TRUE FREEDOM

SPINOZA'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

BRENT ADKINS

True Freedom

Spinoza's Practical Philosophy

Brent Adkins

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Introduction
Spinoza: A User's Guide

My primary interest in Spinoza is not as a professional philosopher, although I think that philosophically Spinoza has a great deal to offer. My interest is straightforwardly practical. I am convinced that Spinoza's greatest value lies in his ability to describe what it means to live well and to offer a path toward that goal. Of course, living well for Spinoza is inseparable from doing philosophy, but doing philosophy is never a dry academic exercise. It is the pursuit of what is best in us, an understanding of who we are and our place in the world.

The chief issue for Spinoza in living well is action, but not in the sense of judging whether a particular act is right or wrong. This kind of judgment is available, but it is secondary to Spinoza's concern about the difference between activity and passivity. To put the matter as succinctly as possible, we are living well, or we are truly free, only when we are active. In contrast to this, we are not living well when we are passive. The key to understanding Spinoza is knowing the difference. While in an abstract sense it is easy to distinguish between the active and passive, the terms are simply opposed to one another. In practice this distinction is not always clear. As we'll see, everything hinges on the emotions, our way of engaging with the world. Some emotions are active. Some are passive. One of the tasks of this book is to clearly articulate the difference between the active and the passive, not only in regard to individuals but also in regard to politics, religion, and the environment.

The bottom line for Spinoza is that action of any kind can only follow from understanding, while passivity at bottom follows from a failure to understand. Not only do I need to understand myself, but I need to understand the world around me in order to act. Spinoza is not unique in the history of philosophy in recognizing the connection between understanding and action. The wisdom traditions across all cultures are replete with this connection from Buddhism to Judaism

to the Ancient Greeks. Thus one of the tasks of the book is to show Spinoza's continuity with other traditions where it is illuminating, but more importantly to show where he is bringing something new to the discussion. As we'll see, what Spinoza brings that's new to the discussion is freedom.

Unfortunately, Spinoza's connection with the ancient wisdom traditions is often lost in focusing exclusively on his claims about the nature of the universe, his metaphysics, and his claims about the nature of knowledge, his epistemology. My first encounter with Spinoza occurred as an undergraduate in an introductory philosophy course. In the flood of all the other philosophers and ideas, I can't say that Spinoza made a particularly strong impression. I remember words like "substance" and "pantheism" being thrown around liberally but not much else. I didn't encounter Spinoza again until I was a graduate student in philosophy, although in the meantime through osmosis, I was able to put together a few more of the contours of his thought and his relation to the history of philosophy. Like most people I was put off by his style, which often reads like a recipe for a dish no one would be interested in eating, even though there was also something compelling about it. What remained opaque to me was how the *Ethics* was an ethics at all. Because Spinoza is usually taught as part of a survey course known as Modern Western Philosophy, the primary focus of these courses is these thinkers' theories of reality and knowledge. This focus, while valuable, gives short shrift to any other views, particularly ethical views, these thinkers might have had.

My encounter with Spinoza as an ethical thinker did not occur until several years later when I was tasked to teach an ethics course. It was my first ethics course and my immediate inclination was to teach it historically. I had already lined up most of the usual suspects for such a course, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche, but I felt it was missing something from the modern period (as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy is inexplicably called) and something from the twentieth century. I filled in the twentieth-century gap with Levinas, and without knowing what I was getting into, put Spinoza on the syllabus. I was woefully unprepared to teach Spinoza to undergraduates, especially the ethical parts of Spinoza, since my familiarity ended with his theories of reality and knowledge. Like a good academic, I went to the library for some help and was fortunate enough to stumble across Stuart Hampshire's *Two Theories of Morality*. The book, now sadly out of print, did me the great service of not only explaining what exactly was ethical about Spinoza's writings but to compare Spinoza's views to Aristotle's, someone I was much more familiar with. It was at this point that the conviction began to grow in me that Spinoza not only made important claims about ethics but that those claims were relevant today. As Hampshire makes clear, Spinoza's view of the universe has much more in common with contemporary scientific accounts of the universe. More importantly Spinoza's ethics follow directly from his view of the universe. As a result there is a very satisfying holism to Spinoza's philosophy. One is not required to believe one thing about the

Chapter 1
The Curious Incident of the Rude Driver in the SUV

While I was living in Chicago, I developed an unfortunate case of road rage. It seemed as if everywhere I went, I was beset on all sides by either incompetent or thoughtless (and thus incompetent) drivers. A drive through any part of the city was the catalyst for the most astonishing phrases coming out of my mouth. I became capable of swearing in numerous languages and learned the appropriate, accompanying hand gestures. While no one was spared my wrath, I reserved a special hatred for the drivers of SUVs. Their incompetence seemed magnified by the ridiculous size of their vehicles. Not only did the SUVs take up too much space, but their drivers did not see the point of slowing down during rain or snow. They often parallel parked poorly, not closing the gap to the next car or ending up too far from the curb. It also rankled me that if there were an accident, though it would no doubt be the fault of the SUV driver, I, in my compact car, would surely be killed, while the SUV driver would walk away unscathed. I was convinced that justice on the road was impossible.

Imagine that while driving in this state of mind (courteously and mindfully, of course) I see out of the corner of my eye a very large object coming toward me very quickly. I slam on my brakes to avoid a collision. As it passes me I see that it is my sworn enemy, the SUV. As I honk my horn, a fusillade of expletives erupts from my mouth. The SUV never deviates from its path. There are no break lights, no I'm-sorry-I'm-an-idiot wave from the driver, no acknowledgment of any kind. I am livid. At this point, I begin to construct a lyrical and cinematic revenge fantasy.

