

## **To Garden or Not to Garden**

Literary Club, Cincinnati

December 7, 2009

*In the morning, before I walk in to work, I walk out into my backyard garden that has no grass but islands and bordered mounds of plants and flowers. The mounds are ringed or sided by paths of bark chips. When I enter I may choose the most direct path or a more circuitous one to arrive at my backyard study, whose French doors and deck face into the garden. Here at my desk I will look out into the cultivated wild, bordered garden, chosen by our former owner, and ponder something I am writing on or reading.*

*Gardens are of all kinds. From the rock gardens of Japan, austere, tidy to perfection, geometric or organic in composition, to the meticulousness of French gardens with their topiaried hedges. Then there are, too, the well-known English gardens, that can be equally precise as the French but also have the look of a regulated meadow. I don't know about German gardens, but I remember speaking with a German homeowner in Waldorf, Germany about his garden. He had a portion dedicated to the orderly and manicured and a portion left to its wildness, to be able to grow and bring up what and as it pleased, both the manicured and the wild existing in juxtaposition within a small backyard, abutted by his neighbors houses on three sides.*

*The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski says that to theorize is to garden. We as humans and as collectivities have our theories about you name it. With these we put in all sorts of facts, impressions, feelings, ideas, and general perceptions that come up as weeds or as flowers. Both more than not exist. The weeds, as in any garden, if left to their own can grow quite sizeable, obstructing or chocking off the flowers or plants we would rather have, in general, giving the garden an aesthetic of negligence. But if we tend to the garden, we will treat*

*the weeds with a deliberation, either taking them out or, if not unsightly or destructive, trimming them back. Spinoza says that we ought to live a life dedicated to reason. We are to be guided not by our emotions, out of control, nor by our passions, or be led astray by bad thinking, unreasoned ideas. There are appropriate and inappropriate ideas. The rational life is to lessen the number of inappropriate ideas. The mind filled with the appropriate ideas is the mind that lives on.*

*As I look out into my garden, I get a feeling of gratitude and of privilege for having such a pleasant place to which retreat and to think and write, like Montaigne had in his turret. Seeing the garden, particularly when I have my door opened to it, allowing in the smells, the coolness, the sounds, and barrier-less intimacy, reminds me of Kolakowski's essay, that to theorize is to garden. And just as there are Japanese, French, English, German, and other types of gardens, so do we each have our type of garden, or theory and theories, designed not from thin air nor cultivated by indifference, but chosen from other places and fitted to our setting and to our own capabilities. I have not mentioned the other factor to a garden: is it private or for the public?*

I wrote this short, two-page, free-thinking, unedited essay on July 22, 2009. I was inspired to write this kind of essay by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Emile-Auguste Chartier, who went by the pen name, Alain. I came across Alain through his book on Happiness,<sup>1</sup> at a time when I was reading Spinoza and when we, at our home in Ann Arbor, were hosting a salon in our backyard garden on the theme of happiness.

Alain's book on happiness is its own collection of two-page, unedited, free-thinking essays which he termed propos (the French for remarks). Over the course of thirteen years, from 1906 – 1919, he wrote roughly, five thousand such propos, grouping them in books on a variety

---

<sup>1</sup> Alain, Alain on Happiness. Trans. Robert D. and Jane E. Cottrell. NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973.

of subjects. They were a form of journalism as philosophy and of philosophy as journalism, a way to apply piecemeal a broader philosophy to the real world, moving from a precise, concrete subject such as, if we go by some of his titles, “yawning,” “elms,” “boredom,” “gambling,” “politeness,” among eighty-five others, to a more general point. Alain believed abstract, muddled thinking and misguided and uncontrolled passions were as much the cause of unhappiness as laziness. Happiness, he felt, comes through discipline, clear thinking, acts of the will, and by keeping the mind focused on practicing right behavior and proper rituals and ceremonies, along the ethical directive of Aristotle who believed virtue comes by doing virtuous deeds.<sup>2</sup>

Alain did not just emulate Aristotle. He also, coincidentally for me, emulated Spinoza. He had even written a book on Spinoza. So it was, through a series of serendipitous and deliberate events --- my studying Spinoza, our salon on happiness, stumbling upon Alain and his indebtedness to Spinoza, the fact that my outdoor study looks onto our garden, plus having read Kolakowski’s essay a few years back and drawing it to mind --- these elements converged at a time when I was thinking on Spinoza’s metaphysic and on what it had to say on the subject of human happiness, human flourishing.

I must correct at this point what I said in the short piece that opened this essay, when I said, “Kolakowski says that to theorize is to garden.” My memory had failed me. He did not equate theorizing with gardening. Rather, he equates theorizing with NOT gardening. As he says in the opening paragraph of his essay, “The General Theory of Not-Gardening,”

Those who hate gardening need a theory. Not to garden without a theory is a shallow, unworthy way of life. A theory must be convincing and scientific. Yet to various people, various theories are convincing and scientific. Therefore

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Robert Cottrell, ix – xix.

we need a number of theories. The alternative to not-gardening without a theory is to garden. However, it is much easier to have a theory than actually to garden.<sup>3</sup>

By this he means, I gather, that theories have a way of standing apart from the daily practicalities of life. They just explain, through abstractions, the world as it is and how to live in it. Because they are by definition theoretical, they do not actually do anything --- they are just ideas about. Kolakowski is satirizing the rational life. If to garden is to get into the dirt and the muck (as when I, in reaching for a clump of leaves while gardening grabbed instead a clump of dog crap), to turn the soil, to separate plants, to trim and weed and fertilize, patiently, repeatedly, lest nature have its way, then to stand apart from the dirt and the labors, with a tight theory that purports to explain it all, is not to garden.

