

## Spinoza and Altruism

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“Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.” So wrote Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> reflecting a commonly held view that not only was Spinoza a brilliant and seminal ethical thinker but one whose personal life demonstrated that he practiced what he preached. And yet, like so many other free-thinkers, Spinoza has always had many vehement detractors – in his case, not so much as a hypocrite but as a philosopher.

Consistent with the charge that he was a godless heretic, Spinoza has been taken to task for preaching the anti-Abrahamic value of selfishness rather than altruism. This paper will consider that charge. We begin by looking at the extent to which Spinoza was, indeed, a psychological and ethical egoist and conclude that there is plenty of evidence that he preached a type of egoism. Then, we will consider how Spinoza touted his ideal enlightened egoist as one who ushers in the best possible results for the society at large, and we will argue that Spinoza is being both glib and utopian in making that claim. Finally, we will explain how Spinoza’s form of ethical pantheism has nonetheless left us with a framework from which contemporary thinkers can build a sound moral philosophy – one that makes room for the kind of other-directed virtue-based conduct at the heart of traditional religious faiths without neglecting the fundamentally self-interested nature of all human activity.

### I. Spinoza’s Egoism

How one stands on Spinoza’s relationship to egoism and altruism may depend greatly on which of his books is used to address the issue. A reader of the *Theological Political Treatise (TTP)* may have little trouble thinking of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy as emphasizing love of the *other* -- meaning one’s neighbor or God. By contrast, readers of his *Ethics* may view him strictly as an egoist, who understood efforts to help others as a mere by-product of enlightened self-interested behavior. The *Ethics* suggests that it is *always* appropriate to act in order to serve our own interests (ethical egoism) and assisting others should be viewed as simply a means to that fundamental end.

Rather than believing that Spinoza changed his views on the topic from the time he wrote the *TTP* to the time he wrote the *Ethics*, I would submit that he simply addressed two different audiences on two different topics. The *TTP* was addressed to a wider audience and dealt with the uses and limitations of religion. As for altruism and egoism, the *TTP*’s author confronted these ideas insofar as they appear in the domain of religion and extolled the primacy of social service and love in that domain. However, when writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza addressed philosophers only and strove to provide them with the unvarnished truth. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza did not shy

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1972), p. 569.

away from making egoistic statements that, while they represent his deepest and truest beliefs, could be misunderstood and even dangerous if revealed to the uninitiated masses.

Let's begin with the *TTP*. That's where Spinoza drummed in the idea that Abrahamic religion, at its core, is intended to inculcate two basic imperatives: to love/obey God and to love our neighbor. In Chapter 12 [34], he writes that "From Scripture itself we have perceived its most important themes without any difficulty or ambiguity: to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself.... [T]his is the foundation of the whole religion. If it were taken away the whole structure would collapse in a moment."<sup>2</sup> In the following chapter [13.8], Spinoza goes on to say that "obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbor." Similar points are littered throughout the book, including the following: "The whole law consists only in this: loving one's neighbor" [14.9], God is to be obeyed and worshipped "by practicing Justice and Loving-kindness toward [one's] neighbor" [14.24], and God "loves above all those who worship him and who love their neighbor as themselves." [7.27]

Notably, when referring to promoting justice and loving-kindness toward one's neighbor, Spinoza proclaimed that these are "teachings of true reason." [*TTP*, 19.9] In the *Ethics*, he went on to say that people should respond to hatred with love, for "Hate is increased by being returned, but can be destroyed with Love." [E3P43. See also E3P44, E4P46] So, in repeatedly touting love of one's neighbor in the *TTP* as being not only pious but also *reasonable*, Spinoza wasn't saying anything he later contradicted when speaking on behalf of the voice of reason. But nor did he address in the *TTP* the issue of whether people are truly able to love one's neighbor every bit as much as themselves, or whether it is appropriate to focus our ethical goals fundamentally on how we can best serve our *own* self-interest. Those questions were answered in the *Ethics* and in a way that many clerics would consider heretical.

