



Rethinking Baruch Spinoza's Ethical Theory on the Good

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ABSTRACT

Baruch Spinoza in his ethical work, *Ethics*, does not begin in a way a typical work on ethics would begin. There is no instruction on how a person should behave, what comprises good and evil, what are the duties of a good man, so on and so forth. He instead begins somewhere much harder and difficult to fathom, with Causality, God, Nature and necessity. At first, these aspects look far away from human life but gradually it makes sense that Spinoza believed that human beings cannot understand good, evil, ethical living, virtue, and freedom unless they understood the kind of reality they belong to. This paper titled "Rethinking Baruch Spinoza's Ethical Theory from Being to the Good" studies Spinoza's ethical theory through his philosophy of being of God and nature. According to Spinoza everything exists within one necessary order of Nature and that forms the basis his idea of the good life. According to him, human beings are not outside this order of nature and their emotions, desires, fears and choices are deeply correlated with this and arise from causes. He explains this through power, understanding and necessity. According to Spinoza, each living being strives to persevere in its being and this striving is not just a wish to survive, it is the very expression of existence. He also connects good with what is useful to human life and virtue as the effort to understand it. He also presents blessedness as the joy that comes from the perfection of the intellect. According to Spinoza people often feel free because they don't understand the deep connection between cause and effect and to



understand fear, anger or desire is already to become less passive before them. Human beings are not absolutely free and Spinoza's ethical theory makes them understand more on self-knowledge, emotional discipline and rational freedom. Spinoza's ethics can be compared to S.N.Goenka's Vipassana where he states that liberation from human desires can be achieved through observation.

Spinoza begins his *Ethics* with reality itself. No simple moral advice, no immediate discussion of good behaviour, nor any teaching on right and wrong, not meeting some of the readers expectations stemming from the title itself. Instead, Spinoza argues that there is only one substance, and that substance is God or Nature (Spinoza 217). And human beings are part of this one infinite reality. This single idea changes the whole meaning of ethics because if human beings are part of Nature, then they are not free in the absolute sense. Their emotions and actions cannot be considered to have come from nowhere instead they must be understood through causes. Human desires, fear, anger, love and ambition are part of causes and effects. These emotions, choices and struggles are not outside nature but are natural events with causes. This is why Spinoza's ethics does not begin with blame, it begins with understanding. Spinoza differs from Descartes in an important way. While Descartes begins with the thinking self and thereafter moves on to God, Spinoza does the reverse. He begins from God or Nature and tries to understand the individual through that larger reality. Descartes still keeps the strong distinctions between God, mind and body while Spinoza's system of understanding them is more unified.

Unlike traditional and moral religious views where morality is often explained through obedience, with good and evil being treated as fixed qualities placed inside things, Spinoza treats good and evil as relational ideas. For him a thing is good when it is genuinely useful to our power of living and understanding and a thing is evil when it weakens our power or prevents us from reaching a greater good (Spinoza 300). This does not mean that whatever feels pleasant is good. Spinoza is careful to differentiate that. When he says useful to us, he means that goodness is not a mysterious property but is connected to what helps human being live more fully, more rationally and powerfully. Similarly, evil is not seen as an independent force and whatever obstructs or diminishes our movement towards a more adequate and happy life is considered evil.

Even this can easily be misunderstood. Spinoza is not trying to say that every personal preference is good. For example, if someone enjoys revenge, that does not make revenge good. If someone desires



excessive praise, that does not make praise-seeking good. Human beings often desire things that weaken them. For Spinoza, desire itself must be educated by reason.

This is why his ethics is not crude self-interest. It is closer to rational self-preservation. Andrew Youpa points out that Spinoza's idea of the good is tied to the increase of one's power and ability to understand and act (Youpa 238–242). Goodness is therefore measured not by momentary pleasure but by whether something strengthens the person's ability to understand and act.

For example, fear may sometimes protect us from immediate danger. But a life governed by fear cannot be good in Spinoza's sense. Fear narrows the mind. It makes a person dependent on uncertain images of the future. In the same way, anger may feel like strength, but usually it reveals that the person is being controlled by an external cause. Spinoza's question would not be, "Is anger morally forbidden?" His question would be, "Does anger increase or decrease the mind's power?"

This is a more diagnostic form of ethics. Spinoza is not mainly interested in condemning people. He wants to understand what makes them passive and what makes them active. This is also why his moral philosophy feels surprisingly modern. He asks us to look at causes, not just labels. Instead of saying simply "this is bad" he asks, bad for what, bad in relation to which power, bad because it produces what kind of dependence? The originality of Spinoza lies in this movement from moral judgment to rational analysis. He does not remove ethical seriousness instead he relocates it. The serious ethical question is whether a life is becoming more rational, more active and more capable of joy.

His definition of virtue also changes the usual meaning of morality. Virtue is not simple obedience. It is power, but not power over other people. It is the power to act from one's own nature through adequate understanding. This is why Spinoza says that the striving for understanding is the foundation of virtue (Spinoza 308–309). What he tries to mean is that a person becomes ethically better when he becomes less confused about himself and has more clarity about his emotions, desires and his place in Nature. Spinoza's analysis is valuable because he does not moralize emotions too quickly. He explains their mechanism. When a person tries to understand an emotion such as envy and realizes that it is more of a confused relation between his own desire and another person's success, he may not immediately stop feeling envious but he no longer has to believe everything envy tells him. He can see it as an affect with causes. And gradually as he starts to observe and understand his varied emotions, he is no longer a victim of his emotions and gradually learns to live life wisely.



Koistinen and Viljanen observe that Spinoza links knowledge of the self with knowledge of the larger order of reality (Koistinen and Viljanen 14–18). This point is crucial because self-knowledge is not merely a private introspection. To understand oneself, one must understand the causes that pass through the self, bodily states, social relations, memories, habits, institutions and imagination. The self is not sealed off from the world.

Spinoza's ethics can be compared to S.N. Goenka's Vipassana where he states that liberation from human desires can be achieved through observation. The teachings of Baruch Spinoza and S.N. Goenka offer two powerful, yet unexpectedly parallel, approaches to living wisely. While Spinoza proposed that true freedom and happiness come not from external success or divine reward, but from understanding the nature of reality and mastering one's emotions through reason, S.N. Goenka on the other hand revived the ancient technique of Vipassana meditation, teaching that liberation from suffering arises through direct observation of bodily sensations and the cultivation of equanimity. While their methods differ, one based in philosophical reasoning and the other in meditative practice, both systems point toward the same essential truth: that clarity, self-awareness and alignment with the laws of nature are the foundations of a fulfilling life. Exploring the resonance between Spinoza's metaphysical insights and Goenka's experiential path of inner observation reveals a shared vision of human flourishing rooted in wisdom, peace and harmony with the world as it truly is.

Spinoza's philosophy and S.N. Goenka's Vipassana meditation converge in strikingly profound ways, both offering a path toward inner freedom through self-awareness and rational understanding. At the heart of Spinoza's thought is the idea that true happiness arises from clarity of mind, understanding of emotions, and alignment with the natural order, principles that are mirrored in the practice of Vipassana. Goenka teaches that by observing bodily sensations with equanimity and understanding the impermanent nature of all things, one gradually dissolves ignorance and reactive patterns. Similarly, Spinoza encourages us to analyze our emotions, not as moral failings but as data that help us comprehend the causes of our suffering and joy. Both traditions view freedom not as the absence of constraints but as liberation from ignorance, illusion, and compulsive reactivity. Furthermore, just as Spinoza speaks of the "intellectual love of God" as a serene recognition of our place in the cosmos, Vipassana leads to a compassionate equanimity that transcends the ego and cultivates harmony with all life. Ultimately, both approaches invite us to live wisely, not by escaping reality, but by deeply understanding and lovingly engaging with it.



In conclusion, Spinoza is still relevant among modern readers because some of his insights feel very contemporary. Modern readers are familiar with the idea that human behaviour is shaped by causes: psychology, society, memory, bodily condition, education and environment. Spinoza's philosophy gives this idea a rigorous philosophy of being. He asks us to stop treating human beings as mysterious exceptions and to study them as part of Nature. This has consequences for mental and emotional life. Many people suffer not only because painful things happen, but because they do not understand how their emotions are formed. Anxiety, anger, envy and shame can feel like absolute truths when they are being experienced. Spinoza teaches that they are affected with causes. To understand those causes is not to dismiss the emotion. It is to loosen its control.

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