

Spinoza on Love and Hate

Written by Daniel Spiro

Presented before the Washington Spinoza Society

I. Introduction

When studying at an Orthodox yeshiva, I was told that the human mind is fundamentally emotional. On this point, despite his common association with Stoicism, Spinoza completely agreed with his Jewish kin. It is difficult to imagine any philosophy more centered on the emotions than Spinoza's.

It should thus not be surprising that both love and hatred play an especially vital role in Spinoza's thought. He did not simply see hatred as love's flip side, but rather as an even more dominant facet of the human condition. That elevation of hatred's importance, coming from a hard-headed, joy-seeking philosopher like Spinoza, is truly a gut punch to any humanist.

As for love, what is especially interesting is the two-fold nature that it assumed in Spinoza's philosophy. Most commonly, our intellects are not in control of our emotions, and love serves as hatred's antithesis. But for the rare few, reason can take the reins, hatred disappears, and the love we experience can become the secret of our salvation. Spinoza taught that when we devote our hearts to winning competitions for such goods as money or worldly honors, we can expect our love eventually to turn to hatred. Yet we can escape hatred's clutches by allowing the voice of reason to lead us to more enduring beloveds, none of which is as enduring or healthful as God.

In this talk, I will explain each of these points in some depth. What I will not explain, because it continues to leave me baffled, is why contemporary atheist scholars so often embrace Spinoza as one of their own, despite the fundamental importance he assigned to the idea of God as a beloved.

II. The Essence and Properties of Love and Hate

Spinoza dealt with love and hate extensively in two of his books. After devoting chapters to both these concepts in his work entitled *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well Being (Short Treatise)*, Spinoza returned to them in the *Ethics*, but with a twist. Finally, Spinoza said, he wasn't simply going to describe the *properties* of love and hate; he was ready to reveal their *essence*. And what he revealed was a philosophy that is highly original and especially noteworthy for the crucial role that he assigned to hatred, no less than to love.

Before I attempt to explain how Spinoza understood these words, it is important to start with a little background. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza broke down human emotions into three types: desires, pleasures, and pains. By "desires," he was referring to the sum of our "endeavors, urges,

appetites and volitions.”¹ Together, they constitute an overall striving to “persist in our own being.”² In other words, whether we’re talking about a person, an animal, or even a rock, desire – the striving to persist in one’s own being – is the essence of what we are.

According to Spinoza, our desires can take us in different and often contradictory directions and leave us thoroughly confused. They can either lift us up or help dig ourselves into a deeper hole. And that’s where pleasures and pains enter the equation. In Spinoza’s words, “Pleasure is man’s transition from a state of less perfection to a state of greater perfection,” whereas pain is the exact opposite of pleasure.³ Whenever we experience pleasure or joy, our level of power increases, and the opposite can be said when we experience pain.

With that as a background, let us turn to the subjects at hand: love and hatred. In Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza stated that “Love is pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause,” and added that “[t]his definition explains quite clearly the essence of love.”⁴ Similarly, Spinoza defined “hatred” as “pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause.”⁵ This reflects an explicit statement made in the *Short Treatise* that “hatred [is] the exact opposite of love.”⁶

Spinoza coined the idea that it is possible to view reality “from the standpoint of eternity,” and later we’ll explain what he meant by that perspective. But when it came to defining “love” and “hatred,” Spinoza envisioned a very different state of mind. Call it the *Reality of Restlessness*. It characterizes the way most of us go through life – itching for more of some things and less of others, and feeling either pleased or frustrated, depending on the moment, with our ability to satisfy these urges. It is those pleasures and pains associated with desire that underlie what it means to love and hate in a restless society.

From this conventional human standpoint, love and hatred require a subject that is either pleased or pained (meaning one that is either growing or weakening in power), and an object that is somehow associated with those pleasures and pains. The association does not have to be a conscious one. As any Madison Avenue executive could tell you, we can form strong affinities and aversions without even recognizing what is happening. All we need is some “other” – be it another person, a dog, or a tree – that somehow strengthens us with pleasure or enervates us with pain when we encounter it in our subconscious or conscious minds. No sooner do we experience those basic pleasures or pains than our love or hatred grows as well.

¹ *Ethics*, Part III, Definitions of Emotions, No. 1, Explication. All quotations from Spinoza’s works herein are taken from *Spinoza: Complete Works*, Samuel Shirley Translation (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002) (hereafter, “*Shirley*”).

² *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 6-7. See also *Ethics*, Part III, Definitions of Emotions, Number 1.

