

“Human Beings are Determined” by Baruch Spinoza



Spinoza, Thoemmes

About the author... Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam to parents who had fled from the Spanish Inquisition and sought refuge in the Netherlands. His study of Descartes and Hobbes led his philosophical views away from orthodox Jewish philosophy; subsequently, he was excommunicated from the Jewish community. In the years thereafter, he skillfully crafted optical lenses for a living while dedicating his life to render clearly his philosophy by the geometrical method of proof. Unfortunately, his strict deductive writing style, although perhaps the clearest method of logical exposition at the time, remains to us somewhat stiff and formal. When Spinoza was offered a teaching position at Heidelberg, he wrote, “I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of the peace.” Spinoza is best read only one sentence at a time; otherwise, the depth of this thought can easily be overlooked. Somewhat dismissively, Novalis once characterized Spinoza as “a God-intoxicated man.”

About the work... Sometime after his sentence of excommunication Spinoza began working of the ideas which would eventually be published

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as *The Ethics*,¹ a book published posthumously from the fear of persecution from the charge of the blasphemy of pantheism.² Pantheism should be distinguished from “panentheism” which is the view that gods are *in* all things. Spinoza believed, much as Socrates believed, the excellent life is the life of reason in the service of one’s own being. The soul seeks knowledge as a good; indeed, the soul’s highest good is knowledge of God. Spinoza argues that the mind and the body are, in reality, only one thing but can be thought of in two different ways. The person who understands how the soul is part of the system of nature also understands, at the same time, how the soul is part of God. In sum, Spinoza’s monism³ is the deductive exposition of existence as the complete unity of God and nature. According to this view, human beings have no free will, and the world cannot be evil.

From the reading...

“Thus, when men say that this or that physical action has its origin in the mind... they are using words without meaning...”

Ideas of Interest from *The Ethics*

1. Explain as clearly as possible Spinoza’s two objections to the belief that human behavior is the result of the free will of the mind.

1. Baruch Spinoza. *The Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometric Order*. Translated by R.H.M. Elwes. 1883. Part III: On the Origin and the Nature of the Emotions—Note to Proposition 2.

2. Pantheism is the doctrine that God is identical with all existing things. Often the view derives from spiritual motives, but a monist could be a strict materialist or a strict idealist.

3. Monism is the doctrine that reality can only be the modifications deriving from one kind of subsistent entity. Often the view derives from spiritual motives, but a monist could be a strict materialist or a strict idealist. For Spinoza, everything that exists is both God and the system of nature, and the implicit pantheism (and the consequent threat of blasphemy) of this view provide one reason why his works were published posthumously.

2. What counter-objection does Spinoza raise against his view that mental and physical states are merely coincidental and the mind neither controls the body nor controls events in the physical world?
3. How does Spinoza define “decision” from the standpoint of thought, and how does he define it from the standpoint of extension?⁴
4. According to Spinoza, why do many persons believe human beings have free will? How can we become conscious or discover the causes of our decisions and the unconscious “appetites” upon which they depend?

The Reading Selection from *The Ethics*

[The Unknown Causes of Human Action]

I can scarcely believe, until the fact is proved by experience, that men can be induced to consider the question calmly and fairly, so firmly are they convinced that it is merely at the bidding of the mind, that the body is set in motion or at rest, or performs a variety of actions depending solely on the mind’s will or the exercise of thought. However, no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has as yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish solely by the laws of nature, in so far as she is regarded as extension. No one hitherto has gained such an accurate knowledge of the bodily mechanism, that he can explain all its functions; nor need I call attention to the fact that many actions are observed in the lower animals, which far transcend human sagacity, and that somnambulists do many things in their sleep, which they would not venture to do when awake: these instances are enough to show, that the body can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind wonders at.

4. “Extension” can be thought of as the essence of matter. The most important quality of bodies or physical or material substances are that they are extended, *i.e.*, materially or physically existent things take up space. Height, width, and depth are essential to physical existence.

[Meaninglessness of the Mind’s Control of Body]

Again, no one knows how or by what means the mind moves the body, nor how many various degrees of motion it can impart to the body, nor how quickly it can move it. Thus, when men say that this or that physical action has its origin in the mind, which latter has dominion over the body, they are using words without meaning, or are confessing in specious phraseology that they are ignorant of the cause of the said action, and do not wonder at it.

