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Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation in Spinoza's *Ethics*¹

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The Issue: Science and Happiness

A given statement may be plausible, well founded or true. An individual action may be judged courageous, useful or good. Human beings are judged as well, for statements or actions that invite such evaluations, though the terms used may be different: a person may be described as truthful and virtuous, clever and happy. Epistemology and ethics – the theories that justify theoretical and practical judgements – may address not only the criteria used to assess states of belief, assertions, knowledge and the like, actions, omissions and feelings, but also the *people* that give rise to them. Nowadays, the issue of when and how a *human being* becomes clever, truthful, good or happy is less a matter of philosophy and more a question for religion, psychology and pedagogy. This has not always been the case. There has been a perceptible shift in moral philosophy: in antiquity, inquiries as to when a *life* is to be classified as good or happy were prevalent; in the modern era, the focus is primarily on when an *individual action* is to be regarded as right or good, wrong or bad.

It has been argued² that the *absence* of an ideal of how human beings *should be* is a problem for modern philosophy, inasmuch as the latter is unable to rely on Aristotelian ideas of a happy life (which, it is claimed, are impossible to justify outside the framework

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in German in A. Beckermann and D. Perler, *Klassiker der Philosophie heute* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), pp. 230–250. Citations from the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico demonstrata* are given as follows: the first Roman numeral indicates the Part, the Arabic numeral the proposition, axiom or definition. Propositions are indicated by ‘p’, definitions by ‘def’, appendices to the Parts by ‘app’, prefaces by ‘praef’, notes to propositions by ‘sch’, and lemmata by ‘l’. The abbreviation ‘defaff’ indicates affect definitions in Part III; ‘dem’ refers to the proof of a proposition.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 58.

Michael Hampe

of ancient Greek conventions), or indeed on the religious conceptions of humankind and models of happiness contained within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Without a concrete idea of human development towards a goal that is deemed morally justified, the argument goes, it is impossible to distinguish between *manipulation* and *education*, between guiding people towards maturity and making arbitrary changes to their personality.

Spinoza is one of the fiercest critics of the teleological view of the world and of humankind. He rejects many of the convictions shared by most of his contemporaries: that nature was designed with a goal in view; that there is a purpose to God's creation; and that there are ideals of humanity that constitute the objectives of a development towards happiness and that are *wished* by nature or God and *imposed* on human beings (IappIVpraef). Yet he nevertheless continued to view philosophy as a kind of *deliverance from unhappiness*. For Spinoza, the rational argumentation that he conducts in his Ethics is part of an approach to life that leads towards happiness and a *doctrine of wisdom*, and is thus a therapeutic enterprise. In this sense the 17th-century thinker positions his philosophical project among its forebears in classical antiquity, such as that of the Stoics; however, he articulates an explicitly therapeutic modern philosophy that is presented as a scientific enterprise or reflection on the scientific method, rather than as a therapy of human life outside the domain of science.

Since this volume is devoted not to Spinoza but to therapeutic philosophy, a brief excursus on the life and work of this unusual modern philosopher may be of use before we go on to consider his philosophical therapy.

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on 24 November 1632, the third child of Miguel Despinoza, a Portuguese merchant, and his second wife Deborah. The descendant of Jews forcibly converted in Spain and Portugal during the 15th century (known as *marranos*), he spoke Portuguese as his first language. The *marranos* attempted to maintain their faith under difficult conditions, but in so doing frequently alienated themselves from both Judaism and Christianity. This background has led Karl Löwith to assert that Spinoza's philosophy occupies a 'special place' in the thought of the modern era, having completely divorced itself from Jewish and Christian ideas.³

³ Karl Löwith, 'Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche' (1967), in his *Sämtliche Schriften 9: Gott, Mensch und Welt – G.B. Vico – Paul Valery* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), pp. 3–194; p. 155. On Spinoza as a *marrano* philosopher see also