David Cooper, in *A Philosophy of Gardens*, says that “to the ancients, a philosopher was not a theorizer but a person engaged in an act, an attempt through various exercises --- intellectual, spiritual, meditative, character forming, even physical --- to live the good life.”<sup>4</sup> Taking this prompt, we find that Spinoza’s all-encompassing metaphysic for human flourishing, that asks us both to reason our way to happiness while at the same time to trust our own inner drive to carry us to that happiness, has us both to garden and not to garden.

### **Reflecting on Happiness**

The quest for happiness is a persistent and elusive one. As human beings we desire a life that counts and that will offer us a set of experiences more pleasurable than painful. As Americans, the quest for happiness constitutes a part of our national character. It’s in our DNA. We believe ourselves entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

---

<sup>3</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, NY: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 11.

Because happiness does not come by being inert and because we as humans are by nature rational and reflective beings, to pursue happiness means we have to apply the will and our mind. Moreover, because nature does not exist to oblige us, because we are limited in what we know and in our capabilities, and because our reasoning is often misguided, fueled by unconscious drives and distorted objectives, it is difficult for us to get the control over our lives that we need to achieve the happiness we seek. In addition, happiness often escapes us because we pursue competing ideals, such as life (we want the right to the best health care), liberty (to have all the choices in health care plans), and happiness (and we do not want to be burdened by high costs). Nevertheless, however elusive and problematic the quest after happiness, we keep seeking to achieve it, as individuals and as a society, hence the plethora of “six-steps to a life-time of happiness” and the number of political philosophies, theories of justice, and public policies to orchestrate societal flourishing.

When it comes to stepping back and reflecting on whether we are happy or not, and whether we are on the right path, we tend to do so at predictable, if not necessarily anticipated, times. For instance, Janus faced, looking at the present, we take stock of how things are going for us now. Looking forward, we ask if we are on the right track. And, looking backward, we assess if from where we have come has been satisfying or not, and, if not, if our past can still be redeemed. As a society, we do much the same kind of reflection, as when we ask ourselves if we are better off now than we were four years ago, and, if, as a country, we are on the right track. During the recent economic great recession, when shockwaves swept through our most stalwart of industries --- banking, investment, manufacturing, housing, the automobile industry, and not just in the United States but around the world, we took a number of readings of how we were feeling. The The New York Times was inspired to run a blog called “Happy Days: The Pursuit

of What Matters in Troubled Times,” a series of opinion pieces by artists, writers, politicians, and celebrities of all sorts, on what constitutes happiness in a fractured economy.

But to reflect on happiness is not just a lighthearted aside. It has become a scholarly enterprise, of its own. Fields from psychology<sup>5</sup>, neuroscience<sup>6</sup>, behavioral economics<sup>7</sup>, philosophy<sup>8</sup>, religious studies<sup>9</sup>, all weigh in with ideas, arguments, and data on the theory, criteria, experience, and the permeation of happiness. Even countries and sociological groups are ranked according to a happiness scale: If we define happiness as subjective well-being, of feeling personally content with one’s lot, Forbes richest Americans, the East African Masai, and the Pennsylvania Amish rank near the top. California homeless, hospitalized mental patients, prisoners, and Detroit sex workers rank at the bottom . Among nations, Switzerland, Denmark, and Iceland (pre or post its economic collapse?) top the list, with Belarus, Russia, and Bulgaria at the bottom (the United States is 9<sup>th</sup> from the top, between Austria, 8<sup>th</sup>, and Norway, 10<sup>th</sup>).<sup>10</sup>

Much of the current scholarly fascination with happiness has been stimulated by the study of the brain and of our genetic makeup. Through functional MRIs and genetic mapping, neurobiologists and cognitive psychologists monitor how certain stimuli cause us to think and act and feel and how those acts and feelings in turn influence our neurons and genes.

Reflecting on what constitutes happiness is nothing new, of course. In one form or another, the subject has been thought about since the time of Plato. In Plato’s Republic, Socrates debates whether a life of satisfaction can come as readily from vice (injustice) as from virtue (justice) and whether the watchful eye of the gods makes any difference or not for whether we

---

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Gilbert, Stumbling on Happiness, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Damasio, Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain, NY: Harvest Book Harcourt, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno S. Frey, Happiness: A Revolution in Economics, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Owen Flanagan, The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Leroy S. Rouner, ed., In Pursuit of Happiness, Notre Dame, IN: Univ of Notre Dame Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Flanagan, p. 153, 156.

act virtuously, since, to the Greeks, the gods were thought capricious in their judgments, indifferent to human plight, and easily propitiated when we do transgress.

Aristotle, who refers to happiness less as pleasure but as a life well lived, *eudaimonia* --- human flourishing--- says happiness comes when we practice virtue as its own reward and pursue the life of reason. Epicurus, regarded happiness as a life of pleasure, not of wanton pleasure, but as a life lived free from having to expiate vengeful gods. The stoic Seneca, regarded happiness as being resigned to one's lot and facing life with equanimity. It would be Augustine who said happiness is found by obeying a God who knows what is best for us; we find happiness by following a divine will.