In my fantasy I speed up in front of the SUV and skid sideways blocking the lane. The angry driver gets out of his car to give me a piece of his mind. I, too, step out of my car and I've been magically transformed. First, everything begins happening in slow motion. Second, my clothes have changed from the drab earth

tones that I usually wear into all black. Suddenly, I no longer need glasses and am able to wear exceedingly cool sunglasses. In short I look very much like a character from the *Matrix* movies. I am revenge personified. The SUV driver is unfazed by this and continues angrily walking toward me. When I round the back of my car he stops in horror and begins to run the other way, because it's only then that he sees the sawed-off, pump-action 12-gauge shotgun that has been concealed by my black trench coat, which is artfully flapping in the wind. Grim-faced and without saying a word I begin blowing large holes in the tires and radiator of the SUV, no doubt ensuring that this SUV will never endanger anyone again.

I am brought out of my reverie just before uttering some witty quip such as, "License revoked" or "Looks like you need a tune-up." The SUV and I happen to be going in the same direction, but it now appears to be turning. My hope is to get in an icy stare of moral superiority before he drives off, never to be seen again. Luckily for him, he is spared the horror of my wrathful gaze as he turns down a different street and pulls immediately into a parking lot. I see that it is a hospital parking lot and that he has pulled up to the emergency room doors. He quickly gets out and runs to the other side of the SUV to open the door and help out a very pregnant woman.

Numerous feelings pass through me at that moment, nausea, guilt, embarrassment, shame, and an overwhelming, "Oh . . . so that's why he cut me off." One feeling that does not pass through me, though, is anger. The lack of anger at this point seems remarkable. The anger was something I had been laying the groundwork on for years. I had been slowly and carefully nurturing it, judiciously recording all the slights against me. I had localized the source of my anger in SUVs, and then all the elements came together in such a way as to insure an explosive reaction that left me constructing an exquisitely detailed revenge fantasy. All of this was gone in an instant. Why? The first thing that probably comes to mind is that I no longer had a reason to be angry. Or, perhaps, I felt that driving a pregnant woman in labor to the hospital was an acceptable reason to be cut off. Or, maybe, I saw that my anger was based on a misconception. I assumed that the driver of the SUV cut me off because he was incompetent or thoughtless. Once I saw, however, that he was neither incompetent nor thoughtless, the anger based on that assumption dissolved.

As we move through Spinoza's philosophy we'll be able to give an increasingly precise account of exactly what happened there, but even at this point I think we can see what I take to be Spinoza's fundamental ethical insight. Provisionally, we could state Spinoza's insight this way: To the degree that one understands, one cannot be angry. While this insight captures what happens in the illustration, it also raises more questions than it answers. On the one hand, it is certainly helpful to reduce the amount of anger in the world. That in itself would seem to have numerous positive effects. On the other hand, does Spinoza's ethics only deal with anger? Does it have anything to say about other emotions? Is it *only* about the emotions? Also, what precisely does it mean to "understand" in this

case? Isn't my understanding in the case of the SUV driver pure happenstance? What if I never discovered that I was cut off for justifiable reasons? What if the SUV driver is in fact thoughtless and incompetent? Is my anger justified, then? What about the other emotions that accompanied my understanding, the guilt and shame? Why do these arise?

Obviously, we do not yet have the resources to respond to these questions. The primary purpose of the illustration is to show that at least in some cases, when we know why something happened we are much less likely to get angry about it. Or, even better, if we find ourselves angry about something and then learn why it happened, our anger dissipates. We'll have to look very closely at Spinoza to see if this model can be generalized. Furthermore, we'll have to examine precisely what can be generalized. What we'll discover is that Spinoza has a full-blown theory of the emotions that follows from his more abstract claims about God and the mind, and that the relation between the understanding and the emotions extends far beyond anger. Spinoza says it this way, "An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it."[1] There are a few things that we can note at this point. First, notice that Spinoza uses the word "affect" to refer to what we would normally call "emotion." This is because Spinoza is concerned about all of the ways in which we affect and are affected by our environment. These ways of affecting and being affected, although they include the emotions, are in fact much broader than the emotions. Thus being angry for Spinoza is an affect, but so is stubbing my toe or any of the innumerable ways that I interact with the world around me. The second thing we can note about Spinoza's proposition is that what concerns him is the type of affect one is experiencing, namely the passions. What Spinoza has in mind here is not captured by the word's connection with a related word like "passionate." The passions for Spinoza are not primarily the things we are passionate about, that is, the things that we pursue with the most vigor and energy. Rather, the principal connotation operative in Spinoza's use of "passion" is "passive." The passions, for Spinoza, are thus the ways in which we are affected that render us passive. To be passive for Spinoza is to not be myself, to be controlled by something other than me. We have a ways to go before we see why this is, but for Spinoza passive affects are the source of all detrimental behavior.

The final thing we can note about Spinoza's proposition is that if passive affects are the source of all detrimental behavior, the solution is forming clear and distinct ideas. Spinoza is clearly echoing Descartes in his use of the phrase "clear and distinct," and in many ways each has the same thing in mind. What is at the forefront of both Spinoza's and Descartes' minds here is something that cannot be doubted, or something bordering on transparency or full disclosure. With this in mind, let's return briefly to the run-in with the SUV driver. When I was cut off by the SUV driver I became angry and reveled in revenge fantasies. Was I passive at this point? It seems that I was. All of my thoughts and actions were suddenly dependent on the SUV driver. I was no longer controlling myself; I was being

controlled by something other than me. This is the very definition of "passive." At what point was I released from my passivity? At the point that I understood why the driver cut me off. When the driver's reasons for acting the way he did became apparent to me, I was no longer angry. That is, when I clearly and distinctly understood why I was cut off, I was no longer affected passively. A clear and distinct idea replaced a passion.

