

Ethics Study Guide

Ethics by Baruch Spinoza

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Plot Summary

Spinoza's Ethics is one of the most difficult books in philosophy. It is notoriously obscure, as Spinoza invents a variety of new terms and attempts to layout the book like a geometric proof. At this period in philosophical history, philosophers were extremely impressed both with geometry and the physics of Newton and Leibniz. As a result, they attempted to mimic these mathematical and scientific methods. Thus, to understand the Ethics, you must be prepared for obscure, mathematical arguments that often hide what is going on. Further, the book is littered with terms that you will be unfamiliar with and ones that you will be familiar with but that Spinoza has given a distinct meaning.

The Ethics covers many issues other than ethics. Spinoza is a system builder and believes that our ethical lives, the nature of the good, right action, etc. can only be understood within the context of a general philosophy. Thus, Part One focuses on the ultimate ground of all being, i.e., God. God is not the God of classical theism. Instead, it is the only 'substance' in the universe and contains all other things in terms of its 'attributes' as 'modes.' Thus we do not have independent existence, but exist as modes of God.

Part Two covers the nature and origin of the mind. God is the only thing that truly exists. We are modes that are manifestations of his two attributes (that we know of) - thought and extension. Thus we have both a mind and a body, yet we are ultimately one thing. Our body and mind operate in parallel and can affect one another. The mind is composed of ideas, rather than the sort of thing that entertains them.

Part Three concerns the nature of the emotions. In it, Spinoza distinguishes between actions and passions, the nature of things to 'endeavor' towards their self-preservation, and understands goodness and badness in terms of pleasure and pain. Desire, pleasure and pain are the primary emotions and all other emotions are combinations of them.

Part Four covers both the idea of human 'servitude' and the strength of the emotions. Spinoza focuses on the nature of the active life. We pursue the good and avoid the bad; virtue is the power to do the good, the power of reason to rule the emotions. Rational control is hard to achieve but it is possible. We are only free when our actions are determined by our reason alone.

Part Five covers the nature of the good life and true religion. The good life is acting on pure reason and coming to understand ourselves. To the extent that we understand ourselves, we understand God. The love of God derives from this understanding. We can achieve a kind of immortality, but one acts from a bad motive if one is good due to seeking eternal life. This brief summary contains many complex ideas that can only be understood through carefully reading the text. However, understanding the Ethics is a significant achievement and helps one to understand not only the history of philosophy but the history of ideas.



Part One: On God

Part One: On God Summary and Analysis

The Ethics concerns metaphysics, epistemology, the nature of the mind, morality and human freedom. The beginning of the ethics, however, starts with Spinoza's conception of God. The idea of the human must be understood in terms of the divine. So Spinoza builds a structure through which human nature can be fully understood. Spinoza must begin with the ultimate ground of being, or the most basic part of reality. The basic structure of reality is substance or what he calls God. God is known as both substance and as cause. God as a cause will determine all the other events in the universe in history necessarily (call this view determinism).

A substance, for Spinoza, has independent existence. This means that it can exist by itself. Think about it as the real-world equivalent of a noun. The person, places and things referred to by nouns are their own entities, whereas, say, adjectives only make sense when attached to nouns. In the real world, substances are like nouns, they are basic units of existence to which properties attach. Another important term is 'attribute'. Substances have attributes, the property that comprises a substance's essence. Imagine, for instance, a white horse. One of its attributes is being a horse, a feature of the white horse that it not only has necessarily but that explains the kind of thing that the white horse is.

Spinoza argues that substances cannot be created by another substance, the substances must exist by their nature and that every substance is in some sense 'infinite'. Spinoza moves from these ideas to the core idea that there is only one substance: God. And God exists necessarily. In other words - he possesses the attribute of existing in the same sense as the white horse possesses the attribute of being a horse. He will argue later that God has two attributes - thought and extension. They are not different substances, but different attributes of the only substance, God.

Until this point, we have only been told the nature of substances and attributes, assuming that there are any. Spinoza transitions to arguing that substances exist. Since God possesses existence as an attribute, he must exist. Further, he must have an infinite number of attributes and must be 'indivisible.' Everything else exists within God (this view of Spinoza's led some to think he was an advocate of pantheism). Additionally, those things which exist within God are known as 'modes.' Thus, all that exists is substance and modes. Unlike traditional theism, the world and the objects within it are not separate from God and created by God. They are modes of God's infinite substance-being.