Much of what Spinoza wrote in the *Ethics* would have made Ayn Rand proud. There, he gave a full-throated defense of a moral philosophy based fundamentally on self-interest, claiming that it is both psychologically healthy and appropriate to place one's own interests at the center of one's ethical projects. Part 3 of the *Ethics* provides the basis of what some have called Spinoza's psychological egoism – the teaching that, by nature, people cannot avoid pursuing their self-interest at the heart of all their activities. In propositions 6 and 7 of Part 3, Spinoza enunciated one of the keystone doctrines in all his philosophy. He wrote that "Each thing, as far

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<sup>2</sup> When citing Spinoza, this essay will use the translation of Edwin Curley, as reflected in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton U. Press: Princeton, NJ, Vol. 1 1985, Vol 2, 2016). At times, I will include page references to Gebhardt's *Spinoza Opera* (4 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), including the volume, page, and line numbers (e.g., OP II/37/5-9). Those page references are also found in Curley's *Collected Works* and represent a major help to scholars in determining the exact passage that is being cited. At other times – when the passage at issue is short enough that the *Opera* cite is unnecessary – I will simply cite to the paragraph number, in the case of the *Political Treatise* (PT) or the *TTP*, or to the proposition, corollary, definition, scholium, appendix, preface, or axiom, in the case of the *Ethics* (E).

as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being,” and that this striving “is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.” Collectively, those teachings represent the so-called “conatus” doctrine. A few propositions later [E3P12], this doctrine is expanded to teach that not only do we try to persevere in our own being, but we also strive to imagine those things that increase our power of acting. In each case, though, the focus is on one’s own self – we want to persevere and we want to expand, and we do this because this is what *all* beings – human and otherwise -- must do, insofar as we are acting in accordance with our own nature.

That last phrase – acting in accordance with our own nature – is a critical concept for Spinoza. This comes across in Part 4 of the Ethics. There, he defined “virtue” as follows – “By virtue and power I understand the same thing, i.e., 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.*” [E4d8, emphasis changed from the original] Then he went on to differentiate between what we might call constructive versus destructive behavior based on whether we are truly acting in accordance with our own nature. Whenever our emotions are in agreement with our nature, we are said to be operating with an “active” mind; by contrast, whenever we have fallen prey to lust, envy, anger and other passions, we are said to be controlled by “passive” emotions. So, for example, in considering suicide – which is quite obviously *inconsistent* with “persevering in [one’s] own being” – Spinoza taught us that such conduct is not possible when people act in agreement with their own natures and only happens when we are “compelled by external causes.” [E4p20S]

In short, when we are in charge of our feelings and actions, we succeed in persevering and expanding ourselves. And whenever we are overwhelmed from the outside, such as a conned cult member or a ship lost in a stormy sea, our nature still strives to persevere and expand itself; we simply succumb to stronger forces that oppose our natures. In each case, every motivation aside from the conatus is derivative– including, presumably, the desire to act justly and lovingly to *anyone* else, such as one’s neighbor.

In teaching that everyone, by nature, strives ultimately to pursue their own self-interest, Spinoza can be called a *psychological* egoist.<sup>3</sup> But what is perhaps even more interesting is that he was very much an *ethical* egoist as well – meaning that we *ought* invariably to pursue our self-interest. The following passage brings that point home:

“Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead man to a greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can. This is, indeed, as necessarily true as that the whole is greater than its

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<sup>3</sup> Some may challenge the extent of Spinoza’s psychological egoism, pointing out that he recognized that our emotions and actions do not invariably agree with our own best interests. But he clearly claimed that all emotions and actions that emerge from our natures alone promote our interests, and asserted that when we fail to behave egoistically, which is frequently, that is only because we have fallen prey to other (outside) influences. Accordingly, it is difficult to deny that he is at least a qualified psychological egoist.

part. Further, since virtue is nothing but acting from the laws of one's own nature, and no one strives to preserve his being except from the laws of his own nature, it follows: (i) that the foundation of virtue is this very striving to preserve one's own being, and that happiness consists in man's being able to preserve his being; [and] (ii) that we ought to want virtue for its own sake, and that there is not anything preferable to it, or more useful to us, for the sake of which we ought to want it...." [E4P18S, OP II/222/18-31.]

In a later passage he goes on to say that the more we seek our own advantage, the more virtuous we are, and the less we do so, the more impotent. [E4p20] So, for the Spinoza who wrote the *Ethics*, virtue is fundamentally about increasing our own power, which is about striving to further our own advantage and act in accordance with our own natures, rather than in accordance with some abstract sense of "goodness," such as that supplied by the models and teachings of the Biblical Prophets. This is not to denigrate the importance or the value of Prophetic religion – for the masses surely need to be told to love God and one another, lest all hell break loose. But when it comes to understanding the truth about why we act as we do and what are the central ingredients of virtue, Spinoza clearly puts the pursuit of self-interest at the head of the class.

