

The Gist of Spinoza's Ethics

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Abstract

Spinoza's *Ethics* is one of the most important works in Western philosophy, yet it remains one of the least understood. Written in a geometrical form modeled on Euclid, it develops its argument through an intricate structure of definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, and scholia. As a result, readers can easily become absorbed in the details without ever gaining a clear view of Spinoza's larger purpose.

Behind this complexity, however, Spinoza had a definite goal and offered a coherent solution. This essay attempts to make that larger structure visible. It explains what Spinoza sought to accomplish, the fundamental problem he believed human beings face, and how the philosophical system developed in the *Ethics* provides his answer.

This essay presents Spinoza's principal conclusions without reproducing the elaborate demonstrations by which he establishes them. Those demonstrations are available in the *Ethics* itself. Once the overall framework is understood, the more technical details of the work become considerably easier to follow and appreciate.

The Goal

One of the earliest writings we have from Spinoza is an unfinished work written when he was about twenty-five years old, commonly titled *The Emendation of the Intellect*. In its opening paragraph, Spinoza makes his goal plain:

After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realized that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to inquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity.

Spinoza's goal was clear: to find a source of "continuous and supreme joy."

The *Ethics* is his solution to that problem.

It is important to understand that Spinoza did not set out merely to discover the truth of things in general. He set out to solve a particular problem. He wanted to understand how a person could

attain lasting happiness in a world filled with uncertainty, loss, conflict, fear, disappointment, and death.

In pursuing that goal, however, he had to investigate the nature of reality, the human mind, the emotions, freedom, reason, and human behavior. Those subjects became the path leading to his solution.

What is Unique

Several things make Spinoza's work unique.

First, unlike many thinkers who claimed to begin without prejudice but did not, Spinoza based all his conclusions on facts that are self-evidently true. The *Ethics* is his exhaustive demonstration of the conclusions that follow from those facts.

Second, following Spinoza's chain of reasoning is not difficult merely because it is logically complex. It is primarily difficult because our own prejudices interfere with our understanding. We approach the work with assumptions about God, free will, good and evil, purpose, and human importance. Spinoza challenges nearly all of them.

Few readers can set aside those assumptions long enough to follow his reasoning wherever it leads.

Third, there are no leaps of faith in the *Ethics*. There is nothing mystical, magical, supernatural, or outside the plain universe in which we live. Everything Spinoza discusses belongs to one natural order.

If a reader finds something supernatural or beyond the material universe in Spinoza's system, that reader has misunderstood him.

What Spinoza Discovered

Along the way, Spinoza arrived at a series of conclusions that became the foundation of his solution.

God Although Spinoza uses the word *God* frequently, he does not mean the anthropomorphic supernatural being most people imagine when that word is used. The simplest modern way to understand Spinoza's use of the word is as equivalent to *the universe, nature, or everything that exists*. Spinoza does not mean a being outside nature who created the universe and occasionally intervenes in it. God is the whole of reality.¹

Attributes There is nothing in the universe except the material. There is also nothing in the universe except patterns². These are not two separate universes or substances, and there is no parallelism. They are the same reality viewed from two different perspectives. A physical object can be understood as matter arranged in a particular way. The same object can also be understood as a pattern. The physical arrangement and the pattern are not two separate things. They are two ways of understanding the same thing. There are infinitely many attributes, or ways in which it may be understood, although the human mind can only understand two: thought and extension.

Modes What we naively consider individual things are what Spinoza calls *modes*. A tree, a rock, a car, a frog, and a person are all modes. They are particular arrangements or expressions of the one underlying reality. A mode is not something separate from the universe. It is a tiny part in a particular form.

Life There is nothing immaterial about life. Life is simply a more complex and organized form of nonlife, just as an automobile is a more complex and organized collection of material parts. A living being is composed of the same material and operates according to the same natural laws as everything else. There is nothing fundamentally special about human beings compared with frogs, trees, or any other modes. Human beings differ in their organization and complexity, but they do not occupy a separate supernatural category.

Determinism The past is fixed. The present is the current state of the universe. The future follows necessarily from the current state of the universe together with the laws of nature. Since the current state is fixed and the following state is nothing more than the current state and the laws of nature, the future is just as fixed as the past. We simply do not know it yet. Every decision we make is the natural result of our original construction and everything that has happened to us throughout our lives. Nothing can be different from what it is. We believe ourselves free because we are conscious of our desires but unconscious of the causes that produced those desires.

Purpose³ Nothing has a purpose outside its own structure. A car is a car because it is structured as a car. Its structure determines what it is and what it does. The same is true of every other thing, including human beings. The structure of human beings is such that they desire to continue to live. What something is and does follows from its structure.

