatus as we remarked earlier is a "striving to persevere in one's being" (E3P6). So we must consider carefully how seriously we wish to take the idea that, for the free person, pursuing one's own being involves the being of others. Our two commentators seem to take it that although pursuit of one's own being usually involves the being of others, the former takes precedence over the latter in a life and death crisis. This assumes that the highest good, or at least the most basic good, in Spinoza's system is the pursuit of one's own physical existence.

This brings us to the eternal goods in Spinoza's philosophy. Barbone notes:

What Bennett does not quite grasp is that while it is true that I may possess the last place in the elevator or the last bit of food, in no sense can I ever "truly" possess them since these objects are transient and mutable (that is, you can remove me from the elevator or there eventually will be more food). When Spinoza writes about things which we can truly possess, he is speaking of "... something immutable and eternal [self understanding through love of God] (E5P15) which we can truly possess (E2P45), and which cannot be defiled by any of the faults that are to be found in the common sort of love." (E5P20 Schol)⁸

I believe that we can use this line of reasoning to argue that the free man would not necessarily fight for the elevator. It would be inappropriate to say *a priori* what the free person would do in such a situation since

8. This quotation is taken from the unpublished version of Barbone's paper.

Spinoza's philosophy does not generate universal answers, but advocates an adequate understanding of each particular situation. Thus the outcome is dependent on who the people in the mine shaft are, as well as a range of other factors. But here are some possible outcomes. If two unfree people are trapped in the mine, then they will probably fight for survival and the one who can overcome the other will survive. But even this is not evident, since sometimes one can love another with such passion that one is willing to die for him/her (e.g., a mother's love for her child). If there is one free person trapped with an unfree person, then the outcome may be similar.⁹ The free person could of course, decide that s/he is of more use to society than the unfree free person and thus that s/he would be justified in overcoming the other. However, this need not be the case and one of the people may sacrifice his/her life because it is perceived as the ethical thing to do. Spinoza does not subscribe to a Kantian ethics, and thus it would be inappropriate to say exactly what would be ethical in each case. Since we do not know all the factors involved, we cannot have an adequate idea of the situation. Moreover, it would also be incorrect to decide what the free person would do based on a standard utilitarian argument. If there are two free people in the mine, then it seems that they could decide rationally (albeit quickly) who rides the elevator. They may agree to flip a coin or decide in some other impartial way which of them rides the elevator. In this manner, they would both make an attempt to save their lives without acting deceptively. E4P18Schol, quoted above, supports this line of argument since it states that people can unite together and form one individual. Thus persevering in one's being would include the preservation of that 'individual' as a whole. Here we should keep in mind Spinoza's definition of a complex individual:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same nature or of a different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions in a certain and fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies. (E2P13, definition after L3)

9. Here it is important to refer to E4P20 for some guidance. It is possible that the free person understand that his companion is of superior strength and thus eventually accept his fate. Notice that Seneca, in a somewhat similar situation, chose death.

A society or a group of individuals can relate to one another in such a way that they form a new and more powerful individual.¹⁰ This is the direction in which Spinoza is moving when he says “all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all” (E4P18). Notice that the conatus is described in terms of “their being” and “the common advantage of all” instead of “a particular being.” In relating this to the elevator, one should remember that the two people in the elevator do not necessarily have to forget that they are part of a larger society.

3. Immutable Goods

It is the nature of an immutable good that it enables one to sacrifice one's own particular being for something greater. As Barbone notes, the last place in the elevator, or my life, is not such a greater common good. In other words ‘good’ does not mean ‘useful’. On the surface, this seems to contradict E3P6-10, which state that self-preservation is essential to all beings. But the problem is overcome when we realize that ‘self’ does not have to mean ‘self-sufficient individual’ and therefore can include others. Spinoza was aware of the *apparent* contradiction between the conatus as described in E3 and the social ethics of E4, and thus replied to some possible objections in E4P36Schol:

But suppose someone should ask: what if the greatest good of those who seek virtue were not common to all? Would it not follow from that, as above (P34), that men who live according to the guidance of reason, i.e. (by P35), men, insofar as they agree in nature, would be contrary to one another?