## **II. Spinoza's Invisible Hand – How Living Truly Egoistically Invariably Serves the Public Interest**

Perhaps it was a cheap shot to compare Spinoza's philosophy of egoism to that of Ayn Rand. A more apt comparison would be with Adam Smith. That seminal Scottish thinker suggested that it is when self-interested producers strive for profit that they are led, as if by an invisible hand, to create an economy that best promotes the interests of the society at large. Similarly, Spinoza taught that when self-interested individuals live freely, meaning that they are determined to act by their own natures rather than falling prey to passions that are not in agreement with those natures,<sup>4</sup> they necessarily act in a way that promotes the public interest.

We have already seen how Spinoza touts the value of seeking virtue or power for oneself as the ultimate goal of human conduct. But this is not to say he was preaching, to use Hobbes' phrase, a "war of all against all." Far from it. Spinoza envisioned that his ideal, self-seeking individuals would serve as models for a society that maximizes overall utility. Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that the rational, self-seeking actor cannot help but behave in a way that produces the best consequences for the society at large. The Invisible Hand at work!

Consider, again, Part 4 of the *Ethics*. There, Spinoza stated that whereas people who are subject to passions can "disagree in nature" [E4P33], those who not driven by their passions share an altogether different fate. In fact, he added, "Only insofar as [people] live according to the guidance of reason, must they *always* agree in nature." [E4P35, emphasis added] Spinoza went on to contend that "When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another," [E4P35C2] "[t]he good which everyone who seeks virtue wants

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<sup>4</sup> More precisely, in E1D7, Spinoza defined "freedom" as follows: "That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner."

for himself, he also desires for other men,” [E4P37] and “everyone who is led by reason desires for others also the good he wants for himself.” [E4P73S] When we set forth Spinoza’s principle of ethical egoism, we emphasized a lengthy statement he made in a Scholium to Proposition 18 of Part 4 of the *Ethics*. In that same Scholium, Spinoza set forth the connection between the pursuit of self-interest and the socially beneficial conduct that inevitably flows from it. “[M]en who are governed by reason – i.e., men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage – want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men. Hence, they are just, honest, and honorable.”[OP II/223/15-18] Spinoza added in that Scholium that he was trying to win over people who believe that the principle that “everyone is bound to seek his own advantage” is actually the foundation of *immorality* – when in fact, the “contrary is true.” [OP II/223/21-24]

It is precisely, then, by pursuing one’s own self-interest that a person can become just, honest and honorable – and to this list, Spinoza would add various other character traits combining the classic virtues of Athens and Jerusalem. The self-interested Spinozist is noble, courteous, forgiving, merciful, friendly, temperate, moderate, sober, chaste, mentally alert and strong. [See, e.g., E3P59S, E3Def.Aff.48E, E4App14 and 17]. You should now be able to see why Bertrand Russell would say that a thinker who truly practiced what Spinoza preached could be considered the most “noble and lovable of the great philosophers” and ethically “supreme.” Nobody, to my knowledge, could ever confuse such a person with one of the heroes of an Ayn Rand novel.

Scholars will forever debate whether, for Spinoza, helping others is simply a means to an end (promoting one’s self-interest) or an end in itself. I have taken the former position in part because I consider his statements about the *conatus* and its application to human conduct to be more fundamental than his portrait of what the rationally self-interested person behaves like when interacting with others. Along the same lines, we shouldn’t forget what Spinoza said about living in a state of nature (a place where no civil state exists) or interacting with animals. Those who find themselves in a state of nature, Spinoza argued, may consider only their own advantage, and decide good and evil purely from their own temperament. [E4P37S2 at II.238/18-24] As for interacting with animals even in a civil society, Spinoza attributed laws against animal killing to “empty superstition and unmanly compassion;” he then added that in dealing with all non-human animals, despite the fact that these animals are sensate, we may “consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us.” [E4P37S1 at II/236/33-II/237/11] In short, in both those spheres of life, Spinoza directs us to interact with the *other* by consider that *other* solely as a means to our own ends. Later philosophers, such as Kant and Buber, have powerfully refuted this perspective. And yet here we have the “supreme” ethicist making room for it, at least in certain limited spheres.

