

In the entirety of the *Ethics*, there is one theme that stands out as the most troublesome. Spinoza's idea of free will appears to undermine notions presented by previous philosophers, and indeed seems most similar to rigid determinism. A simple reading of his work leaves one feeling that man is not free in the broadest sense of meaning, and is instead merely a pawn in the universe. This analysis does not do Spinoza justice as I see it. In this paper, I will attempt to provide my own interpretation of Spinoza's free man, which is far closer to our intuitions of such a being.

To bring this discussion properly, an explanation of the nature of mind is necessary. Spinoza appears to be a monist, but with dualistic tendencies, and EII fully explains how he views the proposition of dualism. Whereas Descartes had a rather rigid definition of mind and body, Spinoza appears to accept them as separate, but also considers mind and body to be merely aspects of the same thing, i.e. G-d. Spinoza provides us with an infinite number of possible substances, but only calls those two by name. We can suppose that Spinoza does this as to not fall into the trap that plagued Descartes with rectifying the interactions of the mind with the body. However, Spinoza denies that the mind can causally interact with physical objects, giving rise to the problem of dualism again. Spinoza answers thusly: extended substance and thinking substance are indeed equivalent, but we cannot substitute one for the other when dealing with causal relationships.

From this we can see that while Spinoza strives for a monistic account of substance, in the end he is forced to remedy the same issues that Descartes could not. It

appears, then, that mind is separate from the body, even if they are derived from the same source. Interestingly, it is in this separation that we begin to see the seed of a free will. Only through admission that the mind cannot be directly influenced by physical factors does the idea of free will have any true meaning. For instance, if we were Hobbesian materialists, we might simply state that our minds are nothing more than a collection of physical parts, casually linked to other physical parts on the universe; we must act as dictated by the events which have led up to our “choice”. Spinoza’s implied dualism, even monistic in feel, opens the door for true freedom of thought.

Given that we are indeed capable of formulating ideas in our minds, the question arises as to just what those ideas are. For Spinoza, all ideas can be classified as either adequate or inadequate. Adequate ideas are those that in their entirety define something completely. The Sun’s being yellow is adequate in the sense that the color of the Sun is defined wholly by that one statement. However, describing all the attributes of the Sun known to man, even exhaustively, would not provide us with an adequate idea of the Sun. There exist many things about the Sun we do not know. Thus, we can have adequate knowledge of the Sun’s color, but not about the Sun itself. These inadequate ideas are essentially fragments of adequate ideas, contained within our own minds. Every idea exists adequately in the Mind of G-d, as G-d encompasses all and everything is merely an expression of G-d. The passions, then, arise out of this inadequate knowledge. When we do not truly understand something, it is then that we act in a manner in opposition to our nature, swayed by the passions. By gaining adequate ideas, we come closer to understanding G-d, and in turn understanding our own nature. Free will exists insofar as

men act according to their nature; by not having enough adequate ideas, we become puppets, controlled by emotion and madness. It is possible to attain more adequate ideas through work, and it is this acquisition of adequate ideas that Spinoza deems as necessary to gain freedom.

The question arises as to how we can know if an adequate idea is actually true or not, as it would do no good to know something adequately without know its truth value. This is in fact an impossibility. Falsity of an idea is merely inaccurate knowledge about an object, a property that only inadequate ideas are capable of having. Surely we know many inadequate ideas about things that are either false or true, yet adequate knowledge of something can only be true, or else it is merely inadequate. Thus, all adequate ideas, or all ideas related to G-d, are true. If we truly know something, according to this notion of adequacy, then we cannot be mistaken about it (which echoes Descartes and Plato). Gaining adequate ideas will never lead us astray from our paths to freedom, since they are true in the most definitive sense of the word.

One might read the adequacy of ideas as a straightjacket, as our minds appear to be completely contained within the mind of G-d, hence, there is no difference between one person to the next. The appearance is correct: all minds, and indeed every idea, are contained adequately within the mind of G-d. I don't see this as limiting, however. If we comprehend G-d to be the totality of all there is, being contained within Him is nothing more than a logical conclusion we must draw. There can be no separation of man from G-d unless we are outside of Him, completely unfeasible in the Spinozistic sense of reality.

As we gain adequate ideas, we strive to become more and more like G-d; it is this striving that is free will. Thus, our minds being contained within the mind of G-d is no different than our bodies being contained within the universe. Surely our bodies are composed of the same atomic particles that make up beach balls, but we don't think that part of us is actually beach ballness. So too do we not identify ourselves as aspects of G-d, all conjoined into a morass of thought, but autonomous in the sense that while we are within G-d, we are still separate, much like my stomach is part of me, yet separate from my gall bladder.

