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Essay on Spinoza's psychology.

Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza is best known in the history of psychology for his theory of the emotions and for being the first modern thinker to conceptualize psychology as a wholly natural phenomenon. To the religious and secular authorities of his day, this naturalism seemed dangerous and they put considerable effort into suppressing his work. They were only partially successful; Spinoza's books have remained in print since his death in 1677. But within the universities, the study of psychology would remain part of a religion-based Moral Philosophy until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until 1871 -- when Charles Darwin published *The Descent of Man*<sup>i</sup> -- that a comparably naturalist idea of human science would start to gain acceptance in mainstream Western intellectual culture.

Spinoza was born in 1632 in Amsterdam into a family of Portuguese Jewish immigrants who had fled the Inquisition and its policy of forced conversion. As a young man, he was expelled from the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam for maintaining that nature is not the creation of a transcendent God. He subsequently supported himself as a teacher and a lens grinder. He studied Scholastic and Cartesian philosophy and made several major contributions to Western thought, most of which were published after his death in 1677 at the age of 44.

For psychology, the most important of his books is his *Ethics*. This work was written in a very formal "geometrical" style as a series of proofs derived from a handful of definitions, and axioms. References to passages in the *Ethics* take the form of what, at first glance, appear to be opaque strings of numbers and letters (e.g., E1d3 or E4Apn32). Readers not interested in consulting the original text can ignore these odd looking references, but those who do want to find the cited passages can do so, without too much difficulty, by using the reference key provided at the end of this essay.<sup>ii</sup>

Spinoza, like most 17<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers approached psychology as part of a complete natural philosophy and his *Ethics* was written as a direct refutation of Descartes. Specifically, he rejected the Cartesian mind-body dualism and the method of radical doubt that reduced the possibility of certain knowledge to the famous statement, “I think, therefore I am.” As opposed to this, Spinoza’s foundational philosophical and psychological intuition was that: “we know ourselves to be part of the totality of nature, and subject to its laws” (*E4Apn32*).

The implications of Spinoza’s formulation differ from those of Descartes’s in several significant ways. The first of these is that, where Spinoza’s intuit both self and nature in a single insight, the *cogito* only demonstrates the existence of the thinker’s mind. In order to justify any certainty about the existence of bodies, or of other minds, Descartes had to introduce a separate theory accounting for knowledge of things other than the knower’s mind by positing innate ideas, placed in the mind by God. The other important consequence of Descartes’s *cogito* is a mind/body dualism, according to which our minds, which we know directly, and our bodies, which we know by the grace of God, are considered to be separate substances. In contrast, Spinoza’s intuition does not imply any substantial separation between the knower’s own mind and body – he speaks of “ourselves.” He also does not posit any categorical distinction between the observer and the observed; for him our knowledge of the external world is implicit in our knowing of ourselves to be parts of nature, taken as a whole.

One of the most important elements of both Spinoza’s metaphysics and his psychology is the idea that mind and body are not separate substances but merely different attributes, of nature as a whole and of individuals. Just as in contemporary physics, where light can be described as either particles or waves, Spinoza thought that to speak of the mind or the body is to speak of the same thing in different ways. In a formulation that would later be picked up and elaborated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by neuro-scientist, Antonio Damasio (2003)<sup>iii</sup>, Spinoza spoke of the individual mind as the “idea of the body”. He argued that, as such, the mind is aware of everything that happens to or within the body (*E2p11*, 13) and also of all external things that cause bodily reactions.

Because our experience of external objects and forces is derived from our

awareness of our own bodily changes, Spinoza thought that knowledge based on experience could only be partial; it is limited to how the things we encounter affect us. Knowledge from experience, for Spinoza, could never be what he called “adequate” because it is necessarily biased – knowledge of “what this thing means to me”. But experience for him is only one of three kinds of knowledge, because we also know things on the basis of reason and intuition, both of which, he believed were sources of adequate knowledge (*E2p40s2*).

Spinoza based this conclusion on his two fundamental conceptions of the nature of reality: that individuals are parts of the totality of nature, and that mind and body are complementary<sup>iv</sup> attributes of a single substance. Particular things, as he understood them, are not entirely discrete entities but are, rather, modes or instantiations of nature as a whole. Individual bodies are, thus, instantiations of the matter of which the universe as a whole is composed, and individual minds are, likewise, instantiations of the overall order and intelligibility of the material universe. Thus, knowledge of the properties of one’s own body, gives the individual a starting point from which to reason to the general properties of all bodies; and what we know of our mental properties gives us similar purchase from which to reason to an adequate understanding of (at least some) properties of the rational order of nature.

In addition to this capacity for reasoned knowledge of the properties of nature, Spinoza also believed that we have adequate knowledge of particular natural things by direct intuitive perception of them. The recognition of ourselves as parts of the totality of nature is an example of an intuition, as is the knowledge that we are constantly striving to preserve our own existence. That reason and intuition aren’t entirely separate can be seen in the fact that both the above intuitions can also be reached by stepwise reasoning from general principles. A simple, if not particularly profound, example of this can be seen in the fact that, given the ordinary definitions of “part” and “whole” it isn’t logically possible for any natural thing, including a person, not to be part of “nature as a whole.”

