

Ethics

Readings (see copies for full bibliographic details)

[1] Descartes, from the *Discourse on the Method*, Part III.

[2] Descartes, from the *Correspondence with Elizabeth*, 4.8./18.8./1.9.1645.

[3] Spinoza, from the *Ethics* IVP18.

1. [1] Do you find the four maxims of Descartes's 'moral code' convincing? Why, or why not?
2. [2] What can make us happy? (cf. Letter of 4 August)
- 3.* [2] Does Descartes lean more towards the Stoics or the Epicureans or neither? (cf. Letter of 18 August)
4. [2] [1] Explain the connection between reason and happiness.
5. [3] What is the fundamental principle of ethics?
- 6.* [3] What is wrong with suicide?

Background Information. Here are some of the passages that Spinoza refers to. Note that an *affects* are defined as 'affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained' (see IIID3).

IIIP11S: 'By *joy*, therefore, I shall understand [...] that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection. And by *sadness*, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection. The affect of joy which is related to the mind and body at once I call *pleasure* or *cheerfulness*, and that of sadness, *pain* or *melancholy*'.

IIIP4: 'No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause'. The proof says that this is self-evident. The thought seems to be that a self-destroying entity is incoherent (and so inconceivable).

D8: 'By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is [...] virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone'.

IIIP7: 'The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing'. The demonstration goes like this: a thing's essence determines the thing's power, or what that thing is capable of doing or bringing about. But striving do to anything just is the thing's power.

IIPost. 4: 'The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated'. The thought is that bodies, and in fact all things, are dynamical entities. In a letter to Oldenburg (*Ep.* 32), Spinoza says because bodies are part of the universe, they 'agree' with the entire universe and cohere with all other bodies. All bodies are inter-connected according to the laws of nature. But like little worms living in the bloodstream, we are aware only of a tiny section of this dynamical system, which is Nature *or* God.