SOME TENSIONS IN SPINOZA'S ETHICAL THEORY

In a recent essay on Spinoza's moral philosophy, E. M. Curley has pointed to the paucity of serious studies of Spinoza's ethical theory :

> It is a rare book on ethics which does not have at least a passing reference to Spinoza. But it is an even rarer book which has more than a passing reference. Those philosophers in our century who have been interested in ethical theory and who have gone to the history of philosophy–either to find a congenial ancestor or to add a scalp to their collection–have tended to go to Mill or Kant, to Plato or Aristotle, to Hobbes or Butler, to Hume or St. Thomas, but not to Spinoza.[1]

Now why should Spinoza's ethical theory be neglected in this way ? Spinoza is, after all, one of the three or four most famous figures in the entire history of philosophy, one of the few philosophers whose name is known among the general public as well as among academic intellectuals. One explanation that we hear from time to time is that Spinoza's writings are "obscure." But this explanation cannot be taken seriously. Spinoza's terminology is no more difficult to understand than Aristotle's or Aquinas' or Kant's, and unlike most philosophers, Spinoza lays out all his arguments clearly, indicating his definitions, axioms, premises, and conclusions. Some ethical theorists complain that Spinoza's ethical writings are "dated," and yet, anyone who has even cursorily examined these writings knows that many of Spinoza's ideas are very much in vogue. A far more plausible explanation of the current neglect of Spinoza's ethical writings is that they do not provide the ethical theorists of our day with what they want from a great, dead philospher. For as Professor Curley has rightly observed, contemporary ethical theorists have generally gone to the history of philosophy either to find a congenial ancestor or to add a scalp to their collection. For all their depth, most of the great ethical theories have been one-dimensional; it is easy to put a label on the ethical theory of a Mill or a Kant or even an Arist-

otle. But Spinoza's ethical theory is multi-dimensional, and it defies being pigeonholed. To understand Spinoza's ethical theory, we must break it down into its component theories. In this paper, I shall consider ten of these component theories. I shall not consider any of the ten in great detail, but I shall argue that there are five major tensions in Spinoza's ethical theory and that some of them seem to be serious enough to warrant our regarding Spinoza's ethical theory as internally inconsistent. The five tensions that I shall examine are compatibilism vs. fatalism, absolutism vs. relativism, egoism vs. altruism; hedonism vs. self-perfectionism and activism vs. passivism. Again, I shall not give to any of these ten theories the attention that it merits, but shall deal instead with the problem of inconsistency in Spinoza's ethical theory as a whole.

Compatibilism vs. Fatalism

The most famous tension in Spinoza's philosophy is that which is related to the incompatibility of his compatibilism and his fatalism. Much has been written on Spinoza's approach to the problem of human freedom, partly because the subject is of interest to metaphysicians as well as ethical theorists, and so I will not say very much about it here.[2] At **Ethics**, I Def. 7 Spinoza tells us that a thing is said to be free (**ea res libera dicetur**) which exists solely from the necessity of its nature, and of which the action is solely determined by itself. Thus God alone is free. God acts solely from the laws of his nature and is constrained by no one (I, Prop. 17).[3] Human beings, being finite or particular things rather than substances or attributes of substances, have necessarily been determined to act as they do by God, the one substance (I, Prop. 26). Moreover, no thing which is finite and has been determined to exist can exist or be determined to act unless it is determined to exist and to act by another finite cause (I, Prop. 28). In the mind there is no absolute or free will (**absoluta sive libera voluntas**) but the mind has been determined to will this or that by a cause, which has itself been determined by another cause, **et sic in infinitum** (II, Prop. 48). Men believe themselves to be free because they are conscious of their wishes and appetites, while of the causes which have led them to have such appetites and to wish, they are ignorant and never even think in their dreams. (I, Appendix). In discu-

ssing falsity, Spinoza tells us in no uncertain terms that men are mistaken in considering themselves free. Their idea of freedom consists in their not knowing the causes of their actions (II, Prop. 35.) In the scholium that follows II, Prop. 49, Spinoza speaks of the great practical value of being aware that we human beings are not free. This awareness brings with it calmness of soul and enables us to discern that our highest happiness or blessedness consists solely in knowing God. It also enables us to be better citizens, for it teaches us not to hate, condemn, or deride other men, and it teaches us to be content and to help the next fellow, not from pity, partiality, or superstition, but solely from the guidance of reason.