³ *Ethics*, Part III, Definitions of the Emotions, Numbers 2 and 3.

⁴ *Ethics*, Part III, Definitions of the Emotions, Number 6.

⁵ *Ethics*, Part III, Definitions of the Emotions, Number 7.

⁶ *Short Treatise*, Part II, Chapter III.

In other words, if something hurts you, you hate it. If it makes you happy, you fall in love. Obviously, the intensity of these emotions can change dramatically depending on the circumstances. But at bottom, the effect is the same: in Spinoza's world, we react as animals that encounter stimuli, viscerally evaluate them positively or negatively, and inevitably fall in love or in hate as a result. It's not exactly the portrait of civilization you'd get from a Victorian textbook. Then again, it is not unfamiliar to those who imagine what goes on in a Victorian's bedroom once the masks are removed and the humanity is allowed to flourish in its natural state.

Whereas Spinoza was relatively concise in identifying the essence of love and hatred, he spilled plenty of ink identifying their *properties*. That task became a focus of both the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics*.

In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza says that love "is nothing else than the enjoyment of a thing and union therewith";⁷ it "arises from the idea and knowledge that we have of a thing," and the greater and more glorious something shows itself to be, "so also is our love greater."⁸ Moreover, Spinoza said, because the lover and the beloved become one and the same thing, those of us who are united to transient things – like honors, riches, and objects of lust – are, to use his word, "wretched."⁹ This is another way of making the same point that he made earlier, in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, when he said that "all happiness or unhappiness depends solely on the quality of the object to which we are bound by love."¹⁰

In other words, we are what we love. And this isn't to contradict the earlier statement that our essence is desire; after all, what is it that shapes our desires but the objects of our love? If we love that which endures, we can be blessed with long-term happiness. If we love transient things, we will get frustrated whenever our desires are unmet, as they frequently will be, and our love will turn into its opposite – hatred. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza used that word to refer to "an inclination to ward off from us that which has caused us some harm."¹¹ When such hatred reaches a certain level, it is said to produce anger, which refers to a desire not only to escape from the object of hatred but to "annihilate it, when that is practicable."¹² Another emotion that Spinoza said arises from great hatred is envy. Readers of the *Ethics* will recognize that for Spinoza, both these species of hatred – anger and envy – play central roles in the human psyche.

Part III of the *Ethics* contains a treasure trove of principles that describe the ways love and hatred manifest themselves. Our love and hatred are shaped by every association we have with things or ideas that either please or pain us. As long as we love something, we will tend to feel similarly about anything that either consciously or subconsciously reminds us of it, and the same

⁷ *Short Treatise*, Part II, Chapter V (page 68 in *Shirley*).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Short Treatise*, Part II, Chapter V (page 69 in *Shirley*).

¹⁰ *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Paragraph 9 (page 5 in *Shirley*).

¹¹ *Short Treatise*, Part II, Chapter VI (page 70 in *Shirley*).

¹² *Short Treatise*, Part II, Chapter VI (page 71 in *Shirley*).

goes for our hatred.¹³ Also, once something becomes an object of our love, we will hold it in excessive esteem, and just the opposite applies to anything that becomes an object of our hatred.

¹⁴ In other words, once an object excites in us pleasure or pain, it kicks off a whole array of emotions, and they become powerful forces in our life.

According to Spinoza, if we're willing to put in the effort, we can come to understand the properties of love and hatred, and that is precisely one of his major tasks in the *Ethics*. For me, Spinoza paints a portrait of human beings as if they are magnets that are constantly being pulled toward what they love and repulsed by what they hate. We often vacillate between these two conflicting emotions, including feeling both love and hate for the same object.¹⁵

We want our love objects to be present to us and preserved, and we want to remove and destroy what we hate.¹⁶ We feel pleasure or pain depending on whether a loved or hated object is pleased or pained.¹⁷ So yes, we are able to feel "compassion," which Spinoza identified as either rejoicing at a beloved's good fortune or suffering at a beloved's pain.¹⁸ But we are also capable of rejoicing at the suffering of someone we hate; indeed, for no other reason than that we think of another person as especially fortunate, we will tend to regard her with envy, which is a type of hatred.¹⁹

When I consider the *Ethics* as a whole and reflect on what it means to be human, I see a species that above all else is characterized by its competitiveness and insecurity. Not surprisingly, Spinoza taught that nothing spurs our love or hatred quite like other people. They can turn us into jealous, vengeful wretches, or form incredibly symbiotic relationships with us. People elicit these reactions both because they remind us of ourselves and our other loved ones, and because they can compete with us for so many objects of desire.