### **Defining Happiness**

What, though, do we mean by happiness? To try and define it is problematic, a “quagmire,” says the Harvard psychologist, Daniel Gilbert.<sup>11</sup> When define it we must, most fall back on Aristotle's three types: as the experience of pleasure; as self-satisfaction, that is, to do the right thing; and as human flourishing, *eudaimonia*, which we determine further down the road, upon reflection, than upon present perceptions, like when we assess the value of a stock not by its day-to-day performance but by its long-term results. Daniel Gilbert labels Aristotle's three distinctions as emotional happiness, moral happiness, and judgmental happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Spinoza would define happiness as human flourishing. Indeed, his entire metaphysical enterprise was to lead humans and society to this flourishing. His masterpiece, Ethics,<sup>13</sup> is a comprehensive metaphysic, a theory, a rational, logical structure, in which moral action and reason operate. It's both a method and a system. For Spinoza, how we view the world (thought)

---

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert, Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Edwin Curley, Ed. and Trans. A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1994.

and live in it (action) are two aspects of the same thing, corresponding to his mind-body unity, his philosophical monism. It is this monism that has made him a drawn-upon classical philosopher for cognitive scientists today and a philosopher of choice by certain atheists who seek to debunk religion, such as Christopher Hitchens in his God is Not Great.<sup>14</sup>

### **Spinoza and his metaphysic**

So, who is this Spinoza? And what does he have to say about human flourishing?

Baruch Spinoza, his family called him Bento, and later he took the Latinized Benedict --- all meaning “blessed”--- was born in Amsterdam in 1632, the son of Jewish Marranos from Portugal. The family fled Portugal to escape persecution and settled, along with many other Jews, in tolerant Amsterdam. Even though Amsterdam was known for its religious toleration, this toleration only went so far in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. The more upper class Spanish and Portuguese Sephardim, for instance, marginalized the less educated, lower class German and Polish Ashkenazim. Within the religious community itself, failure to uphold the teachings of the elders and the discipline of one’s community had not just religious but social and economical implications as well. It was vital to submit to authority in thought and practice if the community was to remain vibrant and prosper. Not to conform, one risked excommunication and alienation, as Spinoza came to know all too well.<sup>15</sup>

As a precocious boy growing up within the Dutch Jewish community, Spinoza learned early, the first when he was eight years of age, just how dangerous being a free-thinker in matters of religion could be. The first incident involved Uriel da Costa, who was defamed and excommunicated for questioning God’s transcendence and the mosaic authorship of the Torah.

---

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hitchens, God is Not Great.

<sup>15</sup> Yosef Kaplan, “The Portuguese Community in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World,” in Dutch Jewish History, Vol. 2, Ed. Jozeph Michman. Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989, p. 23-45. See also, Daniel Swetschinski, Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam. Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000, p. 48.



Da Costa's banishment and exile was so traumatic and humiliating, he committed suicide.<sup>16</sup> The second incident involved Jan de Witt, a Dutch statesman, mathematician, and backer of Spinoza's revolutionary Theological-Political Treatise.<sup>17</sup> For his liberal politics, de Witt was turned on by a Dutch mob and dragged through the streets to be brutally murdered. These experiences impressed upon Spinoza how tyrannical and deadly religion can be when it takes on the authority of absolute certainty and is defined more by what it excludes than by what it includes. Spinoza would forever argue for toleration and an openness to an expansive worldview, free from the constraints of all authorities save for that of reason alone.

Spinoza based his theory of religious toleration --- he being one of the earliest western thinkers to define it --- on a metaphysic of non-transcendence, whereby God and humans are coterminous with nature itself. If all humans abide by similar natural laws, and nature expresses itself diversely, then it stands to reason that no single person or group can speak for or impose beliefs on another. God as Nature, reason, and toleration, all these are the foundations of the secular state. We do not know what led Spinoza to adopt a secular, humanist, and scientific --- even evolutionary outlook --- but we know he began to break from his Jewish strictures and learning by the age of twenty-two, after he had come under the tutelage of the humanist Franciscus van Eden. It was not long afterward, in 1656, that Spinoza was excommunicated, as the rabbis phrased it, "from the people of Israel" for holding to "horrible heresies" and for practicing "monstrous actions."<sup>18</sup> It was also during this time that Spinoza began to wean himself from the empty pursuits of vanity, pleasure, wealth, and status.<sup>19</sup> Between his

---

<sup>16</sup> W.N.A. Klever, "Spinoza's Life and Works," in The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, Ed. Don Garrett. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Goldstein, Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave us Modernity. NY: Schocken, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Klever, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Nadler, Spinoza: A Life. NY: Cambridge Univ Press, 1999, 101-102.

excommunication and distaste for the transitoriness of worldly attachments, Spinoza was growing up fast.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when reason began to exert its independence from ecclesiastical authority and to be the medium through which the world was known and the goal of human life achieved, to be a philosopher was more a scientific enterprise than a purely reflective one. Philosophy meant natural science, to explore nature in all its aspects.<sup>20</sup> Spinoza came of age during the scientific discoveries of Galileo (1564-1642), Robert Boyle (1627-91), father of modern chemistry; Christiaan Huygens (1629-95), a physicist who discovered the wave-like qualities of light; Isaac Newton (1642-1727), and of Rene Descartes. Spinoza saw himself as not only a philosopher but a scientist, too. Indeed, after he was excommunicated from the Jewish community, and no longer able to draw upon the family business, Spinoza became a grinder of optical lens at the highest level of precision, such that optics was for him more than a trade but a technical science.

