

Script for Baruch Spinoza

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Slide 1: Ok, you've gotten an overview of Spinoza's works thanks to the School of Life video. Now, let's focus on the one relevant to this course and your assigned reading for the remainder of the semester, the *Ethics*. You'll find that Spinoza mirrors Descartes, but with a few major exceptions that may blow your mind a little bit. Out of all the philosophers we've covered in this course, if I had to rank them, Spinoza would be at the top of the list in big, bold letters, followed by Rousseau and Machiavelli.

Slide 2: What makes Spinoza one of the most fascinating and controversial philosophers out there is that his ideas and beliefs gained him the title "the atheist Jew," which is a total misnomer. In order for Spinoza to be considered an atheist, his philosophy would've attempted to disprove the existence of God or a god, but he didn't do that. Instead, he challenged the notion of who or what God is, how God should play a role in our lives, and how to eliminate suffering in order to ascend to our true potential. Unfortunately, his beliefs made him public enemy number one.

Slide 3: Spinoza challenged his religion's concept of God and his omnipresence in our lives, and by doing this he is disagreeing with Descartes who embraced his church's concept of God as all-knowing and all seeing, blessing us with His gifts, including the gifts of reason and doubt. These two things, says Descartes, should be employed at every opportunity. The only thing we cannot doubt is that we are thinking beings; I think, therefore I am. But this doesn't stop Spinoza from mirroring Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. In fact, his structure and "much of the technical language of Part One is, to all appearances, right out of Descartes" (Nadler 7).

Slide 4: Spinoza's *Ethics* is a wild and complicated ride, people, and like I've been doing for the other philosophers covered, I'm going to simplify and break it down as much as possible and focus on a few key points. To do this, I'm going to organize the information like Spinoza did in *Ethics*, but only focus on Parts I, II, III and IV. Let's begin with Part I.

Slide 5: Spinoza, much like other philosophers, sets up a series of propositions in which he, “presents the basic elements of his picture of God” (Nadler 4). He posits a deceptively simple question: what is substance? He answers that question with the following: A substance is a thing able to exist independently without any aid from anything else. And this, in Spinoza’s view, is what God is; God is a substance, a thing able to exist independently. This substance, God, is indivisible; it cannot be separated. This substance possesses infinite (endless) attributes, which he calls essences. Think of attributes as the characteristics of what makes a thing a thing and even if the thing changes, the essence remains the same.

To explain what I mean by this, I’ll have to bounce back to Descartes for an example, for Baruch borrowed this concept from him. For example, think of a lit candle. As it burns down, the wax expands, extends* in length, breadth, and width. Even though the wax has changed from its original form, it still remains the same; it still retains its essence, the properties that make it wax (Shein). It’s still wax, it’s no different from a candle that hasn’t been lit and through melting it has merely extended its essence (attributes).

*extension – a property whereby something occupies space

Slide 6: Now, back to Spinoza and God...

To recap, God is an indivisible substance that possesses infinite attributes. God is the only substance that exists; there is no other. Therefore, everything else, in Spinoza’s view, is called a mode because anything **other than** God must rely on something else in order to survive. So we humans are modes; we rely on other things for our existence (“Study Guide”). For example, we are in a constant exchange of gases (oxygen and carbon dioxide) with trees and plants in order for both to survive. We all know about the circle of life and the hierarchy of creatures (Lion King, anyone?).

Think of modes as the melted wax example from earlier. The candle, as it melts, is expanding its essence. So humans, trees, flowers, fish, fowl...all of these are like the melted wax, an extension of God’s essence, which is why, “everything else that is, is in God” (Nadler 7).

That's it for the overview of Part I. Moving on to Part II!

Slide 7: Now, as I stated earlier, God has many endless attributes (essences). In Part II of *Ethics*, Spinoza claims two attributes of God are *extension* and *thought*. These two attributes are expressed through physical bodies (extension) and ideas (thought). Physical bodies aren't just human bodies; they can be non-human as well. Anything that takes up space is an expression of God.

Our ideas are an expression of God since they come from God's attribute of thought. Any idea we have is a reflection of "God's mind or infinite intellect" (Nadler 7).

The controversy regarding this concept is that it was mistaken to mean that we're all God, but that is not what Spinoza is saying. What he is claiming is God is everywhere and the fact that we exist reflects his infinite power.