In short, as depicted by Spinoza, human beings are dominated by the objects of their love. Those love objects in turn reflect our desires, which define who we are as grasping, restless souls. Hatred emerges front and center into the equation because our ability to satisfy desires so often falls short. Whenever this happens, whenever we feel frustration, shame, anger, envy or other pain-based emotions, we inevitably grow in negativity. The result is a weakened state of character, an extended array of perceived adversaries, and a much more precarious existence. In such a state, our love is hardly a solution to our problems, because the happiness that flows from it so often tends to be transient, and more pain – whether in the form of silent suffering, out-and-out aggression, or something in between -- is always just around the corner.

¹³ See *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 15-16.

¹⁴ See *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 26.

¹⁵ See *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 17, Scholium.

¹⁶ See *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 13, Scholium.

¹⁷ See *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 20-21.

¹⁸ See *Ethics*, Part III, Definition of Emotions, Number 24.

¹⁹ See *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 32 Scholium; Part III, Propositions 20-21.

III. Taking Hatred Seriously and Overcoming it with Love

From that discussion it should be clear that Spinoza viewed hatred both as more ubiquitous and more insidious than we might otherwise think. Contrast his perspective with the way we conventionally discuss the word. I suspect that many people see themselves as essentially lacking in hatred. We often talk about this emotion as requiring some sort of extreme malice or vengefulness. We reserve the term for people who are unusually bigoted, petty, or resentful, or for sociopaths. You sometimes even hear it used as a noun, as in “she’s a hater” – and inevitably, we think of “haters” as jerks.

For Spinoza, however, anyone who feels pain is a “hater.” And if we don’t recognize that fact, we won’t be able to do what we can to find enlightenment and freedom. In short, as long as we’re in denial about hatred and what leads to it, we can’t minimize our pain and maximize our love.

Spinoza frequently reminded us of just how seriously he took hatred as a facet of the human condition. He stated in Part IV of the *Ethics* that “it is rarely the case that men live by the guidance of reason; their condition is such that they are generally disposed to envy and mutual dislike.”²⁰ In Part III, Spinoza stated that “men are prone to hatred and envy, and this is accentuated by their upbringing. For parents are wont to incite their children to excellence solely by the spur of honor and envy.”²¹ He also opined that “men are far more inclined to revenge than to repay a benefit.”²² And, in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza added that “men are by nature enemies, and even when they are joined and bound together by laws they still retain their nature.”²³

You get the idea. It isn’t hard to go from Spinoza’s depiction of the human condition to Hobbes’ portrait of the state of nature – the so-called “war of all against all.” Clearly, Spinoza wanted his readers to appreciate that the passions that give rise to our daily bouts with love and hate are like predators, and we are their prey. Moreover, lest we conclude that we can somehow free ourselves altogether from our emotions, Spinoza tells us that “[A]n emotion cannot be checked or destroyed except by a contrary emotion which is stronger than the emotion to be checked.”²⁴ Obviously, then, our goal should be to replace a hate-based emotion with one grounded in love – or, stated differently, to replace a pain-based emotion with one grounded in pleasure. But this is easier said than done, since as Spinoza points out, “love and desire can be excessive.”²⁵ In fact, Spinoza counts the desires of avarice, ambition and lust as being grounded

²⁰ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 35, Scholium.

²¹ *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 55, Scholium.

²² *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 41, Scholium.

²³ *Political Treatise*, Chapter 8, Paragraph 12 (page 727 in *Shirley*).

²⁴ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 7.

²⁵ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 44.

in our love, and yet he also refers to them all as “kinds of madness.”²⁶ Whether you are talking about the pursuit of honors, wealth, or sexual pleasure, the end is the same, Spinoza argued in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. “The more each of [these goals] . . . is possessed, the more our joy is enhanced, and we are therefore more and more induced to increase them But if it should come about that our hopes are disappointed, there ensues a profound depression.”²⁷ For Spinoza, a profound depression is above all else just another breeding ground for widespread hatred in all of its hideous manifestations.

So is there a solution to this hell on earth? Certainly not an easy one. Spinoza tells us that “human power is very limited and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes, and we do not have absolute power to adapt to our purposes things external to us.”²⁸ In short, despite our best efforts, we remain prisoners of our status as human beings – emotional, interdependent, and ultimately subject to the limitations of nature. But part of our nature is that we possess the faculty of reason. And the more we use that faculty, the more we can escape from the up-and-down cycles that include pain and hatred, and instead live a life filled with love.