In Parts IV and V of the **Ethics**, however, Spinoza speaks over and over again of the "free man". At IV, Prop. 67, he tells us that a free man (**homo liber**) thinks of nothing less than of death. In the demonstration of the next proposition, he tells us that one is said to be free who is led by reason alone ("**Illum liberum esse dixi, qui sola ducitur Ratione**"). The propositions which follow tell us more about the free man, and the Preface to Part V tells us that this last part of the **Ethics** deals with the way that leads to freedom (**modo sive via, quae ad Libertatem ducit**). Spinoza clearly does not believe himself mistaken in regarding human beings as capable of being free in this sense. He is obviously introducing a second concept of freedom in the latter parts of the **Ethics**, one which unlike that introduced in Part I can be ascribed to human beings. Unfortunately, the two concepts of freedom do not co-exist comfortably. For is Spinoza's **homo liber** really free ? If we accept Spinoza's views on human behaviour in Part II, then we must conclude that whoever is free in the second sense is simply fortunate to be so, for men cannot be responsible for their rationality or irrationailty, their "freedom" or their bondage. All of Spinoza's positive prescriptions are vitiated by his denial of the fact of human moral responsibility in the early parts of the **Ethics**. Still, those of us who accept the fact of human moral responsibility can evaluate Spinoza's prescriptions without making reference to his approach to the problem of human freedom.

Absolutism vs. Relativism

The existence of the second tension in Spinoza's ethical theory has been recognized by Bidney, who writes that, "**Spinoza's Stoic rationalism with its acknowledgment of absolute moral standards is incompatible with his biological naturalism which teaches the complete relativity of all good and evil, virtue and vice, to the requirements of self-preservation.**"[4] We must remember here that Spinoza's ethical relativism is rather different from the more popular kinds of ethical relativism that we encounter in the modern literature (e. g., emotivism, or the cultural relativism of anthropologists like Westermarck and Herskovits). Spinoza's ethical relativism is rooted in the metaphysical conclusions of Part I of the **Ethics**; it follows from Spinoza's repudiation of finalism. In the Appendix to Part I, he tells us that after men had persuaded themselves that everything that is made is made for their sake, they were obliged to judge as the most important quality in a thing that which is most useful to them. And they formed notions for explaining this nature of things, such as good (**Bonum**), evil (**Malum**), etc. whatever is conducive to health and the worship of God they have called "good," and whatever is contrary to these things they have called "evil". In other words, the "goodness" and "badness" of things is not determined by God, who lacks or needs nothing, but by individual human beings Thus, "goodness" and "badness" are not objective properties of things. This point is developed in the Preface to Part IV, where Spinoza tells us that "good" and "evil" indicate nothing positive in things (**nihil etiam positivum in rebus**) considered in themselves, but are simply modes of thinking or notions that we form by comparing things with one another. So one thing can at the same time be good, evil, and indifferent. It is here that Spinoza gives his famous example of music, which is "good to the melancholy person, bad to the mourner, and to the deaf person neither good nor bad." Soon after, Spinoza formally defines "good" as that which we know to be useful to us and "evil" or "bad" as that which we know to be an impediment to our attainment of some good. The criteria of utility are specified in Part III. Utility is determined by considering to what extent the thing in question helps the person to persist in his being. Human beings (and all other things insofar as they are

" in themselves ") strive (**conature**) to perist in their being, and they are conscious of their striving. Spinoza also associates utility with the extent to which the thing in question is conducive to joy (**laetitia**); and since he associates joy with increasing perfection or realization, Spinoza's association of utility with joy is not unrelated to his association of utility with a man's basic striving (**conatus**).

On the other hand, immediately after informing us in the Preface to Part IV that one thing can simultaneously be good, bad, and indifferent, Spinoza observes that the words " good" and "bad" should still be retained. And he tells us that in the discussion that follows he will understand by "good" that which we know is a means of coming closer to the ideal or model of human nature (**ad exemplar humanae naturae**) which we have set before ourselves. So Spinoza is aware that there is something strange about an ethical relativist telling us in great detail how we all ought to behave. But the "explanation " he gives us in the Preface to Part IV for retaining the words "good" and "bad" in no way mitigates the tension that arises from the juxtaposition in the Ethics of ethical relativism and ethical absolutism. The question before us, then, is whether or not Spinoza could have given us a sounder defense of this juxtaposition.

