
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Examination of Spinoza's Moral Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Spinoza's moral philosopher represents his most concerted attempt to come to terms with the great philosophical questions of the existence and identity of God, the nature and origin of the human mind concerning God, the origin and nature of emotions, the power of emotions as they restrict freedom of choice. His ethics is derived from his metaphysics and psychology. His belief that everything emanates from a perfect and infinite God made him conclude that evil does not exist. Further, he argues that anything that happens could have happened otherwise since it emanated from the unchangeable laws of nature. The surest part of happiness according to Spinoza is the study of philosophy and meditation. Arising from the foregoing, this discourse views Spinoza's doctrine as running contrary to human nature. For maintaining that everything is fated and determined including human disposition implies that all human actions can, therefore, be said to be amoral. The corollary of the above is that institutions such as law court, police, prisons, and judiciary, Christianity and Islam are superfluous, irrational and serving no purpose. Consequently, his postulates smack of a moral lacuna.

Keywords: Substance, Determinism, Metaphysics, Morality.

INTRODUCTION

This discourse proceeds in the following manner: It begins by examining Spinoza's metaphysics. This deals with his understanding of the nature of the universe. Following his metaphysics, it examines Spinoza's psychology. This is the nexus between his metaphysics and his moral philosophy and explains human conduct derived from the nature of the universe. Thereafter, it explores Spinoza's moral theory which forms the bulk of this discourse. Spinoza's moral theory is, of course, the function of his metaphysics and psychology. This article examines Spinoza's moral philosophy in the light of its implications.

SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS

Spinoza was a monist, pantheist, rationalist, relativist, determinist and fatalist (Nwaorgu, 28). As a monist, he held that there is only one substance, God or Nature. This is the only thing that is wholly positive. Existence thought and all other things in existence are the attributes of God because He is infinite. He defined substance thus: "by substance, I mean that which is in itself and conceived through itself; in other words that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception" (45).

This definition of substance here has some similarities with that of Descartes; whereas Descartes (126) defined substance as, "that thing, the nature of which can clearly and distinctly be understood by itself"; Spinoza added to Descartes' definition the characteristic of substance as that which is in itself (45). Spinoza's definition of substance as that which is in itself gives a deeper meaning to what Spinoza called the cause of itself, that is explained through itself and not by reference to any other external cause either for its existence or for its attributes and modification.

For Ekpo (37), Spinoza's description of substance as one self-existent entity was to avoid postulating objects, as Descartes did, as having an independent existence. However, Nidditch (189) observes that Spinoza's concept of substance cannot give the solution or explain the nature of things in the universe. He points out that substance may be taken to be mutually independent being without the need of another being in which it must cohere to have existence.

The scholastics had contended that substance might be seen in two ways; as a thing-in-itself and support for other things (Ekpo, 38). This is to say, the primary concept of substance, according to the scholastic, is that it is a thing-in-itself and at the same time a subject of modification. Thus, for a concrete individual being, it is the substances which make it be "what it is" since accidents have no real being or existence of their own except in so far as they receive it from the substance of which they are modifications and actualisations.

Closely linked to Spinoza's notion of substance is the concept of mode. This term is essential in Descartes's philosophy. Descartes defined mode as that which cannot be understood except by the concept of the substance to which it belongs. This is to say that for Descartes, the mode is not a real thing; it is only a manner of being, which means it is completely dependent on the substance (Bassey et al, 11). Spinoza's notion of mode is that of modification of substance. "By mode I understand the modifications (affections) of substance, or that which exists in and is conceived through something other than itself (43). Unlike Descartes whose notion of mode was something like an accident, Spinoza's saw mode as real things. It is important to stress that, for Descartes, there are many substances whereas there is only one substance for Spinoza and modes only constitute real things. Spinoza's notion of mode can be seen as an instantiation of an individual substance that is dependent on one substance. This is because substance *per se* is incommunicable to any other being since it is the unit that contains all parts. Spinoza according to Ekpo (39) writes: "by MODE (modus) I understand the modifications (affections) of a substance or that which is something else

through which it may be conceived.”

As a rationalist, Spinoza belongs to the school of philosophers that upholds that reliable knowledge can only be achieved through reason. His philosophy has been termed the zenith of rationalism. In terms of relativism, he submits that good or evil in itself does not objectively exist. Nothing is good or evil in itself except as the mind conceives it. Due to ignorance, humans term the things which give them pleasure good and those which give them pain as evil, but everything is neutral and derives from God's perfect nature. This leads him to determinism. He believes that everything follows a causal chain that emanates from a regularity ordered by God. And as a fatalist, he holds that all events happen as a result of God's inscrutable nature and this cannot be otherwise. For him, there is neither free will in the mental world nor chance in the physical world. Spinoza according to Albert writes: "all things ...are in God, and all things which come to pass come to pass solely; through the laws of the infinite nature of God and follow... from the necessity of his essence" (157).