The replacement of passive affects by clear and distinct ideas succinctly describes the mechanics of Spinoza's ethical theory, but in order to get a sense of the theory as a whole I'd like to look at the way that Spinoza concludes the *Ethics*. Perhaps, then, if we see where Spinoza is heading we can better understand the steps required to get there. In the closing comments to his final proposition Spinoza's language is reminiscent of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. In the opening two chapters of *Proverbs*, Wisdom personified lays out two possible paths, the path of folly and the path of wisdom. Wisdom portrays herself as calling out in vain,

> How long, O naïve ones, will you love simplicity?
> And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing,
> And fools hate knowledge?[2]

Those who fail to heed her call will reap the reward of the folly, namely, death. Let's compare this to what Spinoza says about the ignorant.

> For not only is the ignorant man troubled in many ways by external causes, and unable ever to possess true peace of mind, but he also lives as if he knew neither himself, nor God, nor things; and as soon as he ceases to be acted on, he ceases to be.[3]

For Spinoza, those who remain ignorant are never really themselves. Their lives are a series of passive affects, being controlled by things other than them.

On the other hand, those who heed the call of Wisdom, according to *Proverbs*, will be greatly rewarded.

> Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
> Incline your heart to understanding;
> For if you cry for discernment,
> Lift your voice for understanding;
> If you seek her as silver,
> And search for her as for hidden treasures;
> Then you will discern the fear of the Lord,
> And discover the knowledge of God.[4]

In a similar contrast, Spinoza writes this about the wise,

> On the other hand, the wise man, insofar as he is considered as such, is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind.[5]

Spinoza's ethical theory is thus about two possible paths one might follow, two fundamentally opposed ways of affecting and being affected. One path leads away from peace and knowledge and toward death. The other path leads toward peace and knowledge and away from death. Also, notice that Spinoza's concerns are characterized in terms that would be familiar to anyone. He takes up the ancient philosophical dictum of "Know yourself." He takes up the theological concern, knowledge of God, that had been dominant in Europe for the previous millennia and a half and is evidenced in the much older tradition of Hebrew wisdom literature that Spinoza would have been intimately familiar with. Finally, he takes up the contemporary scientific concern of knowing the world. The wise person possesses knowledge of all of these things and thus possesses the concomitant peace of mind. The ignorant person, however, does not possess this knowledge and thus fails to achieve peace of mind.

After laying out these two paths, Spinoza concludes the *Ethics* on an edifying note:

> If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, still, it can be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.[6]

The tone here remains very similar to the passages from *Proverbs*. It is patently obvious to the writer of *Proverbs* and Spinoza that the world is lacking in wisdom, and yet few people are actively seeking it. Furthermore, although it is clearly advantageous to possess wisdom, it is difficult to achieve. The rewards, however, are extensive. The writer of *Proverbs* speaks in terms of "deliverance," deliverance from "the way of evil" and all the things to be found on it, from the one who "speaks perversely," from the ones who "walk in the ways of darkness," from the one whose "tracks lead to the dead."[7] Spinoza adopts a Christian idiom and speaks of "salvation" as the reward for following the path of wisdom. We'll return to Spinoza's use of religious language in chapter 9.

As we have seen there are numerous resonances between Spinoza's project and numerous intellectual and religious traditions. As we progress through Spinoza's thought these resonances will become richer and increase in complexity. One famous commentator on Spinoza's *Ethics* went so far as to say that everything in the *Ethics* has already been said but that Spinoza puts it together into an absolutely unique system.[8] Thus, while we will see numerous points of convergence between Spinoza's ethical theory and Stoicism, Epicureanism, Aristotelianism, Cartesiansim, Christianity, and Judaism, our primary focus will be to highlight what differentiates Spinoza from these other traditions.

One crucial point of differentiation between Spinoza and most ethical theories lies in the descriptive nature of Spinoza's ethics. Most ethical theories are prescriptive rather than descriptive. To be prescriptive means that a particular way of life or particular act are prescribed, or required of a person. Prescriptive ethics are

might lead if one interacts with harmful things. This is the path of ignorance, the path of sickness, the path of curse and bondage.

Spinoza's fundamental ethical insight is that when we understand why something happens it loses its power to control us. When I understood why the SUV driver cut me off, I was no longer angry about it. A great deal of work needs to be done to fully flesh out why this is the case for Spinoza. But, to begin that process we characterized Spinoza's work in terms of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Both take very seriously the image of two paths, wisdom and folly. Furthermore, we looked at what distinguished Spinoza from other ethical theories. First, we noted that it was descriptive rather than prescriptive, and finally we noted that it is characterized by a kind of experimentalism. That is, Spinoza is concerned with the possible ways that one might live, which is vast given not only our complexity but the complexity of our environment. In the following chapters we will explore how these fundamental differences set Spinoza apart not only on ethical topics but also wide ranging topics such as psychology, politics, and religion.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted all translations of Spinoza come from *The Collected Works of Spinoza,* vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Spinoza's *Ethics* has a standardized citation system that I will employ throughout the remainder of the book. The *Ethics* has five parts, which are indicated in Roman numerals. The part number is followed by the next level of specificity, usually a proposition number. This is indicated by a "P" followed by the number of the proposition as an Arabic numeral. Finally, the citation indicates whether the text is subordinate to the proposition as a demonstration (abbreviated as "D") or a note related to the discussion (indicated with an "S" for "scholia"). The quote above comes from part 5 of the *Ethics* and is proposition 3. Thus, the citation is VP3.

2. Proverbs 1:22. New American Standard Version.

3. VP42S.

4. Proverbs 2:2–5.

5. VP42S.

6. VP42S.

7. Proverbs 2:12–18.

8. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 3.

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), 22–3.

10. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 27–8.

11. Todd May in his *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), uses all three of these questions in order to differentiate Deleuze from other modes of thought. Spinoza does not arise in this context, but May does go on to argue that

Chapter 2
What's Love Got to Do with It?

In *The Simpsons* episode, "The Springfield Files," which itself is a spoof of the show the *X-Files*, Homer is convinced that he's seen an extraterrestrial. In the climactic scene the whole town gathers to discover that the "alien" is in fact Mr. Burns, owner of the Springfield nuclear plant. Mr. Burns has been disoriented by drugs and treatments intended to "cheat death for another week" and a "lifetime of working at a nuclear power plant has given him a healthy, green glow." When Mr. Burns appears before the town in this disoriented state he says, "I bring you peace. I bring you love." To which the cigar-smoking Dr. Hibbert retorts, "Is that the kind of love between a man and a woman or between a man and a fine Cuban cigar?"

For the sake of our discussion here, I'll risk killing the comedy by analyzing it. First, if we were to imagine Mr. Burns's response to Dr. Hibbert it would be one of confusion. Mr. Burns is not bringing either of those kinds of love. He would claim to be bringing a more transcendent "love of all humanity" or "love of the universe," as evidenced by the scene closing with the whole town joining hands and singing "Good Morning Starshine" with Leonard Nimoy. Second, both of Dr. Hibbert's examples equate love to a kind of pleasure, sexual or gustatory. (Admittedly, "love between a man and a woman" is ambiguous. It could be the kind of relation that arises in a long-term commitment, but I think it's funnier to imagine Dr. Hibbert responding to Mr. Burns's world-embracing love with the equivalent of, "Is that like the love of sex or the love of smoking?" Maybe it's just me.)

Regardless of how one takes Dr. Hibbert's response, what this short exchange shows is that the word "love" is being used in three distinct ways. How is this possible? On the one hand, when we're asked to reflect on the meaning of "love" we tend toward the more high-minded accounts. We describe love in terms of devotion and sacrifice. Furthermore, we tend to rigorously distinguish love and sex. Sex might be an expression of love, but sex by itself cannot produce love, only

lust. Our actual use of the word "love," however, often betrays our high-minded explanation. No one would claim that either Dr. Hibbert or Mr. Burns are misusing the word. In fact, it's the collision of these opposed meanings that make the exchange humorous. We do say things like, "I love these shoes," or "I love this TV show." I can say that I love my wife, my kids, and Italian food without having to use scare quotes at any point to indicate that I'm using the word ironically or in opposition to its appropriate meaning.

In order to explain what's going on here, I'd like to turn to Spinoza's theory of the affects. In the previous chapter we saw that replacing affects that are passions with clear and distinct ideas is crucial to Spinoza's ethical theory, but it's not entirely clear at this point what the affects are and why some of them might be passions. Also, the existence of affects as passions raises the possibility of affects that are not passions. Suffice it to say that Spinoza's theory of the affects is rich and complex, and while it will allow us to answer questions about the nature and definition of the emotions, like love, for example, it also covers much more than the emotions. Spinoza is concerned about the possible ways that we might interact with the rest of the world, from shoes and cigars to other people to the world as a whole.

Spinoza's theory of the affects is found in part III of his *Ethics*. Here Spinoza presents a taxonomy of the types of interactions that one might engage in. He introduces the affects with two remarkable notions. The first is that humans are not a "kingdom within a kingdom." What Spinoza is pointing to here is the relation of humans to the rest of the world. Other theorists of human nature have gone wrong by supposing that the rules governing human interactions are qualitatively different from the rules governing other types of interactions and thus a law unto themselves. As a result, human interactions become deeply mysterious and without precedent. In the face of this mystery all we can do is bemoan our impotence. The mystery of human affects is unsolvable in principle. We cannot understand them, and thus, we are always at their mercy. The best we can do, then, is fulminate with more or less skill against the mysterious vice that afflicts us all. Spinoza's response to this dead end is to argue that there is no qualitative difference between the rules that govern human interactions and the rules that govern other interactions. All interactions share crucial similarities that can be cataloged and, more importantly, understood. For it is only in understanding our affects that we can hope to improve our lot. While Spinoza is adamant that human interactions are not mysteriously different from other types of interactions, he is not claiming that humans are therefore identical to everything else. Humans are manifestly different from other things in the universe. This difference, however, is not the result of the fact that human interactions differ from other interactions. As we will see in a later chapter, human difference emerges from the complex interrelations of the human body not from being a kingdom within a kingdom.

The second remarkable notion by which Spinoza introduces his theory of the affects follows from the first. If humans are not a kingdom within a kingdom,

then the rules of their interactions are the same as the rules of other interactions. Human emotions are not opaque. They need to be treated with the same rigor as any other natural phenomenon. As a result human affects are to be treated in the same manner as "lines, planes, and bodies." The reference to geometry here is not accidental. The full title of Spinoza's work is *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometric Order*. Euclid's *Elements* is clearly in the background here as the model of clarity and logical precision, and Spinoza's style is deeply indebted to Euclid. While to many, Spinoza's style in the *Ethics* is cumbersome and impedes understanding, Spinoza is trying to present his system as clearly as possible. As a result, he doesn't assume any knowledge on the reader's part but clearly defines his terms at the outset. He even goes so far as to articulate truths that he takes to be self-evident, called axioms. For example, "Whatever is, is either in itself or in another."[1] Spinoza takes it as obvious that everything that exists, either depends on something else for its existence (i.e., "in another") or is self-subsistent (i.e., "in itself") and that all objects fit into one of these two categories. Clearly, we are not accustomed to dividing the world in this way, but it does seem to cover all the options, in the same way that, "it is raining or it is not raining outside my window right now" covers all the options regarding precipitation. Spinoza's method then is similar to geometry in that he uses definitions and axioms to construct proofs. Each proof yields a proposition. Propositions can then be combined with other propositions, definitions, and axioms to produce more propositions. The crucial thing for Spinoza is that as in geometry the proofs yield necessary truths, that is, truths that cannot be otherwise. Thus, the propositions deduced in the *Ethics* are for Spinoza on the same order as "the sum of a triangle's interior angles equals the sum of two right angles." This seems reasonable when one is discussing triangles but wholly unreasonable when one is talking about emotions. Is Spinoza saying that there is some sort of formula for love? Furthermore, is he saying that there are necessary conditions for love, and that when these are met, love will always result? As strange as it may sound and as difficult as it may be to believe, yes, that is exactly what Spinoza is saying. He will treat love and any and all other human interactions in the same manner as lines, planes, and solids.

So, Spinoza is not a romantic, but let's reserve judgment about his theory of the emotions until we look at it a little more deeply. Spinoza's theory depends on several interrelated concepts. The first pair comes from the definitions at the beginning of part III: adequate and inadequate cause. What is at issue is the relation between a cause and its effect. Either an effect can be clearly understood through the cause or it cannot. If the effect can be clearly understood through the cause, then it is adequate. If the effect cannot be clearly understood through the cause, then it is inadequate. Much like we saw above in our discussion of axioms, these are exhaustive possibilities for Spinoza. There is no third possibility. All causes are either adequate or inadequate.

In order to illustrate this point, let's suppose that I leave my office to go to the coffee shop down the street. The coffee shop is just a few blocks away, and as

I walk I cross several streets. If at any point, I reflect on my progress and ask, "How did I get here?" My answer, very simply is, "I walked here on my way to the coffee shop." Thus, the effect of my being at any point along the way is understood by the cause of my having walked there on my way somewhere else. Furthermore, the explanation is sufficient. No additional information is needed to explain to anyone the reason why I am at one point on the sidewalk and not another, or why I am walking at all and not in my office. In this case, *I* am the adequate cause of my position.[2]

By way of contrast, let's suppose that as I'm crossing the street on my way to the coffee shop, an SUV runs a stop sign, hits me, and sends me hurtling through space on a trajectory perpendicular to my previous one. If I'm fortunate enough to come to and still enough in possession of my wits to ask, "How did I get here?" The answer can no longer be, "I walked here on my way to the coffee shop." The effect of me lying battered in the middle of the road can no longer be understood solely by my walking to the coffee shop. Thus, I am no longer the adequate cause of my position. Rather, I am the inadequate cause of my position. That is, a complete understanding of the effect requires an account of me *and* my unforeseen collision with the SUV. This distinction between adequate and inadequate causes allows Spinoza to distinguish sharply between activity and passivity. Very succinctly, I act when I am the adequate cause of an effect, and I am passive when I am the inadequate cause of an effect. Thus, in the example above, I was active while walking to the coffee shop under my own power and was passive after being struck by the SUV.

The second set of concepts that are crucial to Spinoza's account of the affects are the three basic affects joy, sadness, and striving. All other affects are related to these basic three. Joy (*laetitia*), for Spinoza, is "that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection."[3] The first feature that distinguishes joy from the other affects is that it indicates the move from a lesser to a greater perfection. The immediate difficulty with this conception of joy is the meaning of "perfection" here. What is perfection and how does joy move one from lesser to greater perfection? Perfection does not here indicate flawlessness, but completion. For Spinoza humans are always a work in progress, and they express degrees of completeness or perfection. If we think of a house in the process of being built, for example, it is easy to imagine triumphs and setbacks in this process. The distinction between a triumph and setback is also easy to determine. Triumphs are those events that lead toward the completion of the house, a solid foundation, a squared frame, good plumbing, etc. Spinoza calls those ways of affecting and being affected that lead us closer to completion "joys."

By the same token, setbacks are those events that lead away from the completion of the house. Numerous types of setbacks are possible. One could imagine a storm that damages the frame. One could imagine plumbing that fails inspection and would thus need to be replaced. One could even imagine a flawed plan whereby different components of the house are destructive to one another, for

able. Again, the phone's power to resist destruction is not a result of conscious activity, but merely a function of its construction. Because the phone is made of hard plastic and not, say, cream cheese, it is able to resist destruction or persevere more readily.

What something is and its ability to persevere are, then, one and the same. Spinoza says it this way, "[t]he striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing."[9] Here Spinoza explicitly connects "striving" and "essence." The straightforward claim here is that striving makes a thing what it is. Or, in the traditional language of necessary conditions (*sine qua non*), without striving nothing can be itself. At the same time that Spinoza appropriates the traditional vocabulary of philosophy, he is also breaking with it in an important way. Since at least Aristotle, the essence of a thing has two aspects. First, the essence is a property of the thing. Thus for Aristotle, the essence of humans is reason. Second, and this is related to the first, the essence must be the property that distinguishes one class of things from another. Humans are defined by reason precisely because reason is what humans possess that no other thing possesses. Humans are identified by their specific difference. Hence, Aristotle's definition of humans is taken up in the medieval tradition as "rational animal." In contrast to this, Spinoza is claiming that striving defines, is the essence of, all things. This immediately flies in the face of the traditional distinctions of philosophy that sharply distinguish the human and the animal, and the animate and inanimate. Striving is the essence of all of these. Where then, does the distinction lie? Spinoza cannot be claiming that there is no difference among amoebas, lawnmowers, and humans. The difference lies in the striving itself. Amoebas strive differently from both lawnmowers and humans, and each of these strive differently from each other and amoebas. Quite simply, striving refers to the ways that a thing can affect other things. For an amoeba, this striving amounts to very little most of the time. An amoeba perseveres in existence by controlling the comings and goings of other single-celled organisms around it. A little bleach in the water can really ruin its day. On the other hand, if ingested by a human the amoeba can wreak great havoc merely by persevering in existence. Given the differences in their ways of striving, though, an amoeba has no effect on a lawnmower. Steel and plastic lie beyond its striving. As we'll see below, understanding things in terms of their ways of affecting and being affected provides an important corrective to dominant ways of thinking in the Western tradition.