For me, Spinoza’s statements about animals and the state of nature solidify the egoism that is fundamental to his ethical philosophy. But equally importantly, they create such a jarring contrast with the one domain of conduct to which he devotes most of his attention as a social philosopher: the domain in which people interact with one another in a civil state. That’s where all his statements promoting generosity, mercy, justice, and the other Abrahamic virtues come to

the fore. That's where we encounter his model of a rational, self-interested, yet invariably socially-constructive person. I am certainly not the one to denigrate any individual who lives up to such an image. What I would like to do, echoing the conclusions drawn by Samuel Newlands in his recent book, *Reconceiving Spinoza*, is to question whether Spinoza is being overly glib and utopian in suggesting that such a model is realistic.

Recall that the model disciple of Spinoza is one who “*always* agrees in nature” with other people who live “according to the guidance of reason.” [E4P35, emphasis added] They want what's best for themselves and for everyone else – indeed, the object of these desires are one and the same goods. [E4P37 and 73S]. When living in accord with reason, they “must do only those things that are good for human nature, and hence for each man.... For what is most useful to man is what most agrees with his nature, i.e., ... man.” [E4P35D and C1] Guided fundamentally by self-interest, they come to epitomize generosity and love, and their conduct is always in the public interest – for it is precisely when they are most pursuing their own self-interest that they are most useful to others. [EP35C2]

So there you have the model Spinozist philosopher – motivated by the drive for *virtue*, by which Spinoza meant power, and which he understood to be brought about by pursuing what is in own's own self-interest. And yet, when this philosopher interacts with others in a civil state, his conduct invariably harmonizes with the traditional religious and classical virtues and advances the interests of the society at large. You see, Spinoza begins with the notion that reasonable people are the only ones who invariably “agree” with each other's natures, but he uses this as a springboard to suggest that the Spinozist philosopher invariably behaves in a way that promotes the interests of the society as a whole. This model philosopher recognizes that our salvation as individuals includes recognizing that we are part of a species, the members of which have profound similarities, and that it is only when we all join together in common projects with common goals that we have a chance to grow in strength sufficiently to conquer our passions.

Again, we turn to the Scholium to Proposition 18 in Part 4 of the *Ethics*.

“There are ... many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought. Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those that agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they comprise an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.” [OP II/223/3-14]

Notice the pivot. Now, Spinoza is no longer speaking about how reasonable people invariably agree by nature with other reasonable people. He has moved into the additional implicit statement that reasonable people invariably serve the common advantage of people as a whole because they recognize that we all must join together if we want to grow in power and stay secure. Notably, it was immediately after writing the last-cited passage that Spinoza made

his point that, in light of the advantages of joining together with all other people, reasonable people must be “just, honest and honorable” – not merely to some people (those we always “agree” with) but to all. In other words, it is precisely because we thrive most when we treat each other with nobility that Spinoza can preach to his self-interested man the need to repay hatred with love, and to be merciful and forgiving.<sup>5</sup>

So, Spinoza has painted for us a portrait of a model philosopher who pursues self-interest directly and the public interest derivatively, and who invariably reaches both of her targets. But is he talking about the real world? And is Spinoza even being internally consistent given so many other things he has said about the human condition? One moment, he asks us to imagine the human species as being composed of one mind and one body, striving together in support of the commonweal. And the next moment, Spinoza paints an altogether different portrait of the human species:

- “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” [E4P35S]
- “men are prone to hatred and envy” [E3P55S]
- “men are far more inclined to revenge than to repay a benefit” [E3P41S]
- “men are by nature enemies, and however much they’re united and bound by laws, they still retain their nature” [PT 8.12]
- “everyone has the same nature. Everyone is proud when he’s master; everyone terrorizes when he’s not cowed by fear.” [PT 7.27 at III/320/14-15]

In those passages, Spinoza is not talking primarily about the state of nature; he is describing life in a civil state marked by the scarcity of goods, services, awards, and other sought-after things. Here, whenever any of us enters society seeking to live with the nobility of a Spinozist philosopher, she looks down the proverbial gun-barrel at the Prisoner’s Dilemma – where the single worst outcome for oneself is when the other guy acts as a competitor in a zero-sum game and you approach the situation with the spirit of compromise and cooperation. How exactly does self-interest and the public interest coincide in that kind of context, which we know to be ever so common in the real world?

