

Spinoza's Intermediate Ethics For Society And The Family

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*"We are necessarily passive only in so far as we have inadequate ideas,
and only in so far as we have inadequate ideas are we passive."*

Introduction: Feminist Reflections On Spinoza

Spinoza envisioned the philosophic life, which was also the consummate ethical life, as aiming at the liberation from all forms of oppression and, particularly, internalized oppression. He termed the latter "passivity." This liberation could be gained, he said, only through developing independence of mind by embracing the pleasures of the broadest human and natural connectedness. I offer here a liberationist reading of Spinoza's ethics and argue that feminists ought to take it seriously. We discover that Spinoza was inspired by Jewish conceptions of ethics and of politics in developing his liberationist theory.

Although Spinoza was not himself a proto-feminist -- yet neither was he anti-feminist--, he understood the plight of the marginalized and oppressed. He was recognized in his time as having cast his lot with political radicalism. One of his mentors was the radical democrat Franciscus Van den Ende, his Latin teacher. Spinoza also displayed ideological (not Christian) affinity with the Quakers and other radical Protestants. Spinoza captured in the Ethics --albeit in a highly formal and technical philosophic language-- the plight of the powerless in society and proposed a remedy for the internal emotional and cognitive effects of such powerlessness. I suggest here that Spinoza's greatest concern was with the psychological effects of social oppression. Thus he was perhaps the first to recognize, articulate, and try to develop a remedy for what we feminists have called the personal effects of the political. Nor did he limit his remedy to an internal cure but also went on to propose a politics that would eliminate as much as possible the social hierarchy and political authoritarianism at their base.

Spinoza recognized the political and social construction of belief. All thinking, he held, is driven by desires, by interests rooted in one's body and in one's social and natural contexts. This insight follows from his claim of the identity of mind and body, theory and

¹ EIIP56Dem (Shirley, 138)

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praxis. Knowledge is always and necessarily of the body's interconnectedness in the web of its life.² Knowledge captures and furthers the ever-expanding relations of our body in the world.³ Thus it is never neutral with respect to our own interests and purposes. But belief need not be, nor is it in our interest that it be, private and subjectively distorted.

Spinoza never thinks of ethics as having to do with rational choice or any kind of choice. His determinism precludes the possibility of choice as a self-serving fiction. We are left with the determination of our minds by our desires expressive of our body's relations, material and social.⁴ The individual is never, for Spinoza, the Hobbesian atomic individual. The individual in the Spinozist sense includes and encompasses its bodily and mental interactions with the world. Andrew Collier proposes in a paper on Spinoza's materiality of morals that the transpersonal nature of the individual is the cornerstone of his moral philosophy. Spinoza relies on a "conception of interests transcending 'ego boundaries.'" Collier suggests that most contemporary philosophical ethicists would regard Spinoza as an "anti-moralist," for Spinoza holds that "we will not make people more moral by telling them to be moral; we will not even make ourselves more moral by trying to be more moral." Better morals in the conventional sense come about only from understanding how our interests are interconnected and stand or fall together.

Thus Spinoza engages in a different kind of discourse, one incommensurable with contemporary Anglo-American discussions of almost any variety because his metaphysics and psychology differ so markedly from those originating in the Cartesian or Kantian traditions, to which most discussions, even feminist ones, are heir.⁵ The various versions of the feminist ethics of caring, ironically perhaps, share more assumptions with the Cartesian and Kantian models of mind, which many feminists in other respects eschew, than with the Spinozist: because these are still wedded to a notion of ethics as involving how we make choices and find reasons for our choices.⁶ They presuppose that our minds are separable from our desires (and hence bodies and situatedness) in ways that

² EIIP23 (Shirley, 81): "The mind does not know itself except in so far as it perceives ideas of affections of the body."

³ EIIP25 (Shirley, 82 - 82): "The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing except through the ideas of affections of its own body."

⁴ Andrew Collier, in his paper, "The Materiality of Morals: Mind, Body and Interests in Spinoza's *Ethics*" (in *Studia Spinozana* 7 (1991), devoted to "The Ethics in the Ethics", 69 - 93) has argued that the bounds of the individual person whose survival and flourishing are the object of ethics are never atomic. He holds that "we must consider the body as extendible, in the sense that the more the body in the narrow sense interacts with the world about it, the more the world is to be counted as part of the person's 'inorganic body'" (76). In my paper, "Spinoza's Individualism Reconsidered: Some Lessons from the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*," (in *Iyyun: Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, # 47, July 1998, pp. 265-292) I agree in substance with Collier's position and suggest some modifications and extensions of his account.

⁵ As Lee Rice puts it, "Freedom, conceived in a spinozistic sense, is neither the exercise of desire divorced from its empirical conditions (Descartes) nor the exercise of will displaced into a world outside space and time (Kant)." Lee C. Rice, "Reflections on Spinozist Therapy" (unpublished manuscript, p. 10)

⁶ See, e.g., Held' *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago University Press: 1993), p. 24: "Moral experience is the experience of consciously choosing to act, or to refrain from acting, on grounds by which we are trying conscientiously to be guided. Moral experience is the experience of accepting or rejecting moral positions for what we take to be good moral reasons or well-founded moral intuitions or on the basis of what we take to be justifiable moral feelings."