To this the answer is that it is not by accident that man's greatest good is common to all; rather, it arises from the very nature of reason, because it is deduced from the very essence of man, insofar as [that essence] is defined by reason, because man could neither be nor be conceived if he did not have the power to enjoy the greatest good. For it pertains to the essence of the human mind

10. This interpretation of the relation between individual and society has been the subject of much recent debate and I shall not pursue it in detail. For a good summary of this debate from an alternative viewpoint see Lee Rice, “Individual and Community in Spinoza’s Social Psychology,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990).

by (IIP47) to have an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.

From the above passage we can see that reason and God unite men, since all men by nature have an eternal idea of God. Since reason is deduced from the "essence of man" in general, it is not an exclusive good. Spinoza believes that if the two men follow reason they will necessarily agree, and this would be true even if they were in a flooded mine. Moreover, I maintain, the idea of God enables Spinoza to move beyond an individual's 'personal' existence. However, the important thing is to show that the intellectual love of God, the greatest good, is essentially connected to the social, since if this were not the case, then it would be better to take the last place in the elevator because it would enable one to love God.

We sense the social nature of the knowledge of God upon reading E4P37: "The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater." So the more one knows God the more one seeks the common good. Knowledge of God is the prerequisite to the intellectual love of God as described in the E5. This knowledge and love of God is the foundation of Spinoza's ethics:

Again, whatever we desire and do of which we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, or insofar as we know God, I relate to Religion. The Desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason, I call Morality. The desire by which a man, who lives according to the guidance of reason, is bound to join others to himself in friendship, I call Being Honorable, and I call that honorable which men who live according to the guidance of reason, praise; on the other hand, what is contrary to the formation of friendship, I call dishonorable. (E4P37Schol)

Morality and honor, two virtues which link the individual with the social, are rooted in reason, which in turn is rooted in God. Spinoza can make this move because, in a manner of speaking, for him, God is the World. Therefore, "[t]he more we understand singular things, the more we understand God" (E5P24). Now, we should note that the understanding in this context is not "cold" but accompanied by the intellectual love of God. "The intellectual love of God, which arises from the third kind of knowledge, is eternal" (E5P33). From E4P37Schol above we notice that this "intellectual love," which is the third and final stage in the development of

one's conatus, is also a love for one's fellow man. Love is the basis for the desire to join oneself to others in friendship.

An important step in this move from loving God to loving other humans is to notice that God loves both himself and humans:

The Mind's intellectual love of God is the very love of God by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human Mind's essence, considered under the species (aspect) of eternity; i.e., the Mind's intellectual Love of God is part of the infinite Love by which God loves himself.

Cor: From this it follows that insofar as God loves himself, he loves men, and consequently that God's love of men and the Mind's intellectual Love of God are one and the same.

(E5P36&Cor)

The mind's love of God is God's love of people (E5P36Schol) and thus one loves other people through loving God and vice versa. On a first reading, E5P36Cor may seem to contradict E5P17Cor, which states: "Strictly speaking, God loves no one, and hates no one. For God (by P17) is not affected with any affect of Joy or Sadness. Consequently (by Defs. Aff. VI, VII), he also loves no one and hates no one." It would seem to follow logically from the definition of love, namely, "a Joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause," that for God to be able to love, he would need to experience Joy by an external cause. But since (by E1P14) there is only one God or substance and nothing can either be nor be conceived without it, it is impossible for it to have an external object. Now if God is capable of loving, it would either be by externalizing himself, à la Hegel, and/or by loving in a manner that goes beyond the duality between subject and object (i.e., an external cause). From P35-36, we see that the only type of love from which God loves himself is an intellectual love. God loves himself in this way eternally since nothing can destroy this type of love. But in Spinoza's system, where God generates and is all things, God's loving himself also implies that he loves all things. Matheron¹¹ explains this in some detail and thus I quote him at length:

God feels neither joy nor sadness, because his power for acting

11. Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et Communauté(e) chez Spinoza* (Editions de minuit, Paris, 1969).

