

# Spinozian Psychology

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Spinoza's treatment of human psychology is disarmingly simple, but with far-reaching implications. This short document gives a high-level overview of his masterwork, *The Ethics*, and particularly parts 3 and 4. It needs to be stressed that Spinoza's treatment of our psychology is echoed by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and more recently by some aspects of evolutionary psychology.

## The Conatus

For Spinoza, the root of all our desires and emotions lies in what he called the conatus. This is an ancient term used by Cicero to depict the striving that we all undertake to ensure our survival. It cannot be doubted that our primary driver is the survival drive, in common with all living things. Darwin posited that survival and procreation are the primary concerns of living things, the latter being manifested through the sex drive.

Spinoza goes further than most by saying that the conatus, the survival drive, is the very essence of us and the root power of God (or nature). It's worth pointing out that for Spinoza, God is nature, although there are some nuances that are not particularly relevant here.

In part 4 of his *Ethics* he states:

*The power whereby each single thing, and consequently man, preserves its own being is the very power of God, or Nature ...*

There is, of course, an existential issue to be dealt with. While we strive with all our being to continue our existence, we are all aware of the fact that we will die. This is a cause of suffering, and as the Zen tradition has stated, the root of all our suffering is the desire to exist. Spinoza does not treat this issue directly, but as will be shown shortly, he does explain how anything that diminishes our survival prospects creates any one of a diverse array of negative and painful emotions.

## God (or nature)

Various religions, spiritual traditions, psychoanalysts, and philosophers have stated that the world is the product of a kind of excess manifested by an underlying void. For Spinoza, this void is called substance. For Schopenhauer, it was will, and for Nietzsche, the will-to-power. More recently, psychoanalysts such as Freud, Lacan, and Willicott have seen the world as emerging from a pregnant void. I state all this to simply put Spinoza in context. In Spinoza's terminology, substance (the void) gives rise to modes (things) in an act of expression. I should add that the void is not nothing, it is a pregnant potential. Quantum froth, the spontaneous, short-lived emergence of atomic particles seemingly from nothing, might be seen as the manifestation of such a void.

## The Essence of Man

For Spinoza, the conatus is the very essence of man. The word essence has a very specific meaning for Spinoza, describing the property that determines all other properties of a thing. If the conatus is the very root of us, its effect will be felt everywhere, and particularly in our desires, emotions, thoughts, and actions. He states this very clearly in part 3 of The Ethics:

*The conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself.*

So, if the conatus is our very essence, we should be able to deduce everything about our behavior and inner world.

## Mental Automata

As far as Spinoza is concerned, our inner world is determined in exactly the same way as the outer world, namely through cause and effect. If all our science and understanding is based on causality, it makes no sense to treat our inner world any differently. The immediate implication of this is that we have no free will; we are, to quote Spinoza, mental automata. The implications of this are far-reaching. Again, Spinoza is not alone in this, and Schopenhauer famously said (paraphrased): we can do what we will, but we cannot will what we will. You might need a moment to think about that.

The direct implication of this is that there is no such thing as praise or blame. We should not indulge in regret, guilt, remorse, or any of what Spinoza would call the sad emotions.

Without doubt, many people will be offended by such statements. Let's offend them a little more by also stating that we are not responsible; how can an automaton be held responsible?

## Emotions and Summer Storms

In the spirit of his "mental automata," Spinoza also goes on to say that our emotions are wholly natural phenomena, not to be judged or suppressed in any way. Anger, envy, hatred, love, excitement, are all natural phenomena in exactly the same way as a summer storm is a natural phenomenon. He claims we should come to understand our emotions in the same way we might understand anything else, and particularly without judgment. At the very start of his Political Treatise, he states:

*Philosophers look upon the passions by which we are assailed as vices, into which men fall through their own fault. So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate them, or, if their purpose is to appear more zealous than others, to execrate them. They believe that they are thus performing a sacred duty, and that they are attaining the summit of wisdom when they have learnt how to shower extravagant praise on a human nature that nowhere exists and to revile that which exists in actuality. The fact is that they conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be.*

## Pleasure and Pain

Having established that the conatus, our striving to exist, is the very essence of us, Spinoza then goes on to say that when the conatus is impeded we feel pain, and when it is freely expressed we will feel pleasure. His exact statement on this:

*Pleasure is man's transition from a state of less perfection to a state of greater perfection.*

*Pain is man's transition from a state of greater perfection to a state of less perfection.*

We feel pleasure when we move to a more powerful expression of the conatus (perfection in his words), and feel pain when our conatus, or survival prospects are diminished. A million dollars will enhance our survival prospects, and a serious illness will diminish our survival prospects. It's all quite simple really, but the important thing is to remember that it always relates back to what Spinoza calls our essence; the conatus or survival drive.

## Power

Another way of looking at the conatus is to see it as a power, specifically the power to survive and be what one is. Spinoza is quite explicit about this:

***By virtue and power I mean the same thing; that is, virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is man's very essence, or nature, insofar as he has power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his own nature.***

This is a useful way of looking at things and is reminiscent of Nietzsche's will-to-power. When our power (survival power) is enhanced, we feel pleasant emotions, and when it is diminished, we feel pain.

## Love and Hate

Spinoza's take on love is not at all romantic. For him, love is what we feel when some external thing enhances our power in some way, and we are then said to love that thing. A million dollars, a new partner, an expensive motor car, may all be the objects of love simply because they bring pleasure. We love our children because they carry our genes and enhance our power (usually anyway).

Hate is just the opposite and results from something that diminishes our power, no matter how indirectly. Getting fired, becoming ill, getting a divorce, violence directed toward oneself, are all examples of things that diminish us and will probably result in hatred towards the things that bring this about.

## Emotions

There are many emotions that spring from love and hate. Love might bring about excitement, whereas hate can bring about anger, envy, and derision. It is Spinoza's contention that hatred manifests most commonly as envy. In fact, he goes so far as to say it is our default state; we pity those less fortunate than ourselves and envy those more fortunate. Shame is

also an emotion that derives from a diminished sense of power. We feel shame because we believe something we have done will diminish us in the eyes of the herd.

Other emotions include fear and hope, remorse, regret, and guilt. As far as Spinoza is concerned, these emotions are natural phenomena that can be dealt with through the use of reason.

## Understanding

It is Spinoza's claim that our emotions can be moderated through a reasoned understanding of them. Understanding that you may be feeling down simply because life circumstances are diminishing your power very often offers some relief. For example, we might be envious of a person in the office that has just gotten a promotion. This person has seen an increase in power, which in turn might make you feel diminished because you wanted the promotion. Understanding the power dynamics can, and often does, bring some relief from the pain of a negative emotion.

There is obviously a little bit more to it than this, because, as Spinoza states, our emotions are experienced in the body. We might have ideas associated with these emotions (I hate that person because he got the promotion), but the actual emotion is an increase or decrease in the power of the body. Have you ever noticed how someone feeling dejected might walk with a stoop, or someone who has just been complemented may have a spring in their step? Many emotions might not be as obvious as these, but they are always in the body.

## Summary

The root of all our behaviors lies in survival and procreation. When these things are going well, we feel happy; when they are not, we feel unhappy. It's that simple. The act of understanding our emotions and desires gives us the tools to moderate them, and since many emotions are painful, we have the opportunity to live a happier life.

Please remember that this is a brief overview of Spinozian psychology and the power is in the details. Even so, just the simple act of understanding the basics gives us a certain amount of power.

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