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

Spinoza entered Talmud school in 1639. From 1650 onwards he began to distance himself from Judaism, and attended the Latin school of Jan van den Enden. It has been argued that van den Enden had already identified nature and God, anticipated Spinoza's 'deus sive natura' formula, and espoused political ideas that later emerged in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*.⁴ In 1656, the Jewish community denounced Spinoza for alleged heresy and excommunicated him. His education under van den Enden awakened in him an interest in Cartesian philosophy and the natural sciences. After an attempt to continue his father's business in collaboration with his brother, he worked as an independent scholar and constructor of telescopes and microscopes. His *Theologico-Political Treatise* was published in 1670 and banned by the Dutch state in 1674. A year before the ban, Spinoza had turned down an invitation from the University of Heidelberg because he was unsure that he would be able to avoid disrupting established religion, which was a condition of accepting the post (*Collected Works*, vol. 6, 206). In 1675 he abandoned an attempt to publish his principal work, *Ethics*. He died on 23 February 1677 of lung disease, probably contracted by inhaling glass dust while grinding the lenses of his optical instruments. His *Opera Posthuma* were published the same year, and banned in 1678. The problems Spinoza experienced with the religion he was born into and his enthusiasm for the then modern sciences are probably the main roots for his kind of rationalistic philosophical therapy, which make him a unique figure in the landscape of modern thought.

Spinoza, it has been said, was a critic of teleology and an advocate of the view that nature is a matrix of laws susceptible of scientific investigation from which human beings cannot exempt themselves, and that 'perfection and imperfection ... are merely modes of thinking' (IVpraef) that come about through conventional comparisons and contingent classifications. Yet *at the same time* he asserted that there is a philosophical path to happiness that can be elucidated through a strict process of argumentation. How could he square these apparently opposing views? How could he simultaneously regard humans as entirely part of a purposeless and deterministically perceived nature and as beings who could achieve happiness or

Yirmiyahn Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 15–127.

⁴ W. N. A. Klever, 'Spinoza's Life and Works', in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 13–60; p. 18.

Michael Hampe

salvation in the traditional sense by means of philosophical examination – and fail to achieve it without those means? How was he able to formulate his conception of human happiness in the language of religion, describing a person as happy when they understand that they are ‘in God’, yet regard the Christian idea of a creator with a personal identity transcending nature as a *fiction*? The two relevant statements that need to be reconciled come from the fourth and fifth parts of the *Ethics*. The first reads:

It is impossible, that Man should not be part of Nature, or that he should be capable of undergoing no changes, save such as can be understood through his nature only as their adequate cause. (IVp4).

The second claims:

Our mind, in so far as it knows itself and the body under the form of eternity (*sub aeternitatis specie cognoscit*), has to that extent necessarily a knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God, and is conceived through God. (Vp30).

Philosophical Therapy Between Technique and Practice

The minimalist conception of happiness that can be found in both naturalist ideas and those of Spinoza consists in the purely negative absence of *pain* and *suffering*. The mitigation of these discomforts is often viewed as a *technical* problem to be resolved by a form of medicine that is either somatic or directed towards the life of the soul. The analogy between the doctor and the wise man has been widespread since the ancient Greeks and Buddhists, and is also found in religion.⁵ Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between technical and practical knowledge, or between a *technical* and *practical* approach to one’s own life.

For Aristotle (EN VI,4,1140a), technical knowledge deals with the correct means of achieving a given objective. Practical knowledge is knowledge of ends as such. A technical approach to life will view an existence led without pain and suffering as the means to another end, such as the experience of states of desire. A practical approach to life, meanwhile, will seek to achieve an *existence that is an end in itself*, the realisation of a way of life in which action and experience need not be directed towards anything other than that life.

⁵ See Christopher Gowans, this volume.

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

Insofar as the modern era ever correlates knowledge and happiness, it is in the hope of *technical progress* as the result of advances in scientific understanding, leading for instance to the successful eradication of diseases and the formulation of a set of instructions for correct living in the shape of a non-conventional morality (as in Descartes). At the end of the *Ethics*, in a statement setting out the aim of his deliberations, Spinoza criticises the technical approach to life: 'Blessedness (*beatitudo*) is not the reward of virtue (*virtus*), but virtue itself; neither do we rejoice therein, because we control our lusts, but, contrariwise, because we rejoice therein, we are able to control our lusts (*libidines*).'⁶ (IVp42)

The word 'lusts' points to a fundamental issue in Spinoza's view of happiness: the *release from dependency*. That which induces lust provokes regret when it is *absent*, because it is *coveted* and yet is no longer available. Although, as we will see later, its presence enhances a being's power to act, as soon as its presence can no longer be taken for granted it leads to *dependence* on the external circumstances which make that presence more likely – a dependence that ultimately causes the affected being to become unhappy. In its absence, that which provokes lust gives rise to *hope* that it will return, and *fear* that it will not. But for Spinoza, fear and hope are feelings that lead to unhappiness because they reduce a being's power to act (IIIp18schII & IIIdefaff12 & 13).