neither increases nor decreases;¹² sentimental love is therefore as foreign to him as hate: nothing we do can affect him. But, under the aspect of eternity, this negation has its positive counterpart. Even if God never passes to a greater perfection, he still eternally rejoices in an infinite perfection. And nothing is unconscious to this joy, since God, insofar as he immediately produces his infinite understanding, knows himself as the cause of himself and of his own perfection by the third type of knowledge without the obscuring of any imagination. Consequently, God experiences [*goû(u)te*, literally: tastes] eternally an infinite bliss with the idea of himself as cause.... Besides, the idea that he has of himself necessarily comprehends all the ideas of all the consequences of his nature; in loving himself, he necessarily loves all the individuals that he produces: all in general and each one in particular. Let us be precise: If he loves a finite mode A, it is not as this finite mode is deformed by the action of another mode B; he knows this as well, but by the ideas of A and B taken together, not merely by the unique idea of A. With respect to A this mutation is nothing real. What God loves in each individual in itself is that which is positive in this individual: its conatus, conceived independently of any relation to external causes; its eternal essence, with its eternal pretension to exist.¹³

Matheron accurately depicts the difference between the love that Spinoza discussed in E3 and the intellectual love that God has for himself. The love that God has can be understood only *sub-specie aeternitatis* and is not of perishable things. If God loved perishable things, he would by definition suffer when they perished. Now God already loves our eternal essences under the aspect of eternity, but only the people who realize their true natures will be able to experience God's love of himself, and with God's own love, they will love him. But since at this point, God's love and human love are the same, people at this level will also participate in God's love toward all eternal essences (including their own and those of other people). It is this important fact that makes the intellectual love of God

12. Here Matheron refers us to the definition of Joy and Sadness given in E3P11Schol: "By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection. And by Sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection."

13. Matheron, *Individu et Communauté(e' chez Spinoza*, 592-93.

social.

Matheron explains the social nature of the intellectual love of God clearly by giving an example of a group of people who know each other with the third type of knowledge.

They also will love God; they will also love us, us and everyone like us, by reconstructing our essences from God and by disclosing them in existence [*en les dé(e)celant dans l'existence*]; for them as well, the intellectual love of God, extended in the form of love for humans, mixes itself with Gods love for humans. In combining our point of view with theirs, we obtain the following quadruple equation: our love for God = our love for an other = God's love for men = the other's love for us = the other's love for God.¹⁴

This passage explains the manner in which people come into an eternal communion through the intellectual love of God. This should warn us against interpreting the intellectual love of God as a type of isolated practice. Although it detaches one from the sensuous world at the same time it promotes a love for the essences of all things, and “[t]he individual essences are not isolated from one another: they communicate with one another by the mediation of God who is their common foundation.”¹⁵ Thus when we understand how a particular essence is part of God we love it. This love can serve as a base for morality since is not partial. In case of people who are ‘unethical’ or ‘cruel’ the intellectual love advocates that one loves these people not for what they are at present, but for their eternal essences.

E5P36Schol reinforces this social aspect in the intellectual love of God and also links this love with the concept of self-esteem or ambition (the second stage of the conatus’ development):

From this we clearly understand wherein our salvation or blessedness, or Freedom, consists, viz. in a constant and eternal Love of God, or in God's Love for men. And this love, or blessedness, is called Glory in the Sacred Scriptures — not without reason. For whether this Love is related to God or the Mind,

14. *Ibid.*, 597.

15. *Ibid.*, 596.

it can rightly be called satisfaction of the mind, which is really not distinguished from Glory. For insofar as it is related to God (by P35), it is Joy (if I may still be permitted to use this term), accompanied by the idea of himself [as its cause]. And similarly insofar as it is related to the mind.

In his definition of the affects (in E3), Spinoza defines love of esteem as “a Joy accompanied by the idea of some action of ours which we imagine that others praise.”¹⁶ On the level of the passions this can be both good and bad since the person who acts solely to promote her/his esteem is not genuinely concerned about the other, but is concerned mainly about her/his own image in the eyes of another. But the intellectual love of God enables us to know God’s Joy and realize that we are at least partially the cause of his love. This is because God is the cause of his own Joy and we are part of God. But this love and knowledge is also present in everyone, since God loves everyone and everyone loves God whether s/he knows it or not. Therefore, there is an intimate communion between the essence of every individual and God. Now, only those who have realized their love of God will explicitly reciprocate their love for one another and mutually praise one another. In fact, as is shown in Matheron’s example, their love is identical since they each love one another with God’s love for himself.