Do you remember Descartes' mind-body problem? The fact that Descartes claimed the mind and body were separate because they had separate properties and therefore couldn't be one in the same? Here's Spinoza's say on the matter:

Everything in nature operates by a set of laws that relate to its nature; for example the law of physics or the law of motion. God doesn't determine, create, or control these laws; they merely follow from God's attributes without being controlled by God. So if a physical body does this or that, it does so within a set of laws EVEN THOUGH it is an expression of God. Every expression of God's attribute of extension (the body) is the result of a "causal series of bodily events and is determined only by the nature of extension and its laws" (Nadler 17). This means every time a body does a certain, it's the result of a body either being in action or acted upon, thus reflecting "universal laws of motion" as well as "other bodies in motion and rest surround it and with which comes into contact" (Nadler 8).

The same can be said for the mind and any ideas that come from it: "Similarly, every idea follows only from the attribute of thought. Any

idea is an integral part of an infinite series of ideas and is determined by the nature of thought and its laws” (Nadler 17).

The tricky part with Spinoza’s theory is that it might suggest that he agrees with Descartes, that the mind and body are separate because of separate properties, or in Spinoza’s case operating within separate laws of nature. And indeed, Spinoza states there are, “...no causal interactions between bodies and ideas, between physical and the mental” (Spinoza as qtd by Nadler 17).

But then he puts a slight twist on the issue. He states there is, “...however, a thoroughgoing correlation and parallelism between the two series. For every mode in extension that is a relatively stable collection of matter, there is a corresponding mode in thought” (Spinoza as qtd by Nadler 17). What he is saying here is that, no, the mind doesn’t influence the body and the body doesn’t influence the mind. Each have a set of laws they must operate by, BUT when they do act, they are one in the same but “expressed in two ways” (Nadler 17).

Well, let’s watch this clip and you can form your own opinion of Spinoza’s idea.

Slide 8: Another claim that made Spinoza public enemy No. 1 was his claim that God is NOT a “transcendent creator, a being who causes a world distinct from himself to come into being by creating it out of nothing” (Nadler 8). God’s infinite power created what NEEDED to be created; the world is a “mathematical necessity” and wasn’t created by a “spontaneous act of free will” (Nadler 8). To Spinoza, religion makes the mistake of claiming nature and God are two separate entities.

Slide 9: Now, let’s get to the concept that’s the mind blower.

Acts that occur are not the result of God’s planning or a way of control, nor does God have a purpose for us all. Anything that occurs does so because of the laws of nature. Miracles are another thing that God is not responsible for because nature has a course to follow. The belief of miracles is, “due only to ignorance of the true causes of phenomena” (Nadler 12). In short, anything

unusual that occurs that may be viewed as a miracle can be explained through science and reason. Nothing in nature happens by chance:

In nature there is nothing contingent*, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way...Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced (Spinoza as qtd by Nadler 7).

*contingent - liable but not certain to occur; possible

Because God is nature and not the omnipotent figure as portrayed in scripture, God shouldn't be worshipped:

“there is nothing holy or sacred about Nature...instead, one should strive to understand God or Nature, with the kind of adequate or clear and distinct intellectual knowledge that reveals Nature's most important truths...the key to discovering and experiencing God...is the philosophy and science, not religious awe and worshipful submission. The latter give rise only to superstitious behavior and subservience to ecclesiastics* authorities; the former leads to enlightenment, freedom, and true blessedness” (Nadler 16).

* ecclesiastic - a member of the clergy or other person in religious orders.

God, according to Spinoza, is not a vengeful being who judges our actions and who we must obey in order for us to be rewarded. God is NOT “...like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions” (Spinoza qtd by Nadler 7). If man continues to anthropomorphize* God, it will only restrict what we do and how we act, and “fosters a life enslaved to hope and fear and the superstitions to which such emotions give rise” (Nadler 7).

* anthropomorphize - give human characteristics to a thing or entity

In other words, if we live our lives in fear of God's wrath, always adhering to what WE think will please God to avoid punishment based on what MAN has written in the Bible, we are restricting ourselves and denying the right of free will, or free agency to quote Rousseau, given to us. By fearing God's wrath, we

are basically giving human characteristics, like anger and love, and human actions to an infinite being.