Value Events occur throughout the universe. Living modes desire to continue living. An event may help or hinder a particular mode. To the extent that it helps that mode, a living mode judges it good. To the extent that it harms or obstructs the living mode, the mode judges it bad. Outside the perspective of a particular living mode, however, there is no good or bad. There are only events. Rain may be good for a farmer and bad for someone whose house is flooding. The rain itself is neither good nor evil. Those judgments arise from the relationship between the event and the individual affected by it.

Human Beings Because Spinoza was a human being seeking a solution to a human problem, his principal concern was the human condition. He was not seeking unrelated or generic philosophical truths.

Emotions Just as pressure, heat, and controlled explosions are critical components of an automobile's function, emotions are a critical component in human behavior and ultimately the goal, happiness, is an emotion. Therefore, understanding human emotions is key. Also, just as pressure, heat, and controlled explosions are laws of nature and operate within laws of physics, so

too are human emotions. Spinoza makes it abundantly clear how mechanical human emotions are.

Although I have presented the above in their concluded form, Spinoza goes through great lengths to prove each beyond a doubt.

Three Kinds of Knowledge

Spinoza classified three different ways in which people understand things: imagination, reason, and intuitive knowledge.

Imagination Imagination occurs when a person knows that something exists but does not understand it. The person has impressions, experiences, memories, or incomplete ideas about the thing. Those impressions may be useful, but they do not provide a clear understanding of how or why the thing works.

Reason Reason occurs when a person understands the thing. The person understands its parts, relationships, causes, and operation. Rather than merely knowing that something exists, the person understands it.

Intuitive Intuitive knowledge occurs when the understanding has become part of the person and no longer requires conscious thought. The knowledge has been absorbed so thoroughly that it becomes the person's immediate way of seeing and responding.

A bicycle provides a simple example. Suppose a person sees someone riding a bicycle for the first time. The observer knows that the bicycle exists and sees that someone can ride it, but does not understand how riding works. This is *imagination*.

The observer then attends a class about bicycle riding. The instructor explains pedaling, balance, steering, braking, and the relationship among them. The student now understands how bicycle riding works. That is *reason*.

Finally, the student gets on a real bicycle. At first, the student consciously thinks about pedaling, balancing, steering, and braking. There is a great deal to keep track of. After sufficient practice, however, everything comes together. The rider no longer consciously thinks about each individual action. Instead, the rider thinks, "I want to go to the store," and the body performs all the necessary actions. Riding the bicycle has become *intuitive*. The knowledge is no longer merely something the rider understands. It has become part of the rider.

This distinction becomes crucial to Spinoza's solution. Merely understanding an idea through reason is not enough. The idea must become part of the way a person immediately experiences the world.

¹There are very specific reasons Spinoza uses this word. See *Spinoza's Ethics Explained* (2024) Blake McBride.

²Thought.

³*Conatus*.

Communicating Ideas

No idea can be communicated from one person to another without error. Spinoza, like every other writer, had only words with which to convey his ideas. Words are imperfect. A reader may attach a meaning to a word that differs from the meaning intended by the writer.

Spinoza's use of the geometrical method was an attempt to reduce this uncertainty. He constructed a tightly connected system of definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, and scholia.

The purpose of this structure was to provide enough interconnected statements that an incorrect interpretation would eventually contradict another part of the *Ethics*.

A reader may misunderstand one proposition and remain unaware of the mistake. But as the reader continues, that misunderstanding should eventually produce a contradiction with another proposition, definition, or conclusion.

If the interpretation remains consistent with the *Ethics* as a whole, and no contradiction appears, then the reader has strong reason to believe that Spinoza has been understood correctly. Ultimately, if the *Ethics* can be understood as a single, consistent idea without contradictions then it is understood. That is the test.

The Solution

Now that Spinoza's goal and several of his key ideas have been explained, we can ask what conclusions he reached.

1. Human beings are driven by emotion, not reason. Reason is a tool used by the emotions to obtain what they desire. People often believe that reason governs their actions. In reality, reason frequently serves desires that already exist. This is why people can see the better course and still follow the worse.
2. Reason cannot overcome an emotion by mere force. Only a stronger emotion can overcome another emotion. Reason remains useful, however, because it can be used to create corrective emotions. Through understanding, a person can develop emotional responses that are stronger than the destructive reactions they replace. The solution is therefore not to eliminate emotion. It is to use reason to produce better emotions.
3. Understanding emotions reduces their power. Spinoza's analysis of emotion gives us insight into our own motivations and those of others. An emotion has greater control over us when we experience it without understanding its cause. Once its cause is understood, the emotion becomes less mysterious and less powerful. Understanding why a person behaves in a particular way also makes that behavior easier to comprehend. It may remain harmful or undesirable, but it no longer appears as an inexplicable act of freely chosen evil. Understanding a cause lessens its impact upon us.
4. A complete understanding of determinism leads to the unavoidable conclusion that things cannot be other than they are.

