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Spinoza and Feminist Ethics

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I must confess that, at first, it seemed very strange to me to be presented with Spinoza as an example of a philosopher to whom to look as a valuable historical source for feminist ethics. I still have problems with this particular juxtaposition, although I am pleased to report that Dr. Tomm made a far more convincing case than I had originally expected might be possible. The aspects of Spinoza on which she focuses her analysis are, first of all, his emphasis on the interconnectedness of all existence, and second, the impossibility of separating reason and emotion in his analysis of human character. Both of these aspects tie in with current trends in feminist writings on ethics. The first would be received sympathetically by all those who object to the emphasis on the individual as the locus of morality, an emphasis which has been with us for a long time, and finds perhaps its most prominent current expression in utilitarianism and contractarianism. The second ties in with the common feminist objection that present, and past, ethical theories tend to place far too much emphasis on reason over emotion in the formulation of ethical principles. We are all too familiar with ethical man, and I have chosen the noun deliberately, standing alone in the world, deciding by some rational and, he hopes, deductive, process what is required of him in his present situation. To perceive the world as Spinoza did, as a world in which each individual is individual only in terms of a point of perception of a whole and in which all individuals are part of this one whole, makes it difficult to maintain a highly individualistic stance in morality. If reason and emotion are one, or at least not opposed, then there can be no justification for excluding emotional factors from an account of morality. Why, then, am I still uneasy?

The first reason is that in accepting Spinoza's unified view of the universe we are required to accept somewhat more than simply the view that we are all interrelated and that morality has much more to do with this interrelationship than it does with people seen as independent entities. Under standard analyses of Spinoza's theory, his reality is wholly determined, whether seen as being or becoming, and the order of causes is the same as the order of reasons; that is, reality is rational in the very strict sense of following necessarily and inevitably the laws of logic. The concern for others that Spinoza would have us adopt and express in action is, roughly, the understanding that they, too, are wholly determined in their actions, and thus that praise and blame are in a strict sense inappropriate. The truly moral person understands that all is as it must necessarily be, and gains peace in accepting this inevitability and in coming to greater understanding of why things are as they are.

This understanding is in terms of efficient causation; one of the things in which Spinoza took pride was the elimination of final causation from our understanding of reality. Thus, as just one example, to understand why someone acted as she did is to understand the factors that operated on her, it is not to understand her actions in terms of her goals and desires, except in so far as they count as part of her mental make-up prior to her action. Certainly there is interrelationship: there is one system of causality governing all of reality, but it does not appear to be the same sort of interrelationship that writers such as Gilligan and Noddings, just to take the examples that Tomm uses, have in mind when they tell us that women's morality is of a different order than men's in taking interrelationship into account. In fact, this appears to be a very male version of interrelationship: some irresistible force controls the scheme of things, ordering them in a logical fashion regardless of what we might want, and what we should do is resign ourselves to the rule of logic.

My second locus of uneasiness has to do with the analysis of emotions. The first aspect to which I would like to draw attention is that in Spinoza, as Tomm has said, ideas and emotions are understood as two different ways of describing a single phenomenon. Obviously the attractive part of this is that there is not the great divide between reason and emotion found in other philosophers. The unattractive part is that adequate ideas should follow the rules of logic, so that we seem to be back to the old emphasis on logic as characteristic of rationality and of proper, and, I would assume, morally acceptable, human behaviour. It does not appear to advance the cause of emotions in ethics further, if emotions do end up as subsumed under reason. Not that I am suggesting that we should ignore reason in ethical thought. I am suggesting

that part of the drive of feminist writers in ethics has been to emphasize that there are more things in our moral universe than logic, and I am not sure we can get this from Spinoza if emotions, properly functioning, are the material counterparts of reason, properly functioning. I think the source of the disagreement between Tomm and me has to with the placing of emphasis. If one thinks of the relation between emotion and idea as being an inextricable connection, then one seems to have two things which are necessarily linked. This I take it is Tomm's approach. On the other hand, if one thinks of idea and emotion as being two ways of viewing one substance, and therefore subject to the same laws, then one appears to have only one thing, and one then has worries about the nature of this one thing and the laws it follows. That is my approach, and why I have difficulty in seeing this account of emotion as taking us very far.

My second problem has to do with the structure of the emotions. For Spinoza there are three basic constituents of the emotional system: *conatus*, or the drive for self-maintenance or self-actualization, pleasure, and pain. Pleasure and pain are affects: we feel pleasure as our organism changes from lesser to greater self-actualization, pain as it moves from greater to lesser. The other emotions are all to be analysed in terms of these three. It is true that Spinoza had a number of insightful and original things to say about human behaviour and the emotions, but I am not sure that the schema is rich enough to give me the emotional aspects of morality that I want.