Alright! That's enough of Part II, let's bring this puppy home with Parts III and IV.

Slide 10: In Parts III and IV, Spinoza's aim is to "restore the human being and his volitional and emotional life into their proper place in nature" (Nadler 22).

In Part III, Spinoza explains emotions, which Spinoza calls affects, are divided into two camps: actions and passions. When an event occurs due to something we have done based on our knowledge of the world and nature, then it's our mind acting. But when something happens to us caused by something or someone, "we are passive and being acted upon" (Nadler 22). When we are acting or being acted upon, it creates a change either mentally or physically, "what Spinoza calls 'an increase or decrease in our power of acting' or in our 'power to persevere in being'" (Nadler 22).

We all have what Spinoza calls "conatus*", which makes up our "essence," our power (Nadler 22). Anything that occurs affects our power to push forward either positively or negatively:

Affects that are actions are changes in this power that have their source (or 'adequate cause') in our nature alone; affects that are passions are those changes in this power that originate outside of us.

*conatus - the tendency of all things to persist in their own being

Therefore, we need to be free from passions or "at least to learn how to moderate and restrain them, and become active, autonomous beings" (Nadler 23). Once we do this, whatever happens outside of us will be the result of our own nature and not how we interact with things outside of us. In other words, we won't allow external influences to govern or control our behavior; whatever we do will be a reflection of nature or God's attributes. We will "be truly liberated from the troublesome emotional ups and downs of this life" (Nadler 23).

Because of our desire to push forward, what could be considered our will or appetite, we go after things we think will benefit us (thereby increasing our power to act) and avoid what we think will harm us (thereby decreasing our power to act). The passions we feel, such as love, hate, joy, sadness, are the majority of the time “directed outward, towards things and their capacities to affect us one way or another” (Nadler 24). If we continue to chase after things we have no control over, we are allowing them to control us.

Slide 11: In Part IV, Spinoza discusses what it takes to free yourself from the bonds of your emotions in order to achieve true happiness. To find the solution, all we need to do is look at previous philosophers for the answer.

Since we have no control over external objects we want and how they influence our well being, we need to control the impact or minimize how those objects influence over us. What we need to understand is that we will never really eliminate being acted upon because we are a part of nature. But we can control our passions so we can “achieve a certain degree of relief from their turmoil” (Nadler 25).

How do we control our passions? With virtue. How do we strengthen and improve our virtue? Through the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of ideas:

The best kind of knowledge is a purely intellectual intuition of the essence of things. This ‘third kind of knowledge’, beyond both random experience and ratiocination*, sees things not in their temporal** dimension, not in their duration and in relation to other particular things, but under the aspect of eternity, that is, abstracted from all considerations of time and place and situated in their relationship to God and his attributes (Nadler 25).

*ratiocination – the process of exact thinking: reasoning

**temporal – of or relating to time

In short we should strive to understand God and God’s attributes, and this understanding is our virtue. Once we understand God, we will then:

...see that all bodies and their states follow necessarily from the essence of matter and the universal laws of physics; and we see that all ideas, including all the properties of minds, follow necessarily from the essence of thought and its universal laws. This insight can only weaken the power that the passions have over us (Nadler 26).

In other words, once we understand that events in the world happen the way they are supposed to according to the laws of nature no matter what precautions we might take because we're trying to obtain or maintain something, the easier our lives will be. The more we strive to understand God and nature, whatever love we have for objects will be replaced by a love for God and the laws that govern our universe:

...the mind's intellectual love of God is our understand of the universe, our virtue, our happiness, our well-being and our 'salvation.' It is also our freedom and autonomy, as we approach the condition wherein what happens to us follows from our nature...alone and not as a result of the ways external things affect us...[a] 'free person' is one who bears the gifts and losses of fortune with equanimity* and does only those things that he believes to be "the most important in life...the free person neither hopes for any eternal, otherworldly rewards nor fears any eternal punishments.

*equanimity – mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation

Slide 12: As you can see, Spinoza was a radical thinker for his time and if you think about it, very courageous. Some may think of him as a heretic and blasphemer, but if you open your mind you will see Spinoza's only goal was to free man from restrictions that may hinder progress. To quote Rousseau:

"Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains."