

Spinoza's Ethics gives a thorough examination of the traditional conception of God and comes to some very unorthodox conclusions. Spinoza imagines what a truly infinite being would mean. He concludes that such a being would be 'everything', for were it not, then that thing that God is not would limit God's infinity. Thus, this world and every creature in it is a mode of God-- the only substance. Spinoza denies the teleological view of the Universe. This view, held by Aristotle, states that things in the universe have a purpose and the Universe demonstrates a design. Spinoza argues that this view is false since it implies an imperfection in God. Spinoza argues further that the mistaken perception of function in the Universe leads to a mistaken conception of 'good' and 'bad'. It is man's tendency to project his own emotional responses on the world that gives mistaken perceptions of these properties. Spinoza is rejecting that there is any basis to second order moral claims. It is my position that Spinoza is correct in his denial of second order moral claims, however, this does not entail the rejection of first order moral claims. First I will examine Spinoza's concept of God and his arguments against teleology. Second I will examine some problems with Aristotle's concept of 'function' and 'virtue'. Third, I will offer a further argument from John Mackie and conclude that Spinoza's rejection of final causes and second order moral norms does not entail a rejection of first order moral claims.¹

Spinoza argues that everything in the Universe is as it is out of necessity. This leaves no room for God to choose which world to create, or which person. Spinoza believes that God has

¹ First order moral claims are those claims that are themselves action-guiding. They are statements like "thou shall not kill". Second order moral claims are those claims that justify the first order moral claims, such as human rationality for Kant's Categorical Imperative.

created the Universe in accordance with his divine nature which could not be other than it is.

Spinoza criticizes the traditional view that holds that God has a free will. He writes:

Others take the view that God is a free cause because— so they think— he can bring it about that those things which we have said follow from his nature— that is, which are within his power— should not come about, that is, they should not be produced by him. But this is as much as to say that God can bring it about that is should not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles, or that from a given cause the effect should not follow, which is absurd (Spinoza 44 Prop. 17 Scholium).

Thus for Spinoza, The concept of God, like the concept of a triangle, comes with certain properties already built in. These properties are part of the nature of God. Thus the Universe is as it should be and cannot be otherwise. Spinoza takes a hard line on this position, maintaining that the universe could not possibly be different than it is.

From this argument Spinoza continues to say that God has neither will nor intellect in the way that these are traditionally conceived. He writes “If intellect belongs to the divine nature, it cannot, like man’s intellect, be posterior to (as most thinkers hold) or simultaneous with the objects of understanding, since God is prior in causality to all things” (Spinoza 45 Prop. 17 Scholium). Hence the intellect of God is at all not similar to human intellect. In proposition 32 Spinoza denies the traditional concept (found in Descartes) of a free will. He writes, “Will cannot be a free cause, but only a necessary cause” (Spinoza 53). Spinoza’s God is not free to decide how the Universe will be created, instead the universe is created by necessity from the very conception of God. Proposition 33 reiterates this position: “ Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case” (Spinoza 54). Spinoza maintains that to deny this proposition is to deny the perfection of God. If God could have created a Universe more or less perfect than this one then this would show imperfection in God (Spinoza 56 Proposition 33 Scholium 2).

The denial of the will of God leads to the denial of design in the Universe (Tripathi 140).

A fact about which Spinoza is most vehement. He thinks the denial of teleological creation is much more important than the denial of God's will:

I admit that this view which subjects everything to some kind of indifferent will of God and asserts that everything depends on his pleasure, diverges less from the truth than the view of those who hold that God does everything with the good in mind. For these people seem to posit something external to God that does not depend upon him, to which in acting God looks as if it were a model, or to which he aims, as if it were a fixed target. This surely is to subject God to fate; and no more absurd assertion can be made about God, whom we have shown to be the first and only free cause of both the essence and the existence of things. So I need not spend any more time refuting this absurdity (Spinoza 56 Proposition 33 Scholium 2).

Spinoza sees God's perfection as the basis for the denial of purpose in creation. Spinoza maintains consistently that God is infinite, thus there is nothing outside of God. If we were to imagine God creating a Universe according to a plan, we would have to admit that the plan was outside of God. Spinoza denies this possibility stating that it is absurd.