I mentioned the striving towards our nature, and this seems to be the crux of the problem of free will. Per IVP28 "Knowledge of G-d is the mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know G-d". Only by acting in a manner which satisfies our desire for knowledge of G-d can we become virtuous. Virtue and power are synonymous for Spinoza; power is the act of gaining adequate ideas, and we must act instead of remaining passive. By actively pursuing adequate ideas, we exercise our power and gain virtue. From this it seems that Spinoza is advocating a very selfish sense of being. If we strive to gain virtue, we are living in a way that in fact preserves our being. Is self-preservation the purpose of being? Spinoza argues that the virtuous person strives for knowledge of G-d for its own sake, regardless of the consequences. Yet, the consequence of seeking knowledge of G-d is self-preservation. Seeking knowledge of G-d for its own sake is the view Spinoza would have us believe, yet he advocates preserving our being as vitally important. Virtue, then, is when a person gains knowledge of G-d because he knows it will lead to self-preservation. The virtuous man exercises his free will in an attempt to

gain adequate ideas, all of which lead him closer to knowledge of G-d. This knowledge is what makes the man preserved, and in fact gives him the ability to use his free will.

A common criticism to Spinoza's view of advocating the seeking of knowledge of G-d for preservation is that rather pragmatic in view: wouldn't seeking a coat be better at preserving your being than knowledge of G-d if you're cold? The question implies that biological preservation is demoted secondary to Spinoza's transcendental sense of existence. Ironically, Spinoza does insist that knowledge of G-d is indeed vital to preserving oneself biologically, and again the most important thing. Spinoza claims it is the desire arising from knowledge that will make us persevere, even when a coat would help. If we have no knowledge of G-d, we will not seek the coat to keep us warm; our drive to live isn't strong enough to have us seek protection from the cold. Free will in this case is the product of our wish to live: we exercise our reason and the knowledge we have to keep ourselves alive. There is something fundamentally instinctive about wanting to stay alive, but wanting to stay alive because of what we know is the true path towards virtuous behavior for Spinoza, and thus we require our own will to make such a decision. Else, we are simply like the other animals seeking shelter during the winter.

Considering the implications that the preceding view provides about a purely spiritual sense of perseverance, it is surprising that Spinoza is adamant about advocating the biological portion of the view above all else. It seems that Spinoza is openly denying that persevering solely in the mind has any relevance to living, giving Hobbesian materialism some ground. Yet, I cannot help but think Spinoza would indeed say that

striving in thought is to persevere in reality. If thought and extension are expressions of the same thing, then perseverance in mind should be similar if not the same as perseverance in body. I think this view can be rectified by instead thinking Spinoza wishes us to survive biologically as means to having our minds healthy. Only with a healthy mind can we possibly gain adequate ideas, and a body that is unaffected by external physical factors does facilitate a healthy mind. Perhaps freedom of will is predicated on our own physical health, as we cannot possibly be free if we are concerned with those things that cause us grief, such as being cold or lacking food.

Biological factors are gateways to emotions, passions from external sources. Spinoza claims that the emotions shackle us into bondage, as we do that which seems right instead of following reason and actually doing what is right. Freedom relies on doing that which is based on reason, so we cannot be free if we are swayed by emotion. Emotions can only be countered with greater emotions, those that we create within ourselves from true knowledge, but the external emotions are very strong, more powerful than we can possibly be. Those who are able to follow reason are free; yet it appears that such a person is not capable of actually existing.

It would seem that from the idea of emotions being able to control us that Spinoza implies free will is non-existent. We have some knowledge, and perhaps a stronger external emotion, but we are unable to decide between the two. Instead, the greater in power dictates our behavior; there is no will that drives us to choose one over the other. As a counter to this claim, I would simply state that personal experience has shown that

people do indeed lack control at times; there are cases where knowing what is best is no match for the emotional state being experienced. Thus, Spinoza seems correct: we do act according to emotions even when we “know better”. The inability to act otherwise does not seem to be a lack of free will, but an overwhelming desire of impulsiveness. With practice, as Spinoza claims, we can overcome our instinctual predilections, and instead rely solely on reason. Where some might say this signifies an utter lack of free will, I instead claim that it is a very accurate view of human nature; even when we are able to make choices, we are sometimes swayed more greatly than we are capable of overcoming.

The idea of emotions being greater to those things that have occurred as opposed to contingencies in the future is addressed by IVP13, and helps significantly with the above problem. If we think of past experiences, we can use the greater emotion they produce to overcome things that we have yet to face. For example, in the past a family member had given me advice about succeeding in baseball, to never give up and always strive for greatness. Now, I am faced with an uncertainty about a game I must play later. Instead of letting the emotion of the game yet to be played overcome me with grief, I focus on the past, letting the emotion of the pep-talk given sway my actions. I do not step up to the plate to strike out, but instead to hit a homerun. Thus, free will is preserved in this case; we have the ability to use past experience when we know that emotions might take control. That, I think, is Spinoza’s point concerning emotion. We do have the ability to counteract them by our own volition, preserving freedom of will in the broadest sense.

All the talk of free will is irrelevant if we limit ourselves to personal tribulations, hence Spinoza advocates preservation of oneself, but not at the expense of others. The freedom to act towards another person is driven by love or hatred, views that are expressions of feelings towards external things. Humans can differ in nature by their difference in feelings towards specific things. For example, I like the Spurs and my friend loathes them because he's a Mavericks fan. Even though I can attempt to convince my friend that Tim Duncan is the best power forward in the league, my friend will insist it's Dirk. Thus, there is a conflict in our nature by virtue of how we feel about a particular basketball team. These feelings can lead to hatred between my friend and me; the conflict we have causes discord between us.