What concerns us here, however, is an overview of Spinoza's theory of the affects. As we have seen, two of the basic affects, joy and sadness, are passions. That is, both refer to ways that we are acted upon by external causes. In contrast to this, striving is not a passion but an action. Striving indicates the ways in which we act in accordance with our nature. It is here that we are able to answer the question that arose above in regard to completion or perfection. We are complete to the degree that we act, or we are complete to the degree that we are the adequate cause of our affects rather than the inadequate cause of our affects. Thus, for Spinoza there are

two basic types of affects that indicate our activity, or "strength of character" (*fortitudo*): "tenacity" (*animositas*) and "nobility" (*generositas*).

> Those actions, therefore, which aim only at the agent's advantage, I relate to tenacity, and those which aim at another's advantage, I relate to nobility. So moderation, sobriety, presence of mind in danger, etc., are species of tenacity whereas courtesy, mercy, etc., are species of nobility.[10]

In the chapters that follow we will continue to explore the wide-ranging implications of Spinoza's theory of the affects. For right now, however, let's return to getting cut off by the SUV driver. As we've already seen, I was affected negatively by this event. I was diminished rather than strengthened, made less complete. Why? Because at that point, I was not the adequate cause of my actions. My actions could not be explained through me alone, but only through the way I was being affected by the external cause of the SUV. Some might argue, though, that I was watching out for myself. By asserting myself, however impotently, I was being tenacious. A little reflection, however, shows that this is not the case. Does road rage tend to lead toward or away from my perseverance? Am I more or less likely to get into an accident in this state, or when I'm prudent and keep my wits about me? For Spinoza, road rage would not be a case of tenacity, where I strive toward perseverance. This is borne out by the conclusion of the event. Only when I finally understand why I was cut off do I become active rather than passive. Only then can I seek not only my advantage (tenacity) but the advantage of others (nobility).

NOTES

1. IA1.
2. Eventually, we'll see that adequacy lies on a continuum for Spinoza. The path of wisdom lies in the direction of being an adequate cause, although we can never eliminate our dependence on external causes.
3. IIIP11S.
4. IIIP11S. We'll return to Spinoza's conception of perfection when we discuss Spinoza's conception of God in chapter 9, but for right now the relevant analogue is grammar. The perfect tense indicates an action that is already completed. If I say, "I've been hit by an SUV," it means that at some point prior to now the action of being hit by an SUV has been completed.
5. IIIP13S.
6. IIIP13S.
7. IIIP13S.
8. IIIP6.
9. IIIP7.
10. IIIP59S.

Chapter 3
On Not Being Oneself, Or the Shmoopy Effect

In the *Seinfeld* episode, "The Soup Nazi," Jerry has a new girlfriend. Inexplicably they call each other "shmoopy." They have long conversations with one another about who is in fact shmoopy. George and Elaine find this insufferable. George goes on the counteroffensive by mirroring Jerry's behavior when he's with his fiancée, Susan. This creates an escalating war of public affection as both couples end up making out in the coffee shop. Ultimately, balance is restored late in the episode when Jerry breaks up with his new girlfriend.

The question that concerns me here is Jerry's behavior and George's reaction to it. Both George and Jerry have a continual series of girlfriends throughout the show, and while it is sometimes the source of tension, usually George and Jerry work together to solve the tension (most famously in "The Switch" where Jerry tries to date the roommate of the woman he is currently dating). In the shmoopy incident, though, George's primary response is to avoid Jerry as much as possible. Why? Clearly he finds Jerry's behavior irritating, but this simply begs the question. George's problem is that Jerry is not acting like himself when he's around the new girlfriend.

I take it we've all had the experience of being around someone not acting like him or herself. The classic example is a college roommate who begins the semester as a good friend with thoughtful, predictable behavior, but once he begins dating, morphs into a completely different person. On further reflection, however, this is a really strange expression. How is it possible for one not to act like oneself? If I'm acting, then am I not necessarily acting like myself? When I'm not acting like myself, am I acting like someone else? This seems less likely. It's not as if Jerry is acting like his girlfriend. George never claims that Jerry is acting like his girlfriend or anyone else for that matter. The problem is, he's not himself.

It seems that the possibility that one can on occasion not coincide with oneself reveals some tacit assumptions that we have about the self. The first assumption is that there is a constancy to the self. The self, who a person is, somehow persists through time. This persisting self has two aspects. Some of the qualities that define who we are are given genetically, qualities like height, shoe size, or lactose intolerance. Other qualities are acquired throughout life. Many of these qualities are acquired unconsciously, hand gestures, verbal tics, posture, etc. These unconsciously acquired properties are naturally susceptible to conscious manipulation, but for the most part their acquisition and deployment remain unconscious. Finally, there are qualities that define us that we acquire only consciously. Learning to play an instrument or a sport would fall into this category, and for most moral philosophers so would being a good person. The self is thus this complex nexus of given and acquired traits that remain relatively stable.