The fundamental irony here is that Spinoza began his *Political Treatise* by taking philosophers to task for speaking of people in unrealistic idealized terms. In fact, because philosophers “conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be,” Spinoza said that “[n]o men are thought less suitable to guide Public Affairs than Theorists, or Philosophers” [PT 1.1.] – a position he himself appears to adopt. Cannot that same charge be leveled, however, against Spinoza himself? After all, he teaches that (a) it is reasonable to be guided fundamentally and invariably by our own self-interest, and yet (b) if we follow that advice, we will somehow, as if led by an invisible hand, pursue a path of justice, nobility and integrity that is *invariably* in the best interests of the society at large? Clearly, we would not want to teach

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<sup>5</sup> Curley most frequently translates the word “*generositas*” in Spinoza’s work as “nobility.” As Curley himself recognizes, other translators have used such words as “generous” or “high-mindedness” instead. Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I., p. 647.

principle (a) without also teaching principle (b) – because then we’re left with Ayn Rand and the antithesis of justice. But do we truly think that both these teachings are accurate? Stated differently, if we feel invariably compelled to serve our self-interest as human beings, will we not frequently act at odds with the interests of the society at large? For example, wouldn’t we decide to refrain from jumping on a land mine, even if we were convinced that doing so would save hundreds of other human lives, because of an overpowering drive to “persevere in our own being”? That would not seem to be the noble course of conduct, or the ethical one. But you will forgive Spinoza’s reader for thinking that it would be natural *and appropriate* from a Spinozist standpoint.

In short, my basic problem with Spinoza’s analysis is that even though he must have recognized the frequent instances when the narrow interests of oneself (or one’s family) would not coincide with the interests of the society at large, he continued to conflate public and private interests. Sometimes he suggests that it is only with respect to “reasonable” people that the public and the private interests always coincide, but in other instances he suggests that it is precisely because ALL people have such fundamentally common interests and characteristics that in seeking their own self-interest, his disciples will invariably behave in a way that furthers everyone’s collective interest. Personally, I think he was trying to have it both ways and didn’t fully succeed. But that does not mean he failed to provide a framework on which we can build a moral philosophy that both protects our urges to serve the collective and recognizes the primal power of self-interest. It is to that framework and that philosophy that we will now turn.

### **III. Toward a New Synthesis: How Spinoza’s Panentheism Can Ground Our Altruism While Respecting the Power of Self-Interest**

I set out to write this paper before reading Newlands’ *Reconceiving Spinoza*. But I must credit that work with stressing a crucial element in how we can best synthesize Spinoza’s views on egoism and altruism. I am referring to Newlands’ efforts to unpack what precisely we mean by the “self” vis a vis the “other.”

In the seventh definition in Part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defined “singular things” as follows: “things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.” As Newlands explains, “the wording of IId7 suggests that [Spinoza] is singling out a very specific case: one *effect* brought about by *one* action of a collection of individuals working *together*.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, it is possible to think of the same entity (“X”) as (a) a collection of individuals that somehow join together to produce X, (b) a discrete individual (nothing more and nothing less), or (c) a part of a larger composite individual composed of X and other entities working together. To use the example closest to our hearts, when we think of a “singular thing” in the context of a human being, we could think of such alternatives as (i) each of the cells, organs, or other physical or mental components that interact with one another to produce a living person, (ii) the combination of mind and body that

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), p. 144.



collectively comprise the person as the term is conventionally used, and (iii) any number of larger groups in which people work together to create a collective identity, including a person's family, her faith community, the collective citizenry of her country, or even her species as a whole.

As Newlands has argued, once we take Spinoza's definition of "singular things" seriously, it becomes possible to envision any number of "selves" with which every finite entity is associated. So, from a Spinozist standpoint, when we think about our own "self-interest," it is far from clear what "self" we are referring to – that choice is left to us as moral agents. To be sure, we can and should consider Spinoza's guidance on the specific ways in which we might want to expand on the traditional human sense of "self," but neither he nor anyone else can tell each entity what we mean by the "self" or "selves" with which we personally most identify.

Armed with Newlands' thoughts in mind, let us return to the passage in the Scholium to Proposition 18 of Part 4 of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza spoke about individuals of the "same nature" joining with one another and comprising "an individual twice as powerful as each one." For me, those concepts work best when thinking about the institution of marriage. While the people who enter that institution don't have precisely the "same nature," they presumably have complementary natures, for why else get married? More to the point, they have identified an institution that impels them to join together in common activities with common goals for (hopefully) the rest of their lives, resulting in accomplishments that people could never dream of attaining as isolated individuals. This is why we often hear people talk about their spouses as their better "halves" or talk about marriage as making "one person out of two people." Anyone who is involved in a happy marriage can surely relate to that perspective.