Of the thinkers of his day, it would be Descartes, thirty-six years Spinoza's senior, who most influenced Spinoza. Spinoza dedicated himself to correcting Descartes and to extending the implications of Descartes' thought on matters of religion, political philosophy, and, ultimately, human flourishing.

Born in France in 1596, Descartes spent most of his adult life in Amsterdam, settling there in late 1628 or early 1629. Here he found the peace he needed to pursue his studies. He published works in philosophy, geometry, meteorology, cosmology, and physics, and saw his ideas fiercely debated in the universities and among Danish intellectual circles.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Klever, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Nadler, 112.

The Cartesians, as the followers of Descartes were called, were the progenitors of a new way to conceptualize the world, of how the body we occupy relates both to the natural world and to that evasive, ambiguous entity called the soul, or, in secular terms, the mind. Cartesians had their liberal and conservative expressions, the former more prone to question the fixed reality of anything, thus of God, and the latter those able to see the reality of both the natural world and of God. Descartes himself was of the group that held to a dualism that preserved the integrity of God. He essentially secularized the religious concept of the separation of the soul from the body. As the anthropologist Andrew Strathern says, “Descartes used an existing religious dichotomy and turned it into a philosophical one....enabling him to draw on tradition while significantly transforming it. Basically, his act was to conflate ‘soul’ with ‘mind’.”<sup>22</sup>

Spinoza challenged the Cartesian view that the body and the mind are separate by disagreeing with the way Descartes understood the philosophical notion of substance, that which is said to constitute a thing’s essence, what makes something what it is. Spinoza’s critique of Descartes’ dualism set the stage for Spinoza’s one-substance monism. Spinoza took Descartes’ rationalism further than Descartes himself was willing to go with it, which, for Descartes, would have meant giving up on his view of God, whom Descartes regarded as independent of human thought and the establisher and sustainer of the material world.<sup>23</sup> Centuries later Einstein himself hedged from following his theory of relativity to its more radical conclusion in the unpredictable micro world of quantum mechanics because, as Einstein said, “God does not play dice.” Ironically enough the God of Einstein was the god of Spinoza.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Andrew J. Strathern, *Body Thoughts*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Rene Descartes, “Meditations,” in *Self, Cosmos, God*, Eds. Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993, pp. 16-18.

<sup>24</sup> “Quantum mechanics is certainly imposing,” said Einstein, “But an inner voice tells me that it is not yet the real thing. The theory says a lot, but it does not really bring us any closer to the secrets of the Old One. I, at any rate, am convinced that He does not play dice.” (335), and on Spinoza’s God, he said, “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who

Turning back to Descartes, Descartes defined substance in three ways: 1) that which is self-contained; it relies on nothing else for its existence. In this sense God is the only true substance; 2) that which is finite, be it material (a tree, a cow, a human body) or mental (an idea), and 3) that which has either the essence of thought (which occupies the realm of ideas) or of extension (that which occupies space – it has the dimensions of weight, volume, length, etc.),<sup>25</sup> substance here is not an individual thing, but a classification of things.

There are some problems in defining substance in these three ways. If by substance we mean that which is self-reliant, but that at the same time can be any finite object or idea, each with attributes shared by other finite objects or ideas, then, in reality, there is no substance that can be said to be self-contained, that is not reliant on another substance. Descartes' God, for instance, could be both independent and dependent, both autonomous and reliant.

On the other hand, if substances are autonomous, as Descartes defines substance, such that they have no attributes in common with other substances, then how does the substance of thought (the mind) physically affect the substance of extension (the body), that is, how do the body and the mind interact? How is it that I think to move my arm and my arm does move?

To resolve the divide between the mind and the body, Descartes posited the pineal gland, a particular part of the brain, called the conarion, where the mind interacts with the physical body. But this explanation merely shifts the problem: if we do not know how a non-physical mind can affect change in our physical body (such that I think I am raising my arm and then I

---

reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind," says Einstein. Walter Isaacson, *Einstein*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2007, p. 388.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Scruton, "Modern Philosophy I: The Rationalists and Kant," in *Philosophy I: a guide through the subject*, Ed. A.C. Grayling, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 2003, p. 453.

do), how are we any better able to explain how the non-physical mind can cause me to raise my arm by acting on the pineal gland, which, after all, is a component of the body?<sup>26</sup>

Spinoza solved the Cartesian problem of multiple, independent substances and of the dualism between the mind and body, by saying that if a substance is self-reliant, then the only way we can explain how the mind and body interact, is to say there is only one substance, and the mind (thought) and the body (matter) are but two attributes of the one substance; one substance informs the ideas we have and our feelings. All finite things, therefore, are but modes, expressions, of this one, all encompassing substance, which is Nature, or God.<sup>27</sup> The God of Spinoza, however, is not the God of the Hebrew or Christian scriptures, but a God co-equal with nature and its own infiniteness. The infiniteness of nature is God.

I do not want to get into Spinoza's view of God and what it implies for religious devotion, but to say that Spinoza's one-substance monism better aligns with the naturalism of modern scientific thinking than Descartes' dualism.<sup>28</sup> Even if there is no unified agreement in defining naturalism, naturalism has been the prevailing philosophical position for the past fifty years and holds, by definition, that the mind (brain) and the body are one.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza defines his naturalism this way: "Nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere the same.... through

---

<sup>26</sup> "Rene Descartes," In The Oxford Companion to the The Mind. Ed. Richard L. Gregory, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Della Rocca, Spinoza. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 33-58f.