Philosophers have traditionally made a distinction between these two kinds of traits in terms of nature. Given traits are referred to as "nature," while acquired traits are referred to as "second nature." We still use this distinction today in claims like, "Playing basketball is second nature to her." The force of the claim is that she plays basketball as if she were genetically programmed to do so. However, her playing basketball is actually the result of years of practice acquiring the traits of a good basketball player. The acquisition of traits is usually referred to as habit. Aristotle helpfully distinguishes among three stages in the acquisition of habit. The first stage is the capacity to form the habit. Humans, for example, do not have the capacity to fly under their own power. Thus, no matter how hard they try, they cannot develop the habit of flying. Humans do, however, have the capacity to play basketball. The game was designed specifically with humans in mind. Having the capacity to play basketball and playing basketball are very different things. Just because it is not opposed to my nature to play basketball does not mean that the first time I walk onto a court I will know what to do.

What is missing from my capacity to play basketball is instruction and practice. I need to learn the rules of the game. I need to learn how much force is required to shoot a free throw and differentiate that from shooting a three-point shot. I must actually develop my capacities in order to form a habit. On the way to forming a habit, though, I will invariably do a few things right purely by accident. It's conceivable that upon walking on the court for the first time, I pick up a basketball and sink a half-court shot. Everyone might cheer, but no one would confuse me for a good basketball player. Exercising a capacity prior to forming a habit is the second stage of habit formation. Habits cannot form without practice, but the practice is not necessarily, especially initially, habitual. It is only when I consistently make half-court shots that I have developed the habit and might be considered a good basketball player. It is only when playing basketball has become second nature to me—when I have developed all of the appropriate habits—that my habit formation is complete. This last step is the most difficult to achieve of Aristotle's three stages.

The principal aspect of habit that separates it from its acquisition is its permanency. If I continually practice and after much hard work possess the habits of a good basketball player, these habits remain remarkably engrained. For example, when I played football in middle and high school, one of the habits engrained in us was to yell, "Ball!" if there was a fumble. We were required to yell it whether we were in the play or on the sidelines. To this day, some twenty-five years later, I cannot watch football at any level, whether live or on TV, without yelling, "Ball!" when I see a fumble. While my wife finds this somewhat amusing, it is also another indication for her of my none-too-firm grasp on reality.

This short detour through habit and its acquisition leads us back to the presuppositions that we have about the self. As we've seen, because of habit there is a certain stability to the self. Otherwise, the claim that one is not oneself would be meaningless. However, the second tacit assumption that makes such a claim possible is that the self is *not* absolutely stable. One necessarily develops habits that cover a huge range of activities, but these are not so set that one cannot on occasion act against them. What makes Jerry's behavior so vexing to George is that neither is particularly affectionate. In fact, one could argue that *Seinfeld* is predicated on all of the characters' complete lack of sentiment. George and Jerry's disdain for affection, particularly public affection, is highlighted in "The Kiss Hello." In this episode Jerry continually finds himself in situations where he's required to kiss as a form of greeting. He finds this intolerable and expresses real admiration for George who is only required to kiss his Aunt Sylvia hello. The lengths to which Jerry goes to opt out of the kiss hello leave him ostracized from all of the other tenants in his apartment building. George is understandably appalled when the same Jerry who would rather be an outcast than kiss someone hello is kissing and snuggling in public while calling and being called "shmoopy."

Jerry has clearly developed the habit of not displaying affection publicly. That's who he is. He is able, however briefly, to set aside this habit and act differently to the extent that George no longer recognizes him. How is this possible? Habits are overcome in the same way that they are formed, through practice. For example, everyone has a habitual way in which he or she interlaces fingers and thumbs. For right-handed people this is generally with the left thumb on top. Regardless of how it is done, one way will feel comfortable ("natural"), and the other way will feel uncomfortable ("unnatural"). Remarkably, it is possible to reverse these feelings and make it so that having the opposite thumb on top feels "natural." This, of course, is only possible because what is at stake here is not "nature" in the traditional sense but "second nature." We can change our habits not by fiat or force of will but by practicing something opposed until a new habit forms. Thus, if I continually practice interlacing my fingers the other way with the opposite thumb on top, eventually this will become my habit. This will become comfortable, second nature. Habits are instilled through practice and replaced by practicing something in opposition to the original habit. What happened in the case of Jerry's new girlfriend is that he began practicing actions that were opposed to his

ishness? Is saying that "one is not oneself" necessarily pejorative? Can't one be better than one used to be? While we will answer these questions more fully in the following chapters, Spinoza is quite clear that bondage is not the only fate that awaits us. It is possible to act rather than be acted upon. It is possible to affect rather than be affected. There is a path of wisdom in addition to a path of foolishness. The path of wisdom lies beyond both sadness and joy in what Spinoza calls "freedom."

While saving our discussion of freedom for a later chapter, it is possible to think about the way in which some changes can be good. First, for Spinoza since we cannot remove ourselves from the world and are in a constant state of affecting and being affected, the answer must lie in the affects themselves. Thus the goal of Spinoza's practical philosophy is not Stoic indifference or lack of affect but a fruitful engagement with the affects. In this regard Spinoza writes, "An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained."[3] Affectlessness is not an option. The only possibility is replacing one affect with another stronger one. For the most part this is an unconscious process. We go through the day experiencing a range of emotions, each one replacing the one before it. So, if we imagine that I am particularly sad one day, I will remain in that sadness until another stronger emotion comes to take its place. It's entirely possible that a funny YouTube video might snap me out of my funk, a clip from the Daily Show or a monkey riding a dog. However, it's also possible that while my sadness might be briefly overcome, in the end the new affect was not strong enough to take hold, and I remain in my sadness. Regardless of what happens, though, the path to change, whether good or bad, happens through the affects rather than in spite of them.