I believe that he could have, and I want to draw your attention again to the way in which Spinoza is an ethical relativist. Spinoza's relativism is not at all like that of Protagoras or Nietzsche or the cultural anthropologist. Spinoza's relativism is, as we have seen, rooted in his repudiation of finalism in **Ethics, I**. When Spinoza tells us "good" and "evil" indicate nothing positive in things, he is telling us that goodness and evil do not exist independently of human beings and human judgment. One cannot explain goodness and evil by speaking of God's ends, for God needs nothing and has no ends. Goodness and evil, then, are not determined by God but by men. In having made this observation, Spinoza is no different from most ethical cognitivists, certainly not utilitarians. And as we learn from IV, Def. 1, Spinoza is both an ethical cognitivist and a utilitarian, for here "good" is defined as **that which we know to be useful to us.** The

kind of knowledge which Spinoza has in mind here is an important one; it is not simply **imaginatio**, for Spinoza tells us that by "good" he understands **quod certo scimus nobis esse utile**. So if we are going to call Spinoza an ethical "relativist" because he recognizes that good and evil are categories which depend on human existence, human striving, and human judgment, we shall also have to call many other ethical theorists "relativists" who, being cognitivists, are generally regarded as non-relativistic or even anti-relativistic.

However, there is another element in Spinoza's ethical relativism. For he tells us that human nature is somewhat variable. Some men are melancholy, others are in mourning, and still others are deaf. What is good for one is not necessarily good for the other, and one thing can simultaneously be good, bad and indifferent. The point Spinoza is making here is only indirectly related to his original reason for asserting that " good " and " evil " indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves. He is now making the additional point-and it is a correct one-that men are significantly different from one another and have dtfferent needs. However, Spinoza also makes it quite clear to his readers that he considers human nature to be **reasonably uniform** from person to person. Spinoza's ethical theory is based on his psychology. His discussions of desire, joy, sorrow, etc. are considered by him to be relevent to **all** men. So although he recognizes that what is " good " varies **to some extent** from person to person, he also realizes that human nature is **basically** uniform. In fact, his view of goodness as involving utility and his view of the criteria of utility are both themselves based on Spinoza's belief that **all** human beings, as a matter of **fact**, have certain very basic and very important things in common. Moreover, it is certainly not unimportant that Spinoza conceives of " good " as what a man **knows** to be useful to him rather than what he **believes** or **judges** or **feels** is useful to him.

To summarize : there is a tension in Spinoza's ethical theory that arises from the juxtaposition in the **Ethics** of relativistic and absolutistic ideas. But Spinoza's " relativism " is a fairly innocuous theory. It involves, on the one hand, a recognition of the dependence of the categories of good and evil on human existence, human striving, and human judgment. It involves, on the other,

awareness of the fact that because men are significantly different from one another and have different needs, what is good for one is not necessarily good for another. The former aspect of Spinoza's " relativism " is compatible with ethical cognitivism, and the latter can only be understood in the context of Spinoza's general view that human nature is for the most part uniform. Thus, Spinoza's special brand of " relativism " does not preclude his being entitled to make specific moral prescriptions. Still, as Bidney points out, Spinoza teaches the relativity of all good and evil **to the requirements of self-preservation.** We shall not be able to pass final judgment on how serious the absolutism / relativism tension is until we have considered Spinoza's concepts of self-preservation and self-perfection in greater depth. We shall consider these concepts a bit later on.

Egoism vs. Altruism

Spinoza's ethical theory is basically egoistic The good for any particular person is what is useful to him and that is useful to him which is conducive to his joy and enables him to persist in his being. There are no criteria of utility for a person other than these. Why then, should-and do-people have a concern for justice and the interests of their fellow human beings? Spinoza has suggested in the scholium that follows II, Prop. 49 that the impetus to helping the next fellow should not be pity, partiality, or superstition; but if the good for an individual is what is useful to him, what can the proper impetus be?