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Spinoza thinks are pure fantasy and self-deception. Some feminists go so far as to denigrate theoretical understanding as an enterprise⁷ as a result of tearing scientific explanation and reflections from their rootedness in self and body. By privileging ethical praxis over rational theory they thereby reinstate the mind-body dualism from which the false dichotomy arises and merely choose the other side. Spinoza, instead, aims his scathing critique at the false dichotomy itself. The feminist approaches of Virginia Held and Sarah Ruddick and others thus seem to have more in common with, e.g., the modified classical liberalism of Martha Nussbaum,⁸ than either has with a Spinozist approach. The critique of Cartesianism even by feminist ethical theorists of the anti-liberal school has not gone as far as Spinoza's critique and rethinking had in the seventeenth century. Susan James, in her work on seventeenth century philosophical theories of the emotions, points out that too much feminist philosophic ink has been spilled on caricaturing and demonizing earlier philosophers at the cost not only of honesty but, ironically, of repetition. Many feminist philosophers have not broken with Descartes and the aftermath deeply enough because their critique has been too crude, too simplistic.⁹

Spinoza's ethical goal of freedom breaks with liberal individualism in that its hallmark is a deeper belonging in larger and larger contexts and webs of relation. We come to see these relations as constitutive of self. Thus Spinoza's understanding of the self is in direct opposition to Descartes' willed subjectivity and all liberal accounts of atomic individualism. Spinoza's independence of mind is positively correlated with extended interrelations rather than with the transcendence of relations. Instead, the polar extremes are between selves that is, our desires and hence our ideas--as constituted by the widest web of social and natural relations or instead by the narrowest, most parochial, and most coercive ones.

Spinoza recognized that at times the survival and furtherance of narrow group needs must take precedence over the psychological and intellectual openness necessary for personal liberation and social reconstruction. Sometimes we must use the enemy's weapons in the immediate interest of survival. There are times for battening down the hatches. Virginia Held, Sarah Ruddick, Eva Kittay, Carol Gilligan all propose variants of an ethic of nurturance, of care, as a feminist model for social relations and for society at

⁷ See, e.g., Held: 8, where she attacks causal explanation as inappropriate to authentic feminist epistemology. The feminist rejection of science suffers from the worst kind of caricature of not only the rational but of women! My paper argues that feminists ought not to eschew science but do better science as embodied, relational human beings.

⁸ See, e.g., Nussbaum's Presidential Address, "The Future of Feminist Liberalism," in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (November 2000, vol. 72, #2).

⁹ Some feminist interpretations, James writes in *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997), p. 19, "belong to a not-yet-completed stage in which the patriarchal face of philosophy as it has traditionally been practiced has been boldly, if sometimes crudely, outlined." But feminist research has now reached a point at which the insights yielded by the demonizing approach have been absorbed, and it is safe and indeed necessary--to muddy the picture by looking more critically at the strategy of vilification.

James (18, and footnote 68) identifies Susan Bordo, Genevieve Lloyd, N. Scheman, N. Tuana, E. Fox Keller, J. Flax, E. Grosz, and S. Benhabib as among those with a tendency to vilify as philosophic strategy.

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large. This parochialism is understandable but regrettable. To expose the constrictedness of an ethic of caring let's turn for a moment to data, in this case to experience, a proposal in keeping with Held's own approach.¹⁰ I will speak personally for a moment.

Nurturance describes my relationship to my daughter as an infant, and my present relation to my cats. Nurturance is a hierarchical relation if there ever was one. No matter how kind one hopes to be, the inarticulate child has no say in this relation. Analysts' couches are filled with the victims of the often well-meaning tyranny of nurturance. My present relation with my daughter, by contrast, is more like the mentoring of my students. An ethic of care, the ideal of nurturance, is simply not true to my experience of myself as a scholar, a teacher, and, most telling, as a mother. For while the mind engaged in discovery is not selfless and disinterested, neither is it confined to articulating theoretically and justifying a narrow group praxis. Spinoza's discovery that the mind monitors the body, *its* body, at every stage from the simplest sensations of cold and hot, for example, to the discovery of quantum mechanics, ever delving into both its own connections and origins, legitimates and eroticizes all our endeavors. If true, opportunities for broadening our attachments are always before us as is openness to new ways of life. For we follow the infinite trajectory of erotic attachment from our center outward. We see here Spinoza's famed collapsing of the distinction of the theoretical and the practical intellect. Thus there is no thinking for Spinoza that is not practical, embodied and impassioned. But neither is the practical thereby reduced to finding means to ends derived either from some purportedly detached and pure Beyond or alternatively from some irreducible, natural quarter.

There is this advantage to our experience as women from a Spinozist point of view: rather than confining us to normative stereotypes, our experience ought to prepare us better than men for gaining an ever wider perspective expressive of our wider webs of relation. Knowledge at best reflects and grasps our ever-expanding practical activities and engagements in the world. Hence knowledge in the Spinozist sense and that not only includes but is exemplified by philosophy and science--involves empathic endeavors, extending our identifications. Since we cannot constrain the world from affecting us or control how it affects us, there should be no constraint on our engagement with it or on deepening and broadening our understanding of those interactions. Mortality and the practical demands of living are constraints enough.

Spinoza argues that an ethic that falls short of the Intellectual Love of God or Nature (what we today call intellectual passion and wide-ranging curiosity), as feminist nurturance and the various versions of the ethics of care do, is simply not in our ultimate interest. They offer neither liberation from oppression nor the attainment of the widest interrelations. Such an ethic may serve a pressing need to overcome the effects of being devalued as women but our vision for ourselves, our engagement with the world, Spinoza warns, would suffer thereby painful constriction. Some feminist ethical theorists thus recommend what would be classified in Spinoza's schema as an intermediate stage of group life and group-think. Such solutions falls short of full liberation, and hence,

¹⁰ See e.g., Held, Chapter Two: "Feminist Moral Inquiry: Methods and Prospects," esp. pp. 25-28.

ultimately of ethics. For Spinoza identifies the aim of the ethical project as Freedom.¹¹ Stereotypes in our case, e.g., the nurturing mother, the supportive wife-- he warns us,¹² can be either negative or positive, denigrating or valorizing. But as social constructions that we passively adopt or even embrace, they are always personally constricting and oppressive to others. Spinoza uses a normative model of human being as an intermediate ethical strategy (that of Reason/Ratio) but never as ethics' ultimate form (as Intuition). This is a warning we feminists ought especially to heed. We are far too quick to valorize and romanticize the stereotype of the Nurturant Mother no doubt an important temporary corrective after decades of the vilification of mothers. I suspect that this is more likely than not a generational temptation. Virginia Held acknowledges this possibility¹³ but still recognizes nothing beyond or between the dichotomy of a liberal atomic individualist ethics of impartial rational principles versus an ethics which "sees the world and society and everything in it from the points of view of women"¹⁴ and our stereotypic endeavors, values, and engagements. Spinoza offers us a way to escape the horns of this dilemma both theoretically and practically.