God is not only substance, he is also a cause. The consequences of God's nature are beyond our grasp, infinite. God's causality produces infinite diversity in infinite combinations. God acts only from the laws of his nature. In this sense he has freedom, because he cannot be compelled to act by anything beyond himself. There is nothing



beyond him by definition. Note - and this is very important - God does not have 'free will.' He cannot decide between different options and he is not outside of his creation. Everything he does he does necessarily, causality is within him and emanates within him in the form of modes.

Next Spinoza talks about the infinite modes of God; these modes derive from God's attributes and these modes have natures. There are two types of these natures - mediate and immediate. No one really knows what Spinoza is after in this distinction, although some speculate that immediate modes are what we understand as physical whereas mediate are what we understand as psychological or phenomenological. Thus, the laws of nature cover two types of modes, and so there are both psychological and physical laws of nature (although we will see that the physical and psychological are two aspects of the same thing, so the laws of nature are one). Now, these two types of modes are 'infinite' and appear to specify types of modes. However, sometimes we speak of instances of modes, or 'particular' things. For instance, we may speak of a type - horses - and a particular of the type - this horse. Spinoza aims to account for these sorts of things as well. These modes are 'finite' and are mere manifestations of attributes of substance in the form of modes.

Finally, Spinoza states his full understand of causality, or the view known as determinism. God determines necessarily the future of everything, connected in infinite, yet wholly determined chains of causes and effects. Nothing in the universe is contingent. God could not have produced modes in any other way than he did. What it means to be free for Spinoza is to be 'self-determined' or to act from one's own nature rather than the imposition of anything else. Since God is the ground of being and contains all being as his parts, he cannot be imposed upon from without, so he is necessarily free. We humans, as modes of God, can be imposed upon, and so are only contingently free. Finally, since God necessarily exists and everything that is caused by him is caused to exist necessarily, then all possible things exist. This entails that the universe is 'full' or that it contains all possible objects. Furthermore, nothing in the universe is at rest. Something follows from the existence of every mode.

An appendix follows Part One. He there argues against some obvious concerns about his views, concerns that would prevent others from agreeing him. Many will argue that the universe was created by a God who is separate from it and that has free will, and that he acts to benefit humans. Spinoza argues that this view is false and why. He thinks the view has produced a lot of bad ideas. Further, we should not understand the world as made for man. This will confuse the nature of the good.



Part Two: On the Nature and Origin of the Mind

Part Two: On the Nature and Origin of the Mind Summary and Analysis

Part Two attempts to explain the nature of mind in terms of a single master concept - an idea. Ideas aren't mere passive objects of the mind, as we typically think of them. Instead, an idea is the activity of thought; ideas essentially involve some positive endorsement or rejection. Part Two has four clearly delineated parts, which cover (i) the relation between mind and body, (ii) relation between ideas and mind, (iii) the external determination of the mind and (iv) the internal determination of the mind.

Recall that God has two attributes: thought and extension. Recall further that substances have modes through an attribute. Spinoza argues that we can only grasp the nature of a mode through grasping its attribute. Therefore, we cannot understand extension (read: the material world) in terms of thought (read: the mental world) or vice versa. Spinoza follows Descartes in this, arguing that mind and body cannot be reduced to one another. However, Spinoza preempts a common criticism of Descartes by arguing that thought and extension are both expressions of the one God and thus cannot be truly separate. As a result, modes like the human mind and the human body are distinct yet unified.

Humans are finite modes of God's attributes; they are not substances. When we speak of the human mind, we speak of a manifestation of the divine mind. Since we have both a mind and a body, then the mind and the body operate parallel with one another. The expressions of the two modes track one another. Spinoza next wishes to distinguish the body and the mind, so he describes the nature of the human body, which he argues is composed of 'corpuscles' or the simplest units of material being (he follows the Newtonian view of the world on this point). Often, the body and mind are contrasted in early modern philosophy (of which Spinoza is a prominent member) because bodies are made of parts and minds are not - they are unified. Not so for Spinoza - the mind is also a complex, but it is a complex of ideas. Did you think the mind had ideas? This is a mistake, for it is to conceive of ideas as passive objects of the mind. Instead, the mind is an ideas itself, which is composed of other ideas.