Spinoza briefly references the potential value of marriage in the Appendix to Part 4 [20], but as we have seen, the relevant discussion in the Scholium to Proposition 18 was never confined to refer specifically to marriages or other isolated friendships. Rather, when he highlighted the importance of joining together with others to increase our own personal power, Spinoza's comments were directed at the idea of viewing oneself as part of humanity as a whole. Apparently, what compelled Spinoza was the thought of a species of rational animals recognizing that their personal power is maximized when they work together cooperatively and lovingly as if their entire species is a single entity. Suddenly, my "self" would have been transformed from Daniel Spiro, isolated individual, to all of humanity, of which Daniel Spiro is merely one part. Then, even assuming Daniel Spiro wishes to act in a Spinozistically-rational self-interested way, whenever he finds himself in positions where he must choose between, on the one hand, behaving mercifully, kindly and charitably towards others, and, on the other hand, feathering Daniel Spiro's nest at the expense of the greater human good, he will happily choose to help his fellow human beings. After all, they are merely part of the same collective "self" with which Daniel Spiro identifies.

Is it realistic that people could identify themselves fundamentally with humanity as a whole? I will leave that for you to decide for yourselves. For me, not only is that unrealistic, but it is not even attractive. For one thing, a purely anthropocentric perspective offends my sense of living in an ecosystem that include countless numbers of sensate non-human organisms, many of

which I feel very much tied to. To be a humanist in the manner of Spinoza is to permit yourself to treat these non-human organisms purely as a means to your own ends – chopping down trees, breaking down horses, slaughtering pigs, you name it. Admittedly, as a vegan of 28 years, my perspective on this issue may not be the norm. But it remains true that I have never met anyone who admitted to identifying herself fundamentally with all of humanity – nothing more and nothing less. If we are looking to redefine the “self” in order to identify a compelling new moral framework, perhaps we must keep on searching. Speaking personally, that search led back to what attracted me most to Spinoza in the first place: his pantheism.

In a 1665 letter to Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza referenced the perspective of a worm in a bloodstream. That worm, Spinoza posited, is “capable of distinguishing by sight the particulars of the blood, of lymph, ... etc. [I]t would live in this blood as we do in this part of the universe, and would consider each particular of the blood as whole, not as a part. It could not know how all the parts of the blood are regulated by the universal nature of the blood, and compelled to adapt themselves to one another, as the universal nature of the blood requires, so that they agree with one another in a definite way.” [Letter 32, OP/171a/9-19] In short, the “self,” according to this myopic worm, would be the worm as a discrete entity. But to the disciple of Spinoza, that worm is merely a component of a larger individual’s blood stream, and that larger individual is merely a component of the universe as a whole.

Fast forward several years to the writing of the *Ethics*, and let us turn to the very final paragraph in Part 4. [App. 32] Spinoza began that paragraph by pointing out that “human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.” Yet in spite of our relative impotence and all the awful things that can happen to us, he said, we can achieve a calm temperament “if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that *we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow.*” (emphasis added) In short, we need to recognize that when we view our “self” exclusively as a discrete human being, we are thinking like worms in the bloodstream who fail to grasp reality from the standpoint of eternity. From that broader, eternal vista, all finite forms are included within a single infinite composite that could be called the universe as a whole or the aggregate face of the universe. Accordingly, when we think about the “self,” we could think about reality as a whole, of which our discrete human forms (“Daniel Spiro,” say) are merely component parts.

Clearly, without giving up the commitment to behaving in a way that serves our “self” interest, that perspective could bring in purportedly altruistic behavior in the same way as equating the self with all of humanity – only now, our apparent altruism could extend beyond the human species to all forms of life. But this still doesn’t quite seem to capture the full power that Spinozism can muster when it comes to re-shaping our fundamental sense of identity. Let us not forget that Spinoza did not begin his *Ethics* with Part 4; nor did he end it there. He began that book by both promoting and explaining his concept of *God*. And in Part 5, he ended the book by both promoting and explaining the power of our love for God. I would argue that by embracing the idea of Spinoza’s God and locating ourselves *in* Spinoza’s God – meaning that our deepest

self is God, and our discrete human forms are but expressions or states of God – we can build the foundation of a morality that puts egoism and altruism in their proper places.