Spinoza is in the Platonic tradition of ethical theorists in the sense that he feels obliged to show that justice is beneficial to the just man. Strictly speaking,then,the tension that we are concerned with here is not related to a conflict between egoism and altruism but to a conflict between "unenlightened" egoism and enlightened egoism. For Spinoza, the proper impetus to doing "good deeds " or helping one's fellow man is an egoistic one. There is no room in his ethical theory for altruism **per se** ; genuine altruism is incompatible with his psychology and his definitions of "good" and " useful ". Spinoza offers us in its place an " enlightened " egoism, and his argument for this quasi-altruism begins in Part III and carries over to Part IV. At III, Prop. 21, he tells us that whoever believes that what or whom he loves is affected with joy or sorrow will himself be affected with joy or sorrow, and the affect

or emotion will be greater or less in the lover in proportion to its greatness in the loved one. At Prop. 27, he tells that when we believe that a thing which is similar to us, and which we have not considered with an emotion, has been affected with an emotion, then we are ourselves affected with a similar emotion. And at Prop. 30, he tells us that if one has done something which he believes has affected others with joy, he will contemplate himself with joy (i. e., he will himself be affected with joy because of his consciousness that he has affected others with it). Similarly, if one has done something which he believes has affected others with sorrow, he will contemplate himself with sorrow. At IV, Prop. 37, Spinoza states that the good which whoever pursues virtue wishes for himself is desired by him for other men (**reliquis hominibus etiam cupiet**). And at Prop. 40 of this part, Spinoza says that whatever is conducive to community or society among men is useful (**utilia sunt**), and whatever induces discord in the state is evil (**mala.**) Spinoza's egoism, then, is an "enlightened" egoism, and there is no need in his theory for an account of altruistic motives.

Unfortunately, Spinoza's " enlightened " egoism may be incompatible with his more basic egoism. Let us grant for the moment that much joy comes with doing good deeds. What grounds do we have for assuming that this joy will necessarily be greater than the joy that comes with attending to our own private interests ? Spinoza does not specify any, and none come to mind. Moreover, since Spinoza has argued that that is good or useful to a person which enables him to persist in his being, then he would seem to be committed to the disturbing view that **anything** that an individual does to preserve his life is good and useful for him, no matter how much misery that thing causes for others. For though a man may contemplate himself with sorrow when he realizes that he has done something which has affected others with sorrow, he knows at the same time that his most basic striving is a striving to persist in his being, to survive. A person who must steal, kill, and induce discord in the state in order to save his own life may well contemplate himself with sorrow, but by Spinoza's criteria, he is doing what is good and useful for him. And, of course, Spinoza cannot allow for or explain rational acts of martyrdom, or perhaps even rational acts of extreme sacrifice.

Now I am not criticizing Spinoza here for attempting to explain why men should and do have a concern for justice in terms of "enlightened" egoism rather than altruism. In fact, it is to Spinoza's credit that to preserve consistency in his ethical theory he is prepared to treat what we generally regard as a altruism as certain kind of egoism. However, when we consider the precise nature of Spinoza's "enlightened" egoism-which is rather different from, say, Plato's-and we consider the juxtaposition of this theory with Spinoza's most basic remarks about the **conatus**, the nature of the good and the useful, and the multiplicity of the emotions, we are ultimately forced to conclude that there is another serious tension in Spinoz's ethical theory.

Hedonism vs. Self-Perfectionism

When we hear the phrase, "the life of reason," Spinoza is one of the two or three philosophers who immediately come to mind. Spinoza follows Plato and Aristotle in believing that the best life for a human being is the intellectual life, and he follows the Scholastic philosophers in believing that the highest good for a human being is intuitive knowledge of God. No one understands Spinoza's ethical theory who does not appreciate the full force of **Ethics**, IV, Prop. 28: "The mind's highest good (**Summun Mentis bonum**) is knowledge of God, and the mind's highest virtue to know God." And surely one of the loveliest passages in all philosophical literature is IV, Appendix Ch. 4: "In life it is before all else useful (**utile**) to perfect the intellect or reason as much as we can, and in this alone consists a man's highest happiness or blessedness; in fact, blessedness is nothing but the peace of soul which comes from the intuitive knowledge of God."

Yet, Spinoza is not only a utilitarian; he is actually a **hedonist.** One of his criteria for utility is the extent to which the thing in question is conducive to **laetitia**. We are told at IV, Prop. 41, that **laetitia** is not directly evil but good (**bona**), and **tristiitia**, on the other hand, is directly evil. Now throughout this paper I have followed the tradition of tranlslating "**laetitia**" as "joy," but there is also a tradition of translating it as "pleasure." Spinoza is no proto-Benthamite, and given some of the developments in ethical theory in the last few centuries, it seems rather out of place to treat Spinoza's "**laetitia**" as "pleasure."