A. Ethics As The Transition From Passivity To Activity

Spinoza adapted the technical language of seventeenth century scientists and philosophers to articulate and address the problem of internalized oppression. He redefined the problem of "passivity," a familiar and central philosophic concept from Aristotle to Descartes, to capture the condition of psychological and cognitive submission to external powers tyrannically exercised. He did so by building on seventeenth century mechanical philosophers' (especially Descartes' and Hobbes') reinterpretations of the Aristotelian active-passive dichotomy. The *Ethics*, as a whole, aims at the overcoming of "passivity," Spinoza tells us repeatedly. Passivity is to be overcome not in a flight from society but through embracing a different posture within it. I call this a feminist ethic because the moral problems it aims to resolve fit so perfectly and speak to two aspects of the historic condition of women. For Spinoza's philosophic ethic aims to redress the necessary psychological price we all pay for the existence and maintenance of society. Every society, even the most just, democratic, and egalitarian, sacrifices individual self-determination to conformity to societal pressures and authoritative expectations. Spinoza defines passivity as the external determination of beliefs, desires, and emotions. Passivity delineates a life lived, an identity forged, through the introjection of social, religious, cultural, (and we today would add) class, and gender imperatives and incentives. The problem of passivity refers to the external group influence over, and even determination of the individual as a result of how power is wielded and distributed in a given society. That is the major concern of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The price of creating

¹¹ Lee C. Rice, in an unpublished paper, "Spinoza's Ethical Project," holds, as I do, that Spinoza envisioned two stages of the ethical life, a rule-bound one, the "Servitude" of E IV, and the ultimate "Freedom" of E V.

¹² EIII46 Lee C. Rice (private communication) pointed out to me that Spinoza's account of stereotypes includes a critique of the group think applicable to many of those who propose solutions.

¹³ Held, 168

¹⁴ Held, 168

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and maintaining social conformity and authority cashes out for the individual as a loss of self-determination. It is internalized oppression and gives rise to a roller coaster ride of emotions and a narrowed focus on the group rather than on the fullest human community and the natural world. For society as a whole, the problem of passivity cashes out as enormous competitive conflicts over the limited supply of rewards meted out by the authoritative institutions that control the system of incentives in order to create conformity in desires and beliefs.

We today recognize a recognition not lost on three thinkers whom Spinoza influenced, Marx, Freud, and Hegel--that Spinoza's moral problem of passivity is exemplified *par excellence* by the weak and marginalized -- for they experience this problem at its most acute. It is the privileged who are most tied to the system of incentives since they benefit most by it. Hegel will later on make much of this paradox in the nature of power, noting that it is the slave and not the master who has less to lose from throwing off his chains. Indicating his understanding of women's subordination, Hegel will call women the perpetual "Irony of the Community." And Freud will muse in *The Future of an Illusion* that the lower classes cannot be fully socialized because they have so little stake in a system that offers them so few rewards. While Spinoza's political theory aims to mitigate the structures of oppression as much as possible for a society as a whole, the philosophic ethic of the *Ethics* aims to resolve the remaining and unavoidable internal strictures on identity thus imposed, thus accepted. This is the "freedom" at which it aims.

The intermediate rational ethical life, the one in pursuit of a model of the good human person, only partially resolves the problem of passivity, for it does so to the greatest extent possible for society as a whole. But a deeper freedom is possible for some and desirable for as many as possible. So the second ethical problem emerges from the limitations of the socio-political solutions of the intermediate ethical life. It is to replace a socially, culturally, and theologically constructed and politically instituted and enforced morality with the full liberation of desire. Spinoza indicates repeatedly that his ethics aims at transforming what he calls passive pleasure to active ones, i.e., the liberation of desire from its social construction, its internalized tyranny. Spinoza attempts to work out a systematic shift in incentives that makes that liberation possible. Those reading the *Ethics* for the first time --and those re-reading it for the first time without moniker of Continental Rationalism with which so many of us studying Philosophy in the U.S. in the '60s and '70s grew up-- will be surprised not only at Spinoza's emphasis on the body but on desire and pleasure as the only worthy motives. He wants us to discover our true pleasures. "The principle that guides me and shapes my attitude to life is this:" he writes toward the end of the *Ethics*, "no deity, nor anyone else but the envious, takes pleasure in my weakness and my misfortune. On the contrary, the more we are affected with pleasure the more we pass to a state of greater perfection."¹⁵ Summing up the remedies for passivity, Spinoza proposes this principle: We must "be determined to act always from

¹⁵ EIVP45S (Shirley, 181)

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the emotion of pleasure."¹⁶ Nietzsche loved this about Spinoza and transformed it for his own purposes. But perhaps the best literary representation of what Spinoza is getting at is Falstaff. Harold Bloom calls Falstaff the consummate exemplar of the exuberant embrace of life and one of the few persuasive images of human freedom,¹⁷ the Socrates of the Elizabethan age.¹⁸

Spinoza hardly advocates an antinomian frenzy of pleasure¹⁹ as the antidote to the strictures and tyrannies of life necessarily operative in even the most democratic and just societies. His *Ethics* aims to prove both globally and precisely in reference to each of us that our true interests are served only in the furthering of the intricate web of all life. Desire and pleasure freed from their internalized social tyrannies are to be refocused on realistic personal goals and common benefits. He aims to awaken in individuals the desire to stake their lives on the concern for the entire human community and for the natural world. This too, I think, speaks to feminist insights emergent from women's historic social and embodied experience.