To Spinoza, the Universe, Reality, Nature, and God all mean the same thing. This is why he conceives a kind of rational unity in all things which he thinks follow with logical necessity from the nature of the whole, so all things have their origin in God. This means that God is perfect; evil cannot exist because whatever comes from God cannot be imperfect.

Spinoza identified God as substance and maintained that God necessarily exists. His main thesis is to show that one substance exists completely in itself. This is to say that, God neither is communicable to any other being nor does he belong to another. He is the unit and contains all parts. He is the ultimate reality to which all perfections of the particular things are referred. He possesses His entire nature, is self-contained, and autonomous. He is complete in order of essence and existence. His definition must of necessity involve existence; since existence pertains to the nature of the substance and therefore from its mere definition, its existence is implied. Substance (God) exists, its existence is necessary, as its essence; God's existence is, in reality, identical to His essence and God's essence is necessary because to say that the necessary essence does not exist is a contradiction. According to Spinoza in *The Ethics* "existence belongs to the nature of substance...cannot be produced by anything, it must, therefore, be its cause...that is, its essence necessarily involves existence or existence belongs to its nature" (487). From the definition of substance, Spinoza moved to affirm real existence and maintained that the denial of its real existence destroys its definition. The fact of existence calls to mind that God is unique. In *The Ethics*, Spinoza maintained that: "there cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature and attributes" (47).

God, as the ultimate and sole substance, is not determined in his actions by any other being or substance; and is, therefore, free. Nonetheless, God produces the entire order of finite things (Ian, 220). Necessary as the result of the infinite perfection of the divine attributes: God cannot either refuse to produce the order of finite things or produce another, different order. Spinoza's God is not, after all, transcendent and "other." God is nature itself and necessarily expresses His perfection in the perfect modification, arrangement, and disposition of His attributes in and through the diversity of the finite order.

SPINOZA'S PSYCHOLOGY

Worthy of philosophical interrogation is Spinoza's psychology. His determination makes him insist that human conduct should be studied just the same way as natural phenomena and thus follows nature's definite laws. This is why E. M. Curley according to Nwaorgu (33) points out that, "most recently (Spinoza) has been interpreted as a philosopher of science on a grand scale, giving metaphysical expression, within a fundamentally cartesian framework, to the idea of unified science."

This conviction also made him write his main book *Ethics*. To him, only ignorance makes us believe that we are a kingdom, that is to say, we do not follow the natural order or imagine that we can influence our behaviour. He states: "most writers on the emotions and human conduct seem to be treating matters outside nature rather than natural phenomena following nature's general laws. They appear to conceive man to be situated as a kingdom within kingdom" (170).

The import of this rendition is that, to deny that human behaviour could be explained as any other natural phenomena are to deny the natural order which human beings exhibit. To imagine that one can control one's action is to imagine that one controls nature rather than follows nature's law.

This is what makes humans bemoan whatever they consider as evil. Spinoza believes that a proper understanding of the laws of nature makes us grasp better our actions and thereby appreciate our shortcomings in the scheme of things. Spinoza according to Nwaorgu again submits:

Nothing comes to pass in nature, which can be set down to a flaw therein; for nature is always the nature's law and ordinances, whereby all things come to pass and change from one form to another and everywhere and always the same; so that there should be the same method of understanding the nature of all things whatsoever, namely, through nature's universal laws and rules. Thus the passions of hatred, anger, envy and so on, considered in themselves follow from the same necessity and efficacy of nature; they answer to certain definite causes, through which they are understood, and pass certain properties as worthy of being known as the properties of anything else... I shall consider human actions and desires in the same manner; as though I were concerned with lines, planes, and solids (34).

Spinoza believes the origin of this misconception derives from the assumption that selfpreservation is the first law of nature. What informs this position is the belief that preserving ourselves is of paramount importance because we must exist to propagate the other virtues. This led human beings to conclude that whatever preserves life is good and whatever hinders life is evil. Spinoza observes this to be the origin of good and evil. As a result, humans started pursuing

those things they considered pleasant because of their belief that they preserved life. In the same vein, they avoided those things which they thought to be painful because they hampered life. Spinoza states that this is the root of the passions and the emotions because people's urges sometimes clashed. By way of example, what a person considers pleasant may be abhorred by another who considers it painful. Also, what a person considers desirable and wants to retain may be wanted by another person. Naturally, there arose the proclivity for people's interests in conflict. These conflicts gave birth to anger, hatred, envy, acrimony, rancor, bickering, and so on.