<sup>28</sup> Descartes operated out of the metaphor, say George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, that "To see is to Know," which held that humans solely see, know, through the eyes of reason. Humans are incontrovertibly thinking beings: I think therefore I am. The body, in Descartes' world, is of no to little consequence; it cannot be trusted. See the chapter on "Descartes and the Enlightenment Mind" in, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy In the Flesh. NY: Basic Books, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> There are two basic themes to philosophical naturalism: 1) the ontological, which accepts science's view of nature, and 2) the methodological, which says either that a) philosophy is in service to science; science is philosophy, or b) that sciences says what it can but philosophy asks its own questions, concerning values and meaning; philosophy is autonomous from science. Spinoza would follow (b). Mario de Caro and David McArthur, Naturalism in Question. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. pp. 6-7.

the universal laws and rules of nature.<sup>30</sup> In effect, as Spinoza would say, to achieve human flourishing we should not look for happiness to come by any other way but by how nature alone works. There is a determinism in Spinoza. However, by means of our reason, the more we understand how nature works, how life is, the more we achieve the tranquility, perspective, and maturity of wisdom. And the method we are to follow to achieve this wisdom is by purifying the intellect of scatter-shot, randomized thoughts, of impressions governed by instinct, and of superstitions created by the imagination.

### **Method for Human Flourishing**

Spinoza first formulated his method for purifying the intellect in his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (1662),<sup>31</sup> written at the ripe age of thirty. The ideas laid out in the Treatise get their fruition in his posthumously-published masterpiece Ethics, his comprehensive metaphysic written in the geometric method, of axioms, postulates, and supporting propositional evidence.

Even though we are ultimately to ground our intellect on the fundamental laws of Nature, and are to look at life through the perspective of eternity, Spinoza realized that our path toward our flourishing cannot take place outside of ordinary life. We still have to garden. We are not immune from our passions, from distractions, and from the limitations life puts on us. We still live within society and must earn a living. We need not be monks. In being integrated with ordinary life, Spinoza's method and metaphysic have, therefore, practical and political implications.

Nevertheless, even though we live in our body and in society, we do not give in to them, but must keep ourselves focused to a life dedicated to reason and to our intellectual salvation.

---

<sup>30</sup> Della Rocca, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Spinoza, The Way to Wisdom, ed. Herman De Dijn. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996.

Just as Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Goethe's Faust saw the salvation of the soul (or in Spinoza's case, of the mind) and of the intellect as the same, so would Spinoza renounce the life of sensuality, acclaim, wealth, and companionship to achieve his intellectual freedom. He never married, he declined his inheritance, he turned down prominent academic appointments, lived alone as a boarder in a family's upstairs bedroom, and eked out a living grinding optical lens. In living separate from institutional attachments, Spinoza withdrew to the inner life and devised a universal metaphysic. The sociologist Louis Zurcher finds that those who have gone through a severe change in their social, institutional identification, as Spinoza had upon being excommunicated from the Jewish community that had defined him, people turn inward for a sense of identity, to a reflective self, and to a more broad, transcendent, mutable view of self, equipped in an expansive worldview, non-traumatized by change. Their flourishing comes by a certain detachment and an opening out.<sup>32</sup>

The purpose behind Spinoza's method for human flourishing is for us to understand our connection with Nature. Says Spinoza, the "highest good" "is the knowledge of the union that that the mind has with the whole of Nature."<sup>33</sup> And, he adds, "...it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire."<sup>34</sup> To come to a knowledge of the union of the mind with the "whole of Nature" we must purify our minds of inadequate ideas, those ideas which are generated by causes external to ourselves, such that I am not thinking for myself, but am being

---

<sup>32</sup> David Karp and William Yoels, *Sociology in Everyday Life*, 2 ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1993. pp. 341-43, *Sociology in Everyday Life*.

<sup>33</sup> De Dijn, pp. 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

prompted and led to think by ideas, images, random happenings, as he phrased it, by “fortuitous encounters with things.”<sup>35</sup>

Rather, as we develop our ability to think for ourselves, to understand the nature of things by tracing their former cause, through a series of regressions, do we draw upon our own mind and thereby eliminate, slowly, by fits and starts, all those inadequate ideas that confuse us. Spinoza, no doubt, gives a high premium to our mind’s ability to purify itself of extraneous thoughts. For if the mind and the body are intertwined with nature, how can he be so confident that we can extricate our thinking from the nature and society of which we are a part? Spinoza realizes this is difficult, but as we identify, through reason, the causes that generate our feelings and ideas will our mind finds its freedom.<sup>36</sup> Spinoza says we must garden.

Those who see a parallel here between Spinoza’s view that we find our freedom by understanding the causes that lead us to feel and think as we do, with Buddhism’s own view that we eliminate suffering by addressing, through a series of regressions, the causes behind our thoughts and actions, would not be mistaken.

But to follow Spinoza’s method comes at a cost. Giving pride of place to the intellect, seeking truth through reflection and study, does not find easy company. As Jacques Barzun says in his House of Intellect, an essay on what threatens the intellect in modern society, “the hostility of the common person toward the intellectual is of all times and places...this sentiment is so universal that anyone who sets himself against it soon knows that he is trying to resist a force of nature.”<sup>37</sup> The way of the intellect, he says, is oft perceived as elitist, aristocratic, not democratic, nor committed to the practical. More particularly, we note, in America, Protestant

---

<sup>35</sup> Spinoza, Ethics, IIP29S, in Curley, Ethics, pp. 135-26.