[Similar States of Mind and Body]

But, they will say, whether we know or do not know the means whereby the mind acts on the body, we have, at any rate, experience of the fact that unless the human mind is in a fit state to think, the body remains inert. Moreover, we have experience, that the mind alone can determine whether we speak or are silent, and a variety of similar states which, accordingly, we say depend on the mind’s decree. But, as to the first point, I ask such objectors, whether experience does not also teach, that if the body be inactive the mind is simultaneously unfitted for thinking? For when the body is at rest in sleep, the mind simultaneously is in a state of torpor also, and has no power of thinking, such as it possesses when the body is awake. Again, I think everyone’s experience will confirm the statement, that the mind is not at all times equally fit for thinking on a given subject, but according as the body is more or less fitted for being stimulated by the image of this or that object, so also is the mind more or less fitted for contemplating the said object.

[Infinite Complexity of Nature]

But, it will be urged, it is impossible that solely from the laws of nature considered as extended substance, we should be able to deduce the causes of buildings, pictures, and things of that kind, which are produced only by human art; nor would the human body, unless it were determined and led by the mind, be capable of building a single temple. However, I have just pointed out that the objectors cannot fix the limits of the body’s power, or say what can be concluded from a consideration of its sole nature, whereas

they have experience of many things being accomplished solely by the laws of nature, which they would never have believed possible except under the direction of mind: such are the actions performed by somnambulists while asleep, and wondered at by their performers when awake. I would further call attention to the mechanism of the human body, which far surpasses in complexity all that has been put together by human art, not to repeat what I have already shown, namely, that from nature, under whatever attribute she be considered, infinite results follow.

[The Illusory Nature of Free Decisions]

As for the second objection, I submit that the world would be much happier, if men were as fully able to keep silence as they are to speak. Experience abundantly shows that men can govern anything more easily than their tongues, and restrain anything more easily than their appetites; when it comes about that many believe, that we are only free in respect to objects which we moderately desire, because our desire for such can easily be controlled by the thought of something else frequently remembered, but that we are by no means free in respect to what we seek with violent emotion, for our desire cannot then be allayed with the remembrance of anything else. However, unless such persons had proved by experience that we do many things which we afterwards repent of, and again that we often, when assailed by contrary emotions, see the better and follow the worse, there would be nothing to prevent their believing that we are free in all things. Thus an infant believes that of its own free will it desires milk, an angry child believes that it freely desires to run away; further, a drunken man believes that he utters from the free decision of his mind words which, when he is sober, he would willingly have withheld: thus, too, a delirious man, a garrulous woman, a child, and others of like complexion, believe that they speak from the free decision of their mind, when they are in reality unable to restrain their impulse to talk.

From the reading...

“...these decisions of the mind arise in the mind by the same necessity, as the ideas of things actually existing.”

[Decision Defined]

Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason, that men believe themselves to be free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined; and, further, it is plain that the dictates of the mind are but another name for the appetites, and therefore vary according to the varying state of the body. Everyone shapes his actions according to his emotion, those who are assailed by conflicting emotions know not what they wish; those who are not attacked by any emotion are readily swayed this way or that. All these considerations clearly show that a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing, which we call decision, when it is regarded under and explained through the attribute of thought, and a conditioned state, when it is regarded under the attribute of extension, and deduced from the laws of motion and rest. . .

[Nature of Human Action]

For the present I wish to call attention to another point, namely, that we cannot act by the decision of the mind, unless we have a remembrance of having done so. For instance, we cannot say a word without remembering that we have done so. Again, it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or forget a thing at will. Therefore the freedom of the mind must in any case be limited to the power of uttering or not uttering something which it remembers. But when we that we speak, we believe that we speak from a free decision of the mind, yet we do not speak, or, if we do, it is by a spontaneous motion of the body. Again, we dream that we are concealing something, and we seem to act from the same decision of the mind as that, whereby we keep silence when awake concerning something we know. Lastly, we dream that from the free decision of our mind we do something, which we should not dare to do when awake.

[The Idea of Free Will]

Now I should like to know whether there be in the mind two sorts of decisions, one sort illusive, and the other sort free? If our folly does not carry us so far as this, we must necessarily admit, that the decision of the mind, which is believed to be free, is not distinguishable from the imagination or memory, and is nothing more than the affirmation, which an idea, by virtue

of being an idea, necessarily involves... Wherefore these decisions of the mind arise in the mind by the same necessity, as the ideas of things actually existing. Therefore those who believe, that they speak or keep silence or act in any way from the free decision of their mind, do but dream with their eyes open.