SPINOZA'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Spinoza's moral philosophy is derived from his metaphysics and psychology. He believes that everything emanates from a perfect God. In Spinoza's converted conception of God, the deity has qualities of matter as well as those of mind; he is of the world, not apart from it; he is the impersonal, amoral, not a spirit who acts in freedom and justice, bestowing his unique guidance, love, and mercy on his separate creatures (O Connor, 190).

Spinoza replaces the idea of dutiful, selfless love for God and man by one of contemplative pleasure. Spinoza identifies God with nature "of nature, all in all, is predicated" (192). Nature consists of infinite attributes each of which is perfect. And this is exactly equivalent to the definition usually given of God.

According to Nwaorgu (34), Spinoza believes that everything emanates from a perfect and an infinite God and he concludes that evil does not exist. He maintains that we hold the notion of good and evil because of our distorted and fragmentary understanding of the laws of the universe. Good and evil are derivative of ignorance. Becoming knowledgeable reveals to man that all things are a function of God's perfect essence, and all things come to be as a necessary logical consequence due to God's inscrutable nature. For this reason, the uneducated man is mentally and morally weak. In his ignorance of the order of nature, he is subject to what happens to him or be at the whim of events.

On the other hand, the knowledgeable man, realising that everything follows from the order of nature understands why everything does not agree with the emotions, thereby appreciating that everything flows from nature's law. To control his emotions and passions, he strives to understand the laws of nature more and more. This enables him realise that anything that happens could not have happened otherwise since it emanated from the unchangeable laws of nature. To imagine that something better could have happened is to believe that God is not perfect or to accept that some imperfect actions do emanate from God.

A perusal of the foregoing points to the fact that Spinoza denies that God is the ruler of the universe, the king of the world, as God is regarded in traditional Judaism. He destroys the belief that God is a pure spirit who designed the universe; that he is set to separate from the things of the world, sitting high on the throne of a royal state far above the subject of his realm; that he is the moral legislator and accountant (accounting in accordance with the legislation) who, when He closes an account, assigns an everlasting fate in proportion to debt incurred and the credits obtained; that He is in the last resort unnamable, mysterious; and that our duty is, in

the word of Pollock (43), to worship in humble silence the inscrutable sublimity of His secrets. It was because of such traditional theism forthrightly declared, that Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community and later condemned in the wider world as atheistical.

Spinoza according to Hallet (211) sees man as the offspring of the world around him and as of no exceptional effectiveness in that world. He is little more than a shadow of a substance than a vein in a single leaf of a multifoliate plant than one blade of grass in a field that stretches on all sides on and on the horizon. Here Spinoza firmly allied himself with the naturalism of the school of Democritus and Epicurus. Man's place is in the ordinary scheme of things, and the laws of nature are the laws of his nature. Only to man himself is man of particular significance in the universe. In reality, Spinoza sees man as having no special power over his natural neighbours. The belief of biblical man in their dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, and overall the earth; the belief that we are physically, metaphysically, and morally at the centre of the universe, dominating it; the belief that it has been made for our peculiar benefit – these beliefs Spinoza said are manufactured by fancy, not by reason.

Spinoza attributes the origin of this flight of fancy to the fact that whatever we do was prompted by a conscious desire aimed at what was useful to us. So, we are interested in the uses of things; when we think we have discovered the uses either by observation or by introspective reflection on actions of our own that are similar to the things we seek to understand, our curiosity is satisfied. Our explanations are by final and not by efficient causes. Our desires themselves are explained by the purposes motivating them, because, Spinoza states, we are conscious of our wishes and appetites and are ignorant of their efficient causes. Ignorance of the causes of things is for Spinoza the reason why humans think of themselves as forming a separate state from the surrounding state of nature.

In conformity with his naturalism, Spinoza denies the objective existence of good and evil; they are for him not properties but relations. Whatever is, has to be. He posits: "in nature there is nothing contingent; on the contrary, everything is determined by the necessity of the devine nature to be and to operate in certain ways" (Connor, 199).