We turn to epistemology, or the nature of human knowledge. First, there is knowledge of the external world, our knowledge of chairs, the sky and others. Spinoza, however, does not have a clear conception of the 'external world'. Instead, knowledge of the external world is knowledge 'through the common order of nature'. And we get this knowledge when minds are externally determined. This may seem obscure, but it is not. Minds are connected to bodies, and the two act in parallel. Thus if the body is affected, the mind is too and vice versa. As a result, when light and matter impinge on the senses, our minds are externally determined. Beyond this, we can infer the existence of external bodies



that we have yet to see (the basis of science) and remember things. Now the mind knows about the external world, but it also understands itself. Think of this as self-knowledge. Spinoza calls external knowledge 'inadequate' because we only grasp the idea of the human body imperfectly, and so the idea does not map onto its true object. Thus Spinoza calls the idea inadequate. (An idea is false to the extent that it fails to 'agree' or map onto or accurately represented its object.)

Now if external perception always involves inadequate ideas, how can we have adequate ideas of nature? Since humans are finite modes and extension is infinite (since God is infinite) all of our ideas of it will be imperfect; but Spinoza resists this move. We are not only externally determined; we are internally determined. There are ideas which all bodies share - or types - say the idea of the heart. Our adequate ideas are of types. This is related to the Platonic idea that our truest knowledge is of universals (like goodness, brownness, truth) rather than particulars (this horse, my mother, that tree). These adequate ideas are the internal determinations of the mind; they impinge on the mind directly. Moreover, we come to adequate knowledge of the world through these ideas; they also enable us to reason. Our knowledge of nature is now called 'imagination' whereas our knowledge of these 'common' notions or universals is called 'reason.' However, Spinoza has a third sort of knowledge, 'intuitive knowledge.' Spinoza does not analyze this idea in detail, but to know intuitively is to ability to know a universal truth through grasping a particular truth.

Spinoza argues that ideas known through imagination are contingent, since we can imagine them differently. Ideas, however, known through reason are necessary, since we understand them as 'eternal' or 'timeless.' This is like our knowledge of God. We have an adequate idea that God is infinite and determined but we cannot grasp all of God's attributes, since we try to understand God in terms of our own imaginations. Spinoza ends Part Two with a criticism of Descartes. Descartes argued that we judge ideas by the intellect and the will, but ideas are not the objects of judgments, but is rather essentially connected to the idea of judgment (remember that ideas are active affirmations or denials, not passive objects of the mind as we typically conceive of them).



Part Three: On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions

Part Three: On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions Summary and Analysis

Part Three covers the human emotions which are part of the mind. This is why Part Three follows on the heels of Part Two. Spinoza begins Part Three by defending his geometrical method as applied to the emotions, as they may not seem amenable to such an analysis. Then he draws the crucial distinction between 'action' and 'passion.' When one is active, she does those things that can only be grasped through her nature, whereas to be passive is to act in concert with other causes. Adequate ideas allow our minds to act on their own, whereas minds must be passive in the fact of inadequate ideas. The idea of an 'emotion' is next explained; emotions are increases or decreases in the power of one's mind or body.

Spinoza has a theory of what he calls the 'conatus.' This is the 'endeavor' that each mode has. We might understand this as the object's end or what it strives for. On Spinoza's view, everything aims at its own preservation. That is the essence of each thing, to strive to preserve itself. Powers enable things to strive for their own self-preservation. Different parts of the human have their own endeavors as well. The endeavor of the mind is known as the will, whereas the endeavor of the mind and body together, Spinoza calls the appetite or desire (a desire is a conscious appetite). Spinoza also discusses 'pleasure' and 'pain.' Pleasures push the mind towards a higher level of perfection and greater power, pain the opposite. Humans have three primitive emotions: desire, pleasure and pain. All other emotions derive from combinations of these three.

The last section of Part Three is a derivation of the emotions (of relevance) from pleasure, pain and desire. During his explanation, Spinoza makes some important claims. Pleasures and pains are often tied to external causes. Love and hate are explained by those things that cause pleasure and pain. We love what causes pleasure and hate what causes pain. He appeals to the notion of a psychological law, so there are associations of ideas that allow for the emotions of sympathy and empathy. We have sympathy or empathy with a thing when we associate it with our own pleasures and pains and imagine it in others. Spinoza also discusses the relationship between other emotions - they can affect one another. Pleasure and pain allow us to understand morality. 'Good' just refers to pleasure and desire satisfaction, whereas 'bad' refers to the opposite. Thus, value judgments are subjective. However, Spinoza has much more to say about the nature of goodness.

Part Three mostly discusses passions which are tied to imagination and inadequate ideas. However, we also have emotions that are related to our own actions and choices, which derive from adequate ideas. These emotions tie to our rational faculties, particularly our ability to rationally master our emotions. This will be covered in more

detail in Parts Four and Five. Spinoza ends with an appendix that is a kind of taxonomy of the emotions.