Matheron explains the ontological dimension of this love in a later passage:

Our passionate joys have, as the condition for their possibility, as we have seen, an eternal bliss that is unconscious — or at least, because there is no total unconscious, not very conscious. Why wouldn’t our passionate identification with another have as a condition for its possibility, the eternal intellectual communion between the eternal parts of our minds? In this case, the explicit intellectual communion that is brought about (insured) by the third type of knowledge would just bring the eternal foundation of any interpersonal love to light.¹⁷

God is the condition for the possibility for any phenomenon and thus it follows that our passionate understanding is also dependent on Him. But God

16. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 538.

17. Matheron, *Individu et Communauté*, 600.

is always loving both Himself and people, and so, as remarked earlier, our essences are always being loved by God whether we realize this or not. The more we realize this love the more we love our own essence and the essences of everyone else.

4. Garrett's Objection

The intellectual love of God is eternal and not corrupted by external causes even if they be life threatening. E5P38 states: "The more the Mind understands things by the second and third kind of knowledge, the less it is acted on by the affects which are evil, and the less it fears death." This passage makes it clear that by "perseverance in one's existence," the sage does not understand simply the preservation of one's physical life. The proposition also provides an answer to Bennett's coal mine dilemma. If the person in the mine truly has achieved the third kind of knowledge, he will not fear death and thus will not mechanically try to overcome the other. In fact, keeping in mind what Matheron has said about the social nature of the intellectual love of God, we can conclude that it is quite possible that the sage would sacrifice his/her bodily life for the other. Don Garrett,¹⁸ however, argues that, while much of the above argument about the love of God and freedom may be true, it does not prove that Spinoza's philosophy allows for ethical self-sacrifice in life and death situations. Garrett claims that, since the free person is an ideal person who can never exist in reality, statements made about him/her do not apply to actual people. Therefore, it would still be good for actually existing people to save their own lives even if doing so involved killing someone or acting deceptively. In other words, Garrett argues that, according to Spinoza, it is not good to act like a free person at the expense of losing one's life:

As one gains in understanding, one begins to approximate as a limit, a state in which one could be totally unaffected by death, or any potential harm. But this limit could actually be reached only by an infinite being whose mind contained all the knowledge and was not at all bound by the imagined. Hence, Spinoza's doctrine does not entail that death could ever cease to be of any harm at all for any finite human being, who must remain a part of

18. Don Garrett, "'A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively': Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's Ethics," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990).

nature (III P4). On the contrary, death does constitute for us the end of at least some portion of the mind, even if (it is) the least important part, and hence constitutes a failure to preserve one's being completely.¹⁹

While Garrett is correct in claiming that death does harm all living creatures, he presupposes that the preservation of one's physical life is the highest goal in Spinoza's philosophy. Garrett has shown that the concept of a free human being contradicts existing reality, but this does not invalidate the model of a free person as an ethical ideal. It is clear that saving one's life would be good on a certain reading of E4Ax1-2; but if one uses the normative conception of good found in the preface of E4, acting virtuously would be preferable to merely prolonging one's physical existence. It is true that E4P22 links virtue to the conatus, but it is unclear whether we should interpret this in a purely physical manner. In the preface to E4, Spinoza introduces a normative definition of good (discussed above) that he believes should guide action.

Garrett notes the different uses of 'good' in Spinoza's *Ethics*, but believes that not even the normative conception invoked in the preface to E4 can be used to argue for the possibility of absolute self-sacrifice. He claims that Spinoza's ethical model applies only to perfect human beings. "Prima facie, there is no reason why an action that would be good for someone to perform, in this sense, should also be the action that the perfect man would perform — unless perhaps, the agent in question were already perfect."²⁰ The definition of 'good' in the preface of E4 states that good is "what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves." Garrett believes that, although it would be good for a perfect human being to always act honestly, the same does not hold true for actually existing people.²¹ Death, he believes would definitely move one away from this model.

19. *Ibid.*, 221-238.

20. *Ibid.*, 229.

21. But this is already problematic, since it is unclear to what extent the definitions of good provided in the preface of E4 apply to the perfect person. As s/he is already perfect, s/he would not need to set any model before him/herself and so concepts like good and bad would not be relevant. It is precisely because we are imperfect that such concepts apply to human beings.