A study recently came out addressing the topic in question: Susan James' *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997). James traces the dichotomy of activity/passivity to its origins in Aristotle's causal model of an active formal principle and a passive matter or material principle. Then she delineates the ways seventeenth century philosophers broke with Aristotelian metaphysics and physics—in particular jettisoning the theories of formal-substantial essences and of final causality. Nevertheless, they retained the passive/active dichotomy transforming it in the light of the new mechanistic science, especially in theories of the emotions. The very Latin term, *passiones*, from which we derive the English 'passions,' is a translation of the Greek, *pathe*, which means both suffering and passivity. So the emotions as passions were thought to embody passivity in its pure state. Emotions are thus the paradigmatic case of passivity.²⁰

The Aristotelian tradition located the emotions in the 'sensitive' part of the soul, the part devoted to perception and appetite. These represented two types of receptive posture toward the external world. The Aristotelian tradition, unlike the Stoic and unlike the 17th century philosophers who in this followed the Stoics, theorized discrete parts or faculties of the soul, each with its separate function. On the Aristotelian account emotions were

¹⁶ EVP10S (Shirley, 210) This is not to say that Spinoza regards acting on every pleasure as beneficial. For some pleasures do not express the desires of the person as a whole. Acting on pain, however, is always bad. (See, e.g., EIVP41)

¹⁷ In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), Chapter 17 "Henry IV": 314 and throughout. Bloom writes here (288): "Sir John [Falstaff] is the representative of imaginative freedom, of a liberty set against time, death, and the state, And a fourth freedom to timelessness, the blessing of more life, and the evasion of the state, and call it freedom from censoriousness, from the superego, from guilt."

¹⁸ Bloom, 292f. Also Spinozist is Bloom's characterization of Falstaff as one who "teaches us not to moralize" (297) and as someone who is beyond superego (313).

¹⁹ I do not wish to imply that Spinoza advocated self-indulgence in sensual pleasures. That reading of Falstaff Bloom forcefully eschews (288).

²⁰ *Passion and Action*, 11

thought to span body and soul. They were states of body and soul as a composite, precisely bodily changes with their accompanying feelings.²¹ The Aristotelian psycho-physical account of the emotions was retained by seventeenth century mechanical theorists along with the distinction between active and passive, now divested of many of its Aristotelian metaphysical assumptions. Active and Passive were reinterpreted as expressing not Aristotelian formal, final, and material causality but instead aspects of the new mechanical account of causality, its reduction of all causes to (what in the Aristotelian taxonomy were) efficient causes of motion.²²

i. Descartes' Account of Activity and Passivity

For Descartes, passive and active characterize the poles of relation of a unified soul to its body. All the functions of the soul were thought to be aspects of its conscious thinking--understanding, willing, imagining, remembering, sensing, and emotional feelings. The union of body and mind is a relation of agent and patient, or patient and agent--and complex permutations thereof. Thus passivity and activity identify the direction of causality between body and mind in any given behavior. The passivity of one is necessarily inversely proportional to the activity of the other, since it indicates both the source of the impetus of the given motion and its recipient. Descartes held that willing and understanding occur in the soul alone and thus represent its activity, whereas some other modes of thinking --sense perception, the passions, some memories and imaginings-- result from interactions of mind and body.²³ Thoughts are either passions or actions depending on whether they originate in the soul and are initiated by it--these are the "volitions"--or originate outside it and are thus passively received and represented by it--these are the "passions."²⁴ Thus for Descartes and for Spinoza who follows his lead in this--passion and action designate internal psychic states of relative mental weakness or strength in initiating thoughts. For Descartes (but not for Spinoza) when the body affects the soul, the soul is passive, and vice versa.

Spinoza follows Descartes in holding that cognitive passivity consists in the mind's determination in part by its own past experiences. It is that aspect of it that is open to modification. The passions thus express a relation, according to Descartes, since they result from external causes and our bodies interacting with our mind.²⁵ Generally speaking, the passions further the well being of the body and involve a judgement about the harm or benefit of whatever it is we have an emotion about. Passions, Descartes says, move us to consent to those things that help us survive and thrive as unions of body and mind they serve to strengthen the link.²⁶ Even the most abstract thinking initiates

²¹ *Passion and Action*, 65

²² *Passion and Action*, 75 - 76: "Advocates of the mechanical philosophy construe the actions and passions of bodies as motions. A body acts when it transfers its motion to a second; and the second body is acted on when the direction and force of its motion are changed. Equally, the standing capacities or powers of bodies to move and be moved in particular ways are also explained by their motions, in conjunction with their geometrical properties such as size and shape."

²³ *Passion and Action*, 91

²⁴ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 17 quoted in *Passion and Action*, 91

²⁵ *Passion and Action*, 102 - 103

²⁶ *Passion and Action*, 101

emotions. Thus for Descartes all thinking is affective and not tangentially so--an insight that is also the basis of Spinoza's account of the remedies for the passions. Abstract thinking is deeply affective, initiating bodily motions, which we feel. Susan James remarks (107) that "not only our experience of the world, but our thinking about that experience is shot through with passions like a piece of silk." Thus Descartes, like Spinoza, never regards the Stoic *apatheia* passionlessness--as an ideal.²⁷