Hatred, Spinoza tells us, may be “destroyed by love,” and once it is “fully overcome by love . . . the love will therefore be greater than if it had not been preceded by hatred.”²⁹ But in making such statements, he was still envisioning the human being as someone who is controlled by the so-called “passive emotions” that assail us from every direction. The key to our blessedness is for our rational faculties to take ownership of our emotions. This is Spinoza’s notion of freedom. Near the beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defined what it means for a person or thing to be “free” as that “which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone.”³⁰ For Spinoza, this entails that our mind become active, we hold our options up to the crucible of reason, we open our eyes to the conditions before us and their causes, and we follow the voice of reason wherever it leads. By accepting reason’s dictates, we attain what Spinoza at one point calls the “highest good we can hope for,” which is *self-contentment*.³¹

In Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza identified various mental states that he associated with an active mind. Based on pleasures or desires, and never on hatred, they involve an endeavor to live “according to the dictates of reason alone.”³² Such qualities include: nobility or high-mindedness, which itself encompasses “courtesy and mercy”; and courage, which

²⁶ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 44, Scholium; Part III, Definitions of the Emotions, Numbers 44, 47 and 48.

²⁷ *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Paragraph 5 (page 4 in *Shirley*).

²⁸ *Ethics*, Part IV, Appendix, Number 32.

²⁹ *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 43-44.

³⁰ *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 7.

³¹ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 52, Scholium.

³² *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 59, Scholium.

encompasses “self-control, sobriety and resourcefulness in danger.”³³ These qualities can be honed by seeking out the proper objects of love and desire -- the ones that can withstand the tests of time and shield us from the endless cycles of pleasures and pains. Spinoza proclaimed that “insofar as a thing is in agreement with our nature, to that extent it is necessarily good.”³⁴ Spinoza also taught that the qualities of an active mind are invariably developed by keeping our passions *balanced*. As Spinoza pointed out, “Desire that arises from reason cannot be excessive.”³⁵

In Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza set out a regimen for gaining control over the passive emotions. He began by preaching that we must first devote ourselves to understanding the emotions, and then we must detach the emotions “from the thought of their external cause, which we imagine confusedly.”³⁶ For example, while we often assume that the human objects of our hatred are free-willed entities who could and should have treated us better, Spinoza urged us to realize that human beings, like everything else, behave as we do because it is in our nature to do so. In other words, our actions are inevitable responses to antecedent causes,³⁷ and not the outgrowth of that mythical faculty commonly known as a free will.

Ultimately, Spinoza taught, we gain control over our passive emotions when we not only form a “clear and distinct idea” of those emotions but also come to understand the earthly objects that we encounter as they truly are.³⁸ This requires patience, intellectual discipline and those character traits associated with nobility and courage. But while the task at hand is obviously daunting, Spinoza said that we do have one critically important arrow in our quiver: the reason-based emotions are the most powerful of all because they are planted in more stable soil. These emotions only develop when we are able to gain some balance in how we view ourselves and our world. And because they won’t be based on confused ideas or irrational impulses, they shouldn’t be so easily susceptible to twisting in the wind.

The idea that reason-based emotions are the sturdiest and most powerful is among the *Ethics*’ fundamental principles. The author of that book clearly sought an anchor to protect our peace of mind regardless of what is going on around us. He found part of that anchor in developing a robust understanding of himself, his emotions, the laws of nature, and the relationships among the objects in the natural world. But that wasn’t the whole answer. As we will see in a moment, Spinoza argued that if you desire to escape the endless cycle of hatred and ephemeral love affairs, you’re advised to devote yourself to God generally, and in particular to what Spinoza has

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 31. His seeking out stable sources of harmony with our own nature is presumably why Spinoza supported the institution of marriage, provided it is not entered exclusively out of lust or some other ephemeral impulse. *Ethics*, Part IV, Appendix, Number 20.

³⁵ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 61.

³⁶ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 20, Scholium, Number 2.

³⁷ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 6.

³⁸ *Ethics*, Part V, Propositions 3, 20.

called the “the intellectual love of God.” To Spinoza, there is no object of love quite like God when it comes to fostering human blessedness.

IV. Our Love Towards God

As a bit of review, let us recall that when Spinoza spoke about the passions, we saw that love would rarely appear without its mirror image, hatred. Whenever you found the one, you’d soon enough find the other. But once Spinoza began talking about the mental states we must adopt if we hope to live under the guidance of reason, the role of hatred receded from the stage. Those who are characterized by “self-control, sobriety ... resourcefulness in danger ... courtesy and mercy” can dramatically reduce their hatred. They are known to Spinoza as free people – those who have gained the power to control their emotions with the activity of their minds. And they have achieved a high degree self-contentment, which Spinoza at one point called the highest good we can hope for.