Recall that for Spinoza, “God” is more than just the sum total of thoughts and things in the universe. God is also the indivisible Substance that underlies all the parts of nature, whose essence cannot help but exist, and who by nature expresses Godself in infinite attributes, each of which involves infinite modal states. God is the ground of being, as well as the sum of beings – and there exists nothing outside of God. But most importantly, “God” is a word that has been used by humans for thousands of years before Spinoza was born to convey a “Thou,” not an “It.” People are now hard wired to find meaning in that word both as a Subject and as an Object that spurs our own emotions, including, most traditionally, love and fear. Spinoza must have understood all of that when he used the word God (*Deus*) precisely 579 times in the *Ethics*.<sup>7</sup>

When Spinoza wholeheartedly embraced the word “God,” discussed the “intellectual love of God” as the surest path to blessedness, and identified human beings when considered from the standpoint of eternity as mere modes or states of God, it is hardly a stretch for his readers to view our deepest self *as God*. Accordingly, even when we view the world from a self-interested sense, we are impelled to devote our lives to honoring our *deepest* self: namely, God. This, I would argue, is best accomplished by nurturing God’s earthly expressions, including human beings. In doing so, we may be thought of by others as behaving in a manner that is largely “altruistic,” but the “*others*” whose interests we serve become for us mere expressions of our own deepest “self.” What’s more, insofar as we serve others in order to honor God, we work toward a goal that human beings have championed for millennia, and which therefore does not seem so alien to our nature. So once we adopt Spinoza’s panentheist framework that the whole of nature, our narrowly-construed “selves” included, is *in* God, it no longer seems such a stretch, or an act of self-sabotage, to place the collective’s interests at the heart of our conduct.

With that impulse to broaden the sense of self as an underlying framework, let us now remember that in Spinozism, while there exists nothing outside of God, that is not a license to denigrate the importance or the reality of the finite individuals that God expresses. So, whenever we construct our moral frameworks, the question must be asked: what role do we set aside for the other “selves” in which we locate yours truly – our individual body and mind, our family, our faith community, our nation, our species, etc.? How much, in other words, should we serve the “particular” as opposed to the “universal”? And in striking that balance, which “particulars” should most compel our self-serving behavior?

If we are looking for a Spinozist answer, we might want to return to the definition of “singular things” in Part 2 of the *Ethics*. But first, let’s put that definition in perspective. For Spinoza, God expresses an infinite number of singular things – specifically, thoughts, physical objects, and an infinite number of other entities that we cannot even begin to perceive. These entities range in power from the tiniest of the tiny to the largest of the large, and they include “all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect.” [E1App., at II/83/27-32] To be human is to be comprised of a truly massive number of components, each of which scientists might

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<sup>7</sup> That number was supplied by Newlands in *Reconceiving Spinoza*, at p. 44, n. 8.

analyze as discrete entities, but none of which compels our attention as a source of self-identity. When it comes to developing that sense of identity, I begin, in other words, with “Daniel Spiro,” and every component part of that person simply is identified in terms of that name (“Daniel Spiro’s right arm,” “Daniel Spiro’s most recent thought,” etc.).

Of course, when we self-identify, we don’t stop at the level of the discrete human being; we build on top of it. This is because each of us is associated with a number of societal groups and enterprises. “Daniel Spiro is a Spiro, a Jew, an American and a human being” tells us that he will tend to identify with and promote the interests of the Spiro family, the Jewish community, the American community, and the human race. The choice belongs to each of us as to which composite groups or enterprises we wish to identify with. As to how we should make such choices, guidance can be found in Spinoza’s definition of “singular things.”

We can identify as part of a composite individual (a type of singular thing) if the other individuals that comprise the set at issue “so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect” [see E2d7] – in other words, if they work together to the point where they tend to bring about common effects. The more they work together with us and accomplish feats with us, or perhaps more broadly, the greater our passion for them to join us in common activities or produce results in which we all can rejoice, the more we will identify with the entity in which we share membership. And this much is crystal clear -- when it comes to viewing our own individual bodies and minds as a discrete “self,” that entity will *always* be a compelling source of self-identity, because our bodily organs and thoughts seem inexorably fated to return to the same nesting place when it comes to activities, goals, and accomplishments.