In the Appendix to Part I, Spinoza deals in detail with the meaning and consequences of his denial of teleology. Before turning to his criticism it is important to remember that Spinoza makes a distinction between the modes of knowing in Religion and in Philosophy (Tripathi 140).

Spinoza believes that Religion is essentially sentimental, uncritical and based on faith. Thus Religion uses the capacity of a proposition to satisfy the religious sentiment as a mark of the proposition's validity (Tripathi 141). Philosophy, on the other hand, is intellectual, critical and based on reason. Philosophy measures truth by the consistency of the proposition (Tripathi 141).

Due to the different criteria for truth in each of the disciplines, what is accepted in one may be rejected in the other, despite the fact that the aim of both is the same (Tripathi). Thus,

“Spinoza's criticism of Teleology must not be understood as a criticism of Religion as such but of an uncritical confusion of the Religious and the Philosophical attitudes” (Tripathi 141).

Spinoza warns us of the importance of the distinction explicitly in his *Correspondence*:

I should like to remark here that while we are speaking philosophically we must not use the modes of expression of Theology. For Theology has usually, and not without reason, represented God as perfect man; therefore it is quite appropriate in Theology that it should be said that God desires something, that God is affected with weariness at the deeds of the ungodly, and affected with pleasure at those of the pious. But in Philosophy, where we clearly understand that to apply to God the attributes which make a man perfect is as bad as to want to apply to a man those which make perfect an elephant or an ass, these and similar words have no place; and we cannot use them without thoroughly confusing our conceptions. Therefore speaking philosophically we cannot say that God demands something from someone, or that something wearies or pleases Him, for all these are human attributes, which have no place in God (Tripathi 141-142).

Spinoza is saying that Religious views do have a place, they allow man to feel a connection with God and they satisfy the religious emotion. However they serve to confuse, rather than to illuminate, the truth. Thus, Philosophy must be careful to do away with sentimental predispositions when considering the nature of God. Spinoza admits that it is very difficult for men to look at things disinterestedly which leads them into many errors in their search for truth (Tripathi 143).

Spinoza begins the Appendix by restating what he has proved to be the nature and properties of God:

that he necessarily exists, that he is one alone, that he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature, that he is the free cause of all things and how so, that all things are in God and are so dependent on him that they can neither be nor be conceived without him, and lastly, that all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power (Spinoza 57).

Bearing these properties of God in mind, Spinoza turns to dispelling common prejudices held by man; most importantly, his denial of final causes (Spinoza 57). Spinoza writes: "Now all the prejudices which I intend to mention here turn on this one point, the widespread belief among men that all things in Nature are like themselves in acting with an end in view" (Spinoza 57). He gives three arguments against teleology. First, he argues that the conception is not based on reason but on an emotional reaction. Second, a belief in teleology gives rise to errors and absurdities, and finally, Spinoza argues that this belief cannot be reasonably sustained (Tripathi

142). We will now examine these arguments made by Spinoza.

The first argument presented by Spinoza is: the belief in a teleological conception of the world is not rational. He writes:

...all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, that they all have a desire to seek their own advantage, a desire of which they are conscious. From this it follows, firstly, that men believe that they are free, precisely because they are conscious of their volitions and desires; yet concerning the causes that have determined them to desire and will they have not the faintest idea, because they are ignorant of them. Secondly, men act always with an end in view, to wit, the advantage that they seek. Hence it happens that they are always looking only for the final cause of things done... (Spinoza 57).

When man sees purpose in Nature, what he is really doing is imposing his own ways of thinking on the world rather than discovering this purpose in the world. Spinoza says that this error arises from man's discovery of many things in nature that are convenient for his use. He sees the ground as designed to grow crops for him to eat. He sees the lakes and oceans as designed to breed fish. He sees the forests as designed to provide lumber for his shelters. "And realizing that these were found, not produced by them, they came to believe that there is someone else who produced these means for their use. For looking on things as means, they could not believe them to be self-created" (Spinoza 58). So humans, using the analogy of a clock-maker or other such inventor, decided that there must be some God who had provided all the means necessary to meet man's needs. Spinoza believes that this view is highly problematic since there is nothing 'in' Nature that would lead one to this belief.²