But the question remains -- how does one develop those virtuous qualities and states of mind? Spinoza’s answer is that virtue stems from pursuing objects of love that are common to everyone and that do not require us constantly to wage a war of all against all in order to satisfy our desires. Here are Spinoza’s exact words from Part IV of the *Ethics*: “It arises not by accident but from the very nature of reason that men’s highest good is common to all, because this is deduced from the very essence of man insofar as that is defined by reason, and because man could neither be nor be conceived if he did not have the ability to enjoy this highest good. For it belongs to the essence of the human mind to have an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.”³⁹

Attaining knowledge of God is central to Spinoza’s notion of what it means to be free. It is also critical to making the love of God such a powerful force in our lives. But before we can understand this love, we must first have a basic understanding of what Spinoza meant by “God.”

Spinoza began his definition with the following: “By God, I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes.”⁴⁰ Spinoza had previously defined “substance” to mean “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself.”⁴¹ So Spinoza saw God as completely self-caused (*i.e.*, free) and infinite in all respects. You might say that he viewed God, in part, as the ground of being or, in the words of my friend Frank Dixon, “the source of all that is,” and saw all of the world’s objects as mere modes of the one divine substance. But remember that Spinoza also equated God with “nature.” That was a reminder that he did not view the world-as-we-know-it as a mere external creation, with which God supernaturally tampers, but rather as part of the divine fabric. Indeed, Spinoza believed that nothing that exists is outside of God, and because he equated the notion of “perfection” with

³⁹ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 36, Scholium.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 6.

⁴¹ *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 3.

“reality” or the power to act,⁴² he truly understood God to be perfect, since any power to act belongs to God. To the extent that we human beings exercise that power, we’re doing so as modes or expressions of God, not as God’s external creations.

So, for Spinoza, God is absolutely free, infinite, and perfect. But what is especially critical for present purposes is that Spinoza’s God is also *eternal*. As usual, Spinoza did not define that term in the conventional way. “By eternity,” Spinoza said, “I mean existence itself insofar as it is conceived as necessarily following solely from the definition of an eternal thing.”⁴³ “[S]uch existence,” Spinoza added, “is conceived as an eternal truth, just as is the essence of the thing, and therefore cannot be explicated through duration or time, even if duration be conceived as without beginning or end.”⁴⁴ In other words, what is decisive here is *not* that eternity lasts forever. It’s that when something is eternal, we cannot help but conceive of it as existing – its essence necessarily entails that it will exist. Obviously, that wouldn’t apply to the concept of a unicorn or that of a squared-circle. But for Spinoza, the idea of necessary existence applies fundamentally to “God or nature.”

“Eternity,” Spinoza said in the *Ethics*, “is the very essence of God insofar as this essence involves necessary existence.”⁴⁵ Like Descartes before him, once Spinoza reflected on the matter, he could not envision that “nothing” exists, and he termed the necessarily existing being “God.” But what’s especially radical is what follows next: Spinoza saw that the God that exists necessarily engages in divine self-expression, and the result is a world that must unfold in just the way we observe this world to unfold – warts and all.⁴⁶

So things are the way they must be because that’s what follows from the nature of their common cause -- namely, God or substance. Fish swim, people emote, and God – who is both the ground of being and the life of being -- self-expresses in infinite ways. All of this is done naturally and inevitably, flowing as it does from the essence of the Eternal. To be sure, from one point in time to the next, a particular expression of God, such as a person, can grow in virtue and power. But at any given point in time, we are as we must be because our nature at all times flows from the nature of the Eternal God in whom we find ourselves.

⁴² *Ethics*, Part IV, Preface (page 322 in *Shirley*); Part V, Proposition 40, Proof.

⁴³ *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 8.

⁴⁴ *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 8, Explication.

⁴⁵ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 30, Proof.

⁴⁶ To quote Spinoza, “to those who ask why God did not create men in such a way that they should be governed solely by reason, I make only this reply, that he lacked not material for creating all things from the highest to the lowest degree of perfection; or, to speak more accurately, the laws of his nature were so comprehensive as to suffice for the production of everything that can be conceived by an infinite intellect.” *Ethics*, Part I, Appendix (page 243 in *Shirley*).

