

Ethics: Living Well

Descartes: Virtuous Reasoning

(1) From the *Principles of Philosophy* (Preface to the French edition): “Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By ‘morals’ I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom.”

(2) *Virtue*: the resolution to act in accordance with our best judgement; to act in line with reason.

(3) Generosity (*generosité*): (a) understand that our essence is but the free control of our will and (b) feel determined to use the will well (cf. *Passions of the Soul* §153).

Spinoza: Striving to Know God/Nature (cf. Handout 13)

(4) Spinoza’s ethics is rationalistic (PSR), egoistic, and Stoic (rule the passions).

(5) From *Ethics* IV Preface (emphases added): “We see [...] that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things. For we have shown [...] that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being call God, *or* Nature, acts from the same necessity of nature from which he exists. For we have shown (IP16) that the necessity of nature from which he acts is the same as that from which he exists. The reason, therefore, *or* cause, why God, *or* Nature, acts, and the reason why he exists, are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle of end of existing, so he also has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause, of some thing. For example, when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. [...] It really is an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. For as I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something. [...]

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. [...] In what follows, therefore, I shall understand

by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves.”¹

(6) The good is useful to individuals: ethical egoism. The ‘dictates of reason’ demand that everyone is bound to seek one’s own advantage (cf. Reading [3]).

(7) PSR: the *conatus* doctrine explains this. The *conatus* is an inherent dynamic capacity of every thing to maintain itself in existence as far as it can. From its own nature, every thing tries or strives to preserve itself, and to increase power or activity. E.g., rocks resist destruction and movement; plants blossom, take in water, shed leaves; humans learn how to control the environment, avoid harm, etc.

(8) We strive to increase our power, i.e. activity (as opposed to passivity), and knowledge. So, the active exercise of our own reason is power: “No one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else” (IVP25). Striving is realising one’s essence, or ‘approaching a model’. Increasing one’s power is also joyful and *good*: “Knowledge of God [*or Nature*] is the mind’s greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God [*or Nature*]” (IVP28).

(9) “Insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature” (IVP32). Whatever decreases our power is evil, which is contrary to us or not in agreement with our nature (cf. IVP30). Since passions decrease our activity and hence our power, they cannot be good. In fact, they lead to bondage (Handout 11).

(10) We “neither strive for, nor will [i.e. purely mental striving], neither want, nor desire [i.e. mind–body striving] anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (IIP9S) (cf. Plato’s Euthyphro dilemma). Against *deontological ethics*, actions are not good or right as such. They are good or right insofar as they make individuals more powerful. Against *utilitarianism*, right action does not depend on an outcome (consequence) such as maximising overall happiness. Such standards for goodness and rightness are arbitrary and thus violate the PSR. What is good and right must flow from an agent’s individual essence or nature. We agree with our nature insofar as we live according to, and guided by, reason (IVP35).

(11) *Sharing Virtues*. It is rational to promote not only one’s own interests, but also those of others: “There is no singular thing in Nature which is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason” (IVP35C1), and “the greatest good of those who seek virtue [power] is common to all, and can be enjoyed by all equally” (IVP36). To the extent that *your* nature converges or agrees with *my* nature, *your* actions benefit *me*, and vice versa. The more *everybody* becomes less passionate and more rational, the more everybody agrees—the more everybody becomes *one* (cf. Reading [3]).

(12) But Spinoza adds a dose of realism: ‘it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason’ (cf. IVP35S).

1 Transl. by E. Curley (1994). *The Spinoza Reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