Still, there is no point in our deceiving ourselves, and the safest course to follow in matters like these is to turn to Wolfson's commentary. Wolfson tells us the following :

> The terms **laetitia** and **tristitia** used here and elsewhere by Spinoza are taken directly from the Latin translation of Descartes' **Les Passions de l'Ame** (II, 101–102), were the corresponding original French terms are Ioye and Tristesse. But they reflect the Greek **hedoné** and **lupe** respectively, and are one of the many pairs of Latin terms which have been used in translating those two Greek terms. Thus in three Latin translations of Aristotle's **De Anima** printed in the same volume the terms **hedu** and **luperon** are translated by (1) **laetum** and **triste**, (2) **iucundam** and **molestam**, and (3) **delectabile** and **contrista**. Thus also Cicero sometimes expresses a preference for the use of the Latin **laetitia** as the equivalent of the Geek **hedoné**, and sometimes he prefers the use of the Latin **voluptas**. The term **voluptas**, as we have seen, is used by Spinoza as the equivalent of the Greek **epithumia**. Since the terms **laetitia** and **tristitia** represent the Greek **hedoné** and **lupe**, they are to be translated according to their primary meanings of "pleasure" and "pain," though in some places they may also mean "joy" and "sorrow." The term **dolor**, which also represents the Greek **lupe**, is evidently used by Spinoza in the sense of "grief."[5]

Wolfson proceeds to point out that while Descartes recognized six "simple and primitive" passions, Spinoza has consciously restricted the class of "primitive or primary" emotions to three, and that Spinoza's classification may be compared with that of the Stoics, who recognized Spinoza's three primary emotions plus fear (**phobos**).

So there would seem to be yet another serious tension in Spinoza's ethical theory. On the one hand, Spinoza directs our attention to the intellectual love of God (**amor Dei intellectualis**) and on the other, he directs our attention to the pursuit of pleasure. But at this point it is crucial that we consider Spinoza's definition of "**laetitia**," for Spinoza's definition of the term is an

attempt on his part to mitigate this tension. In an ingenious-though unjustified-move at III, Prop. 11, in the scholium he tells us that in the discussion that follows he will understand by the term **laetitia**, "a passion in which the mind passes to a greater perfection" (**passionem, qua Mens ad majorem perfectionem transit**). Now, as far as I can tell, this metaphysical analysis of **laetitia** cannot be justified on either empirical or rational grounds. It could even be argued that the concept of a thing's "passing to a greater perfection" is itself rather cloudy. Whenever we encounter such Spinozistic phrases as '**intelligo id**" or **in sequentibus intelligam**" we should immediately become much warier. Still, there is no denying that defining "**laetitia**" in this way is a brilliant move by Spinoza, for by doing so, he is able to bridge the gap between a hedonistic ethical theory and a "self-perfection" or "self-realization" ethical theory.

We must not allow Spinoza to make this move. Clearly the definition is not simply meant as a stipulative definition. This is evident from the fact that Spinoza is prepared to count as a kind of **laetitia** each of the following : love, propensity, derision (**irrisio**), hope, security, approval, self-respect (**acquiescentia in se ipso**), glory, etc. Certainly these are all kinds of joy or pleasure, but it is not at all clear how they are states whereby the mind passes to a greater perfection. Nor is it clear that any of them affects the body in such a way as to increase its power of acting. But let us actually look closely at this concept of **perfection**. Spinoza tells us at II, Def. 6 that by reality and perfection he understands the same thing. His identification of the two concepts has its roots in classical and medieval philosophy, although it has its immediate roots in the philosophy of Descartes. While we now conceive of things as being either real or unreal, Spinoza follows earlier philosophers in allowing for degrees of reality or perfection. As early as I, Prop. 9, he tells us that the more reality or being a thing has (**quo plus realitatis aut esse unaquoeque res habet**), the more attributes it has. Then, as Wolfson tells us, Spinoza also conceives of perfection as **completeness**; for Spinoza, the perfect action of man involves man's not lacking anything that is required by his nature, so it involves the maximum attainment of his power of acting insofar as it is understood by his own nature.[6] So far, so good.