Descartes' theory of the passions draws a line between our passive perceptions and our active volitions. Our perceptual passivity and our passions thus expose part of us as, in a sense, exterior to what is the 'true' locus of self. The activity/passivity dichotomy redraws the boundary between self and other, self and world, and relocates it within the customary bounds of the person--the skin. Since only volitions are identified by Descartes as truly 'our own,' or ourselves, what counts as the self is radically narrowed a solution with Stoic echoes. According to Descartes, it is the will alone that makes us able to have some control over the often-unsettling waves of emotion that can arise. The will is the movement that the mind's judgement initiates. It reverses the direction of passivity from the mind's pervasion by painful passions to its mastery of them. Volition is the activity of the mind, *par excellence*. Virtue, according to Descartes, consists in judging what is best and then acting with complete resolve on those judgements. Our virtue is thus our strength of will. The rewards of such virtue are our pleasure in our capacity for self-control and our satisfaction and ease in knowing that the passions emerging from the winds of fortune cannot move us.²⁸ Such joy Descartes regards as not itself a passion because it is strictly interior to the mind and thus involves no passivity to the body²⁹ while moving the body to emotional expression. Active emotions, that is emotions that originate strictly within the soul as if the soul were without connection to the body, are the ideal for Descartes.³⁰ Susan James remarks that this is a rather narcissistic pleasure.³¹ Descartes' active virtue suggests a kind of psychological independence from external circumstance--a Stoic virtue--that will also characterize Spinoza's account of virtue as activity. Yet for Spinoza activity does not originate in the freedom of the will.

ii. Spinoza's Account of Activity and Passivity

While Spinoza, like Descartes, identifies 'activity' with virtue, he parted company with Descartes over the latter's identification of virtue with the active exercise of mental will over an unruly body and environment. He astutely recognized the moralism and

²⁷ So, too, Beyssade, in "De L'émotion Intérieure chez Descartes à l'Affect Actif Spinoziste" (in E. M. Curley and P. F. Moreau, eds., *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (E.J. Brill: Leiden/New York /Kobenhavn /Köln: 1990), 180 *Passion and Action*, 199.

²⁸ *Passion and Action*, 204

²⁹ *Passion and Action*, 204

³⁰ Beyssade, 181

³¹ *Passion and Action*, 204 In "Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma," (*British Journal of Medical Psychology* vol. 27 (1954)) D. W. Winnicott argues (207-208) that the localization of the mind in the head is a sign of mental illness. Psychotherapeutic cure results in the mind being experienced as an unlocalized pervasive consciousness and awareness of the body. Winnicott would seem to bear out the normativity of the Spinozist account of the mind as the consciousness of the body and call into question the Cartesian account as representing psychological abnormality.

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theological orthodoxy implicit in Descartes' voluntarism and rejected them both.³² Spinoza sought to follow what he regarded as the narrow path of scientific psychological explanation devoid of veiled condemnation and praise. He also rejected the Cartesian dualism of mind and body locked in a struggle for dominance.³³ Eschewing what he called Descartes' positing of a mental 'kingdom within a kingdom,'³⁴ Spinoza repudiated voluntarism and dualism and maintained, instead, a causal determinism as rigorous in Thought as in Extension. With Hobbes he held that there is no causal principle in thoughts other than that in the thoughts themselves.³⁵ Neither is there any motivational impetus from a free, i.e., uncaused, will but only the appetites themselves.³⁶ Unlike Hobbes who identified activity and passivity as simply cause and effect every thought being at once both a cause of some things and an effect of others--,³⁷ Spinoza instead retained the distinction between passive and active as metaphysically, psychologically, physically, epistemically, and ethically significant.

Spinoza replaced the Cartesian free will as the source of mental activity by linking his account to both the necessary self-causality of God and also to a doctrine of the *conatus*. The latter notion was adapted in part from Hobbes' materialist conception of a basic human striving for power, the power to maintain bodily stability in the face of external onslaught.³⁸ In this Spinoza was influenced by both Hobbes' and Descartes' understanding of an inertial power³⁹ inherent in things to resist being destroyed by external forces.⁴⁰ Spinoza's notion of activity also includes the new seventeenth century characteristic of internal coherence or equilibrium (his ratio of motion and rest⁴¹. Spinoza

³² *Passion and Action*, 124 - 125

³³ *Passion and Action*, 152: "There is a further crucial connotation of the opposition between activity and passivity which is all but obliterated in Spinoza's philosophy: the association of mind with activity and passivity with body. [T]his remained influential among those mechanical philosophers who conceived bodies, including human ones, as passive because they have no power to move themselves, and who contrasted this feature of the material world with the capacity of human minds to will. For Spinoza, however, there can be no such asymmetry. The body and mind are one thing viewed under two attributes. Moreover, the *conatus* is a single power manifested in both attributes; whatever bodily events constitute the body's striving to persevere in its being are matched by ideas that constitute the same striving in the mind."

³⁴ EIII Preface J. M. Beysade in "De L'émotion Intérieure chez Descartes à l'Affect Actif Spinoziste" comments (177) that Descartes is the only philosopher cited by name by Spinoza in the *Ethics* and the only work of his referred to is *The Passions of the Soul*.

³⁵ He writes that "the mental decision that is believed to be free is not distinct from imagination and memory, and is nothing but the affirmation which an idea insofar as it is an idea, necessarily involves (Pr. 49, II). So these mental decisions arise in the mind from the same necessity as the ideas of things existing in actuality." (E3P2S; Van Vloten and Land, vol. 1: 125 - 126; Shirley: 108)

³⁶ *Passion and Action*, 135

³⁷ *Passion and Action*, 136

³⁸ *Passion and Action*, 134; and 77 where James writes: "Hobbes identifies endeavour with the motion of the internal parts of a body."

³⁹ Lee Rice comments (private communication) that the "*conatus* was widely used in 17th century physics for what we now call inertial mass (it was used by Huyghens). And Spinoza's sense of *conatus*, or so Gueroult argues, is closer to Huyghens than to Hobbes. The general law of *conatus* ("every being tends...") is just the mental equivalent of the physical law of inertia given following E2P13."