With that in mind, let us return to the topic of love and hatred. It is among love's properties, Spinoza said, that we want others to love what we love, and the more they do so the more our own love grows.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, when it comes to loving money or awards we find ourselves in a competition that could easily enough result in such species of hatred as envy and anger. But when it comes to loving the knowledge of the true God, this good is "common to all, and all can enjoy it."⁴⁸ As a result, we want others to share in our love of the knowledge of God, and this is a pure desire that is unsullied by envy at those who excel at our common endeavor. It is like two parents who love the same child -- it makes no sense for them to compete in their love, because the more either parent loves the child, the better it will be for the whole family.

In offering that analogy, I must acknowledge that for Spinoza, there is no part of nature that can be fully analogized to God. Even the most loving of families can turn hateful, whereas to quote one of Spinoza's most categorical and concise statements, "Nobody can hate God."⁴⁹ Now Spinoza would surely acknowledge that those who have a false understanding of God can come to hate the *name* of God -- they could blame "God," for example, for creating a divine plan in which kind people die young and mean people become rich and celebrated. Yet when Spinoza talks about our love for God, he is referring to our love for the *true* God, not the ones clerics have created in our own image. Remember, it was Spinoza who wrote that "*If* intellect and will do indeed pertain to the eternal essence of God" (emphasis added), they could have no more in common with human intellect and will than the constellation of the dog has in common with the animal that barks.⁵⁰

For Spinoza, contemplating the true God generates love and never hatred, and this love can be profoundly transformative. In Spinoza's words, the love toward (the true) God "is associated with all the affections of the body and is fostered by them all, and so it is bound to hold chief place in the mind."⁵¹ By this and similar statements in Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza was telling us that as we further develop our knowledge of God, by contemplating anything limited we can relate that thing to its divine source, and this can enhance our love for God to the point where it dominates our mind. Though we may experience pain and recognize God as the ultimate source of all pain, insofar as we contemplate the actual proximate causes of our pain we do so with an active mind, and when our mind is active we stop feeling emotional distress. In fact, Spinoza said, "insofar as we understand God to be the cause of pain, to that extent we feel pleasure."⁵²

Well there you have quite a tribute to one particular object of love. The idea of the true God can become such a powerful beloved that we can even enjoy painful stimuli when we associate them with that idea. Whenever we envision the one who is absolutely infinite, free, perfect and

⁴⁷ *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 31, Corollary; Part IV, Proposition 37, Second Proof.

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 37, Second Proof.

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 18.

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 17, Scholium.

⁵¹ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 16, Proof.

⁵² *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 18, Scholium.

eternal, mere contemplation of this being is so potent and wholesome that our pain actually turns to pleasure. We come to recognize that the ultimate source of our suffering is *not* a stupid thing we did or a cruel act perpetrated by another person, but rather the Eternal (the necessarily existing God), whose infinite acts of self-expression have made us what we are and what we must be. In other words, we come to regard existence from the *standpoint of eternity*. This is a standpoint, Spinoza suggests, that should invariably comfort, rather than frustrate, us.

It is no wonder that we want everyone else to love this same beloved, since their love for God increases our own,⁵³ and our love for God is the greatest of antidotes to pain and hatred. According to Spinoza, the love toward God “cannot be stained by the emotion of envy, nor again by the emotion of jealousy,” and “there is no emotion directly contrary to this love by which this love can be destroyed.”⁵⁴ Accordingly, our love toward God “is the most constant of all emotions ... and cannot be destroyed except together with the body.”⁵⁵ You see, to contemplate Spinoza’s God is to remind ourselves that God alone is the ultimate indwelling or ground of every limited thing that exists. By contrast, it is difficult to think of any single or group of natural forms in these respects. When we contemplate “nature,” as that term is conventionally used, we see a world of nurturing one moment and violence the next, all of it crowned by the terribly flawed “free will” of ourselves and other human beings. But when we contemplate Spinoza’s God, we recognize that all existence is as it must be, we ourselves partake of perfection, and we insult God whenever we cry over the milk we spill or the talents we lack.

For Spinoza, no less than for Martin Buber, God-the-Beloved becomes the Eternal Thou through which all other I-Thou relationships are grounded. Through our love for God, we come to love one another and ourselves as examples of God’s infinite manifestations. Moreover, since, in Spinoza’s words, “the more we understand particular things, the more we understand God,”⁵⁶ our knowledge of things in the world breeds more understanding of, and love for, God, which in turn breeds more love for one another.