Unfortunately, Spinoza also tells us (in the Preface to Part IV) hat perfection and imperfection are simply modes of thinking, tnotions, in the same way that good and evil are (**"Perfectio igitur et imperfectio revera modi solummudo cogitandi sunt, nempe notiones .....**"). We must somehow make sense of Spinoza's talk of self—perfection in the context of these conflicting general views of perfection. Now certainly the single most important key to understanding Spinoza's concept human self-perfection or self-realization is recognizing his association of human perfection with **activity** (as opposed to **passivity**). Self-perfection for Spinoza involves increasing the body's power of acting. At V, Prop. 40. one of the last three propositions of the **Ethics**, Spinoza tells us that the more perfection a thing has, the more it acts and the less it is passive, and correspondingly, the more it acts, the more perfect it is. This view has its roots in the views advanced by Spinoza in the early pages of Part III.

A human being strives to persist in his being (prop. 6). This **conatus** is his actual essence (Prop. 7) and is appetite, or in so far as he is conscious of it, desire (Prop. 9 Scholium). Now Spinoza does not think of self preservation in the way that we are accustomed to thinking of it now a days. For Spinoza, the being (**esse**) in which a human being strives to persist is being of a particular degree, and increases or decreases in proportion to the extent to which the person is active rather than passive. So a man's striving for self-perfection or self-realization does not conflict with his striving for self - preservation; it is his striving for self-preservation. A man's striving to persist in his being involves his striving to have **more** being (perfection, reality).

We may now return to Spinoza's claim that **laetitia** is a state in which the mind passes to a greater perfection. Surely neither pleasure itself nor any particular kind of pleasure (e. g., love or honour) involves a person's becoming more real or more perfect in any sense. And it is extremely important that Spinoza himself admits that **laetitia** is not an action but a passion. For if pleasure involved acting, it would indeed enable the mind and body to pass to a greater perfection or reality or being. Now it is true that at V, Prop. 3, Spinoza asserts that an emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion when we form a clear and distinct idea of it. It is through the intellect and knowledge

that we are able to overcome the strength of the passions which enslave us. But this point is simply not relevant to Spinoza's definition of **laetitia.** Thus the tension created by the juxtaposition of hedonism and self-perfectionism has not been removed.

This point and the related points are extremely important, and so I shall elaborate on them. We have seen that Spinoza associates " perfection " with (a) reality, or a particular degree thereof ; (b) a notion or mode of thinking which we form from comparing things; and (c) an increase in a particular thing's power of acting. It is clear from the Preface to Part IV that Spinoza sees these three associations as related. Thus, he does not see himself as inconsistent in associating " perfection " with reality on the one hand and with a mere notion on the other. He even offers an argument to show how they are related. Joachim describes Spinoza's position in the following passage :

> We class all natural products under the abstract universal idea of " being " : and hence **for us** they are " perfect " or "impergect," according as the they exhibit more or less " being " or " reality " in comparison with one another. But in reality—**in and for itself**—every natural product is of necessity all that it has in it to be, **What it has not** in comparison with others, is only **for us** and is no part of its nature.[7]

Toward the end of the Preface, Spinoza tells us that the transition to a greater perfection does not involve changing from one essence or form into another; it involves an increase in the power of acting. Whether these three views of perfection are consistent is an open question; I am inclined to think that they are not. Even if they were, however, Spinoza would have to offer a far better explanation of why an increase in a thing's power of acting necessarily involves an increase in its reality. And even the basic concept of degrees of reality needs to be explained in greater detail. Now in the important Prop. 8 of Part IV, Spinoza tells us that knowledge of good and bad is nothing other than the emotions of joy and sorrow, inasmuch as we are conscious of them. Again Spinoza's cognitivism is itself worth taking note of. But it is in the demonstration for this proposition that Spinoza ties together various strands in his ethical theory by telling us that we call something " good " or " evil " when it (respectively) enables

us to conserve our being or does the opposite, **that is (hoc est)**, when it increases or decreases our power acting. So self-preservation is (self-) perfection or (self-) realization (in sense (c), at least); and that which is conducive to joy, being conducive to a transition to a greater perfection, is conducive to self-preservation, which it is our essence to strive for. Hence, the good or useful is that which is conducive to joy, and rather than there being several independent criteria of utility, all the criteria of utility overlap or are identical. For Spinoza, there is no conflict between a hedonistic ethic and a self-perfectionist ethic because self-preservation, self-perfection, and joy are the same. But, as we have seen, Spinoza is not justified in defining "**laetitia**" as he does, and thus he is not really successful in bridging the gap between a hedonistic ethic and a self-perfectionist ethic. Furthermore, in defining both "perfection" and "joy" as he does, Spinoza does not seem to be following the clear and intelligent rules of definition that he lays down in the **Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione**.