<sup>36</sup> Della Rocca, pp. 112-14.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Barzun, House of Intellect, p. 8. By intellect he refers to a “communal form of live intelligence,” a “habit of discipline,” that seeks “symbols of meaning,” “chains of reasoning,” “spurs of emotion,” a “body of common knowledge,” and a means to bring it to bear quickly, to apply it. Pp. 4-5.



emotionalism and philosophical pragmatism, two orientations that have threaded themselves through our patterns of behavior and manner of thought, resist Spinoza's rationalism.

Moreover, as the historian Daniel Boorstin recounts, the American temper has not been partial to the cultivation of the mind through study and reflection. The American temper has preferred gaining wisdom through experience and action. Says Boorstin, describing the American orientation, "that the reasons men give for their actions are much less important than the actions themselves, that it is better to act well for wrong or unknown reasons than to treasure a systematized 'truth' with ambiguous conclusions, that deep reflection does not necessarily produce the most effective action."<sup>38</sup> In short, Americans prefer to garden.

Not to garden, to follow the Spinozan grand metaphysical plan of reason and detachment, invites, in this scenario, a certain loneliness. The political scientist Thomas Dumm, in his book Loneliness as a Way of Life, says loneliness is a condition one must pay for the reflective life (I recall that when my high school senior classmates were at the prom, I was at home reading Count Philippe-Paul de Segur's Napoleon's Russian Campaign. Frankly, though, I would have preferred to have danced the night away). But, Dumm adds, this loneliness is not without its benefit to self and to the collectivity. "Loneliness," he says, "may be thought of as being a profoundly political experience because it is instrumental in the shaping and exercise of power, the meaning of individuality, and the ways in which justice is to be comprehended and realized in the world."<sup>39</sup> Formulating a theory and stance toward life, not to garden, occasionally brings its loneliness.

Spinoza found this for himself. He lived severed from the religious community of which he had been a part and remained unaffiliated with any institution (that he could do so attested to

---

<sup>38</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience, NY: Random House, 1958. pp. 151-52.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Dumm, Loneliness as a Way of Life. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 29.

the liberalism of Amsterdam and, for having no religious community, he has been labeled as the first modern Jew<sup>40</sup>). Nevertheless, out of his separation and isolation, he affirmed his political stance and formed his political judgments. He took on the clerical, governmental, and philosophical-theological authorities of his day to lay the foundation for freedom of thought, of speech, and of belief and he defined the parameters of how the State ought to secure those freedoms. Spinoza held that a state given to imposing conformance suppressed an individual's right to the life of reason and weakened the state's capacity to be a sanctuary for the freedom of thought and, thereby, its long-term survival, since disallowing freedom of expression suppresses the natural way of things.

Ironically, though, as the Spinozan philosopher Edwin Curley points out in his essay "Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan," for Spinoza to assert that human reason is determined by nature (consistent as this is with the unity of the mind and body), and, therefore, there exists no standard over human thought and behavior other than nature itself, Spinoza says, in effect, that might is right: those who by nature are stronger have the natural right to judge and prevail. The gentle Spinoza says Curley, becomes "...arguably the most Machiavellian of the great modern political philosophers."<sup>41</sup> One's flourishing, one's happiness, best comes if one has power and can exercise it. Unwittingly, Spinoza's monism has the potential to subvert the mind and the docile to the passions and the strongest.

To control this power, the natural passions of the people, the rawness of unbridled expression, we need the State. Spinoza trusted the power of the people to rule themselves more than his contemporary Hobbes (1588-1679), who relied on a powerful sovereign to enforce

---

<sup>40</sup> Swetschinkski, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Edwin Curley, "Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan," in The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, Ed. Don Garrett. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 315.

control.<sup>42</sup> Spinoza was less heavy handed. He felt individual reason and civil authority should not suppress the passions but should direct them for their free but controlled expression toward the way of Nature, which for the individual meant toward wisdom and for the State democracy, which, among governments, is the closest to the state of Nature, since it allows for diverse and free expression.<sup>43</sup> Humans must be free to garden free from the constraints of any authority --- religious or otherwise. For in the end, our happiness and the good of society rests on our integration with nature, our right to garden.

But if to flourish means to have our mind united with nature and to have the freedom to develop our minds toward that end, then anything that helps us to understand our integration with nature takes on authoritative status. So, scientific and medical knowledge which inform us of how our mind and body work, take on authoritative weight for guiding us in how to live. History, sociology, psychology, literature, linguistics, in as much as they help us to understand our own human nature and our dependence upon nature's universal laws, also take on authoritative weight.

What, though, do we make of religion in the path toward human flourishing, given that religion is not predicated on explaining nature but on finding meaning in and beyond our relationship with it? If Spinoza's naturalism holds that all phenomena --- be it thunderstorms, inspired thought, the making of good or bad choices --- must follow equally the same laws of nature, there being no room for explanations operating by a different set of laws --- then it would seem Spinoza would have no room for religious practice and for scripture, a source of religious authority.

---

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan," in Great Political Theories, Vol. 1. Ed. Michael Curtis, NY: Avon Books, p. 340.

<sup>43</sup> Curley, "Kissinger..." , p. 317.