To model one's life after an ideal, however, implies the unity of all one's actions, past and present, and so any unethical action will also move one away from the model of the perfect human being. Garrett uses the example of someone modelling his/herself after the idle rich to show that one need not always act in accordance to the model in order to approach it. He argues that if someone was already rich, idle behavior would be good in the sense that it would help him/her to remain or become even more like the chosen model.²² Now if someone were poor, idle behavior would not be good since it would prevent him/her from attaining the model. But the reason it would prevent the person from attaining the model is that idle behavior would not allow him/her to be rich which is a the necessary condition of being idle rich.

The above analogy would shed more light on the problem if we used the model of a purely idle person instead of an idle rich. This concept, like the model of perfected human nature, serves to guide human conduct in light of a specific goal. Moreover, because of the human condition, being purely idle is also an unattainable ideal which can only be approached as a type of limit. The notion of an idle rich man would be parallel to the model of perfection in E4 if Spinoza had specified that this model involved both existing as a human and being perfect. This however, as Garrett himself notes, involves a contradiction, since perfection and freedom cannot be fully attained by humans. Spinoza's gloss on perfection at the end of the preface of E4 further illuminates this problem, and shows definitively that perfection does not involve durational existence. "Finally, by perfection in general I shall understand reality, as I have said; that is, the essence of any thing whatsoever in as far as it exists and acts in a definite manner, without taking duration into account. For no individual thing can be said to be more perfect on the grounds that it has continued existence over a greater period of time." The idea of perfect person is thus of a man who acts and exists without taking duration into account; one who acts out of his/her essence or conatus. No actually existing human being can achieve this because as E4P3 states: "The force (*vis*) whereby a man persists in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes." No existing person is thus perfect.

Spinoza is aware of the contradiction in the concept of a 'perfect man', but does not believe that it invalidates his model. Since we are always subject to passions, we are in need of a model that can serve to

22. *Ibid.*, 229.

guide our action. In E5P10, Spinoza explains the process of applying these rules:

Therefore the best course we can adopt, as long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our emotions, is to conceive a right method of living, or fixed rules of life, and to commit them to memory and continually apply them to particular situations that are frequently encountered in life, so that our casual thinking is thoroughly permeated by them and they are always ready to hand. For example, among our practical rules, we laid down (E4P46) that hatred should be conquered by love or nobility, and not repaid with reciprocal hatred.

The main problem addressed here is the transition from an actually existing man to a free man. Here the model of a man who lives under the guidance of reason in E4 serves as a type of schematic image that existing individuals should try to mime. The image of a free or virtuous person, unlike the concept, would exist in duration and would thus allow existing people to compare themselves to him/her. Although Spinoza deals with a general situation in the above example, I believe one could generalize this image to include cases of life and death.

The problem is again that of reconciling the conatus with both Spinoza's ethics of similitude (E4P29-31) and his vision of a free person (E4P67-73). Now we can return to Bennett's example of the situation with the two people in the flooded coal mine. Garrett seems to agree with Bennett in concluding that, according to Spinoza, if two people were faced with such a situation, they would, as described in E3P32, fight each other for the last place in the elevator. The nature of the conatus plays an essential role in our attempting to predict the outcome of the situation Bennett proposes. The interesting question is: "Will the conatus of a virtuous person necessarily dictate that it will be good, in the normative sense, to preserve his/her being even if it involved dishonest or unethical action?"

In a recent article, Alexandre Matheron deals with precisely this question in a discussion of E4P29-31. He does not deal explicitly with Bennett's example of the elevator, but with a similar example regarding a food shortage. The essence of Bennett's example is that it provides us with a situation where two people are faced with a good that only one can share. So a situation involving two people who are about to die of starvation on an island where there is only one piece of bread (which Bennett uses earlier in

his book,) will generate the same questions as the elevator example. Matheron argues that in such situations it is unclear what will determine the respective conatus of the two people:

If we suppose, in addition, that the two people are subject to their passions, then the possibility (of struggle) will become a necessity; Spinoza notes further on that it will be necessary only to the extent that their passions are themselves contrary by nature: as the scholium to E4P34 indicates, x and y will struggle, not because they love the same thing, but because that which causes joy to x (the idea of possessing the thing) is precisely what causes sadness to y and vice versa. But if we suppose that the two men live under the guidance of reason, we cannot yet know, from our standpoint, what will determine their conatus, since this is precisely what we are in search of.²³

Although Matheron makes an important point about distinguishing between those who follow reason and those who are subject to passions, Garrett can agree with the above paragraph and still argue that, given the above situations of scarcity, it will be good for any two actually existing people to fight for the last piece of bread (or the last place in the elevator). The reason for this is that, according to Spinoza, the second case described by Matheron, namely two people who live according to reason, can never actually happen. As E4P4Cor states: "From this it follows that man is necessarily subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires." So, although it is true that two free people would not necessarily fight for the last place in the elevator, humans by nature can never be totally free; they are always subject to passions.

But this still does not rule out the possibility of the image of the free man acting as a regulative ideal which can guide and determine the conatus of actually existing human beings. An enlightened conatus must constantly strive to overcome its passions and move towards a greater perfection. In Bennett's example, the conditions are such that the act of moving to a greater perfection involves a failure to preserve his/her being. The situation inevitably involves a loss. If the person were to act unethically in order to save his/her life, then s/he would have failed to move toward a greater

23. Alexandre Matheron, "Les fondements d'une éthique de la similitude," *Revue de Métafysique et de Morale* 4/1994, 490-491.

perfection or the image of a free person. If s/he does sacrifice his/her life then it means that s/he has failed to (completely) preserve his/her being. But, as one moves closer to the ideal of a free person, one will tend to pursue freedom and morality over mere bodily existence. People with a relatively high degree of cultivation, who have the third kind of knowledge, would be capable of sacrificing themselves for a more noble goal. Virtuous action that results from having the third kind of knowledge would give the agent a satisfaction that transcends one's mere physical existence.

Spinoza explicitly argues in Ep58 that there is no contradiction between his theory of virtue and his determinism. "Again as to his statement that if we were compelled by external causes then no one would be able to acquire the habit of virtue, I do not know who has told him that we cannot be of a firm and constant disposition as a result of fatalistic necessity, but only from the free decision of the Mind."²⁴ Since Spinoza here writes about a "firm and constant" disposition, we can conclude that he is speaking of something that transcends mere bodily existence. This firm disposition stems from an adequate understanding of God's relation to humans, i.e., the third kind of knowledge. Humans live a contradictory existence since their conatus strives toward freedom even though they must inevitably be determined by external causes.²⁵ The concepts of freedom and the intellectual love of God serve as goals toward which an enlightened conatus strives; even if it is never completely successful in realizing them. Now, as one achieves a greater understanding of God, one's conatus and one's desire are geared towards more noble 'objects'. This transformation will have a considerable impact on one's conduct.

From a Spinozistic perspective, it is plausible that a person may sacrifice his/her physical life out of the desire to be moral or honorable (see E4P37). Moreover, from E4P37Schol we can conclude that, were someone to sacrifice his/her life out of a desire for being honorable, it would be an action worthy of praise. Spinoza's *Ethics* adequately shows us the tension that can arise between one's self-interest and morality. The ethical life, according to Spinoza, essentially involves living according to reason; even when reason dictates actions that will be harmful to one's physical well being. Every conatus has as its final goal perfection and this goal is not

24. *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, translated and edited by A. Wolf (New York: Dial Press, 1927), 297.

25. See Emilia Giancotti's illuminating article, "Théorie et pratique de la liberté(e)," in Curley and Moreau (*op. cit.*).

limited by physical existence.

In E5P38Schol Spinoza writes: “[B]ecause (by P27) the highest satisfaction there can be arises from the third kind of knowledge, it follows from this that the human Mind can be of such a nature that the part of the Mind which we have shown perishes with the body (see P21) is of no moment in relation to what remains.” This satisfaction is not the material satisfaction that stems from one’s passions but is a transcendent satisfaction that results from following reason. This shows the way in which one can sacrifice one’s life and yet be said to be pursuing one’s interest. Virtue is based on the conatus which constantly tries to perfect itself. The goal of a human conatus is to live the life of a virtuous person, namely, a life that is led by reason and the third kind of knowledge.

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