Part Four: On Human Servitude, Or, On The Strength of the Emotions

Part Four: On Human Servitude, Or, On The Strength of the Emotions Summary and Analysis

Part Four is not merely about emotions as a whole. The first few propositions concern the passions but then Spinoza moves to consider the active life; he wants to outline the nature of the active life and define the sense in which man can be free. Recall that Spinoza has already defined 'good' and 'bad' in terms of subjective pleasures and pain. He attacks the idea of final causes as the ground of goodness. He argues, in short, that final causes do not exist. Aristotle and many of those who followed him argued that every substance has a telos, or a natural aim. This is distinct from the 'endeavor' of a mode. Instead, it is part of the essence of a substance to actualize all of its potencies. Spinoza believe that the only substance is God and that God has no aims. He simply acts as he does necessarily. Thus since God has no aims there can be no final causality. Since Aristotelians say that an object's good is defined by its formal cause, and since there are no final causes, goodness cannot be defined in this way. Instead, there are only 'efficient' causes or the causation that obtains between corpuscles or ideas moving one another. Part Four also defines 'virtue' which is the power to endeavor for one's self-preservation.

We often lack power/virtue because we do not do what reason commands of us. Instead, we are subject to irrational passions and our understanding of the good has a hard time directing them. To have knowledge of the good is to be aware of pleasure, and this feeling of pleasure increases one's power. However, knowledge does not restrain emotion alone. Strength, again, is 'virtue' and the more we preserve our being effectively the more virtue we have. Virtue is acting from reason.

Everyone aims to preserve his own being, and not for anyone else's sake. Yet Spinoze rejects the view that humans are not social animals. Instead, society promoted our good because it agrees with our nature. However, society can be undermined by emotions, since reason does not always guide us. If we live under the guide of reason we are useful to one another, otherwise not. The only way to govern society effectively is to use another emotion to trump our passions, i.e. fear of the sovereign power in the political community. This view parallels that of Hobbes and Pufendorf. Only passions can restrain other passions, thus reason cannot be used to restrain destructive passions, only fear can. The political community of 'commonwealth' is good when it restrains passions. And those actions which produce community harmony are good and those that destroy harmony are bad.

The emotions deriving from pleasure and pain can be good and bad; they can also be virtues and vices. Pleasure is a 'good in itself' yet it can be bad sometimes, such that if you derive pleasure from things that interrupt your internal harmony. Pain can be good



for similar reasons, since it prevents something that would destroy internal harmony. Other passions, like hatred, are always bad. Spinoza also has a particular distaste for pity, since it is painful. The rational man is pitiless, yet he will still be altruistic since altruism is rational. He will not act out of emotion alone.

Part Four ends with Spinoza outlining the life of reason. Reason produces a desire to do the good, yet the rational man is not subject to the will of anyone else. When a man is self-determined by his own reason he is called free. Thus, when no external force is preventing him from acting on his reason and when no internal force is impeding him from acting on his reason, he is free from restraint. Rational men are fearless; they are not afraid of life after death, they are not prone to bouts of anger and act out of good, honest motives. Further, and this is a crucial idea throughout early modern political philosophy - a rational man lives in society. He realizes that he can gain more in cooperation with others than by himself. However, if he wants the benefits of society he must not act on his own reason. If every man did this, then society would be disharmonious. For this reason, he accepts the reason of the community as his own reason; he follows the law to increase one's level of freedom. This foreshadows the crucial idea in Rousseau, Kant and Hegel that freedom is not restricted by the law, but instead good laws increase one's freedom.

Spinoza includes an appendix with Part Four; it simply summarizes what was discussed in Part Four.



Part Five: On the Power of the Intellect, Or, On Human Freedom

Part Five: On the Power of the Intellect, Or, On Human Freedom Summary and Analysis

Part Five builds on the rest of the Ethics as a whole and may be regarded as its climax. In Part Four we understood what human freedom is. Part Five teaches us how we can gain it, and it specifies true religion, or our right relations to God. Spinoza splits Part Five into three sections. Spinoza will explain how to live an active, free life. He then will cover what emotions are appropriate of the free man and articulates a unique understanding of Divine love and love for the Divine. Finally, we will learn about which motives one should have for right action.