⁴⁰ See *Passion and Action*, 77 78: "Both philosophers are suggesting that the internal motions of bodies conform to comparatively stable patterns of motion which are not necessarily destroyed by impact, so that a body's capacity to resist change survives many of its interactions."

⁴¹ EIIP13 Lemma3 Ax. 2Def. and Lemma5

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replaces Descartes' theory of an active mental capacity to exercise will power over a passive body (and thereby over the external world) with a theory of an active striving toward psycho-physical self-organization and self-coherence in all organic beings. He identifies the conatus as each individual thing's essence⁴² and glossed it as desire,⁴³ a desire of the organism as a whole, manifested in both physical and mental expressions, to resist the external forces of disintegration. It is at once a self-organizing principle and an erotic self-relation. The desire expresses itself in thought with the same causal necessity and order it does in extension. Spinoza's famed 'coherence theory of truth' is better understood as a coherence theory of understanding. When functioning optimally, the mind progressively integrates inputs in an expanding and self-correcting unified account of causes. The body at the same time experiences itself as a continuous part of the natural order. I have characterized Spinoza's account as a 'systems theory of organism'.⁴⁴

Spinoza breaks with the Cartesian theory in that for him active and passive are attributable to body and mind as one entity in God. They are an identity since the mind and the body are not two substances but two mutually exclusive modal expressions of one thing. They are active or passive as the relative condition of a single thing in relation to its environment and not as a composite entity in never-ending internal and external struggle.⁴⁵ Spinoza defines the mind as the consciousness of the body. We register in awareness all the changes in the body as it is affected by or affects the external world.⁴⁶ Our emotions span body and mind, registering, as either pleasure or pain, the cognitive and affective awareness of an increase or decrease in the power of the conatus.⁴⁷ In this

⁴² EIII P7 Lee Rice comments that Spinoza's claim of the identity of the conatus with an individual's essence is "what Einstein calls the central claim. When reworked by Einstein, it becomes the principle of equivalence (gravitational and inertial mass are identical) in general relativity. It was the ultimate vindication of Leibniz/Spinoza over Newton (for whom the two concepts are only equal in force, but not equivalent)."

⁴³ EIII Defs. of the Emotions#1

⁴⁴ "Notes on Spinoza's Critique of Aristotle's Ethics: From Teleology to Process Theory", *Philosophy and Theology*, Volume IV, #1, Fall 1989, pp. 3 -32

⁴⁵ EIII P11 Susan James's reading agrees with mine here. See *Passion and Action*, 155: "Because mind and body are the same thing described under different attributes, they can only act or be acted on together."

⁴⁶ EIIP11, P12, & P13

⁴⁷ EIII Definition. 3 (Shirley, 104): "By emotions (affectus) I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections." Thus if we can be the adequate cause of one of these affections, then by emotion understand activity, otherwise passivity. See also General Definition of the Emotions (Shirley, 151 -152): "The emotion called a passive experience is a confused idea whereby the mind affirms a greater or less force of existence of its body, or part of its body, than was previously the case, and by the occurrence of which the mind is determined to think of one thing rather than another."

Explication

I say in the first place that an emotion, or passivity of the mind, is a 'confused idea.' For we have demonstrated (Pr.3, III) that the mind is passive only to the extent that it has inadequate or confused ideas. Next, I say 'whereby the mind affirms a greater or less force of existence of its body than was previously the case.' For all ideas that we have of bodies indicate the actual physical state of our body rather than the nature of the external body (Cor.2, Pr.16, II). Now the idea that constitutes the specific reality of emotion must indicate or express the state of the body or some part of it, which the body of some part of it possesses from the fact that its power of activity or force of existence (*vis existendi*) is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, etc.

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the emotions "cater [to] the whole self."⁴⁸ When the mind is considered by itself, its passivity is found in its very thinking, in the inadequate ordering of its thoughts, in its mental organization or 'method.'⁴⁹ "The active states of the mind arise only from adequate ideas;" Spinoza writes, whereas "the passive states depend solely on inadequate ideas."⁵⁰ In *Imaginatio*, Spinoza's First Kind of Knowledge, the mind is the incomplete cause of its own ideas,⁵¹ and hence passive. Reason and Intuition (the Second and Third Kinds of Knowledge), in contrast, always give rise to adequate ideas.⁵² Spinoza makes an important distinction between Imagination (*imaginatio*), the most primitive kind of thinking, and the imaginative component (the reformed images) of the two higher levels of knowledge. In *Imaginatio* thinking is not creative and original, as we might expect, but a product of its local environment, personal experience, and cultural milieu.⁵³ This kind of mental organization represents a passive psychophysical posture in the world. It shapes both our beliefs and desires.

Imaginative thinking is passive and inadequate because it is associative. It creates ongoing mental links among things that we happen to encounter at the same time and place,⁵⁴ or that exhibit some similarity. It thereby creates patterns of mental association and constructs explanations on the basis of the arbitrary correlations that we find around us in the common order of nature and, as the *TTP* shows, in the common order of culture as well. *Imaginatio* is driven by these remembered associations. Imagination is both our uncritical introjection of what surrounds us and also our helplessness in the face of how past experiences exercise a continuing dominion over the present. We cannot control either how those memories are formed or when and how they recur. For "it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or to forget anything."⁵⁵ The imagination is essentially a historical kind of thinking, in contrast with the timeless truths of philosophy and science.

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either in so far as we conceive them as related to a fixed time and place, or in so far as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. (EVP29S)⁵⁶

⁴⁸ *Passion and Action*, 147

⁴⁹ For an excellent article on what Spinoza's method is and how it operates, see Vance Maxwell's "The Philosophical Method of Spinoza" in *Dialogue* XVIII (1988) 89 - 110.