From the *The Ethics*, IV, 50...

“The man who has properly understood that everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature, and comes to a pass accordingly to the eternal laws and rules of nature, will in truth, discover nothing which is worthy of hatred, laughter, or contempt, nor will he pity any one, but, so far as human virtue is able, he will endeavor to *do well*, as we say, and to *rejoice*.”

Related Ideas

“Interview with Antonio Damasio” (http://www.harcourtbooks.com/author/interviews/bookinterview_damasio.asp). *Harcourt Trade Publishers*. A brief discussion of Spinoza’s anticipation of the possibility of a neurobiological foundations to ethics.

“Spinoza Net” (<http://www.spinoza.net>). *New World Sciences Corp*. Events, articles, works, bibliographies, and newsletters of interest to student and scholar alike.

Antonio Damasio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 2003. A fascinating investigation, based on neurobiology of the differences between bodily emotion and mental feeling and, more important, how this relation elucidates the connection between unconscious and conscious thought.

Roger Scruton. *Spinoza: The Great Philosophers*. London: Routledge, 1999. A short, but engaging, introduction to Spinoza’s thought.

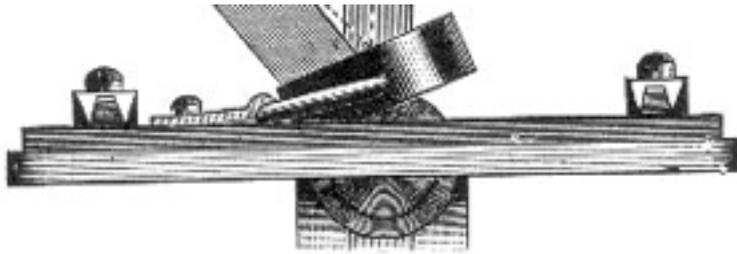
Everlasting Joy of Happiness or the Live and Adventures of Spinoza. Directed by Igal Barsztan. Israel, 1996. An award-winning imaginative and

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intellectual 90 minute comedy based on Spinoza searching for happiness in present-day Tel Aviv.

From the reading...

“All these considerations clearly show that a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing...”



Detail of Mount of Newton's Rings for the Microscope, from George M. Hopkins, *Experimental Science*, 1903.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare Spinoza's discussion of dreaming with Sigmund Freud's statement, "A dream frequently has the profoundest meaning in the very places where it seems most absurd..." Spinoza mentions that we are unconscious of the causes of our actions, and the causes are, in point of fact, our desires. Do you think that Spinoza's account of human behavior differs significantly from the account Freud advanced over two-and-a-half centuries later?
2. If the mind can influence the body and the body can influence the mind (*cf.*, the James-Lange theory), how do mind and body interact? Minds, unlike bodies, have no size, shape, or weight. How can something without any physical properties move a material thing?

How does a thought of drinking a cup of coffee cause the coffee to be drunk? How does a thought fire a neural network?

3. If all things, viewed as bodies in motion, or viewed as minds in thought, are necessarily determined, as Spinoza argues, then how could anything have moral qualities, since no one could have done otherwise? Yet, Spinoza writes, “There is no rational life, therefore without intelligence, and things are good only in so far as they assist men to enjoy that life of the mind which is determined by intelligence. Those things alone, on the other hand, we call evil which hinder man from perfecting his reason and enjoying a rational life.”⁵ Isn’t Spinoza caught in the same paradox as the radical behaviorist, such as B.F. Skinner, who believes human behavior (as a dependent variable) is shaped by operant conditioning (stimuli or independent variables)? How, then, can one tend one’s own soul, or, as the behaviorist would phrase it, how can one achieve self-directed behavior or a self-managed life-style?
4. Evaluate Immanuel Kant’s criticism in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* of Spinoza’s metaphysics: “Fundamentally Spinozism could just as well be called a great fanaticism as a form of atheism. For of God, the one substance, Spinoza affirms two predicates: extension and thought. Every soul, he says, is only a modification of God’s thought, and every body is a modification of his extension. Thus Spinoza assumed that everything existing could be found in God. But by making this assumption he fell into crude contradictions. For if only a single substance exists, then either I must be this substance, and consequently I must be God (but this contradicts my dependency); or else I am an accident (but this contradicts the concept of my ego, in which I think myself as an ultimate subject which is not the predicate of any other being).”

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