First, Spinoza argues that reason has some control over our passions. Descartes held that the passions could be completely dominated by reason. Since Descartes' theory relies on a particular theory of the connection between mind and body (infamously, that they are connected through the pineal gland), to argue against Descartes' view, he simply argues against the theory. Spinoza thinks Descartes' theory is absurd. Spinoza thinks we have a moderate power over our passions. So freedom is possible, but we do not get it 'for free.' So for Spinoza, 'freedom isn't free.' Spinoza argues for his position in several ways. First, we can often redirect our passions by connecting them to different ideas than they were originally connected to. For instance, we can be angry at a friend, realize he did nothing wrong, and our anger will dissipate (this is not Spinoza's example). Further, we can dissipate a passion once we analyze it and truly understand its source. To give another example, reflecting on the nature of our anger often reduces it and brings it under control. Further, if we realize that our feelings are inevitable and necessary, then we will realize we can't avoid them. As a result, they will hurt us less and control us less.

Spinoza discusses reason as the second kind of knowledge (recall from Part Two). Emotions that derive from reason are constant, as they derive from universals, or properties common to all members of a type. We regard the presence of these types as immediately present (we must, since they are eternal, they exist at all times). As a result, emotions derived from reason are superior to those disconnected from reason since the emotions disconnected from reason are changeable and attached to contingent particulars. Additionally, imagination can add to the power of reason. We can add to our understanding of types, true ideas of their instantiations (their presence in particulars). By imagining concrete cases under the aspect of a type, we can consider a rational response to these cases.

Spinoza has argued that humans love limited things as they bring about pleasure. Now he talks about our love for God and God's love. Remember that we are modes of God, which is the only substance. Thus, to understand ourselves is to understand a part of



God and so we know God through self-understanding. To understand ourselves, however, we must understand our parts, body and mind, reason and passions. If we do this, then we love God. However, it's sad to say that God cannot love us, since he has no passions and love is a passion. God can't have passions because he cannot feel pleasure and he cannot feel pain. Now, it is not clear why this is. Pleasure is an increase in our power, so if God is all powerful, then how can he not experience maximal pleasure? Perhaps this is because Spinoza, like Aristotle, understands pleasure as a movement from one state to another. Since God is necessarily and eternally maximally powerful, no movement is possible for him. Therefore, he cannot feel pleasure and pain (those this last position is not explicitly articulated in the Ethics). We are incapable hating God, on Spinoza's view. We can't make God love us since that is impossible for God. Love of God must be perfect, without jealousy; instead, our ultimate desire is that we and all other persons will love God and desire to know him.

The human mind can, in a certain sense, survive death; it can exist forever, but this eternity is not an eternity of 'duration.' Recall that the mind can imagine and remember only with a body, thus the person cannot live after the death of the body. Ideas can, however, express the essence of the person, and since we understand essences as eternal, then the existence of the mind is eternal as a result. This conception of the essence of a person occurs through the latter forms of knowledge - 'reason' and 'intuitive knowledge.' Finally Spinoza explains the nature of intuitive knowledge, or the ability to know particulars adequately. Minds that gain intuitive knowledge are the most powerful and the happiest. Additionally, if we know our own minds and bodies in their essence, and therefore externally, we know God and we understand that we are within God. As we increase in intuitive knowledge, we increase in our understanding of God and the more perfection and blessedness we acquire. This also enables a deeper 'intellectual' love of God, which is eternal in the same sense that our minds are. Remember how Spinoza said that God doesn't love us since he can't love? Well, what Spinoza took away with the left hand he gives back with the right. God has this 'intellectual' or passionless love for us. After all, God (intellectually) loves himself, as he is perfect, and he (intellectually) loves us as part of him. The love God has for us is only possible for a perfect being. Also, our endless love of God and God's love for us makes us both free and blessed. An additional point about intuitive knowledge: it is more powerful than reason because it is 'concrete'.

Intellectual love is literally indestructible. The more than mind knows through reason and intuition, the freer it is from passion. Further, the mind and the body are one, and since they are one, a free mind will produce a more powerful body, one that can engage in many different pursuits. Now, none of us is perfect, yet some of us achieve a partial perfection. But this is no reason to feel hopeless in achieving immortality, for we have a great perfection that is superior to the other parts of our mind. Spinoza ends by arguing that immortality is not needed as part of his ethics. For immortality should play no role in acting rationally and morally. The rational man would still be rational even if he dies. Thus, we should not be motivated to act morally because we are seeking goodness and avoiding suffering in the afterlife. Being perfect should not be seen as a 'benefit' or a reason to be good. Instead, blessedness constitutes virtue. One can only have virtue if one acts on pure reason.