Spinoza goes on to demonstrate, in the second part of his argument, that holding a belief in final causes gives rise to errors and absurdities. "...[In] seeking to show that Nature does nothing in vain— that is, nothing that is not to man's advantage— they seem to have shown only

² This view was again taken up in the modern era by philosophers such as John Mackie, who holds that it is very 'queer' indeed to see these features as somehow 'built in' to the fabric of the universe. I will take up this view below.

this, that Nature and the gods are as crazy as mankind” (Spinoza 58). He points out that along with nature’s blessings men find many examples of natural disasters: There are storms, earthquakes, diseases and so on. Man, when faced with these facts, decided that instead of simply abandoning the teleological theory he would postulate that these acts were punishment delivered by God to men who had done evil (Spinoza 58). Daily experience made this view difficult to hold, however, since good men and bad men had these ‘punishments’ fall equally among them. Man was so deeply committed to the view that the world had a design, that he maintained this view despite its inconsistencies. “Hence they made it axiomatic that the judgement of the gods is far beyond man’s understanding” (Spinoza 58). Spinoza believes that, had it not been for mathematics, man would never have escaped this fallacious reasoning.

Finally, Spinoza argues that a belief in teleology, “turns Nature completely upside down, for it regards as an effect that which is in fact a cause, and vice versa” (Spinoza 59). Thus such a belief cannot be reasonably sustained. Spinoza writes that, according to propositions 21, 22 and 23, the effect that is most directly produced by God is most perfect, “and an effect is less perfect in proportion to the number of intermediary causes required for its production” (Spinoza 59). Spinoza maintains that a belief in teleological ordering reverses this claim, since that which is immediately produced by God is created to bring about some end, which has more intermediary causes between said end and God. “Then of necessity the last things for the sake of which the earlier things were brought about would excel all others” (Spinoza 59). Thus, what Spinoza takes to be most perfect by definition (those things produced by God) become a means to the less perfect (the end that God has in mind).

Furthermore, Spinoza maintains that the teleological view implies God’s imperfection

(Spinoza 59). He supports his view with the proposition: “...if God acts with an end in view, he must necessarily be seeking something that he lacks” (Spinoza 59). If God lacked something, then he would not be perfect. Therefore the belief that God acts for an end entails the belief that God is in some ways imperfect. Spinoza delineates two types of purposes: 1) purpose arising from a want (that satisfies some internal need or lack) and 2) assimilative purpose (that aims to share what one already has with others who lack it) (Spinoza 59 fn8). Obviously, if God were to act for the second type of purpose, his perfection could be maintained. Spinoza maintains, however, that theologians “still admit that God has acted in all things for the sake of himself, and not for the sake of the things to be created. For prior to creation they are not able to point to anything but God as a purpose for God’s action” (Spinoza 59).. Thus the belief in teleology cannot be reasonably sustained. It is only our awe and ignorance that lead us to believe there is a purpose or design in the universe.

From Spinoza’s rejection of final causes, or teleology, follows a rejection of moral norms.³ Spinoza inveighs against holding a belief in absolute goodness or badness and shows that the very basis that man considers his own actions as well as God’s to be purposive is false, to wit, the freedom of the will (Tripathi 145).⁴ Spinoza writes:

When men became convinced that everything that is created is created on their behalf, they were bound to consider as the most important quality in every individual thing that which was most useful to them, and to regard as of the highest excellence all those things by which they were most benefited. Hence they came to form these abstract notions to explain the natures of things: – Good, Bad, Order, Confusion, Hot, Cold, Beauty, Ugliness; and since they believe that they are free, the following abstract notions came into being: –Praise, Blame, Right, Wrong (Spinoza 60).

Spinoza claims that man has a propensity to mistake for reality the way his imagination is

³ Here Spinoza is rejecting second order morality. He rejects the basis upon which moral norms are founded. This does not, however, entail a rejection of first order moral claims, as I will argue below.

⁴ This is also an interesting argument, but one that I will leave for another paper.

affected and this gives rise to mistaken beliefs about ‘the good’ (Spinoza 61).