It would take more space than is allowed here to cover Spinoza and religion. Suffice to say that he does not dispel theology, religious practice, and scripture, nor does he reject God, though Spinoza's God is not the God of theists, as I have mentioned. Instead, he humanizes the claims of religion and neutralizes its authority over free-inquiry and the State. Theology, he says, cannot make claims regarding matters of intellectual truth; that is the domain of philosophy. To try to ground theology in reason, as if by logic we can prove its claims, will bring "harm and danger," says Spinoza,<sup>44</sup> aware as he was of how religious persecution was predicated on the assumption that recalcitrant heretics were simply unwilling to follow their natural, God-given reason. The purpose of theology, says Spinoza, is to show what charity and justice mean, which are the essence of religion.<sup>45</sup> It is not what you believe, the coherence of your theology, or the institution of which you are a member, that makes you virtuous, but how, in the end, you act. Simply: it's what you do that determines your character, that determines what is sacred from what is profane. Our flourishing and happiness comes through the obedience of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," believes Spinoza.

As to scripture, Spinoza says it is to be interpreted in the same way that one interprets nature, that is, by appealing to facts and to what nature, or history or language, themselves reveal. Spinoza, building on the rationalism of Erasmus's approach to scripture, founded the historical, scientific study of scripture. As such, Spinoza does not abide by a transcendent God, independent of Nature and human affairs, as the source of scripture. Nor does he abide by external philosophies and points of view external to scripture's own, to ascertain what it means. For if we ascribe a philosophy independent of scripture, as the scholastics did, to give credence

---

<sup>44</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*. Ed. Jonathan Israel. Trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 194.

<sup>45</sup> Spinoza, TPT, pp. 177,181,195.

to our own opinions as authoritative, this only leads us to condemn those who disagree with us as violating divine truth.<sup>46</sup>

A contemporary of the Thirty Years War (1618-48) of religion, and who had his own experience of religious intolerance, Spinoza knew the strife and danger that can come from giving vaunted assumptions to scripture. But his own metaphysics of a singular substance, his monism, led him, as well, to qualify scripture to the human realm, to ground it in history and shore it of any *a priori* authority.<sup>47</sup> Scripture can only be a human document. An important one to be sure for guiding human life, but it is not a document that can purport knowledge unattainable by humans.

This leveling of scripture did much to challenge the claims of religion as a complete philosophical system and, by extension, a system of governance, and as an arbiter of human thought and moral expression. For this reason, Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise, in which he expounded his view of scripture, came to be regarded next to Hobbes' Leviathan, as "the most vilified intellectual work of the 17<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>48</sup> To be sure, Spinoza's view of scripture, even on purely human interpretive terms, has problems. For one, it assumes an evolutionary perspective in the development of its thought so that, among a number of Spinozan interpreters, Christianity comes off more enlightened than Spinoza's own Judaism, and the New Testament more than the Torah. My aim here, though, is not to evaluate the implications of its historical development, but to consider how this leveling of scripture contributes to human flourishing.

---

<sup>46</sup> Spinoza, TPT, p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> If there is one substance in the universe combining mind and body, thought and action, the ideal and the form, a non-dual universe, scripture, therefore, cannot be dualistic itself, be both a human document yet not a human document, be human thought yet at the same time of knowledge revealed from outside human affairs and independent of our innate cognitive abilities.

<sup>48</sup> Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs, 2 ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, p. 46.

First, I believe, it puts the wisdom for happiness within the human domain. Humans are not by default without means to imagine and reason better. And, second, humans, therefore, are not forever under the perfectedness of a divine judgment, of some amorphous, easily manipulated, standard held by religious specialists. Instead, the standard derived from scripture is a standard scrutinizable by those outside the group as well. There is no privileged revelation and morality. Scripture is on par with other human documents in having to persuade for what constitutes human flourishing.

To have scripture emasculated of its divine authority, I wonder if for those who would now regard it in a new light would still consult it for their flourishing? On what grounds does scripture's relevance for human flourishing now rest? I think of my own practice. Since I no longer regard scripture as divine, arising from some outside agency, I feel less need to consult it for God's word, as it were. Nevertheless, perhaps because of ingrained predispositions, but not necessarily, I still read sacred texts for comfort and insight. The insight gained may not be derived as a specific word from afar. Rather, the comfort derived and the insights gained are of a more general, enveloping nature. I come away with a sense that I am hearing words from the ages --- which scripture is. If I were to exegete and burrow into the Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek languages and re-create as best I could the historical setting of the time, I am sure I would find deeper nuggets of wisdom than if I had just read scripture superficially. We cannot all be exegetes, be it of scripture or of any other text of significance. Sometimes we even speak of and benefit from books we have not read.<sup>49</sup> But it would seem that, as pertains to nurturing human flourishing, the quality of the text is measured by how much it provides the reader an enriching experience and lifts the reader's sights as to what is possible and focuses the lens as to what is

---

<sup>49</sup> See the witty but insightful book by Pierre Bayard, How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read. NY: Bloomsbury, 2007.

probable. Texts traditionally taken as sacred have certainly done this, and still do. Texts not traditionally taken as sacred can do it as well, and some have. In the end, what defines the integrity of the text, for Spinoza, is due to what the text inspires you to do and be. Religion for Spinoza is reduced to action alone: the doing of good. Religion is not a theory. It is a practice. To be religious is to garden.

Spinoza's method for purifying the intellect and achieving the mind's union with nature relies upon a rigorous, objective process of aligning passions --- religious or otherwise --- behind reason and perceiving the world as it is.