I should like to return for a moment, as I promised earliear to the problem of the absolutism/relativism tension. With an eye on Bidney's comment, I suggested that we shall not be able to pass final judgment on the seriousness of this tension until we have further considered the concepts of self-preservation and self-perfection. For Bidney is understandably worried about the relativity of good and evil to the requirements of self-preservation. Now I have expressed a similar anxiety in my discussion of Spinoza's egoism, for I observed there that though Spinoza argues that harming other men is conducive to sorrow, and thus to a decrease in perfection or reality, he cannot deny that it is good or useful to do something which, although it leads to such a decrease in perfection or reality, prevents one from dying or completely ceasing to exist. Still, in light of what we have seen in our inquiry into Spinoza's concept of perfection, it is clear that **in general** or **for the most part**, Spinoza's "Stoic rationalism with its acknowledgment of absolute moral standard's" is **not** incompatible with his "biological naturalism" with its emphasis on the requirements of self-preservation. Spinoza's intellectualism and self-perfectionism are, as we have seen, associated by him with his views on the striving to persist in one's being. Now it is true that

only if a man feels secure in his chances for **survival** (in the popular sense) will he be able to concern himself with Spinoza's lofty absolute moral standards. Spinoza's view seems to be–and he is probably right on this point–that most men *can* feel secure enough in their chances for raw survival to concern themselves with self–perfection of a loftier sort.

Activism vs. Passivism

I remarked earlier that no one understands Spinoza's ethical theory who does not appreciate the full force of IV, Prop. 28. Spinoza is one of the great intellectualists in the history of philosophy. He not only defended the life of reason but lived it. No figure in the history of philosophy, not even Socrates himself, symbolizes the nobility of rationality better than Spinoza. In arguing that the intellectual life is the best life for a human being, Spinoza follows Aristotle and the Aristotelians. In arguing that knowledge of God is the highest good for a human being, Spinoza follows the Christian Aristotelians of the Middle Ages. But Spinoza's defense of the life of reason is significantly different from Arisiotle's. In the last book of the **Nicomachean Ethics,** Aristotle presents various arguments in defense of the contemplative life. He tells us that it is the most pleasant life, a life in which we pursue the one thing that is desired for its own sake rather than for the sake of something else, a life which requires few external goods, etc. His main point, however, is that it would seem to be a human being's special **function** to contemplate. It is his ability to contemplate that distinguishes a human being from all the other things in nature. Surely, then, those things are virtues which enable a human being to lead a life of contemplation. Contrast this defense of the intellectual life with Spinoza's. Spinoza, of course, repudiates teleologism or finalism. In the scholium to the last proposition of the **Ethics** (V, Prop. 42), he tells us that the wise man, unlike the ignorant man, comes to attain **true peace of soul(vera animi acquaiescentia).** The wise man, whose soul is undisturbed, is conscious of himself and of God and of things, and so he never ceases to be, and always possesses true peace of soul. In V, Prop. 27, Spinoza has already told us that from the third and highest kind of knowledge arises the highest peace (**acquiescentia**) of mind that is possible. Spinoza argues in the **Ethics** for the immortality of

the soul, but he adds in V, Prop. 41 that even if we were not aware that our mind is eternal, we would still regard as the most important things piety, religion, and all the other things that are related to the fortitude of the soul. For unlike ignorant men, we are aware that virtue and right living are founded on the **pursuit of what is useful to us.** The value of the intellect to us is that through it we acquire knowledge which enables us to overcome the strength of the passions. We can only achieve the highest possible human perfection if we are as active as possible. To be as active as possible, we must overcome the passions which enslave us. Activity and increased perfection bring us greater peace of soul or peace of mind. But ironically, this **acquiescentia**, whatever exactly it is, is certainly not an action or activity. Though it is not a passion or a passive state in Spinoza's sense of the term (III, Defs. 2 and 3), it is closer to what we now consider a passive state than to what we now consider an activity or action. To the extent that we are the **adequate cause** of peace of soul, it must be, by Spinoza's criteria, an action rather than a psssion. But is such a state of tranquility or satisfaction really an action ? And if Spinoza's criteria of action and passion force him to regard **acquiescentia** of this kind as an action, does this not perhaps suggest that Spinoza's criteria are unsound ?

