

Spinoza on Immortality and the Eternity of the Human Mind

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“A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a mediation on life, not on death.” (E.IV.P. 67) That is one of my favorite sentences in all of Spinoza. From the first time I read it, I have tried to honor that principle in my own thinking. Spinoza would have urged us to not to worry about building and purifying our souls for the so-called “world to come,” but rather to seek understanding in science, math, psychology, philosophy and any other discipline capable of expanding the human mind. To Spinoza, the topic of death is the supreme distraction – a numbing of our power, a sapping of our motivation to head onward and upward and never to wallow in the mortality of the human condition.

Yet here we are, during a pandemic. A time when death is far more common than usual, and survival requires dramatically restricting our liberties if we hope to prevent still more death. I’ve always bought into the teaching of Ecclesiastes, that there is a time for everything under heaven. And truly, if ever there were a time to contemplate death, it would be now, wouldn’t it? So, with all due respect to Spinoza, what do you say we reflect a bit on the topic of death – focusing specifically on what Spinoza himself would say about it if forced to talk. After all, if Spinoza knew that someone was going to do a presentation on this topic,

he would surely say, “Do it during a Grab-Bag session. Don’t waste a full two hours on it.”

Let’s start by dealing with a cut-and-dried issue. Just as there is no crying in baseball, there is no personal immortality in Spinoza, at least not in the conventional sense of the term.

In Part II of the *Ethics*, Spinoza suggests that the human mind is nothing without a corresponding human body. He states that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” (E.II.P.7) and that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.”

(E.II.P.7.S) In other words, ideas and physical things aren’t simply ordered in a parallel way, they truly are identical, when you dig deeply enough.

Later in that part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza turns his attention to the human mind in particular. He says that “[t]he first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is the idea of a singular thing which actually exists” (E.II.P.11) and that “[t]he object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else.” (E.II.P.13.) After demonstrating the reasoning behind that latter proposition, Spinoza concludes that “[f]rom this it follows that man consists of a Mind and a Body.” (E.II.P.13.C.) So what are the ideas in a human mind? The ideas of a particular human

body and what goes on inside that body, and nothing else. We perceive what takes place in our body. And if nothing is happening with our body, this strongly suggests what is left of the mind.

There you have the teachings of Part II of the *Ethics*. But Spinoza didn't conclude the book with Part II. He went on to deal with the relationship between the mind and the body in Part V. And as any Spinoza scholar can tell you, whenever the focus is on Part V, the words "cut and dried" rarely are applicable.

Certain statements in Part V reinforce the notion that the human mind dies with the body. "The Mind," Spinoza teaches, "can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the Body endures." (E.V.P. 21). Our mind "can be said to endure ... only insofar as it involves the actual existence of the body, and to that extent only does it have the power of ... conceiving [things] ... under duration." (E.V.P. 23.S.) In short, if you are talking about the mind in terms of an individual's consciousness, that ends with death. Full stop.

But is there *something* about the mind that can reasonably be called *eternal*? Here, Spinoza opens the door – not to the kind of immortality that reflects a continuation of consciousness, but to a measure of eternity, one that should give us no modicum of solace. The key is to recognize that when Spinoza was talking about the "eternal," he was leaving the realm of duration and time and entering a realm that has

no meaning in contemporary secular society. But let's see if we can give it some.

We begin with one of his most provocative statements in Part V: “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal.” (E.V.P. 23) Then, in his attempt to demonstrate this point, he states that “we do not attribute to the human mind any duration that can be defined by time, except insofar as it expresses the actual existence of the Body, which is explained by duration, and can be defined by time, i.e., ... we do not attribute duration to it except while the Body endures.” (E.V.P.23.D.) So whatever it is that is *eternal* is not to be understood as existing throughout time as we know it, but rather to be understood as not being defined by time at all.