Spinoza's recognition of this relationship, and his appreciation of the price exacted by lust for the temporary and ephemeral, constitute very important practical, indeed therapeutic insights.⁶ In consequence, that which induces lust is immediately linked to the regret that may follow it, and thus ceases to appear attractive. Anyone who strives for these lust-inducing objects in the full knowledge that they will result in a sense of loss, longing, hope and fear, is *addicted*: they are in quest of a joy they know will be followed by pain, and will cause them to rue their action. Controlling lust is therefore not a method by which the ascetic is to be rewarded with greater happiness, but rather a manifestation of independence from external causes of lust; in other words, a sign of low 'susceptibility to addiction.' To understand this assertion, we need to examine the concept of *independence* or *freedom* within Spinoza's conception of happiness.

⁶ The thought process bears similarities to the teachings of the Stoics; see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 316–401.

The reality (*realitas*) of every being, human or otherwise, and its real perfection (as opposed to that judged on the basis of arbitrary ideals) resides in the degree of its power for action (*potentia agendi*, IIdef6 & IVdef8). The more a being is active, the more virtuous it is and the less it suffers (Vp40). Acting freely means being oneself the cause of something in the world (cf. Idef7). It follows from this that the *technical* ‘removal’ of pain or suffering, by which something such as an analgesic or a surgeon acts on me, is a procedure that involves using suffering to relieve suffering: something – a healing substance or a doctor – acts on me in order to prevent something else – a poison or a tumour – from continuing to act on me. In cases such as this, where the solution is technical, it is not *my action* that frees me from suffering, but rather the action of something else on me – something on which I may become just as dependent as I might be on a source of lust that renders me an addict and on which, in the event of serious illness, I am also *de facto* dependent.

Consequently, Spinoza viewed freedom as having nothing to do with indeterminacy or the choice of a will located outside natural necessities. He maintains, with exemplary clarity: ‘Therefore those who believe, that they speak or keep silence or act in any way from the free decision of their mind (*libero mentis decreto*), do but dream with their eyes open’ (IIIp25). Rather, freedom is independence from circumstances that are temporarily favourable or unfavourable to me (*fortuna*) such that I may in my actions follow my own nature or law (*sui juris*, IVpraef). Spinoza makes a sharp distinction between the free realisation of one’s own nature and the quest for imagined ideals. The development of a human being towards the status of an individual leading a happy life therefore consists *not* in the *transformation* or *perfection* of a person in accordance with a specific ideal but rather in the realisation of the possibilities that are inherent in a being by virtue of its nature, in which realisation, however, it is hindered by external circumstances, including the ‘blind’ belief that it is obliged to realise a particular pattern of existence. A fundamental condition of freedom is therefore an insight into one’s own reality and the abandonment of errors that prevent that insight – in other words, *unprejudiced self-knowledge*.

Imagined Ideals, Shared Concepts, Associations and Conclusions

This process of thought requires the ability to distinguish between imagined ideals and erroneous self-judgements on the one hand,

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

and the 'true nature' of a being and true self-judgement on the other. How can this be achieved?

Different people experience what in modern parlance are termed different *conditioning histories*. In one culture, belching after a meal may be regarded as a sign of approval of the food consumed; in another, it may be viewed as an impertinence. Differences in upbringing will lead such behaviour to be linked to different affects based on associations of praise and blame. For Spinoza, therefore, writing in the third part of the *Ethics* (IIIp51), the result of such conditioning histories is that 'different men may be differently affected by the same object', and that 'the same man may be differently affected at different times by the same object' (IIIp51, cf. also IIIp15). Most things that we particularly love or hate, covet or fear, are perceived by us affectively in this way because of our conditioning history, which might just as easily have been different. Conditioning histories also give rise to ideals of things that are anchored in our imagination (*imaginatio*) and that, ultimately, constitute our view of what makes for a happy or unhappy life. States of joy and suffering come about primarily because people look for things that correspond to their preconditioned ideals, and avoid and fear things that do not correspond to them or that resemble negative ideals. Because conditioning histories are *contingent*, with praise or blame being attached to different circumstances, the imaginary ideals that result in objects being experienced as pleasant or unpleasant are also contingent.