Due to Spinoza’s rejection of moral norms as purely human fabrication and not as entities in the universe, his conception of God escapes the criticism often levelled against theists: the argument from evil. He writes, “...many are wont to argue on the following lines: if everything has followed from the necessity of God’s most perfect nature, why does Nature display so many imperfections, such as rottenness to the point of putridity, nauseating ugliness, confusion, evil, sin and so on?” (Spinoza 62). His argument has, built into it, an answer to these claims: The view that these things are imperfections is only a view held by the mistaken belief that man can impose his mistaken beliefs about what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ on the world. Thus, the objection is answered by Spinoza’s conception of God.

Spinoza’s view is internally consistent. If we consistently conceive of an infinite being who is infinitely perfect, then the world-view we create looks a lot like what Spinoza tells us. Spinoza’s rejection of a design for the Universe is a rejection of second order moral claims: If there is no purpose in the Universe, then there is nothing upon which to base normative claims. I concur with Spinoza’s contention that humans have constructed their moral claims on the bases of what they find to be useful to themselves. Our moral theories are all anthropocentric⁵ and refer to things as “good” if they serve some human purpose, and “bad” when they do not. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle refers to the “good” of a thing as those features which allow the thing to perform its function well (15-16). He looks at things in the universe and tries to decide their function, yet what he discovers as their function is inevitably what their function is

⁵ ‘Anthropocentrism’ is the tendency to regard “human beings as the centre of existence” (Bisset 33).

according to what is useful to humans. This is evident from his discussion of the function of knives. Aristotle writes that the function of a knife is to cut. In order to cut well, and with ease, a knife must be sharp, and so sharpness is the virtue of a knife (Aristotle 15-16). Here we can easily see that the function that Aristotle ‘discovers’ for the knife is really what knives are used for by humans. A rabbit, about to be skinned, would surely not find a knife’s sharpness to be a ‘virtue’. Thus Aristotle has not escaped anthropocentrism in his search for the function of things in the Universe.⁶

John Mackie’s took up Spinoza’s objection from a different perspective. His argument is compelling and lends support to Spinoza’s claim. Mackie’s main argument was an argument from “queerness”. There are two main points to this argument. The first involves a metaphysical problem about the strangeness of the existence of value-entities that are completely different from anything else in the Universe (Mackie 38). Mackie maintains that it is very odd, to the point of incredulity, to imagine value-entities that exist and at the same time have “to-be-doneness” or “not-to-be-doneness” built into them (40). Furthermore, Mackie brings up a relational problem: He asks how the moral quality could be linked to the natural features of an object or an action (41). The second point involves an epistemological problem; even if there were such value-entities in the Universe, we would require a faculty of moral perception that is utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else (Mackie 38). The faculty of moral perception would have to simultaneously perceive the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action and its natural features and also the “mysterious consequential link between the two” (Mackie 41). Mackie believes it is simpler if we replace the alleged ‘objective moral feature’

⁶ Michel Foucault has questioned whether we can ever escape our human-centred point of view, and thus whether

with a subjective response (Mackie 41).⁷ Mackie maintains that the objectivists' situation is too convoluted and queer, so he proposes that we abandon it in favour of the simpler situation required by subjectivism. I agree with Mackie's position. It certainly does seem bizarre to imagine that there are entities like Platonic forms in the Universe, as part of the stuff that Nature is made of. Mackie's argument supports Spinoza's contention. Since, if it were possible to find value entities that exist in the Universe, then the conclusion that Spinoza reaches, that man imposes his views on the universe, which he imagines is created for his benefit, would have to be rejected. Mackie's argument, however, offers further support for Spinoza's view that there are no value entities in the fabric of the universe.

Spinoza's rejection of second order morality does not require a rejection of first order moral claims.⁸ It does not imply that we cannot reason about moral actions. We have established moral codes and there is good evidence that community living requires such codes. It is quite logical to reason about the "rightness" or "wrongness" of moral actions according to our first order moral claims. This is true in much the same way that it is possible to discuss the "correctness" or "incorrectness" of grammatical statements. Grammar, too, is a human construct, yet once established, provides objective rules by which we can judge any particular utterance within the context of a given language. The subjectivity of morality in the second order does not imply the falsity of first order moral claims.

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any knowledge can be said to be 'objective', but that is a topic for another essay.

⁷ Here Mackie is relying on an un-stated premise that it is better not to postulate queer entities, something like Ockham's Razor.

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⁸ Spinoza agrees with this position, for he still feels there is a place for Religion and its values (Tripathis 141-142).