This tension may seem to be the least important of the five that we have considered, but in some ways it is the most important. It is perhaps the one that has the most relevance to concrete life. We see this relevance in Spinoza's own life, Spinoza seems to have been the kind of man who could not decide between a life of political action and a quiet, intellectual life. This fighter for just causes and adviser to De-Witt and the other liberal leaders of seventeenth-century Holland was able to seclude himself from friends and strangers for months at a time. Perhaps the expression "*vera animi acquiescentia*" was simply an infelicitous way of Spinoza's expressing himself; or perhaps I am reading too much into it. In any event, I am not suggesting that Spinoza is inconsistent here, merely that there is another tension in his ethical theory.

The Internal Consistency of Spinoza's Ethical Theory

A hefty volume could be written on each of the ten theories of Spinoza that we have touched upon in the course of this

inquiry. It was not my intention to say anything terribly profound about any of the ten ethical theories. My aim, you will recall, was to shed light on the problem of inconsistency in Spinoza's ethical theory as a whole; and even this aim was subordinate to the less ambitious aim of explaining a phenomenon in contemporary philosophical scholarship to which Professor Curley has alluded.

Stuart Hampshire has observed that, "When the study of Spinoza is reviewed historically, one sees that each commentator, unconsciously faithful to his own age and to his own philosophical culture, has seized upon some one element in Spinoza's thought; he then proceeds to develop the whole of the philosophy from this single centre." Unfortunately, the commentaries of these men "do not show the moving tensions and unresolved conflicts in Spinoza's **Ethics**. They remain interpretations that have been imposed from outside. They smooth over and cover up the opposing strains within the original thought."[8] Now Spinoza's ethical theory, as we have seen, is multi-dimensional and defies being pigeonholed, and to understand it, we must break it down into its component theories. When we break it down into these component theories, we find that there are five tensions in the ethical theory as a whole, and that some of these tensions are quite serious while others are not. The seriousness of the compatibilism/fatalism tension is generally acknowledged. The hedonism /self-perfectionism tension is equally serious, although it has not received nearly as much attention. The egoism/altruism and activism/passivism tensions would appear to be less serious, although they are serious enough. And though scholars have criticized and even occasionally praised Spinoza for his "relativism," the absolutism relativism tension is not very serious.

I think that we must conclude at this time that Spinoza's ethical theory is not internally consistent. However, its inconsistency is not in itself a reason for ignoring it. Some of the component ethical theories are brilliant, and Spinoza's arguments in defense of them are uniquely profound. Although Spinoza is very much a systematic philosopher, the importance of his ethical theory for our generation lies not in the interrelation of his ethical ideas but in the ethical ideas themselves. Inconsistency is a

price that great thinkers often have to pay for having refused to analyze a problem from a single, narrow perspective. Fortunately, there are still many people who do not share the fondness of most of our academic ethical theorists for one-dimensional theories which can be pigeonholed, labeled, and then conveniently forgotten about.

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NOTES

1. E. M. Curley, "Spinoza's Moral Philosophy," in **Spinoza : A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City, N. Y. : Anchor Books, 1973), p. 354.

2. See, e. g., Stuart Hampshire, "Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom," **Proceedings of the British Academy**, XLVI (1960) · and my paper, "The Compatibilist Interpretation of Spinoza," **The Presonalist**, L V (1974).

3. This proposition and all subsequent propositions, definitions, appendices, etc. to which I refer are in Spinoza's **Ethics**.

4. David Bidney, "**The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza : A Study in the History and Logic of Ideas**" (New York : Russell & Russell, 1962 [1940], p. 317. The italics are Bidney's.

5. Harry Austryn Wolfson, **The Philosophy of Spinoza**, Vol. II [Cleveland and New York : The World Publishing Company, 1958 (1934,)] pp. 206-207. I have transliterated the Greek characters.

6. **Ibid.**, pp. 222-23.

7. H. H. Joachim,: **A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza** (Oxford Clarendon Press (1901), p. 241.

8. Hampshire, **op cit.**, p. 195.