Characters

Spinoza

Spinoza is one of history's great philosophical masters and the author of *The Ethics*. He is not a character in the book, but he is crucially important to the book. Born in Amsterdam in 1632, Spinoza was raised a member of the Jewish community. He quickly rose to the top of his academic classes and was apparently being moved towards becoming a rabbi. But family matters prevent that. In 1656, his increasingly vocal theological views got him excommunication. Spinoza rejects that God of Judaism. For Spinoza, God is not separate from the world, nor did he create the world. In some sense he is the world. Further, God does everything necessarily and so does not have free will. Furthermore, he does not have passionate love for humanity.

He also held the views that the Jewish law no longer applied. Spinoza left the community, changed his name from Bento to Benedict, and became a full blown pantheist. He left Amsterdam and corresponded with many important historical figures of the time, starting in 1661. He lived in Rijnsburg as this time. He wrote several books during this time, including a critical discussion of Descartes's work. This was the only of his books published while he was alive. He was writing the *Ethics* during this period, but he paused writing it when the Dutch Reformed Church tried to crush religious tolerance and wrote his most famous book the *Theological-Political Treatise*. The *Ethics* was published after his death.

God

God is the central character of the *Ethics*. The *Ethics* is not a novel or even a non-fiction book that tells a story. It has no plot, strictly speaking, and contains exclusively philosophical and theological argumentation. Yet the being known as God plays a central role throughout the book. Spinoza sharply departs from the classical Judeo-Christian understanding of God. God is not the creator of the universe. Instead, he contains the universe within his being. In some sense, he is the universe. Further, he is the only substance in reality, and all other existing things are merely 'modes' of his substances. Thus, God is not separate from material reality or even from humans. In fact, humans, strictly speaking, only exist as part of God. Further, God has an infinite number of attributes but we can only grasp two: his extension and his thought. 'Extension' refers to his physical elements and 'thought' to his mental elements. These attributes are ultimately aspects of a single thing. Furthermore, God loves himself but he does not emotionally love humans. Instead, he has a purely intellectual love. God exists necessarily and his actions are causally determined in the sense that everything he does he does necessarily. However, he is also the only perfectly free being because nothing from outside of him or within him impedes his causality.



The Human

For Spinoza, the human is composed of both body and mind but these are merely parts of a whole that is itself one thing.

Descartes

The great French rationalist Descartes was a generation older than Spinoza and had a major impact on him. Spinoza wrote a critical exposition of Descartes during his lifetime and discusses his views at various points in the Ethics.

The Good Person

The good person is the one who has maximal pleasure and perfection. She acts on reason alone and have total mastery over her passions. Because of this, she has maximal power and virtue.

The Commonwealth

The commonwealth is the political community. Political community is necessary for a rational being because it increases what he can do. He accepts laws and restrictions on his action because, in the end, they increase his freedom.

Aristotle

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle lurks in the background of the Ethics. Spinoza takes on many of his positions but rejects others, most prominently the doctrine of final causality.

Classical Theists

Classical theists hold that God is a creator, immaterial, separate from reality, possesses free will and loves humanity. Spinoza argues against all of these views of God in the Ethics.

Euclid

The great Greek geometrician who discovered some of the first geometric formula. He inspires Spinoza's geometrical method of argumentation.



Newton

Another contemporary of Spinoza's and one of history's greatest physicists and scientists, his mathematical approach to physics influenced Spinoza's view of the world and method of argument.



Objects/Places

Substance

A substance is something that can exist by itself, independently of anything else. There is only one substance for Spinoza: God.

Attribute

An attribute is an essential property of a substance. This means that the property is a property of the substance necessarily and explains what the thing is.

Modes

Manifestation of substance and attributes. Everything else that exists other than God is a mode of God.

Laws of Nature

The laws of nature are the necessary principles governing God's action. There are psychology and physical laws, but in reality they are one set of laws.

Ideas

Ideas are mental entities that are active affirmations or rejections. They are not the passive objects of the intellect, as we understand them.

Mind

The human mind, which is not reducible to the body. It is composed of ideas.

Body

The human's physical aspect, separate from and irreducible to the mind.

Reason

The highest aspect of human activity. The human is happy and free when she is guided by pure reason.

Virtue

A virtue is a power to act on one's reasons in contrast to the passions.

Immortality

Living forever cannot be achieved by living forever in time. Instead, we can grasp the essence of the mind as an eternal entity and thereby (and only thereby) enter into immortality.