For Spinoza, however, the human mind (*mens humana*) does not consist solely of fantasy or imagination and arbitrary networks of associations. Rather, it also contains 'common notions' (*notiones communes*) which relate to that which is shared by all human beings, and indeed all bodies (III2). The human mind need not remain trapped by associations, such as thinking of a pleasant taste when looking at a cake or of pain when hearing the sound of a dentist's drill. People are *different* because they have different conditioning histories, causing each to see the world in a slightly different way and judge things in their own manner. Yet all people also have something in *common*, sharing notions and conclusions arrived at through reason that are independent of their history (IIp18d).

To put it simply, the practice or therapy outlined by Spinoza consists firstly in deconditioning the human mind in a way that results in a *removal of contingent judgements of things* and ideals – a process that in some ways resembles psychoanalysis and is also to be found in the process of 'de-imaging' ('Entbildung' – the dismantling of

established images).⁷ In the second phase of Spinoza's philosophical therapy, the mind should *conclude* solely on the basis of *common notions*. Because that which can be understood by means of common notions necessarily relates to the *true nature* of a being, and since rational thought is an activity, those who conclude *solely* with the aid of true common notions can no longer suffer and necessarily realise their true nature.

Indeed, Spinoza himself considers his *Ethics* to be a work that operates solely with true common notions. It is constructed '*more geometrico*,' which is to say that the conclusions reached in it claim to be as strict as in the geometry of Euclid. This rational method, combined with the use of common notions, ensures that readers of the *Ethics* engage in an activity in which their mind cannot suffer. Moreover, because this activity contains instructions for the dismantling of contingent associations, the first and second steps to happiness are here indistinguishable: understanding one's own affective patterns on the basis of common notions is at once part of the process of deconditioning the mind and the realisation of true reason-nature. Rational conclusion is itself the practice adopted by the happy person: understanding the particular on the basis of true common notions.

This all sounds highly rationalistic, and indeed it is: a happy person is a reasonable person, one whose contingent life story has become irrelevant and who, reaching conclusions about the world solely with the aid of common notions, views it from the standpoint of eternity – as Spinoza puts it, '*sub specie aeternitatis*.'

The Practice of Transforming One's Own Mind and Body

Spinoza advocates what is termed a 'dual aspect theory' of the relationship between body and soul. According to this theory, mind and body are not two things related to each other, but rather one and the same thing that can be *described* in two different ways (IIp13). For everything that happens in the body there is an idea in the mind. A person's conditionings are both mental links and physical connections that are more or less transparent to the person

⁷ Cf. with reference to knowledge of God: Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, edited and translated by J. Quint (Munich: Hanser, 1963), pp. 352 ff.; Meister Eckharts Predigten, edited and translated by J. Quint, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Sermons vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1976), pp. 437 ff.

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

making the association: looking at a chocolate cake causes one's mouth to water. If we accept this psycho-physical parallelism, we can change in one of two ways: when in a bad mood caused by the prospect of an unpleasant situation, we may take a tablet that changes the state of our brain in such a way that the bad mood becomes impossible. This is the *technical* solution, in which we remain passive because we allow the pill to act on us. The other option is to *reflect on why* a situation leads to a bad mood and what association is responsible for it. Armed with this knowledge, we may then attempt to dismantle this association by, for example, repeatedly *thinking* of something pleasant while imagining the anticipated situation. This, then, amounts to 'combating' a negative affect that causes suffering by means of another that is positive.⁸ This approach corresponds to the *active* strategy proposed in Spinoza's philosophical therapy. The ideal he pursues is to convert as many of the *contingently associative* relations in the human mind into ones that are *inferential*. Inferential relations are ones that use common notions to move from one idea to the next, without the imagination playing any role. In Spinoza's view, such a conversion is also a conversion of the body: 'Even as thoughts and the ideas of things are arranged and associated in the mind, so are the modifications of body ... arranged and associated in the body ...' (Vp1) The body, then, can be structured in a more or less 'rational' way, and this will determine the degree to which it is active and capable of survival. Spinoza also calls this 'skill' ('aptitude').