Hence all that occurs, occurs indifferently to the hopes and fears, and the judgments of humanity. For Spinoza, facts in themselves are neither good nor bad. They have natural properties, but no values. Values are relative to human desires. Although nothing is good in itself, nevertheless Spinoza holds that something may appear as good to somebody insofar as it is advantageous to him, that is as long as it assists his self-preservation and his selffulfillment. "By good I mean that which we certainly know is useful to us" (Connor, 199). To Spinoza, the term "good" is what is useful. In Joachim, he states that "there is nothing that we certainly know to be good or bad except that which truly leads to understanding or that which can impede us so that understanding is decreased" (199).

Spinoza puts the various members of the population of knowledge into classes, ranking them as lower, middle, and upper class. This knowledge according to Connor (200) is the *profanum vulgus* of sensations and unreasoned or irrationally held beliefs. These he states are at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge because they are so closely allied to ignorance and

errors, Spinoza looks down with contempt on this lowly sort of knowledge since it is so often mistaken, so easily misled, so quickly swayed, and put in doubt. The middle class of knowledge is through in mediate deduction. This proceeds from premises that are either axiomatically true or validly derived in the last resort, from axiomatic truth. Axiomatic truths are the primary truths about such fundamental concepts as mind and body, cause and motion, God substance and freedom; they have common or simple notions for their subject-matter. Spinoza maintains that knowledge obtained by reasoning is necessarily true.

Spinoza denies the objective existence of falsehood since according to him it could mean a blemish in the divine nature “All things are in Him and so depend upon Him that without Him they can neither be nor be conceived.” Therefore, if falsehood were real, it would be the cause of it: a conclusion repugnant to the orthodoxy in Spinoza’s mind.

The third and the highest kind of knowledge is what Spinoza calls “*sienitia intuitiva*” – intuitive knowledge. This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God, to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things. Spinoza affirms:

the highest good of the mind is knowledge of God, and
the highest virtue of the mind is to know God. This kind
of virtue consists in the progress towards the possession
of adequate ideas of God and is called by Spinoza the
intellectual love of God. The intellectual love of God is
eternal and from it arises the highest possible peace of
mind (Connor, 190).

Spinoza believes that human misery and suffering; our tensions and contentions are due to our lack of self-understanding, to our failure to achieve adequate ideas. Contentment is proportionate to genuine knowledge, to clear and distinct ideas. The final purpose of life, the *summum bonum*, is the permanent attainment of the contentment in the highest possible degree.

According to Spinoza, all suffering results from having inadequate ideas. He maintains, “our mind acts at times and at times suffers in so far as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily suffers” Connor (202). Thus, Spinoza links action to theoretical knowledge. The more we labour to understand, the more we strive towards the third kind of knowledge, the more we are accompanied by the intellectual love of God, so much the greater is our action and our contentment. Form this third kind of knowledge one can attain the highest possible peace of mind.

Love according to Spinoza is joy attended by the idea of an eternal cause. The intellectual love of God is that intellectual enjoyment which is accompanied by the recognition of God as its cause. The search for knowledge is the essence of the mind. Accordingly, the satisfaction of that search brings with it the profound contentment that comes from the awareness of our actions, from the fulfillment of the innermost urges. The surest part of happiness according to Spinoza is the study of philosophy and meditation. Our true happiness is derived from within us, and this means external sources cannot be a part of any person’s true happiness. The root of our unhappiness Spinoza maintains is our slavish attachment to our

passions and emotions. Happiness can only come by freedom, and true freedom is acquired by mastering the laws of nature. This Spinoza calls the intellectual love of God. This enables us to appreciate that we are just part of the universe, and must exist in consonance with the unchangeable laws of nature. Subjecting our lives to prayer then becomes unintelligible, repentance, fear, regret, expectations or miracles are acts of divine providence.

AN EXAMINATION OF SPINOZA'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Spinoza began his system with the definition of "substance" allowing but a single substance (God) to exist. Nwaorgu (35) points out that Spinoza's view of morality runs contrary to the common man's approach. This is to say it does not agree with human nature. Naturally, human beings sometimes reflect on their lives and regret and repent of their bad deeds. Consequently, any moral doctrine which teaches that we must be indifferent to all things and all events that happen to us does not take cognizance of human nature.

Spinoza taught that whenever we say a thing is evil, it is because we considered it with ourselves. This does not hold. Any act of wickedness remains so whether considered concerning ourselves, other people or about the entire universe. The point Spinoza stresses here is that nothing is intrinsically good or bad in itself. Rather than say anything is good or bad, we do so because of how it affects us. There is still an unsolved problem here; how did we get the notion of good and bad if they did not exist?