Ultimately, as we have seen, when Spinoza talks about moral virtue, he is talking about power – for as explained in the eighth definition of Part 4 of the *Ethics*, “[b]y virtue and power I understand the same thing.” So when it comes to choosing which senses of self to most identify with, I would suggest we return to that notion of virtue-as-power and ask the following questions: Which collectives, when fully embraced, help us grow in power? And which ones do we find most compelling as a spur to our own activity, or as a potential source of accomplishment? Whenever we find a suitable candidate, we should think hard before ignoring that sense of identity or domain of activity. After all, as human beings, we have limited abilities, and we owe it to our deepest self (God) to use those abilities efficiently to increase our power.

The great Rabbi Hillel famously said that “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” Clearly, Hillel was using a very specific sense of “self” in that statement – he was referring to the body and mind of a discrete human individual. But I suggest that we consider that statement more Spinozistically. To be a Spinozist is to recognize that the “self” could refer to multiple beings: To God. To our discrete body and mind. Or to some composite entity that is broader in scope than the latter and narrower than the former. It is no sin to recall that whenever we ignore altogether the abilities or the interests of our narrower selves – whether we are talking about our discrete mind and body, our family, our faith community, our country or even our species – we are violating Hillel’s first principle. For if Daniel Spiro is not for Daniel Spiro, who will be? If I do not work to further the interests of the United States of America or the Jewish people, who will?

But to be a Spinozist is to recognize that the second part of Hillel's saying is indeed the most important. If I am only for myself, with my "self" defined narrowly, then what am I? Probably not the kind of person that could ever be called "noble and lovable," let alone ethically "supreme." And if we wish to keep in mind the ethical universalism that is at the core of Spinozism, I would encourage us never to forget the power that is encompassed in embracing the word "God," as Spinoza did, and in recognizing in God our deepest *self*. That way, we can behave like social servants and apparent altruists without giving up the sense that we are behaving in our own best interests. You do not have to be Spinoza to realize that building a moral philosophy on a foundation of self-sabotage is not likely to gain many adherents.

#### IV. Conclusion

If we take Spinoza's words as they were intended to be taken – as the teachings of a mere mortal, not as part of complete, perfect works designed with heavenly precision -- we can put aside their limitations and use them as guideposts for a moral philosophy that works wonderfully even today, four centuries after they were drafted. When it comes to resolving the altruism/egoism debate, we can, to some degree, have our cake and eat it too, once we realize that what is meant by the "self" is a flexible term. Because the same moral agent can identify at the same time with multiple "selves," some of which are far broader than others, we can maintain tied to a strong sense of egoism (or, if you prefer, an unwillingness to self-sabotage), while at the same time embracing a lifestyle that would be viewed as exceptionally altruistic when taken from the standpoint of a narrow sense of self. We can serve the collective, in other words, because one of our senses of self *is* the collective, without completely disregarding the traditional notion of personal identity that has been with us in Western Culture for millennia.

Perhaps what best illustrates the solution I am advocating is a passage from the Christian Bible, a book that Spinoza did not cease praising in the *TTP*. I love this passage for its candor, its wisdom, and yes, its rationality: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." [Luke 22:27<sup>8</sup>] From the standpoint of one's narrowest sense of self, of course one grows in power from sitting at the table, hobnobbing with the best and the brightest, and building the kind of networks and knowledge base that one typically needs to become affluent and socially influential. So why wouldn't it be self-sabotage to cede a place at the table? Because from the standpoint of our deeper self, we who identify ourselves as expressions of God feel compelled to serve. In that way, we do the best job possible in honoring that self (God) and all of God's expressions.

You had better believe it is powerful, and therefore Spinozistically virtuous, to invoke the G-word in this context, rather than using some paler, secular alternative, like Substance or Nature. When the man himself invoked that word 579 times in a single book – the one written for philosophers, not the one written for more of a mass audience - he proved how convinced he was of its power. But let me add that whether you are a panentheist or a more traditional theist,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1988).

whenever you use that word in a universalistic rather than a tribalist sense, and whenever you allow what it represents to become a steadfast object of profound love, it can operate on your sense of self so as to fundamentally *cement* you. It can cement you to virtue – and I do not mean that in the sense of “power” but rather in the sense of feeling compelled to help others. That is one of the themes of the *TTP*. And by focusing on the love of God as the key to “blessedness,” the *Ethics* merely reinforces the point.