Themes

Nothing Exists But God

One of the major aims of the Ethics is to contradict widely held theological doctrines, particularly those concerning the nature of God. Spinoza was raised Jewish, and so he was taught that God is an immaterial creator who loves us and possesses free will. Spinoza wishes to contradict all four of these ideas. First, God is a substance. He is the only thing that can exist on his own, without the support or cause of anything else. Further, God is the only substance in the universe. Everything else that exists is a part of God or a manifestation of the divine nature. God has 'attributes' or essential properties. An essential property is a property a substance has necessarily and that explains the nature of the substance. We know that God has the attribute of existence; therefore he must exist.

Expounding further, we know that God has the attributes of extension and thought. In fact, God has infinite attributes, but we can only directly know these two. The attribute of extension is the material component of God. Since God contains all material things in his essence, he has extension, meaning that he takes up space and time. Further, God has thought, meaning that he has a mind. Now classical theism holds that God is pure spirit, but Spinoza believes that at the deepest level, God transcends the mental-material distinction and is somehow both mental and material at once. Next, we know God as a cause. God is the cause of everything. Everything that happens and exists happens and exists necessarily because God causes it. Further, God does everything he does necessarily, meaning that he has no choice about what he does. Reality somehow emanates from him, or perhaps, within him. Yet God is free in the sense that nothing outside of him determines his actions. Further, God is perfect and has no passions. Since he has no passions he cannot love us save in an ethereal and purely intellectual manner.

Humans are Body and Mind yet One Thing

The relationship between mind and body is one of the oldest in philosophy. Philosophers have wanted to say both that mind and body are distinct and that they are somehow part of a single thing. It seems hard, however, to say that both are true at once. Descartes, the French rationalist that had a major impact on Spinoza, is famous for his mind-body dualism. Mind is a substance and body is substance and they are tied together at the pineal gland. They cause one another. On the other hand, there are materialists that hold that the mind can be reduced to the body and there are idealists who hold that the body can be reduced to the mind. Spinoza wants to reject all of these views. He wants to maintain both that body and mind are in a sense separate and that there are aspects of the same thing. Remember that for Spinoza humans are mere modes of the divine substance, which in reality transcends the distinction between material and mental. Humans are the same in this. We manifest aspects of both God's



extension and God's thought, while remaining, at our core, a mode of the God that transcends the material and the mental. Material and mind are simply attributes of God, ways that God's nature is manifest to us. We cannot understand reality in its essence, as God is infinite and cannot be grasped. Thus, the ultimate unity of God and the person is beyond us. Spinoza's doctrine is a precursor to what are now called 'dual-aspect' and 'neutral monist' conceptions of the mind-body relationship.

Moral Perfection Is Achievable

Spinoza lived within the early modern period in Europe. He follows on the heels of the Protestant Reformation and is at the early end of the Enlightenment. At this time, many held that moral perfection is not achievable in this life. While others, like Descartes, appears to believe that an act of will and habituation could achieve perfection. Spinoza wants to argue that it is both hard but possible to be morally perfect. First, what is moral perfection for Spinoza? Moral perfection is to act on one's reasoning, free from internal barriers, such as the passions. When one acts on reason, one acts morally. Further, one is morally perfect when one has virtue. Virtue is the power one has to use one's reason to control one's passions. Further, the morally perfect man is happy and always moving towards greater states of pleasure, as mastery of the emotions brings pleasure as it moves him to higher states of perfection. Finally, the morally perfect being acts from the right motives, from reason alone. He fears nothing and has pity for nothing. However, he wishes all his fellow men well and is a good citizen of the common wealth. Perfection is achievable through endeavoring towards self-preservation. This is achieved through gradual mastery of the passions through action based on reason. Descartes held that the will could always control the passions, but Spinoza believed this to be false. Instead, the rational will could learn to control the passions as one's life progressed.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of the book is that of the narrator, Benedict Spinoza. Spinoza was a 17th century philosopher and one of the so-called rationalists. He believed there were truths available to pure reason, unaided by experience. Further, he believed that an entire metaphysical system could be built from pure reason. The Ethics begins with a brief argument from the very concept of God to God's existence. Thus, the book is written from a philosopher's perspective, giving arguments that are to tell us the nature of the most foundational aspects of reality. Further, he is specifically biased towards rationalism. This means he believed the intellect is capable of deriving truths about reality from simple conceptual reasoning. We can understand metaphysics and epistemology without direct reference to empirical reality. Instead, a rationalistic metaphysics is required to ground the very validity of experience in the first place. Further, it is important to note Spinoza's hostility to traditional religion. Spinoza is what we might call a 'free thinker.' He believes doctrines that at his time are considered heretical. He goes out of his way to contradict the classical doctrines concerning God in many parts of the Ethics. Further, he believes that these traditional theological views are socially harmful. This is in part shaped by his experience of excommunication from the Jewish community as a young man and from observing religious persecution in Holland.