Moreover, there is no bodily state we cannot understand if we analyse it in sufficient detail (Vp4). Without employing precise physical or physiological analysis, which is of only limited relevance here (IIp13sch), we are able to modify our mind and body through reflection. Physical change comes about through an 'internal view' of our body when we consider what feelings or affects we have fallen prey to, and why.⁹

In the context of present-day discussions on the relationship between neurology and philosophy, Spinoza's psycho-physical

⁸ The process of *reconditioning* is also familiar from psychoanalysis and neural connectionism; cf. in this regard Achim Stephan, 'Psychoanalyse und Konnektionismus', in *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften* 4 (2001), pp. 543–554.

⁹ cf. Michael Hampe, 'Der Körper von innen. Zur Wahrnehmung des Körpers in Spinozas Doppelaspekttheorie der Affekte,' in *Affekte und Ethik. Spinozas Lehre im Kontext*, ed. A. Engstler and R. Schnepf (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002), pp. 129–148; p. 136.

parallelism and critique of the Cartesian concept of the mind as an independent substance capable of acting on the body have caused him to be seen as a precursor of materialistic naturalism. Even the hope that neuroscience can establish a neurologically-based method of controlling emotional problems has been traced back to Spinoza.¹⁰ Yet this interpretation is based on a misunderstanding. It blurs the distinction between technique and practice, associates Spinoza too closely with the scientific hopes of Descartes, and underestimates the concept of a philosophical *programme of self-deliverance*. The fact that, according to Spinoza, people change when something acts on their body just as they do when something acts on their mind – that they undergo psycho-physical modifications in both cases, and that all these changes are founded on natural laws – should not blind us to the truth that he favoured one particular form of change over all others: namely, that which is advanced by a *process of self-knowledge undertaken by the being who is changing*. For it is only in this process of acquiring knowledge that the changing being is active. Theoretically there is also the possibility of changing one's mind by changing one's body, e.g. by following some physical practices like learning to play an instrument. These practices are ways of being active as well. But they do not play any role in Spinoza's argument, as far as I see. Perhaps this is due to the unimportance this type of exercise has in the Jewish tradition. It is essential to understand this difference between changing oneself by being active and being changed by passively receiving something or even by suffering, in order to determine to what degree Spinoza's philosophical therapy differs from medical therapy in the modern sense, which is considered a *technique* rather than a *practice*.

In a technical development, humanity's *collective progress of knowledge* is of help to the individual when, for instance, their suffering is relieved by taking a tablet that is the product of pharmacological research. Spinoza, by contrast, favours the liberation from suffering that comes about through the process of increasing knowledge taking place within the suffering person herself. One may question whether he conclusively demonstrated that the process works.¹¹ There is, however, no doubt that he *believed* he was offering a practicable programme of self-knowledge that liberates from suffering, leads to happiness, and can be achieved independently of collective

¹⁰ cf. Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (New York: Harcourt, 2003), *passim*.

¹¹ cf. Rüdiger Bittner, 'Spinozas Gedanke, dass Einsicht befreit,' in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 42 (1994), pp. 963–971.

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

scientific progress. Spinoza's naturalism is not scientific. It is not just the collective progress of knowledge in the natural sciences that offers true insight into the workings of nature. For Spinoza, the deterministic view of nature espoused by the modern natural sciences has above all a *negative function*: to free people from the illusions of transcendence that give rise to fear and hope, and help them to accept their own implication *in* and dependence on natural circumstances. Specifically, Spinoza transforms the knowledge of nature that each suffering being must acquire into a self-therapeutic *practice* that does not rely on the help of technology to liberate us from suffering.

Viewed against the backdrop of present-day psychological knowledge, Spinoza appears to have been overly optimistic about the possibility that we may direct our attention to our own feelings and pursue our own paths of association. As psychoanalytical processes in particular have demonstrated, true self-knowledge is impossible to obtain spontaneously. Yet it is perhaps superficial to believe that Spinoza's presentation *suggests* the desired reconditioning can simply happen and is available to all. The last words of the *Ethics* are: 'If the way which I have pointed out as leading [to blessedness or happiness] seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation (*salus*) were ready to our hand ... that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare' (Vp42sch).

