

# Overview of Spinoza's Ethics: Happiness & well-being lies in the life of reason.

*"Spinoza's ultimate goal in the Ethics is to demonstrate the way to human happiness in a deterministic world filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways."* Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), x.

In order to show that happiness & well-being lies in a life of reason, Spinoza attempts to first "demystify the universe and show it for what it really is. This requires laying out some metaphysical foundations, the project of Part 1." SEP, 2. Ethics. In contrast to Judeo-Christian conception of God, Spinoza's God "is the cause of all things because all things follow causally and necessarily from the divine nature; it is impossible that God should exist but not the world" [SEP, 2.1 God or Nature in "Baruch Spinoza" by Steven Nadler, 1 December 2008]. World is not an act of God's free will. "The key to discovering & experiencing God is philosophy & science is "not religious awe and worshipful submission. The latter gives rise only to superstitious behavior and subservience to ecclesiastical authorities; the former leads to enlightenment, freedom and true blessedness (i.e., peace of mind)" [Ibid., 2.2 The Human Being].

The 2 attributes of God which we are cognizant are extension & thought. 2 interpretations: (1) God is indeed material, even matter itself, but this doesn't imply God has a body; (2) What is in God is not matter per se, but extension as an essence. Extension and thought are 2 distinct essences that have absolutely nothing in common. These 2 realms of matter & mind are causally closed system. Because of the fundamental and underlying unity of Nature, or of Substance, Thought and Extension are just 2 different ways of "comprehending" one & the same Nature [SEP, 2.2. The Human Being].

Spinoza believed that "the adequate knowledge of any object, and of Nature as a whole, involves a thorough knowledge of God and of how things related to God and his attributes, he also had no scruples about claiming that we can, at least in principle, know God perfectly and adequately...No other philosopher in history has been willing to make this claim. But then again, no other philosopher identified God with Nature" [SEP, 2.3. Knowledge]

*"Since we cannot control the object that we tend to value and that we allow to influence our well-being, we ought instead to try to control our evaluations themselves and thereby minimize the sway the external objects and the passions have over us. We can never eliminate the passive effects entirely. We are essentially a part of nature, and can never fully remove ourselves from the causal series that link us to external things. But we can, ultimately, counteract the passions, control them, and achieve a certain degree of relief from their turmoil. The path to restraining and moderating the affects is through virtue. Spinoza is a psychological and ethical egoist. All beings naturally seek their own advantage-to preserve their own being-and it is right for them [to] do so. This is what virtue consists in. Since we are thinking beings, endowed with intelligence and reason, what is to our greatest advantage is knowledge. Our virtue, therefore, consists in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, of adequate ideas. The best kind of knowledge is a purely intellectual intuition of the essence of things....They are apprehended, that is, in their conceptual and causal relationship to the universal essences (thought and extension) and the eternal laws of nature" [SEP, 2.5 Virtue and Happiness].*

## METAPHYSICS: Part I: "On God"

*"The universe is a single, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing substance which is "God or Nature."*

Propositions 1-15 present the basic elements of his picture of God: God is the infinite, necessarily existing (that is, uncaused), unique substance of universe. There is only one substance in the universe; it is God; and everything else that is, is in God. God is identical with the universal, active causal principles of nature, the substance of it all.

Proof: (1) no 2 substances can share an attribute or essence (Ip5). There is a substance within infinite attributes (i.e., God (Ip11). Thus, the existence of that infinite substance precludes the existence of any other substance. For if there were to be a 2nd substance, it would have to have some attribute or essence. But since God has all possible attributes, then the attribute to be possessed by this 2nd attribute would be one of the attributes possessed by God. But it has already been est. that no 2 substances can have the same attribute. Therefore, there can be, besides God, not such 2nd substance [SEP, 2.1 God or Nature].

**All-Inclusive:**  
*Everything is a part of Nature.*

**Absolutely & Necessarily  
Deterministic:**

*All things within nature, namely everything are necessarily determined by Nature. There are no exceptions*

**No Teleological Purpose:**

*There are no purposes for Nature or within Nature. Nothing happens for any ultimate reason or to serve any goal or overarching plan.*

**Ordinary Causal Order of Nature:**

*Whatever takes place does so only because it is brought about by the ordinary causal order of Nature.*

## ANTHROPOLOGY & EPISTEMOLOGY Part 2: "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind"

**He focuses on the nature of the human being and his place in Nature.**

**Unity:**

*mind & body are one & same thing in Nature, possessing only two attributes: "Thought" (or "thinking essence) & "Extension" (material essence).*

Why? The course of Nature is one, since Nature is one substance, a unity though it proceeds under each attribute in parallel coordination with its unfolding in every other attribute: Though Nature has an infinite number of attributes or essence, each constituting a kind of universal nature of things, we know of only two of them: Thought and Extension.

**Mode:**

Any individual object or event is only a "mode" of Nature, manifesting itself under the 2 attributes: Thought (as a mental or spiritual thing or event) and Extension (as a material thing or event).

**Subject to Causal Nature:**

The human being is as much a part of Nature as any other thing, subject to the same causal determinism that governs all Nature.

## MORAL CONCLUSION # 1: Part 3: "On the Origin and Nature of the Effects"

**He demonstrates the various ways in which a person is affected by the world around him, & examines the striving to preserve in existence in the face of these external forces that characterizes (and any being's) essence (pg. xii).**

**Human Nature:**

*Composed of various passions & actions.*

**Passions:**

*Effective responses to the ways in which objects causally impinge upon us.*

**Actions:**

*Derived from our inner resources.*

**What do Passions & Actions Represent?**

*They represent ways in which our powers are increased or decreased by the causal connections within which we exist.*

*"The picture of human life that emerges from Spinoza's catalog of the passions is tormented one, where a person is emotionally tossed about & at the mercy of things & forces beyond his control" (pg. xii).*

## MORAL CONCLUSION # 2: Part 4: "On Human Bondage, or the Power of the Affects"

**[He] "continues his investigation of the life governed by the passions, but also seeks its remedy in virtue, that is, in knowledge and understanding."**

**We Are Not Entirely Free:**

*We can never be entirely free from the passions since we necessarily a part of Nature and subject to external influences.*

**We Can Achieve Some  
Degree of Autonomy:**

*How? We can achieve some degree of freedom to the extent that we are actively guided by reason. In other words, though we can't ever fully remove ourselves from causal series that link us to external things, we can ultimately, counteract the passions, control them, and achieve a certain degree*

*of relief from their turmoil.*

*"The ideal of the free individual provides a model for a virtuous human life and a guide for seeking what is good and avoiding what is evil. In this way, the power of the passive effects is diminished" (pg. xii).*

## MORAL CONCLUSION # 3: Part 5: "The Power of the Intellect, or On Human Freedom"

**Spinoza discusses the ultimate benefits of the highest form of knowledge.**

**What is Highest Form of  
Knowledge?**

*It is a thorough understanding of Nature, its ways, and how the essence of anything relates to God since God and Nature are one and the same. "Spinoza argues that the mind's intellectual love of God is our understanding of the universe, our virtue, our happiness, our well-being, and our "salvation" (SEP 2.5).*

**Human Immortality:**

*True rewards of virtue are not found in eternally but in the happiness, well-being, & blessedness that understandings confers upon us in this physical life (pg. xii).*

*Understanding our place in the natural scheme of things bring true peace of mind (SEP.2.5).*

*"The ideal of the free individual provides a model for a virtuous human life and a guide for seeking what is good and avoiding what is evil. In this way, the power of the passive effects is diminished" (pg. xii).*