Tone

The tone of the Ethics attempts to achieve the impartiality of a geometrician. The high-tide of rationalism is embodied in the philosophy of Spinoza. Thus, writers in this genre often attempt to sound as if they are merely reading off the structure of reality from pure reason. Spinoza's geometrical method attempts to prove propositions about the nature of reality as a geometrician would prove propositions about geometry. Thus, the tone is often dry. However, Spinoza often has to add explanations to his proofs, summarize his material and critique other ideas. In this, more of his personality shines through. We see a philosopher who is trying hard to provide an unassailable defense of his views, particularly against those he regards as preaching religious doctrines about God that are dangerous and false. Spinoza is ardent that the nature of God and the human good must be properly understood. Further, we must reject certain core ideas from previous philosophers, particularly Aristotle and Descartes. Aristotle's doctrine of final causality must be rejected. It supposes that we know too much about God's aims and that objects are separate from God. Further, Descartes's doctrine of mind-body dualism must be rejected, as it assumes that the two most basic forms of reality are distinct. Finally, the classical doctrines of theistic belief are strongly rejected. Thus, the tone of the Ethics has a kind of duality, which ranges between impartial, dry and complex to opinionated and forceful.

Structure

The style of the book is highly idiosyncratic. First, Spinoza attempts to display his views as 'demonstrated in geometrical order.' The main arguments contain definitions, axioms and postulates. Axioms are self-evident propositions that cannot be denied without contradiction. Axioms are also the launch point for arguments. Axioms cannot be derived from any other truth. Postulates are propositions that admit of no proof. Postulates are given for the purposes of arguments, and have a presumption of truth. Often they are empirical truths that we have reason to accept. Spinoza makes use of definitions as well, which are stipulative statements of the meanings of various terms. This is important as the common usage of some terms in the book is distinct from their usage in ordinary speech. Definitions can be true or false, however, and they often correspond to essences. Spinoza links these three ideas together to prove theorems. Theorems explain the nature of things. Note that Spinoza is the only philosopher to write a book in geometrical form.

The book contains five parts, each of which focuses on a particular topic. Part One is on God, Part Two is on the nature of the mind, Part Three is on the emotions, Part Four is on human servitude and the power of the emotions, and Part Five covers human freedom and the human good. Each Part builds on the previous part and cannot be understood without it. God must be understood to understand mind and mind must be understood to understand the emotions. We cannot grasp the strength of the emotions and the nature of human servitude without understanding the nature of the emotions generally, nor can we understand true human freedom and the human good without understanding servitude and the strength of the emotions.



Quotes

"It belongs to the nature of substance to exist." (78)

"God - in others words a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence - necessarily exists." (82)

"Besides God no substance can exist or be conceived." (85)

"Thought is an attribute of God, or, God is a thinking thing." (114)

"Extension is an attribute of God, or, God is an extended thing." (115)

"Those things which are common to all things, and are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately." (145)

"The actions of the mind arise from adequate ideas alone, but passions depend on inadequate ideas alone." (169)

"Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to preserve in its being." (171)

"Any thing can by accident be the cause of pleasure, pain or desire." (176)

"Human lack of power in controlling and restraining the emotions I call 'servitude'." (225)

"By good I shall understand that which we know with certainty to be useful to us." (228)

"Therefore, a man who is led by reason desires to abide by the common laws of a commonwealth, in order that he may live more freely." (280)

"The person who understands himself and his emotions clearly and distinctly loved God, and the more so, the more he understands himself and his emotions." (298)

"This love for God must occupy the mind most of all." (299)

"No one can hate God." (299)



Topics for Discussion

Why does Spinoza believe that God must exist?

For Spinoza, what is a substance? How many are there? What is one of them?

For Spinoza, what kinds of things are humans in relation to God?

For Spinoza, in what sense do humans have two aspects? In what sense are they one thing?

For Spinoza, in what sense are humans free? In what sense is God free?

What are the three primary emotions for Spinoza? In what way are they primary?

For Spinoza, what kind of being can have pleasure and why? What is it about Spinoza's conception of pleasure makes it such that God cannot share in it? What is Spinoza's conception of pleasure?

On Spinoza's view, why should the rational man join society and obey the law?