Such a rationalist method, though, is not without its limitations. Neuroscientists today and cognitive psychologists speak of our inability to gauge accurately what is in our best interests and what will bring us our best pleasure and happiness. We fool ourselves unwittingly, believing one thing when the opposite is the case. We habitually undermine and misperceive our best interests, even when we aim to approach decisions rationally. We are not as rational as we think we are, nor can we be, for we still like our illusions.

The reasons for this are several. But a fundamental reason, as the philosopher Owen Flanagan says, is that we are incapable of seeing ourselves objectively. We cannot get past our own skin and all the affections that play into our attachments. Reason cannot always get ahead of the body. If the mind and body, the idea and the material, are united, to try to start behaving well while we are still reasoning poorly, or to try and start reasoning well while we are behaving poorly, is like trying to get on the other side of one's shadow. It is impossible to attain perfect knowledge (and, therefore, naturally, perfect behavior) on our own, regardless of how disciplined and focused our life is toward this aim. We cannot achieve perfect objectivity and, in addition, we cannot keep from seeing reality as we *want* to see it, says Daniel Gilbert. We tend to take in

what benefits us. We cook the facts.<sup>50</sup> If we admit this, we eliminate hubris and recognize the need for the collective, such as the State, and of the law, and of the wisdom of community, to help us do what is best for our flourishing and to reason better toward it.

The widely discussed book by Cass Sustein and Richard Thaler, Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness, makes recommendations for assisting people in making decisions on two well-established assumptions: One, people are poor prognosticators of what is best for them. And, two, people are disposed toward inertia, to a lack of the will. Taking these assumptions, people could use a “nudge,” Sustein and Thaler say, to choose and to do that which would be in their best interest.<sup>51</sup> Sustein and Thaler refer to this position as Libertarian Paternalism. Libertarian Paternalism incorporates both nudges (people need help to do what is best for themselves) and incentives (people are able to make their own rational choices). Sustein and Thaler say, essentially, that people have the ability to seek their flourishing and not; they need guidance and a push, a “nudge.” People sometimes need help with their gardening.

So, Spinoza, I believe, is too self-reliant and self-confident in our individual capacity to think through that which is best for ourselves, even if he does acknowledge that his method is not for everyone. Most people simply cannot or are unwilling to let reason be their guide, as the woman protestor at a recent town-hall meeting over health care exhibited when she berated a congressman who attempted to reason with her, saying he would be as successful as “trying to argue with a dining-room table.”<sup>52</sup> This woman’s attitude proves Spinoza’s point that many look upon reason with suspicion and take it as betraying passionate, principled commitment. But even those who do purportedly follow the path of the intellect and of reason, can go grossly

---

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, p. 158.

<sup>51</sup> Cass R. Sustein and Richard Thaler, Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 6, 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> The Economist, August 22, 2009, p.6.



errant, as the best and the brightest took us into Vietnam and down the economic hatch in 2008 (It can be argued that, in actuality, they were not using reason and a broadly-informed intellect at all, but sacrificing their intelligence to other drives and goals.) The whole field of behavioral economics is built on the premise of the irrationality of our choices.

If, then, we are not as rational as we think we are, then it would seem that giving more credence to random, coincidental and fleeting encounters as well in finding happiness and for progressing toward our human flourishing than we actually do, would not be misguided. How many times have I been thinking of nothing in particular or on a totally unrelated subject, to that to which I was giving attention, when a chance encounter, an impromptu image, a spontaneous feeling or an uncalled for recollection came upon me and led me to consider something profound, global, and, at that moment, existentially poignant. This revelation, as it were, forgetting about any divine agency, came not from a sequence of logical deductions but from random firings of my neurons. I learnt something about myself and about the world at that moment and I had a feeling of happiness and saw clearly a way forward. Creative insight often comes in just such a manner.

## **Conclusion**

What should we say, then, about Spinoza's method and his metaphysic for advancing our flourishing as individuals and as a society? Certainly he is valued for integrating all of life – the ordinary, private sphere, the public sphere, and nature – into an inter-dependent whole and that it is upon nature's own laws, in which we all share, that we will ground and discover our long-term happiness. For his naturalism impresses upon us that it is through our own ingenuity, creativity, discipline, and volition that we can create a world rich with meaning and deep in the experience of life. Unlike the cargo cults and millennial movements, we do not wait for some outside savior,

nor for an escape from the challenge of dealing with our humanity's rough association with itself and with nature's own rough edges. Naturalism has the value of turning our focus to life itself, here before us.

In addition, as a rationalist, Spinoza has us to think --- to reason, to seek to understand, to delve deeply into understanding why things are and from where they have come and what is fundamental to them. His recognition of our mind-body unity emphasizes that our emotions are not irrelevant to reason but are the creative fuel behind it and that our happiness is a constant check between the pride of place given to reason and to our emotions. Alain's propos were his attempts to garden: of hoeing, weeding, cutting, and pruning of his ideas on a range of things, seeking to find just what's there to give him the necessary meaning for a life-time of cultivation of and for happiness, which a singular theory, placed upon all the particulars of life's diversity and changes would fail to achieve. A theory would only keep us from gardening. Spinoza's metaphysic sought to give us an overall theory for not gardening --- but only not to garden in a certain field: the field of Cartesian dualism. For everywhere else, we are to garden.

Thank you.

December 4, 2009