The steps in this necessarily repeated process of deconditioning that Spinoza describes as the most important are, on the face of it, not difficult to perform: 1. *understanding* one's own affective status (answer to the question 'What am I feeling?'); 2. *detaching* one's attention from the emotionally judged object and directing it instead towards one's own body as the *prime cause* of the affect; 3. *understanding the instability* of the emotion that arises out of association and the stability and activity-enhancing character of those affects that come about by reasoned action; 4. *insight* into the multifarious causes of each affect, or the removal of belief in monocausality; and 5. *insight* into the fact that the plurality of causes can be penetrated by logical thought, and that one does not stand 'helpless' before it (Vp20sch). As our emotions, concepts and ways of reacting to the world are more or less deeply entrenched in our habits, a change by deconditioning these connections will not be a quick one, but one that resembles the continuous cleaning or polishing of one's state, to use a metaphor from the Buddhist literature.¹²

¹² Cf, e.g. *The Sūtra on the Merit of Bathing the Buddha*, trans. by Daniel Boucher in Donald Lopez, *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton:

Spinoza does not merely develop these steps of change *in abstracto*, but offers a whole series of feelings as specific examples of how they are to be applied: how hatred of a person comes about because I view that person as the free and single cause of a state of suffering that I am experiencing, and how hatred can be removed by considering why I suffer on account of this person, and what makes me susceptible to being affected by them in this way. I can then perceive how unstable this feeling is, given that shortly before I might have felt benevolence or love towards that person. I can move on to consider the many causes that have led me to my harmful action towards that person, and to my own vulnerability. Finally, I should experience joy at this process of knowledge – a joy that replaces the hatred.

In Spinoza's eyes, an affect such as hatred is founded on inadequate knowledge; it is connected to untrue opinions about the object of that hatred. The person who hates views the object of their hatred as the free and sole cause of their suffering. Yet because this judgement fails to recognise that person's own causal implication as the hater, the internal causal complexity of their body, and the causal implication of the hated object in the matrix of nature, it is a *false* opinion.

The endeavour to understand the feeling of hatred and the conditions that lead to its creation and persistence immediately puts this false opinion in context. It has been asked whether, even if affects such as hatred that cause suffering are based on false opinions, a true knowledge of them is really possible.¹³ Yet there is no reason why erroneous states of mind cannot be analysed through knowledge. Of course, this process involves a *change of emphasis*. In its efforts to recognise false belief as such, the mind shifts its focus from the object that is falsely understood towards the false understanding of that object. In his cognitive removal of emotions that cause suffering, Spinoza himself refrained from this change of emphasis. Those who try to understand hatred can no longer hate, because their mind is attempting to understand their own body and its causal complexity as well as the causal circumstances of the hated being. In the

Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 59–68. Boucher's source for the translation is *Taisho shinshu daizokyo* (Tokyo, 1924–1934), 698, vol 16, pp. 799c–800c. He explains that the sūtra is 'a short text—a little over a page in the standard Chinese Buddhist canon—that was translated into Chinese, presumably from Sanskrit, by the famous monk and pilgrim Yijing (635–713 CE).'

¹³ Thomas J. Cook, 'Affektive Erkenntnis und Erkenntnis der Affekte. Ein Problem der spinozistischen Ethik,' in *Affekte und Ethik*, ed. A. Engstler and R. Schnepf, pp. 164–181; p. 165.

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

process, the mind becomes active and ceases to suffer; and indeed, it is precisely this that constitutes the therapy of rationality.

For Spinoza, there is nothing transcendent and perfect beyond the endlessly complicated natural causal links. What transcends us, and what (to use Schleiermacher's formulation for religious feeling) we are *per se* dependent on, is nature in its endless complexity, and it is for this reason that Spinoza refers to it as God. Consequently, true knowledge of the causal complexity of nature is knowledge of God: 'The more we understand particular things, the more do we understand God' (Vp24).

For example, someone who tries to understand a particular feeling of hatred and perceives the causal complexity of the conditions that give rise to this state of suffering is in fact engaged in understanding God. Because human beings are part of nature and have something in common with all that is natural, they may make any aspect of nature the starting point of this knowledge – including the affects that cause suffering. And because such knowledge of nature is equivalent to knowledge of God and involves an endlessly advancing process of rational thought – i.e. endless mental activity – it is what Spinoza calls *happiness*. Self-knowledge, knowledge of God, and an inherently sensible knowledge of nature are here combined into a therapeutic practice that is a condition of happiness. Accordingly, there is a consistency between the propositions (IVp4 and Vp30) quoted at the end of the second section.

General Theories and Individual Life

The precondition for this rational therapy of our emotional dependence is the existence of concepts that are not dependent on arbitrary conditioning histories, and rational processes of conclusion that enable us to understand that 'true nature' of ourselves that can be grasped by those concepts. While not an anthropological ideal, this is *anthropological essentialism* of a kind that we no longer automatically take for granted.