> Again, . . . it follows that we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us. . . . There are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought.[4]

One of the primary ways that we affect or are affected by external causes is through food. We must eat to live and so sating our hunger is part of our striving. Going from hungry to full is the movement from lesser to greater perfection. (Although, eating beyond fullness moves us from greater to lesser perfection.) Not everything that we eat, though, is of equal value. Some foods are better for us than others, and some foods are downright detrimental to our health. When I consume nourishing foods, the change that's produced in me is a positive one. If, however, I consume unhealthy food, the change produced in me is negative. In the first case, I strengthen who I am by combining with things that agree with my nature. In the second case, I weaken who I am by combining with things opposed to my nature. It is in this instance that we can see more fully what is meant by the phrase that a certain food "doesn't agree with me." On the surface, the claim is that a food is the source of some intestinal distress. The real issue, though, is that

ment. Each is the other seen from a different scale. The environment is shaped by its component parts just as much as the parts are shaped by the environment. The barrier between individual and environment predicated on essentialist thinking becomes untenable, and one begins to think only in terms of individuals as ratios of motion and rest that are necessarily exercising their affects to some degree.

From Spinoza's perspective all thinking is "environmental" and not limited to a way of thinking about ecosystems. Just as there is no sharp distinction between the individual and its environment, there is also no sharp distinction between the natural and the artificial.[4] Such a distinction returns us to the problem of essentialism. Rather, Spinoza proposes that we think everything, whether made by humans or by natural processes and regardless of scale, as a particular ratio of motion and rest. The primary concern is not its origin, but what it can do. Furthermore, everything is part of the same nature and interacts with it in some way. It's only on this view that we can begin to ask questions such as: How do petroleum-based fertilizers affect water supplies? Are CO_2 emissions having an effect on average temperatures? Are genetically modified crops a potential danger to humans, animals, or the environment? Is industrial agriculture's dependence on monocultures for high production yields a source of concern? All of these questions (and many others) can only be properly answered if we think systemically and in telescopic scales of mutually interdependent individuals.

It's thinking in these terms that have led some to hail Spinoza as a patron saint of the environmental movement, particularly what's known as "deep ecology." There are some, however, who balk at Spinoza's inclusion. What concerns them in particular is Spinoza's claims about animals. Spinoza writes:

> [T]he law against killing animals is based more on empty superstition and unmanly compassion than sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us the necessity of joining with men, but not with the lower animals, or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them that they have against us. Indeed because the right of each one is defined by his virtue, or power, men have a far greater right against the lower animals than they have against men. Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensations. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects.[5]

As we saw in the chapter on Spinoza's politics nothing is more useful to us than other people. The reason for this is that the more something agrees with our nature, the more our combining with it increases our power. In the case of other people, insofar as perfect agreement is possible, the power increase is double. In contrast to this, animals are not so constituted that they can fully agree with our nature. Their ways of affecting and being affected are fundamentally different from ours. Spinoza concludes two things from this. First, since their ways of affecting and being affected are different, their natures are different, and therefore

they cannot be as useful to us as other people. This first conclusion seems unproblematic. Humans are different from animals (although as we've seen, the difference is not one of essence or substance), and so we can't interact with them in the same way. The second conclusion, however, seems much more problematic. Spinoza reasons that because animals can't be as useful to us as other people it is our "right" to treat them in a way that is beneficial to us.

Part of the difficulty arises from Spinoza's use of the term "right." We generally tend to think of rights as something that's due us by virtue of our being human, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights cannot be taken away for any reason, and it is the government's duty to defend these rights in us. A government that fails in this duty is rightly overthrown and replaced with a government that can fulfill its duty. As we've seen, and as the quote makes explicit here, Spinoza does not have this conception of right in mind. He says flatly that right, virtue, and power are all equivalent expressions. This model allows Spinoza to make two seemingly opposed claims: 1) We have the same rights over animals that they have over us, and 2) We have greater rights over animals than they have over us. How can these two claims be reconciled? I take the first claim to be a generic claim about power. Everything everywhere expresses its power in keeping with its ratio of motion and rest. This is what Spinoza calls "striving." When two individuals collide, either one will overcome the other, or to the degree that their natures coincide, the individuals will combine into a new more powerful individual. The first claim is, then, about the physics of collisions. In any collision only a few basic outcomes are possible, and these outcomes follow from the "right" or power of the individuals involved. It is in this sense that our rights and animal rights are equivalent. The second claim involves a more specific claim about human nature, namely, that a human individual is more complex than an animal individual. As a result, the human individual is capable of affecting and begin affected in more ways than the animal individual. This is the source of human power, virtue, or right. From this perspective, humans have more rights over animals than animals have over them.

When we overlook Spinoza's use of the term "right" and instead import the traditional definition of "right," we force him into saying something that he is not. On this traditional reading Spinoza's claim becomes "humans occupy a higher place on the ladder of being than animals; we can therefore mistreat them in any way we wish," which in turn seems to justify any torture or cruelty we wish to dish out. In opposition to this position attributed to Spinoza, some would argue that the only way to avoid wanton cruelty toward animals is to affirm the rights of animals in the same way that we affirm the rights of humans. Animals also have an inherent right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To deny animals these rights is to deny them their nature. From Spinoza's perspective this position rests on a profound confusion about rights and the nature of the universe itself. To begin with, arguing for human rights in the traditional sense supposes an essentialist reading of human nature. Furthermore, it supposes that humans