⁵⁰ EIII P3, (Shirley, 108)

⁵¹ EIIP29S

⁵² EIIP41

⁵³ Spinoza's insists that the imagination functions passively (E3P1; Van Vloten and Land, vol. 1: 122) "for it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or forget anything" (E3P2S; Van Vloten and Land, vol. 1: 125 - 126; Shirley: 108)

⁵⁴ Lee Rice comments (private communication), Spinoza follows Descartes in part and [anticipates] Skinner completely. The connexions/association of affects are guided by TEMPORAL laws. Skinner claims this as one of behaviorism's "revolutionary" aspects.

⁵⁵ EIII P2S (Shirley, 108)

⁵⁶ Van Vloten and Land, vol. 1: 264; Shirley: 218

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That *imaginatio* introjects a context that is cultural and social and even political is borne out in that the great institutions of the Imagination are, according to Spinoza, Language and Religion. Causal explanations, the second and third kinds of knowledge, on the other hand, are our mind's reconstruction of its experience and memories according to rigorous scientific methods and laws.

The cognitive component of the passions consists in imaginative associations. The passivity of association as a mental operation its simple introjection of the arbitrary correlations of external happenstance, circumstance, and preference--makes these emotions passive responses to the world. Much of the Third Part of the *Ethics* is devoted to delineating how imaginative association operates, giving rise to the various passions. In the passions we associate contemporaneous (and other imaginatively associated) external objects with our affective experiences of pain and pleasure, naively and mistakenly assigning to these objects a false causal efficacy, and hence power over ourselves.⁵⁷ Our passive emotions thus take us on a roller coaster ride as both fortune dictates and our associations have us react. And no Cartesian resolve can help us. Nevertheless, the associative component of the passions is open to modification. For Descartes a given physical state and mental association could be disconnected from each other and the former reconnected to a different thought, thereby reforming the passion. For Spinoza, since a given physical state cannot but be expressed mentally, it is the entire complex that must be modified. The remedy for our domination by the passions will be to make the mind express a different physical order, namely, the global scientific causal order. To do that one must replace passive mental associations with active, that is, self-generated causal explanations. Causal explanation redefines the source and object of a passion as a combination of the internal order of ideas, that is, our own active thinking process, and the global order of causes. It is thus a different extensional state that will be expressed mentally: the new object-subject expressed in a given affect is both internalized and globalized. We see ourselves and God --ourselves in God-- as the source and object of our emotions and thereby partially under our control, and hence active. We now see the behaviors of others, for example, to which we reacted so strongly before we understood it, as merely the last link, the effects, in an infinite causal chain which we have reproduced mentally and is thus our own. As a result, we are no longer subject to the great waves of emotion occasioned by the presence or absence of (what we falsely imagined to be) isolated external objects acting upon us over which we have no control and which we formerly endowed with such power over us.

Spinoza turns the Cartesian analysis on its head, deriving his moral categories from what his version of the new science could expose about organic stability as well as about emotional health and contentment rather than falling back on moral judgements clothed

⁵⁷ See my chapter, "Spinoza's Rupture with Tradition--His Hints of a Jewish Modernity," in H. M. Ravven and L. E. Goodman, editors. *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). I write there: "It is the nature of the passive emotions to be occasioned by the presence -or the imagined presence-- of objects *imaginatively associated* with the changes in the affections of the body. All emotions are directed at objects and include the implicit judgment that the object of the emotion is its cause. In the passions, the causal judgments are false or incomplete, insofar as they are determined by imaginative associations to which the mind is passive."

in scientific garb. This is Spinoza's famed to some, notorious-- ethical naturalism. The active emotions are good qua active. That is to say, Spinoza redefines the 'good' in terms of the psycho-physical internal organization captured in the designation 'activity'; so, too, the passive redefines the 'bad.' We are nature qua Thought as well as qua Extension. When we come to think, especially about ourselves, scientifically and globally rather than locally we enhance our self-determination. Then we are nature thinking itself, aware of itself, as nature naturing, that is, actively producing itself both materially and mentally. In us that state is the Intellectual Love of God.

Spinoza's doctrine has important political implications. He believes it has the power to set us free. Spinoza proposes that if we turn to scientific causal self-explanation, then the withholding or bestowal of external rewards by authoritative individuals or social or political institutions can no longer hold such sway over us psychologically. For in seeing social rewards and punishments as only the last link in a chain of necessary causes the inevitability of which we now understand to be the outcome of both nature itself and of our own thinking, they lose their tyranny over us. They will not be capable of inducing in us desires and beliefs that serve powerful interests and cultural norms. Here we begin to see how Spinoza's Passivity incorporates a social dimension.⁵⁸ The great danger of the passions is political: namely, that they will, as Spinoza so succinctly puts it in the Preface to the *Tractatus*, lead us to "fight for [our] servitude as if for salvation." Thus passivity is less our moral weakness than our tragedy. Spinoza captures here several insights about the nature of learning. It expands the boundaries of the self, enabling us to identify with an ever more inclusive perspective. It frees us from social control. And finally it enables us to escape the psychological dangers of group think and the politics that drives it.⁵⁹

B. The Family

Morals arise, Spinoza says, in what we today call the socialization process rather than through any regulative power in ethics or in the mind itself. Standards of behavior are constructed by society and depend on both its culture and its means of enforcement, its rewards and punishments. What we experience as moral conscience is simply the internalization of these social mores. "Our upbringing," Spinoza writes, "is chiefly responsible for" "our actions that are customarily called wrong" being "followed by pain, and those which are said to be right, by pleasure.

By disapproving of wrong actions and frequently rebuking their children when they commit them, and contrariwise by approving and praising right actions, parents have caused the former to be associated with painful

⁵⁸ I argue in "Spinoza's Rupture with Tradition." that there are three principles of social conformity that Spinoza identifies in *Ethics* III in his discussion of the passive emotions. Spinoza's account of the passive emotions is, I argue, more a social psychology than an individual psychology. The *Ethics* focuses primarily on social conformity whereas *TTP* focuses more on obedience to authority, that other great social force.