Hatred is not merely a product of disagreement, however. Spinoza explicates the problem of two individuals loving the same thing, which causes hate. My friend and I both love the playoff tickets sitting on the table; how is there a conflict? Spinoza insists there is a conflict between us as only one of us can attain the tickets. We are not in agreement about the tickets, then. Instead, I want the tickets to be owned by me, and my friend wants to own the tickets. The disagreement as to the ownership of the playoff tickets causes strife between us. Only by acting according to reason can our natures be rectified, and thus bring about love. Free will is that which is predicated upon reason in this case, but even this seems suspect. Yes, we can act through reason and thus have the same nature, but even then conflict seems possible. Suppose there is one bagel left in a post-apocalyptic world, and Dirk Nowitzki and Tim Duncan, the only two survivors left, are hungry. Obviously, if both act according to reason, they will have a disagreement

between them. Reason dictates personal survival, and Tim needs the bagel to preserve him, just as much as Dirk needs the bagel. There is a conflict between what the two must do, even though both are acting according to a harmonious nature. Spinoza would say that this is a fallacy; gaining knowledge is what truly makes humans the same in nature. Gaining adequate ideas is what is important in the end, not mere survival. Supposing Tim actually has an adequate idea of how to make bagels, he can share this with Dirk, to the benefit of both. If only one of them can have the knowledge, a conflict again arises. If a tape recording existed with the recipe for bagels, but could only be heard once before destroying itself, Tim and Dirk might reason to kill one another to gain that knowledge. Again, though, Spinoza would say that making bagels really isn't adequate knowledge at all; it is knowledge of a philosophical kind he has in mind of attaining. Spinoza implies that freedom of will is indeed attainable in the sense of freedom act how one wishes. We can act in a way that either helps or harms others; we are limited only by our own volition to do either, yet our volitions are tempered by reason. It seems that cooperating with others is important for Spinoza, as only through doing so can we possibly attain adequate ideas, bringing us closer to freedom.

From the preceding, free will for Spinoza is defined as acting out of the necessity of one's own nature. We either act according to external factors, or internal ones. No one thinks acting through the influence of externalities is freedom, thus freedom can only be when we act per our nature. This implies that we must be active, not merely passive and allow externalities to affect us. Striving towards our nature is true freedom, which means we must act in a way that we strive to act. Essentially, this means that our striving to act

good can be reached by acting good. In the same way, if we wish to shoot 90% from the free throw line, we start shooting free throws. Our decision to be an accurate shooter relies on our decision to start shooting accurately. Spinoza seems to imply circularity, but his definition is intuitive. Only by practicing at acting the way we wish to be can we begin to be that way. Being passive only allows us to react to the world in a nominal way; our actions are dictated by external factors beyond our control. Passivity causes us to lose our free will and become nothing more than a ball in a tennis game. This is not a very liberal view of freedom; the power to do as we wish whenever we wish. However, I think it is in fact a very realistic view, far closer to the notion of free will that is intuitively within us. No one would deny that acting according to dictates external to themselves is lack of freedom; Spinoza seems correct.

Spinoza does grant that people are sometimes mistaken about their freedom to act, even in the sense that he implies. This is merely an error made on their part, caused by transitory feelings. Suppose that I have a desire to watch *The Simpsons* tonight. If I do in fact watch *The Simpsons*, I know my own desire to do so, but I do not think something else caused me to have that desire. There may be something causing a desire to watch the TV show manifest itself in my mind. In much the same way that the tennis ball desires to go in the way it is hit, so too may my desire to watch *The Simpsons* be merely a mistake about the true cause. Further, we may at times feel the desire to perform actions, yet do not follow through. Spinoza would simply say that our desire to do such an action was insignificant. The feeling of freedom is analogous to the feeling we get when dreaming of doing things: it can be deceptive. If I dream of shooting free throws, the action is not

taking place in reality. However, I really can go shoot free throws if I wish, thus even though my feeling of freedom is sometimes like a dream, it too can be real. It is up to reason to determine when we are exercising free will and when we are simply being corralled by external forces.

Free will for Spinoza is something that all people are capable of striving for by agreeing with their nature, yet is not the default state of reality. Without reason, we are simply creatures of passion, easily swayed by the world much like any other thing in the universe. If we ignore our nature, we remain pawns, our actions controlled by forces external to us. It is only through striving to satisfy our natures, to seek adequate ideas about the universe, and ultimately G-d, can we break from our bondage and achieve freedom. Spinoza's view of freedom, while deterministic in its essence, seems to capture better the notions of free will than more liberal views. As stated earlier, intuition appears to agree with Spinoza: we do have a choice to be mere animals or rise above such a fate and become men. It is this choice, the decision to gain true knowledge and understand G-d, that underlies freedom. We would like to think we are always in control, but most of the time we aren't. Spinoza's outline of achieving true free will, while almost depressing, captures what I feel to be an accurate picture of reality. In Spinoza's own words, "He alone is free who lives with free consent under the entire guidance of reason".