The general principle from which Spinoza reasons to what we know intuitively as our drive for self-preservation, however, is far more interesting, particularly as it provides the foundation for Spinoza’s most important

psychological idea, his theory of emotions. What we think of as the human drive for self-preservation was, for Spinoza, a particular manifestation of this more general principle: that everything “endeavors to persist in existence”(Ep6, 7). Romantic philosophers have taken Spinoza's emphasis on this principle to imply a kind of universal soul. However, the wording in Spinoza’s text is almost identical to the language used by both Descartes and Isaac Newton when writing about physical inertia or momentum: the tendency of bodies to remain in motion unless disturbed by an external force. This quality of things in general, which Spinoza called *conatus*, appears as inertia, pure and simple at the level of particles. But more highly articulated entities behave in ways that Spinoza attributed to the same general principle. Thus the self-replenishing aspect of dynamic systems -- e.g., flames -- as well as the principle of homeostasis and the drive toward reproduction found in all living organisms, were, for him, all examples of *conatus*.

In humans (and other sophisticated animals) *conatus* is manifest in a purely mental form as will, and more generally in the emotion of desire. Desire, principally the desire for self-preservation, is for Spinoza at the root of all emotions; and any object or event that increases our ability to preserve our existence is felt as some version of joy, while those that decrease that ability are experienced as one or another kind of sadness (*E3p11s*). More complex emotions are combinations of these three basic emotions with other ideas. To give but two examples, he says hope is a combination of joy and the idea of something we think is good for us in the future. Fear, contrariwise, is sadness combined with the expectation of something we think will be bad for us (*E3p18s2*).

Though simple in general structure, this theory of affects is actually quite subtle. For one thing, *conatus* is not simply the desire to preserve life; it is the urge and tendency to continue to be whatever we are at a given moment. For a person who is rich, it includes the effort to stay rich and to have the power to stay rich. For an athlete, it includes the effort to win and to be at the “top of one’s game”. For Socrates, *conatus* included the desire to “be Socrates” and when he thought that fleeing Athens to avoid execution would make him not “be Socrates”, this aspect of his *conatus* proved stronger even than the desire to preserve life.

Spinoza's discussion of specific emotions is quite detailed, with the basic pattern of joy or sadness combining with the idea of specific things. By this method Spinoza accounts for 47 separate emotions. Common to all of them is that, for Spinoza, each is caused by external things or events (and the ideas of them), which are outside of our control, and we experience them passively, which is why Spinoza refers to them as passions. In addition, each emotion is a real increase or decrease in our *conatus*, and we cannot avoid feeling such changes when they happen. Ultimately, the external things that change our *conatus* are numberless and, both on the whole and on average, are so much stronger than we are that, eventually our *conatus* is so completely overwhelmed that it, and we, cease to exist.

One consequence of this state of affairs is that we cannot change emotions with reason. For Spinoza, reason is the very essence of the human mind, which is to say of who and what we are but it, like our *conatus*, is not as powerful as the external things and events that affect us – positively or negatively. Thus, no amount of reasoning can overpower hatred, and fear, or even love and hope. Only other emotions have the power to offset our passions. Hope can conquer fear, but not reason. But even hope, in Spinoza's terms, is a passion: dependent on things external to us and experienced passively.

There is, however, one exception to this otherwise grim analysis. Because reason is an aspect of our own essence, the love of reason and the desire to exist as a reasoning being is an aspect of our *conatus*. Because the love of reason is an emotion it is, at least in some circumstances, able to overcome our passive emotions, or passions. And, because reason is not only an attribute of nature as a whole, but also part of our own nature, love of reason, though an emotion, is not a passion; it is self-determined. Loving reason (and nature as a whole) is the one free act of which people are capable. And this, ultimately, is why Spinoza calls his psychological theory the *Ethics*.

#### NOTES:

<sup>i</sup> Darwin, C. (1998) *The Descent of Man*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.  
(Originally published 1871)

<sup>ii</sup> The *Ethics* is presented in five Parts each divided into numbered Definitions (d), Axioms (a) and Propositions (p), which have Corollaries (c) and Scholia (s). In addition, some of the Parts have introductions (Int) and appendices (Apn). In citations, the first number refers to the Part and is followed by a letter designating the kind of subpart which is then, followed by its number. Thus, *E2p40s2* refers to Part 2, Proposition 40, Scholium 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Damasio, A. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: joy, sorrow, and the feeling brain*. Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Inc.

<sup>iv</sup> “Complementarity” was Niels Bohr’s term for the relation between wave and particle models in quantum mechanics. (Bohr, N. (1950). On the Notions of Causality and Complementarity. *Science*, 111(2873), 51-56).