His first stab at explaining what is eternal is unlikely to give anyone emotional sustenance. He comes to the conclusion that there is, in the attribute of Thought, some idea in the mind, which “expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity;” and that itself is “necessarily eternal.” (E.V.P.23.S). Now remember, Spinoza defines “eternity” as “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.” (E.I.D.8) Stated differently, we see things as eternal insofar as we recognize that they exist necessarily, which of course has nothing to do with how long they last on this earth. In the case of our mind, we find the idea that our own individual body has an essence – that which defines what it is, what

it is not, and what brought it about (namely, God). The fact that this essence exists and does so necessarily is expressed as an idea in our minds, and that is what makes our minds eternal.

I suspect that Spinoza recognized that such a notion of what makes us eternal wasn't going to comfort or inspire anyone, so later in Part V, he takes a second crack at the topic. "The eternal part of the Mind," he teaches, "is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act, ... [whereas] what we have shown to perish is the imagination ..., through which alone we are said to be acted on." (E.V.P.40.C.) For Spinoza, you see, when we see things through the lens of reason and enlightened-intuition, we see them not only as they are, but as they *necessarily must be*. We understand the world of things to be expressions of God's unity, which unfolds naturally just as it must unfold in this world of multiplicity that stands before us. When we perceive things with an intellectual love of God, Spinoza teaches, we become active participants in our lives, rather than simply being tossed around by external forces like a ship in a stormy sea. And most importantly, we recognize that God is eternal (God necessarily is what God is), and that all of God's modes, ourselves included, are also eternal – we each have a place in God, and that place is timeless.

Perhaps Chantal Jaquet is correct that Spinoza was imprecise when he said that "the more the Mind knows things by the second and third kinds of knowledge" – respectively, reason and enlightened-intuition –

“the greater the part of it that remains.” (See E.V.P38D). More accurately, what he is saying is that our mind has the power to have higher order thoughts, and these allow us to be aware of our eternity and everything that flows from it: our necessary existence; our residence in God as modes or properties of the Divine; our relationship to all other things in existence, which also reside in God; and the fact that we are who we are meant to be and that virtue lies in celebrating that fact, rather than bemoaning or denying it.

In this sense, Spinoza teaches that the greatest part of our mind is eternal. For we all have the power of recognizing what this truth means and reveling in it.

Before I conclude this discussion of a difficult aspect of Part V of the *Ethics*, I would like to remind you of something about its author. Typically, philosophers think about him as a rigid know-at-all, who treated the premises of his system like indisputable facts, when in fact they are unproven hypotheses. The truth is, though, that Spinoza didn't think he had all the answers. He knew better. You can see this reflected, for example, in a letter (Ep. 83) he wrote seven months before his death to an interlocutor who had asked “whether a variety of things can be demonstrated a priori from the concept of Extension alone.” In other words, how we get from that simple unity of God, the source-of-all-that-is, to this multiplicity we observe in our world. How do we get from the One to the Many? Spinoza's response was “up until now I

have not been able to set out anything concerning [these matters] in an orderly way.” Clearly, that issue remained a conundrum for him even as a mature philosopher.

I suspect that demonstrating the eternity of the human mind remained another difficult predicament for him. Otherwise, he would have had greater success in clarifying his views. Perhaps he was even disappointed that he couldn't give us a more upbeat approach to the question of immortality and recognized that the “eternity” he gave us would be perceived by the masses as a pale substitute by comparison. But Spinoza's essence, or more precisely, his *raison d'être* on this earth, was not to provide us with sugarcoated platitudes in order to tickle our fancies. He was here to preach the truth the best he could. He saw no truth in teaching that our minds survive our bodies in the conventional sense. And yet he was inspired to find comfort, even love, through faith in the notion that the world is how it must be because it flows from the nature of its source. By tying the word “eternity” to our ability to recognize that what exists necessarily exists as part of the very definition of the thing at issue, Spinoza gave us a sense of self-respect that we all have the power to find our own salvation through human wisdom.

Of course, what does that wisdom teach us above all else? That we are put on this earth to take this world seriously, and strive to improve it, rather than to focus on some after-life that is probably just a figment of our mortal and often flawed imaginations. In short, we must follow the

words of Spinoza's disciple Goethe, who wrote, "Remember, to live!"
That means to live fully, with eyes open, hopes high, and faith in the
enlightenment that comes from meditating on life rather than worrying
about its absence when our heart stops beating.