Suppose someone harms you. It is misleading to explain the event merely by referring to that person's character, history, experiences, or present condition. That still treats the person as though he were an independent source of cause and effect. He is not.

The person who acted, the person who was harmed, the place, the time, the surrounding circumstances, and everything that led both people to that moment are all parts of one deterministic universe. The event did not arise from one individual acting independently upon another. It arose from the entire state of the universe at that moment, which itself followed necessarily from everything that came before it.

The other person could not have acted differently, but neither could you have been somewhere else, encountered someone else, or responded differently while the entire preceding state of the universe remained unchanged. Both of you, and the event that joined you, were necessary expressions of the whole system.

The mistake is therefore not merely believing that the other person could have chosen differently. The deeper mistake is imagining that either person exists as an independent cause, separate from the rest of Nature.

This does not mean that you cannot protect yourself, resist, leave, cry, punish wrongdoing, or try to prevent the event from happening again. Those actions are also parts of the same deterministic universe. They follow from causes just as necessarily as the original event did.

What disappears is resentment based on the belief that one isolated individual freely introduced something into the universe that did not otherwise belong there. The person, the action, your presence, your response, and every surrounding condition were all parts of one indivisible event produced by the whole of Nature.

Becoming angry at that person for independently causing the event makes no more sense than becoming angry at one wave for independently causing the movement of the ocean.

This is what Spinoza was seeking: freedom from the destructive emotions that arise when we imagine separate individuals or events acting as independent causes rather than understanding every person and every event as part of the necessary activity of the whole universe.

5. Reason and understanding are helpful but incomplete. Understanding determinism through the second kind of knowledge is useful, but it does not fully solve the problem. A person may understand intellectually that everything is determined and still react with immediate anger

when injured. At that moment, the person's emotional reaction may be stronger than the intellectual understanding. The idea remains something the person knows but has not yet fully absorbed.

The third kind of knowledge completes the solution. For Spinoza's solution to work fully, the understanding of determinism must become *intuitive*. The person must no longer need to stop and reason through the chain of causes after each event. The understanding must become part of the person's immediate response. It must become as natural as riding a bicycle after the mechanics of riding have been fully absorbed. The person no longer has to think: "This person could not have acted differently because everything follows from prior causes." Instead, the person sees the event that way immediately. The truth has become part of the person. At that point, the emotional response changes. The person may still take action, defend against harm, or prevent its recurrence, but resentment based on the imagined possibility that events could simply have been otherwise loses its foundation.

6. A person's highest attainment comes with their intellectual love of God. What this means is a deep understanding and appreciation of the true source of a person's life, which is being a part of all that is — God.

The result is freedom from one's own destructive emotions and happiness. Spinoza's solution does not remove human beings from nature. It allows them to understand their place within it. A person who does not understand the causes of events is continually pushed and pulled by fear, anger, hope, hatred, envy, and disappointment. A person who understands necessity sees events differently. Rather than fighting reality by insisting that it should have been otherwise, the person understands why it had to be as it was. That understanding produces emotional freedom. The person remains capable of action but is no longer dominated by resentment against the unavoidable. Through reason, the person understands the truth. Through intuitive knowledge, that truth becomes part of the person. The result is the continuous and supreme joy Spinoza sought.

Final Thoughts

Spinoza's *Ethics* is far richer than what has been presented in this essay. Spinoza's *Ethics* contains detailed arguments concerning God, nature, the mind, the body, knowledge, emotion, freedom, virtue, and happiness. Each of Spinoza's propositions rests upon an extensive logical foundation.⁴ The *Ethics* is not a collection of maxims or unsupported assertions. It is a connected system in which each major conclusion is derived from what came before it.

The purpose of this essay has not been to reproduce those demonstrations. It has been to make the overall structure visible.

Spinoza began by seeking a source of continuous and supreme joy. To find it, he examined the nature of reality, human behavior, emotion, knowledge, and causation. He concluded that

⁴A detailed explanation of the entire *Ethics* is contained in: *Spinoza's Ethics Explained* (2025) Blake McBride.

human suffering is intensified by misunderstanding. We believe ourselves free because we do not know the causes of our desires. We become angry because we imagine that events could have been otherwise. We judge events good or evil without recognizing that those judgments arise from our own perspective.

Spinoza's remedy is understanding. Reason allows us to understand the necessity of events. Intuitive knowledge makes that understanding part of us. Once necessity is fully absorbed, resentment toward the unavoidable loses its foundation.

We may still act, resist, protect ourselves, and seek change. But we no longer suffer from the false belief that the past could have been different while all its causes remained the same. That understanding is Spinoza's path to freedom, peace, and continuous joy.