Most people will instead tend to identify themselves with an arbitrary history that conditions their life and their view of things: it is that which distinguishes them from everyone else. Of course, it is indisputable that there must be something people have in common if they recognise each other as people. Knowledge undoubtedly has something to do with common notions. The problem of true self-knowledge as presented in Spinoza nevertheless appears to point to a *removal of all* arbitrary elements that make up a human being.

As long as a process of self-knowledge operates with common notions and yet remains tied to what has been termed the ‘contingent conditioning history’ of an individual, it undoubtedly remains the reflective process of an individual. For Spinoza, however, something more is at stake: the *removal* of conditioning, and of the judgements of things that arise from it. For Spinoza, therefore, the removal of conditioning also implies the removal of *contingency*. And yet, does this not mean that the ultimate goal of self-knowledge is the dismantling of the individual world-view that has arisen contingently? Does not the ‘sub specie aeternitatis’ perspective imply the abandonment of each person’s individual understanding of the world, meaning that Spinoza’s concept of happiness involves the abandonment of individuality? There is something in this interpretation. Indeed, it highlights the problematic relationship between science and happiness: science attempts to obtain findings that have *general* validity, while happiness is a matter of *individual* life. Can generally valid knowledge by itself ever promote individual happiness? Can there be a scientific therapy for human unhappiness? Does this not also require a more precise understanding of the individual – one that cannot be obtained through the generalities of science (concepts and nomological premises)? This question also ties in with the difficult issue of what precisely is the reality – if any – that Spinoza ascribes to the suffering individual, and whether such an individual, in need of therapy, is more than arbitrariness and error.

Because Spinoza conceived his *Ethics* as a way of leaving behind suffering and moving towards happiness, he must have acknowledged the suffering of individuals as genuine. Critics (such as Bayle and later Hegel,¹⁴) who deny that he acknowledged the reality of the individual are mistaken.¹⁵ Because of its psycho-physical parallelism, every state of mind – including error – has a physical counterpart. The difficult question is whether individuality can be *more* than suffering, error, and the physical body’s lack of skill or capacity for survival. Possibly not. Perhaps, for Spinoza, the abolition of contingent individuality is the price of happiness and the aim of therapy. In this sense his teaching may exhibit certain parallels with Buddhism.¹⁶

From a methodological perspective, the problem of self-knowledge in Spinoza is the same as that which has been posed since the 19th

¹⁴ Cf. Löwith, ‘Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche,’ p. 180.

¹⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Bartuschat, *Baruch de Spinoza* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996), p. 76.

¹⁶ Cf. David Burton, this volume.

Rationality as the Therapy of Self-Liberation

century: a contrast between disciplines that explain by reference to general laws (nomothetic) and those that describe individual lives (idiographic). Knowledge based on common notions that are not calibrated invariably remains knowledge of the general rather than the individual. One pear differs from another in that, although it *also* has a weight, it is a *different* one, that can be expressed in calibrated concepts using such figures as *so and so many* kilograms. To say anything more about the difference between the pears, we must record the story of their genesis. In turn, in order to do this we need more than common notions: we must identify places and points in time by *names*. Spinoza's conception of self-knowledge contains neither calibrated common notions – numbers – nor nameable times and places. It remains at the level of a relatively concrete doctrine of affects – but one that deals with affects that we can *all* have against the backdrop of a general theory. Spinoza *understands* these difficulties inasmuch as he differentiates *de facto* between as many affects as there are individuals (IIIp57), but he does not resolve them theoretically. This dilemma – that of describing the individual person using common notions, indeed desiring to *help* that person therapeutically by means of a general theory – places Spinoza's concept in the same boat as all the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic methodologies that identify individual life stories using the resources of a general conceptual scheme with a view to improving them, but without taking into account the significance of narratives of individual life stories. The fraught relationship between science and wisdom that clearly emerges here – one that is characteristic of modern thought, and perhaps of the entirety of modern culture – appears also to be a constituent part of Spinoza's conception of philosophy. Indeed, this tension remains unresolved to this day. Spinoza was possibly the last modern philosopher to tolerate it within his work, before it was subsumed in a kind of 'division of labour' between religion, psychotherapies, literature and science.

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