For Spinoza, all entities are characterized by *conatus*. A physical entity is characterized by a particular proportion of motion and rest; it seeks to maintain this proportion. If it fails to do so, then it will cease to exist, at least as this particular mode of reality. On the mental level *conatus* is characterized as the drive for self-actualization, which is the drive for greater understanding of the way things really are; in Spinoza's terms, the replacement of inadequate with adequate ideas. The reason for the comparison between the two levels is to demonstrate the essentially self-interested nature of *conatus*; it is **self**-maintenance and **self**-actualization. On the physical level an organism is likely to find that self-maintenance involves cooperation, since all organisms are part of one whole; similarly, on the mental level self-actualization is not likely, given the unity of the whole, to involve trashing one's neighbour. To understand the whole of which one is a part, one will have to understand the other parts, and so one is guaranteed an interest in other people: one wants to know how they work.

My problem is that I do not think this is the sort of interest in other people that I would characterize as moral interest. One may, of course, want other people to be at peace with themselves, so that they will leave you alone to get on with your self-actualization. (This is Stuart Hampshire's analysis of Spinoza's position.[1]) This is not an interest in the happiness of other people for their sakes. It is an interest for one's own sake, and as long as all emotions are to be analysed in terms of the self-actualization of *conatus* and the pleasure and the pain which are directly the results of moving towards and away from self-actualization, I do not see how it can be otherwise.

This point is not controversial. Tomm says that, for Spinoza, "One's obligation is fundamentally to oneself" (p. 4). However, I see more difficulty in reconciling this with benevolence and concern for others than she does. The theory is not as egoistic as Hobbes', but at the least I am reminded strongly of contractarian moral theory here. One's concern for other people is based on one's concern for oneself. Tomm would, of course, place her emphasis on the fact that for Spinoza one is only part of the whole, so that in a strict sense concern for oneself is concern for the whole. I, on the other hand, find myself worrying about the specific motivation of the person acting. If the motivation is self-actualization, then this does not seem to be a genuine expression of concern for others. It does in any case seem some distance from the sort of concern for other people that Noddings is talking about in *Caring*[2].

Another way of getting at this point is to notice that Tomm talks of the love of God and the love of other human beings as the same sort of love. The love of God, for Spinoza, is a very abstract enterprise. God is all of reality, the love of God is the intuitive appreciation of the interconnectedness of the whole; it is essentially a kind of understanding, a sort of mystical, rational "emotion." This is really not much like the love we generally regard people as having for one another, which is a kind of concern or caring on a less ethereal level. If the love for others which motivates our concern for them is this sort of love, then it seems to be far more impersonal than the sort of concern and caring that feminists have been talking about. This difference is perhaps captured in Tomm's "Spinoza and Vasubandhu emphasize the universality of the nature of personal encounter. Feminists emphasize its particularity" (p. 21). I must confess that as far as morality is concerned, I would opt for the particularity.

Another thing Tomm finds appealing about Spinoza is that he provides us with a metaphysical foundation on which to rest these claims about the interrelationship of individuals and the importance of emotions for ethics. What if one is not tempted to accept the metaphysics presented? This may be one of the reasons I found myself less than sympathetic to the prospect of seeing Spinoza's

work as a suitable foundation for a feminist ethical theory. This is not the place to debate the merits of metaphysical positions, but there is one feature of Spinoza's which makes it particularly problematic in this context, and this is of course the determinism. Spinoza himself says that "good" and "bad" are only terms that reflect the pleasure and the pain of the human organism in moving towards or away from self-actualization, and that there are no moral values separate from that. The subjectivism inherent in that claim bothers me less than the problems involved in creating any sort of ethical theory on a deterministic base. Not only am I not attracted by a deterministic metaphysics, but I regard it as a bad foundation for a comprehensive ethics. Thus, on a very general level, I again feel some reluctance to adopt Spinoza as a source of ethics.

All that said, it is true that feminists may well find Spinoza a more sympathetic figure than others in the history of philosophy. For one thing, as Tomm points out, there do not appear to be any systemic reasons why he would have to distinguish between the sexes in terms of rational or moral capacity. There is a greater sense of the interrelation and mutual dependence of people than one finds in, say, Locke or Aristotle. Thus an ethic based on Spinoza would not involve the competitive notion of morality that so many of us find objectionable. We do not necessarily find the sort of hyperrationality of a Kant, where it does not matter what people want or whether they will be happy when one formulates a moral principle, so long as no logical inconsistency results from one's willing of that principle. It is the case that for Spinoza, emotion does play a role in ethical behaviour, although I do not think it is as extensive as Tomm does. Finally, the whole notion of morality in the *Ethics* as being concerned with how we should lead our lives as a whole, and not just with a narrow part of our lives governed by some externally imposed set of rules, is sympathetic, and is one point at least on which I have always agreed with Spinoza. However, in the end, I still find too much emphasis on the logical nature of reality in Spinoza to be able seriously to accept him as more than a minor inspiration for feminist ethics.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hampshire. *Spinoza*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1951, p. 63.
2. Nel Noddings. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

No More

Sylvia Anne why?
You are more than analyst's files or
thin lines of ill-used blood
left to rot onto icy tiles
printed like graffiti which cries
all the while " Live, live,"
You both wailed those words
into empty stoves locked bathrooms
asylums for incurables.
Your breath on the mirrors spews out
hospital white yet clean like the gowns
you wear in city cabs to sterile churches
praying all the way " Live, live,"
Virginia, you've walked into that river
too often with useless tones in your pocket.

Susan Tellman
Indiana