⁵⁹ The dangers of group think cut both ways. The Spinozist analysis suggests the terms of our freedom and also should serve as a warning about our own capacity for reintroducing an oppressive conformity in thought within our own group to wit, the tyranny of feminist political correctness, for example.

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feelings and the latter with pleasurable feelings. Not all people have the same customs and religion. What some hold as sacred, others regard as profane; what some hold honourable, others regard as disgraceful. So each individual repents of a deed or exults in it according to his upbringing.⁶⁰

Socially defined norms, mediated and internalized through the authority of the family, can be transcended only by the informed cultivation of pleasures not tied to external rewards, chiefly the joy of learning and discovery.⁶¹ The turn to internal incentives frees one's judgement⁶² about what is in one's own best interest from the corrupting influences of the social institutions that mete out external rewards and punishments to serve political ends.⁶³ A political drama is played out internally in the soul. For Spinoza, the personal is overwhelmingly and ultimately⁶⁴-- the political!

Paradoxically, however, the coercive forces of socialization can be mustered to implement the principles of a rational, liberating ethic as well as to bolster more authoritarian norms. There is a positive role for both society and the family to play as moral educators, even if coercion can never be entirely eliminated from either. Norms that are imposed familiarly and politically can, nevertheless, bring about an increase in activity (freedom) even if the coercion inherent in these institutions hampers full liberation. For the authority of a culture and the rewards and punishments its institutions dispense can reinforce the political democracy that reason independently and freely recommends. Democracy is the most liberatory form of government but it is also both our cultural inheritance and mandated by law. We transmit its values and practice many of its principles in the family as well as in society at large. Our public culture and institutions, including the family, thus, at best and in principle, conform to the Spinozist model of politics as the imposition of freedom.

It is not only the freedom and reason of democracy, however, that are capable of imaginative expression in politics and culture, society and the family. For the global reach of the natural causal system and its internalization in our (self-) understanding can also be embodied in culture and praxis as well as expressed in science. We find just that

⁶⁰ III Def. of Emotions #27 Exp. (Shirley, 147)

⁶¹ IIP59

⁶² Spinoza speaks (EIVP47 & Schol) of freeing the mind from the influence of Hope and Fear, the defining characteristics of the social control exercised by religion.

⁶³ EIVP19 & Dem; and also EIVP20&Schol. (Shirley, 166) : Nobody, unless he is overcome by external causes contrary to his own nature, neglects to seek his own advantage, that is, to preserve his own being. A man kills himself when he is compelled by another who twists the hand in which he happens to hold a sword and makes him turn the blade against his heart; or when, in obedience to a tyrant's command, he, like Seneca, is compelled to open his veins, that is, he chooses a lesser evil to avoid a greater. Or it may come about when unobservable external causes condition a man's imagination and affect his body in such a way that the latter assumes a different nature contrary to the previously existing one, a nature whereof there can be no idea in mind (Pr. 10, III).

⁶⁴ Vance Maxwell (private correspondence) here points to EVP20 that the love of God is held in common with as many others as possible.

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in the ecology movement. Spinoza's ethics has been aptly called an eco-ethic⁶⁵ for its metaphysics suggests that, ultimately, we stand and fall together as those whose fates are intimately and thoroughly interdependent as components of one natural world. We all are aware that eco-ethics is embodied politically in a movement and also has popular expression in quasi-religious terms. Moreover, the family is often the transmitter of eco-values and of ecological practices in fact in many cases far more than the government institutions are.⁶⁶ So although Spinoza did not anticipate it, the ecology movement expresses Spinoza's notion of the popular imaginative embodiment of reason as much as democracy does. While the latter was an outcome he fervently hoped for and contributed to no doubt Spinoza would be most pleased about the former as well.

Society and the family can thus introduce their members to the pleasure of self-contentment, *acquiescentia*. Although self-contentment is not the same as Intuition's Intellectual Love, this joy accompanies the exercise of Ratio (Reason) upon which the best societies (and families) are based. Spinoza reminds us in IVP63Dem that "all emotions that are related to the mind in so far as it is active, that is (pr.3, iii), emotions that are related to reason, are emotions of pleasure and desire only (pr.59, iii)." The Corollary is that reason eschews the external social motivations of Fear and Hope. The dependence of Spinozist ethics upon cultural embodiment in conventions and upon political implementation in society and in the family flies in the face of the freedom and globalism it promises and that is logically its own. Yet society and the family also make these values available to all and thereby open up further avenues to their fuller development. For Reason, Ratio, turns out to be the first stage of a two-stage process of gaining activity or freedom, one that can be completed only in Intuition. We now understand Spinoza's repeated insistence that Intuition emerges essentially from Ratio. For the accomplishment of Ratio *is* Intuition. Spinoza initially intends in Ratio to hold the two conceptions, the regulative and coercively imposed ethical model and his notion of activity/freedom, in an uneasy identity and tension. This tension cannot, however, be consistently maintained and it pushes beyond Ratio beyond political life and beyond the family-- for resolution in divine Intuition. For the conatus to be completely active and free, Ratio's coercive ethics, as an interim socio-political strategy, can and must be transcended by the cognitive and affective achievements of Intuition. Yet that is the province of the few, never of the many, nor of society as a whole or of the family as a part.

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⁶⁵ See, for example, Lee C. Rice, "Individual and Community in Spinoza's Social Psychology" (in E. Curley and P.-F. Moreau, editors, *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990) and Arne Naess, *Spinoza and the Deep Ecology Movement* (Delft: Eburon, 1993).

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Vance Maxwell (private correspondence) for suggesting this point and also for proposing how it contributes to my argument about the family.