Spinoza never uses the word “holy” in reference to the name of God, but he invokes another traditional religious word – “blessedness” – in reference to our love for God. For Spinoza, contemplation of the true God is the most powerful tool available to us in fighting the scourge of hatred and attaining the goal of self-contentment or, in other words, the state of blessedness.

It would appear to follow from the above that the idea of “God” is imbued with as much meaning, affection, and veneration for Spinoza as for any traditional Muslim, Christian or Jew. Yet when Spinoza spoke about the highest form of affection for God, he used a term that is anything but traditional: the “intellectual love of God.” Near the end of the *Ethics*, Spinoza expressed that the love of God that is supreme for its durability and contribution to blessedness is

⁵³ *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 37, Both Proofs.

⁵⁴ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 20, Scholium.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 24.

none other than an “intellectual” love – one that is grounded in the highest kind of knowledge, which he called “intuition.”⁵⁷ Intuition, for Spinoza, involves a true understanding of particular things and their dependence on God.⁵⁸ From this knowledge, Spinoza said, we can develop a “love of God not insofar as we imagine him as present but insofar as we understand God to be *eternal*. And this is what I call the intellectual love of God.”⁵⁹ (Emphasis added.)

As you can see, Spinoza is encouraging his readers to think about God – and all that flows from God – from the standpoint of eternity. He wants us to love the ultimate source of being as a foundation for blissfully regarding every natural form as a blessed expression of an eternal God. To be sure, Spinoza was intimately aware of the benefits of doing science; regardless of whether we are learning about psychology, biology or physics, Spinozism is supportive of the activity. But remember, it is not God’s *presence* that is the supreme object of intellectually love, but God’s *eternity*. In other words, it is not so much nature’s intricacies, but its *necessity*, to which we are asked to open our hearts.

Surely, we could use an antidote to the envy, anger, insecurity, self-loathing and other pain-based emotions that Spinoza knew all too well as an excommunicated Jew who lost his parents at a young age, may well have died a virgin, and whose political hero was physically ripped apart by a crazed mob. It was not many years after the de Witt Brothers were massacred that Spinoza completed the *Ethics*. He must have recognized that unless we human beings consciously embrace the eternity of God, we are bound to head back into that cycle of love and hatred that, no less than the Buddha, he desperately wanted to avoid.

V. God’s Love for Us

That brings us to our final subtopic: Spinoza’s perspective on God’s love for us. This is one of those areas where this famously consistent systematizer seems to be at his *least* consistent.

Let’s begin with Proposition 19 of Part V of the *Ethics*, the proposition that Goethe called a “wonderful sentiment ... [that] filled my whole mind.”⁶⁰ There, Spinoza said that “He who loves God cannot endeavor that God should love him in return.” As a “proof,” Spinoza added that “If a man were so to endeavor, he would therefore desire that God whom he loves should not be God, and consequently he would desire to feel pain, which is absurd.”

⁵⁷ See, e.g., *Ethics*, Part V, Propositions 32, 37.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 36, Scholium.

⁵⁹ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 32, Corollary.

⁶⁰ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Auto-Biography of Goethe*. Translated by A.J.W. Morrison. London: Bohn, 1849, 26.

That seems to be clear enough, doesn't it? To posit a God that loves us is to posit a deity that is different from the true God. This point is consistent with Spinoza's comments two propositions earlier,⁶¹ that "God does not love or hate anyone," "God is without passive emotions," and God "is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain."⁶² Based on all of these statements, it would appear that if someone were to ask whether our beloved God is capable of loving us in return, Spinoza's answer should be a categorical "No."

But that would ignore what he said as he began to draw the final part of the *Ethics* to a close. For not long after Spinoza repeatedly rejected the possibility of divine love, he hit us with a wave of contradictory statements: "God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love,"⁶³ "God insofar as he loves himself loves mankind,"⁶⁴ and "the love of God toward men and the mind's intellectual love toward God are one and the same."⁶⁵

What gives? Why did Spinoza, he of the geometrical proofs and painstaking logic, suddenly become a Zen master? He must have understood that he was talking out of both sides of his mouth. Is there a way to reconcile these contradictions?

Perhaps the key can be found in Spinoza's discussion of Proposition 36 of Part V of the *Ethics*. Here's the proposition: "The mind's intellectual love toward God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the mind's intellectual love toward God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself." In the proof in support of that proposition, Spinoza explained the following about our intellectual love of God: it is an active, not a passive, state of mind; this activity involves thinking about oneself as the product of God; and in essence, it involves God's power, as expressed through the mind of a person, contemplating and loving himself. In other words, whenever a person focuses on the true God and our dependency on the Eternal, God (as manifested in the form of a human being) is essentially contemplating himself. Such contemplation gives rise to the glow of intellectual love on the part of the blessed person who is engaging in this activity. Moreover, because God

⁶¹ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 17.