Spinoza concerned himself so much with describing human behaviour. We say a thing is good for instance because it enhances life or we desire it, and evil when it hinders life or we do not desire it. However, what we desire is not necessarily good and what we do not desire is not necessarily evil. This means that human beings do not know what they want. Also, Spinoza believes that apart from abstaining from the pursuit of perishable things, humans should devote much of their time to meditation and the study of philosophy to enable them to possess a proper grasp of nature's laws.

The controversy concerning fatalism, determinism, and freedom was not properly resolved. According to him, our problems are derived from our ignorance of the laws of nature. If we realise that whatever comes to be must come to be, then we would stop worrying ourselves. The question is, if everything were fated and determined, this would include our dispositions. Thus, if it is our fate to believe that certain events could have happened, then nothing can change that attitude. Also, if it is the fate of some people to be unhappy whenever they have cause to accept that some events affected them unfavourably, then that cannot be changed. This doctrine also leads to difficulties regarding sin. Some critics have contended that if everything followed from the inscrutable nature of God, then it would be extremely difficult to explain the notion of sin. It has been pointed out for instance that the act of some people does not agree with the accepted view of rightful acts. Also, does it mean that God can request something from Himself and deny himself that thing; or that God can kill Himself, say when one person kills another?

Spinoza's ethical theory completely lacks the notion of justice and obligation. Since all occurrences in the universe follow from the immutable laws of nature, and the future is as fixed as the past, it means we cannot do anything to change our actions. This implies that all human

beings' actions, good or evil, are not derived from them. All human actions can, therefore, be said to be amoral, which is not possessing any moral worth. By way of example, there is no difference, morally speaking, between the honest man and the liar or the thief. There is no criterion to determine what is morally acceptable and what is morally reprehensible. In Spinoza's opinion our ethical problems are derived from our ignorance of the laws of nature. This seems a questionable assumption. It is erroneous to assume that mastering the causal relationship among events in the universe necessarily leads to equanimity or rest of mind. One can understand these natural laws without changing his disposition towards the occurrences of events. This runs counter to Spinoza's claim that everything is immutable and fixed.

Spinoza sees human happiness through a rational understanding of its place within it. On account of this and the many other provocative positions he espouses, Spinoza remains an enormously controversial figure. For many, he is the harbinger of enlightened modernity who calls us to live by the guidance of reason. For others, he is the enemy of the traditions that sustain us and the denier of what is noble within us.

Spinoza claims that one substance (God or Nature) has an infinite number of attributes. Consequent to the above statement, several scholars have found it hard to understand what one substance could have multiple attributes each of which is "what the intellect perceives as constituting its essences, or that the attributes are not really the essence of the substance but only seem to be.

EVALUATION/CONCLUSION

Our discourse on Spinoza's moral philosophy dealt with three distinctive matters. It began with his metaphysics and moved into the psychology of passion and will and finally, it set forth ethics based on the preceding metaphysics and psychology. The ethical theory of Spinoza does not take cognizance of moral responsibility. This should form the superstructure of all ethical doctrines. To ignore it is to undermine one's moral theory. It is so because human actions are ethical or unethical to the extent that the moral agent is held responsible for his action. But for Spinoza, God thus evolves into "nature" and "spirit" so that God becomes both a thinking and an extended being. Also, this paper aligns with Nwaorgu (40) who states that to accept Spinozean moral philosophy will mean that institutions such as law courts, prisons, the police force, and religious faiths like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc are superfluous. They are irrational and cannot be said to be serving any useful purpose. There would be no justification whatsoever to allow law courts because it would be extremely difficult to justify their decisions; what will they be based on? The saints and the criminals are both carrying out functions assigned them by nature or God. So what constitutes the rationale to punish one and leave the other? The same argument goes to prisons. If some people must be put under lock and key for what they did not cause; how can anybody call that justice? If it is anything, it is an injustice. Also, the police force which is supposed to maintain law and order cannot be rationally justified. How can we determine what constitutes a breakdown of law and order? What is the touchstone used to declare one person's actions unlawful and other person's lawful? The case of justifying some religious faith will even be more difficult. This will mean either hell does not exist as they claim

and teach, or their so-called benevolent God is certainly the contrary. This is because everybody is supposedly carrying out his orders, and thus it would be difficult to justify why some people should be punished for doing this.

In line with the views expressed above the question becomes apt: if all things have their origins in a God which is infinite and perfect, how can evil exist? For evil to exist, it must either pertain to God or it does not pertain to God. If it pertains to God, then he is not infinite, and if it does not pertain to God, then where? Again, it presupposes that God is not infinite either way.

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