⁶² Similarly, Spinoza taught that when we talk about "will, desire, [or] love" – no less than when we talk about a rock or a piece of paper – we are referring to things that follow from God's nature, and not about God as a free cause. *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 31; Part I, Proposition 29, Scholium.

⁶³ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 35.

⁶⁴ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 36, Corollary.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

encompasses all that exists, this person's love for God – or, stated differently, God's love for himself -- is extended to *all* that exists, including humankind.

In the Scholium supporting Proposition 36 of Part V, Spinoza continued to reinforce this same point: “Our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists ... in the constant and eternal love toward God, that is, in God's love toward men. This love or blessedness is called glory in the Holy Scriptures, and rightly so. For whether this love be related to God or to the mind, it can properly be called spiritual contentment, which in reality cannot be distinguished from glory. For insofar as it is related to God, it is pleasure (if we may still use this term) accompanied by the idea of himself.”

I can just see the critics shouting, “Hold your horses, Spinoza. Isn't our hatred also in God? Can't we say, for example, that when we feel anger, God 'explicated through the human mind' is also feeling anger? Or that God experiences anger at humankind just as God experiences intellectual love?” I don't see Spinoza refuting those points altogether. But I also imagine that he sees a profound difference between the divine love for God and for humankind, on the one hand, and any kind of hatred attributed to God, on the other. The difference is illustrated by what the human expressions of God are focusing on when we experience these emotions.

For Spinoza, to the extent we focus on the Eternal, we can *only* experience love. And this is why Spinoza can write that “God loves himself” but not that “God hates himself.” No divine expression, human or otherwise, is capable of focusing on the true God and feeling hatred. Quite the contrary, insofar as we contemplate the Eternal, we experience what Spinoza called “spiritual contentment” – a type of love which is grounded in the affection for the divine unity, and extends beyond oneself and towards all humankind. According to Spinoza, there is no corresponding type of hatred that is either as contagious or as durable. Yes, he said, this spiritual contentment is a “pleasant” experience, but it is hardly the same kind of pleasure we were talking about at the beginning of this paper. Unlike the pleasures we gain from receiving honors or feeling lust, this one is a sustaining, spiritual glow, not a merely temporary rush.

Moreover, if you're talking about the *essence* of Spinoza's God, there are multiple words you might use – powerful, eternal, infinite – but “loving” wouldn't be one of them. Yes there is love in Spinoza's God, but there is also hatred, for people feel both of these emotions and we are expressions of Spinoza's God. The sense in which his God is loving-yet-not-hateful is when we're talking about the *idea of the true God*. Whenever God's expressions contemplate that idea, they become disciples of love rather than hatred. As for human beings, by focusing on the true God rather than more trivial and transitory objects, the power in the idea of God turns us into beacons of light -- for ourselves, for humankind, and ultimately, for all of existence.

VI. Conclusion

Clearly, Spinoza enjoyed using religious language whenever possible, but no one can deny he was a heretic. He never suggested, for example, that the true God's love for us resembles the kind of divine love that clergymen have evoked for centuries to gather billions of followers. In the end, the religious Spinozist is left with the challenge that Goethe must have assigned for himself: loving God with all one's soul, one's heart and one's might, despite not being able to posit a supernatural, yet humanlike, being who we assume is loving us in return.

Is this a formula for a robust relationship with God -- the kind that could sustain us emotionally to such a degree that it suspends the vicious cycle of love and hatred that dominates our psyches? That's for you to decide. But if Martin Buber is correct that we can have an I-Thou relationship with a tree, then perhaps it is possible to have a fulfilling I-Thou relationship with God without expecting to receive human-like affection in return. Indeed, such a relationship could *only* be of the I-Thou, rather than the I-It, variety, since to truly love Spinoza's God is not to endeavor for God to love you in return, but rather to take God for what God is. Not a human being or any kind of conventional human ideal, but rather the synthesis of the ground of being and the life of being. You can call Spinoza's God the Absolutely Infinite Unity that transcends all multiplicity and finitude, or the Eternal One that necessarily exists and expresses himself in the world as we know it.

Is it easy for a person to forge a meaningful, transformative, relationship with such a God? That was not Spinoza's concern. But if forced to address that question he would surely respond with the last sentence of the *Ethics*: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 42, Scholium.