

*Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline (DRAFT)*

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“A triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangle, and a circle that God’s nature is eminently circular” (Spinoza, Letter 56 | S 277) <sup>1</sup>

“But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw their hands, and do the works that man can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and with cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves” (Xenophanes, Fr. 169)<sup>2</sup>

**Introduction**

I. A common perception of Spinoza considers him as one of the precursors, perhaps even founders, of modern enlightenment and humanism.<sup>3</sup> Having in mind that humanism is

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics*, the early works of Spinoza, and Letters 1-29 are to Curley's translation (henceforth, **C**): *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). In references to the other letters of Spinoza I have used Shirley's translation (henceforth, **S**): *The Letters*, translated by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995). Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); ‘d’ stands for either ‘definition’ (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or ‘demonstration’ (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. Occasionally, I will supplement a reference to Gebhardt’s Latin edition, by volume, page, and line (hence, II/23/5 is volume II, page 23, line 5). I will use this notation when the reference by proposition number (in the *Ethics*), chapter or letter, is not specific enough. I am indebted to Robert Adams, Hillel Braudie, Michael Della Rocca, Oded Schechter and Peter Thielke for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Kirk, G.S., J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, 1983, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> For the view of Spinoza’s philosophy as anticipating “secularism,....,the Enlightenment, and the liberal-democratic state”, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

associated with secularism and the politics of liberal-democracies, and Spinoza has been taken to provide “the message of secularity”,<sup>4</sup> “the psychology and ethics of a democratic soul”,<sup>5</sup> and to give “the decisive impulse to... modern republicanism which takes its bearings by the dignity of every man..”,<sup>6</sup> we can see how this humanistic image came about. Spinoza’s deep interest in, and extensive discussion of, human nature may as well have contributed to the emergence of this image. In this paper I will argue that this common perception of Spinoza is mistaken and that Spinoza was in fact the most radical *anti-humanist* among modern philosophers.

The notions of ‘humanism’ and ‘anti-humanism’ have been discussed extensively -

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1989), vol. 1, p. ix. For the view of Spinoza as a humanist, see Erich Fromm, “Humanism and Psychoanalysis,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 1 (1964). Cf. Leo Strauss (quoted below, note \*5) on Spinoza’s republicanism which “takes its bearings by the dignity of every man.” Any quick search on the web will yield dozens of popular characterizations of Spinoza as one of the heroes of modern humanism. See, for example, the following declaration (<http://www.ihcu.org/node/771>): “We, the Sixth International Congress of the IHEU (International Humanist and Ethical Union), representing humanists from all over the world, meeting in Amsterdam on August 5-9, 1974, wish to pay special tribute to Benedict de Spinoza...Spinoza is one of the greatest forerunners of humanist philosophy in modern time. A defender of intellectual and religious liberty and the free mind; he attempted to establish ethics on rational foundations independent of religious dogma. Standing as a bridge between the Middle Ages and Modern science, Spinoza was committed to the use of reason as a source of human freedom.” Similarly, in a declaration signed by an impressive group of philosophers and intellectual (among them, W.V. Quine, Arthur Danto, Ernst Nagel, George Hourani, Sidney Hook, Walter Kaufman, and A.J. Ayer) Spinoza is included in a list of “distinguished secularists and humanists who have demonstrated moral principles in their personal lives and works” (<http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=main&page=declaration>).

<sup>4</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1, p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Steven, *Spinoza’s Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), \*\*\*\*. For Spinoza’s support of democracy, see his *Theological Political Treatise*, translated by Samuel Shirley [2nd.ed] (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), chapter 16.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, Leo, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965 [orig. German edition, 1930]), 16. On Spinoza as a champion of human dignity, see also Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xvi: “Spinoza did not use the term ‘liberal’ to describe his system of politics.... But if to be a liberal is means to have a lively sense of the autonomy and dignity of the individual,...then Spinoza can be described as a liberal”.

mainly among continental philosophers<sup>7</sup> - since the end of World-War-II. Because these notions carry a variety of historical, ideological and philosophical meanings, it is important to provide at least a rudimentary clarification of my use of these two notions at the onset. By ‘humanism’ I understand a view which (1) assigns a *unique value* to human beings among other things in nature, (2) stresses the primacy of the human *perspective* in understanding the nature of things, and (3) attempts to point out an essential property of humanity which *justifies* its elevated and unique status.<sup>8</sup> This definition of humanism has little to do with the *historical* notion of Renaissance humanism.

This notion of humanism should be grasped in contrast with two competing positions. On the one hand, in contrast to the *theocentric* position that considers humanity to be radically dependent upon God, humanism affirms at least some degree of human independence. On the other hand, in contrast to the *naturalist* position which endorses the scientific examination of human beings just like any other objects in nature, humanists affirm the existence of a metaphysical and moral *gulf* between humanity and nature. This gulf assigns a special value to humanity and does not allow us to treat human beings like any other things in nature. For many humanists the nature/humanity gulf does not allow the application of the methods of natural

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, Heidegger, Althusser, and Foucault are probably the most prominent philosophers associated with anti-humanism, though, at least in the case of Heidegger, the appropriateness of this association is, to my mind, questionable. Max Black is one of the very few analytic philosophers who have developed a serious interest in this issue. See his “Humaneness” in Black, Max, *The Prevalence of Humbug and Other Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 97-114.

<sup>8</sup> Hence, *speciesism* (the view which suggests that we should favor human beings *only* by virtue of their belonging to our species) would not count as humanism for our purposes. It is not hard to detect the Kantian undertones of my definition of ‘humanism’, though a very similar view is expressed by Max Black: “[I]n calling human beings *persons*, we are rightfully ascribing to them important properties that cannot, even in principle, apply to other animals or to inanimate material beings” (“Humaneness”, 99). According to Black, self-consciousness is such a distinctive characteristic of human beings (ibid, 104). For a similar definition, see Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 396-7 (under ‘humanism’).

sciences to the disciplines of the humanities.<sup>9</sup>

Humanism does not begin with modernity. In order to see how far back we can trace this position one may recall Protagoras' saying: "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not." In modern philosophy the humanistic position had regained dominant status since the renaissance, and variants of this position were vigorously argued by prominent thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola, Descartes, Kant, Fichte, and finally, Hegel.

In this paper I will argue that Spinoza was a foe and not a friend of this tradition.<sup>10</sup> I suggest that in contrast to these humanist philosophers Spinoza considers man as a marginal and limited being in nature;<sup>11</sup> a being which has claims and presumptions much beyond its abilities. Arguably, Spinoza locates the origin of our most fundamental metaphysical and ethical errors in a human *hubris* which not only tries to secure for humanity an exceptional place in nature, but also attempts to cast both God and nature in its own, human, image.

My view of Spinoza as an 'anti-humanist' relies on the following four elements of his thought: (1) Spinoza's perception of human beings as rather marginal and limited beings in an infinite universe, (2) Spinoza's critique of anthropomorphism as a baseless arrogance which makes people believe that the world is arranged to fit their fictions and caprices, (3) Spinoza's radical naturalism about human beings which denies the existence of *any* gulf between humanity and the rest of nature, and, finally, (4) Spinoza's amoralism. Each of these elements was subject

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<sup>9</sup> Some famous proponents of the latter view are Wilhelm Dilthey, and the Neo-Kantian philosophers, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert,. Here again, Max Black provides a crystal-clear statement of this position: "I believe that there are features of human personality that are outside the purview of any of the natural or social sciences, and that there is something therefore conceptually – or, if you like, ontologically – special about human beings" ("Humaneness", 99).

<sup>10</sup> Hyppolite seems to disclose a similar view of Spinoza in noting that "Hegel is still too Spinozistic for us to be able to speak of a pure humanism" (Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, tr. Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>11</sup> "To what length will the folly of the multitude not carry them?... [T]hey imagine Nature to be so limited that they believe man to be his chief part" (*Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 6, p. 72).

to detailed discussion in the existing literature; however, as far as I know, these elements were never taken as pieces of a comprehensive world-view. The attempt to draw the outline of such a comprehensive world-view is, I believe, the major innovation of the current paper.

In the first part of this paper I will attempt to draw some outlines of Spinoza's philosophy, point out the limited place of humanity within this universe, and present Spinoza's views on some crucial issues such as: human freedom, human self-knowledge, and the nature of the human mind. In the second part I will discuss several aspects of Spinoza's critique of anthropomorphism. In the third part I will discuss Spinoza's naturalistic account of human beings and his amorality.

It is important to note that by describing Spinoza as an anti-humanist I do *not* suggest that he either despises<sup>12</sup> or is uninterested in human beings. As I have already mentioned, Spinoza was deeply interested in the question of human nature. Indeed, the greatest bulk of Spinoza's texts deal with the nature of human beings, their associations, and their illusions. However, his interest in human beings results not from any admiration of man or from a belief in the exceptional place of human beings in the universe, but rather from the very simple fact that Spinoza himself was a human being, and that he considered an illusion-free understanding of humanity to be necessary for understanding his own life.

### **First Part: The Place of Humanity in Spinoza's World**

**II. *Man's marginality in Spinoza's Universe.*** - At the beginning of the *Ethics* Spinoza defines God as a "substance consisting of an infinity of attributes [*substantiam constantem infinitis attributis*]" (E1d6). Human beings, however, are present in only two of God's infinitely many attributes, Thought and Extension. It is only these two attributes, which we can know.

We [i.e., human beings] neither feel nor perceive any singular things except bodies and modes of thinking (E2a5).

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<sup>12</sup> See E4p35s (II/234) and E4app13 (269-70).

For Spinoza, a human being is simply a pair of two modes of God: a body (a mode of extension) and an idea of that body (i.e., a mind).<sup>13</sup> Yet, since Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism holds that the order of modes is the same in all attributes, and that modes which are parallel to each other are identical, one may wonder why we can not know the modes which are parallel to our body in all the other attributes. If I know my body, and a certain mode of the third attribute is *identical* with my body, how can I *not* know it? When challenged with this question by one of his correspondents, Spinoza replied that the mode of the third attribute, which is identical with my body, has its own idea, or mind. However, Spinoza adds, the mind of my body and the mind of the mode of the third attribute (which is identical with my body)

“[C]annot constitute one and the same mind of a particular thing... For each of these ideas has no connection [*nullam connexionem*] with the others” (Letter 66).

Since the mind of my body and the mind of the mode of the third attribute, which is identical with the body, have “no connection with each other”, it would make sense that the two minds cannot know each other. Yet, it is still not clear *why* these two minds have “no connection with each other”. This enigmatic doctrine of Spinoza has caused much controversy and wonder among Spinoza scholars. I believe it is a serious doctrine that is consistent with the rest of his system, though space does not permit full discussion of this doctrine in the present paper.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I think we can already recognize here a huge gap between the infinity of God/Nature, and the limitedness of human knowledge which captures merely two attributes.<sup>15</sup> It is not only that the human mind could never grasp the vast majority of the infinite attributes, but also, in a sense, there is a limitation on human ability to know itself. My body has infinite modes that are parallel to it in the infinitely many unknown attributes. These modes are identical with my body, and in *some* sense, they are me.<sup>16</sup> Yet, I have no idea what they are and what they do in

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<sup>13</sup> “[M]an consists of a mind and a body” (E2p13c).

<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of these claims of Spinoza, see my \*\*\*\*.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, the human mind can know only *one* attribute (extension) and a *tiny* aspect of the attribute of thought (i.e., ideas which represent bodies).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Joel Friedman, “Spinoza’s Problem of ‘Other Minds’”, *Synthese* 57 (1983), 105: “It follows, again contra

the infinitely many attributes unknown to the human mind (God knows what they do!).

If the Copernican Revolution threw man from the center of the physical universe, Spinoza's metaphysics multiplied infinitely this fall of man. It is not just that humans are not any more at the center of the (extended) world, but even the extended world itself turns out to be just one out of infinite aspects of nature, the rest of which are eternally barred from human grasp.

**III. *Self-Knowledge.*** - Spinoza does allow for the human mind to know itself. Yet, it is quite a poor, and unreliable form of self-knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The Mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body (E2p23).

For Spinoza, human self-knowledge consists in our ability to have second-order ideas. If I have an idea of a certain event that occurred in my finger, I would also have an idea of that idea. That is all what self-knowledge amounts to for Spinoza. These second order ideas have no privileged characteristics, such as clarity or certainty. In fact, Spinoza claims that

The idea of the idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human Mind (E2p29).

The inadequacy of human self-knowledge is even more striking given Spinoza's view that human beings have an adequate knowledge of God's essence.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it would seem that for Spinoza my knowledge of God is more adequate than my knowledge of myself.

While for other modern philosophers, such as Descartes, self-knowledge was both the most certain and the most fundamental knowledge,<sup>19</sup> it has no such privileged status in

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Descartes, that I am much more than a thinking thing".

<sup>17</sup> Several scholars ascribed to Spinoza a much stronger view of self-knowledge. See for example, Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 117: "[N]o reflective human being ... can fail to perceive that the idea of himself as thinking cannot be false." As I will shortly argue, I do not think Spinoza shared this Cartesian view.

<sup>18</sup> E2p47: "The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence." Cf. E247s: "God's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all."

<sup>19</sup> Recall Descartes' memorable conclusion of the second meditation: "I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else" (*The Philosophical Writings of*

Spinoza.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as I will later argue, Spinoza does not seem to limit self-knowledge to human beings.

**IV. *The Non-Substantiality of the Human Mind.*** - Another common characteristic of the human mind in modern philosophy is its independent existence as a *substance*, a view which was held by Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and Berkeley, to name a few. Here again, we find Spinoza in a striking opposition to the dominant view. For Spinoza, the human mind is neither a substance nor even a genuine *simple* being, but rather a mere collection of ideas (i.e., modes of Thought):

The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man [*substantia formam hominis non constituit*] (E2p10).

The idea that constitutes the formal being of the human Mind is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas [*Idea, quae esse formale humanae mentis constituit, non est simplex, sed ex plurimis ideis composita*] (E2p15).

The denial of the substantiality of the human mind has two crucial implications. First, it denies the existence of a thinking subject that is anything more than a sum total of a number of ideas.<sup>21</sup> Second, it denies that the human mind is in any sense more independent from God than any other mode.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar way Spinoza claims that the human body is not a substance but is rather a

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*Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 22-3 (AT VII 34)).

<sup>20</sup> For an interesting attempt to reconstruct a thicker account of self-consciousness in Spinoza (based on of his discussion of the affects, see Lia Levy\*\*\*\*. \*\*\*\* Self-consciousness in Part V.

<sup>21</sup> A crucial implication of the non-simplicity of the human mind is that it seems to undermine one of the most common arguments for mind eternity. Indeed, Van Blijenbergh, one of Spinoza's correspondents and an orthodox Cartesian attacks Spinoza precisely on this point. In death, claims Van Blijenbergh, "as the human body, when it disintegrates, is resolved again into the thousands of bodies of which it was composed, so also our mind... And as the scattered bodies [which composed] our human body no longer remain bound to one another, but other bodies separate them, so also it seems to follow that, when our mind is disintegrates, those countless thoughts of which it was composed are no longer combined, but separated" (Letter 24| *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 391).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Van Blijenbergh's complaint in Letter 20 that Spinoza "makes man dependent on God in the way the elements, stones, and plants are." (IV/103/15).

collection of modes of extension.

V. *The Denial of Free Will.* - Descartes' affirmation of the freedom of the will is the target of one of Spinoza's sharpest criticisms (see, e.g., E2p33s2, Letter 21, Letter 58). For Spinoza, the notion of free will is nothing but a human illusion which results from the fact that human beings "are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which [their actions] are determined" (E2p34s)<sup>23</sup>. In fact, Spinoza denies that *any* being - even God (E1p32c1) - has free will, since everything that happens, happens necessarily.

Yet, in spite of his unequivocal denial of free will, Spinoza does not ban all notions of freedom. At the beginning of the *Ethics* Spinoza defines a free thing in the following way:

That thing is called free [*libera*] which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled [*coacta*], which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate way (E1d7).

This definition allows Spinoza to claim that,

Although God exists necessarily, he nevertheless exists freely because he exists solely from the necessity of his own nature (Letter 58).

and that

God alone is a free cause [*causam liberam*]. For God alone exists only from the necessity of his nature, and acts from the necessity of his nature (E1p17c2).

Since, like any other finite beings, human beings do not exist "from the necessity of their nature alone," and since their actions are always determined by external causes as well, it is clear that they cannot be free even according to Spinoza's own definition of freedom.<sup>24</sup> However, in various places in his writings Spinoza attempts to mitigate this conclusion by relaxing the definition of freedom, so that it would allow for a variety of *degrees* of freedom.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Letter 58 (S 284): "[T]hat human freedom which all men boast of possessing...consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the cause by which they are determined. In the same way a baby thinks that it freely desires milk, an angry child revenge, and a coward flight."

<sup>24</sup> For an insightful discussion of the "free man" as an impossible model, see Dan Garber, "Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability" in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (eds.), *Spinoza on*

In his correspondence with Van Blijenburgh, Spinoza seems to hold that *the more* our actions follow from our nature, *the more* we are free:

If God's nature is known to us, then affirming that God exists follows necessarily from our nature... [W]e are never *more free* than when we affirm a thing in such a way (Letter 21 | IV/130/6. Italics mine).

Since, Spinoza holds that the essence, or nature, of every finite being is the striving to persevere in its being (E3p8), it would seem that the more a person strives to persevere in his being, the more he is free.

The result of this relaxation of the definition of freedom is a rather humble view of human freedom. Furthermore, freedom does *not* seem to distinguish man from the rest of nature. The *conatus*, or the striving to persevere one's being, belongs to the essence of any finite being,<sup>25</sup> and to that extent, any cockroach, which follows his essence and strives to persevere in its being is - to some extent - free.

## **Second Part: The Battle with Anthropomorphism.**

**VI. *The Finite and the Infinite.*** - In E2p10s2, Spinoza rebukes those philosophers who, [D]id not observe the order of Philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature - which they should have contemplated before all else (*because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature*) - is last in the order of knowledge, and the things that are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less that they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than their first fictions [*figmentis*].” (Emphasis mine.)

That philosophy must begin with the infinite and then conceive the finite through the infinite

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*Reason and the “Free Man”* (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), 183-207.

<sup>25</sup> E3p6: “*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.*” In his aforementioned article (“Humaneness”, pp. 105-6), Max Black suggests that having a need for the individual's survival (rather than survival of the species) is another unique characteristic of human beings; he then quotes Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine in support of this claim. It is hard to understand what made Black think that the *conatus* is particularly human, while Spinoza explicitly states “Each thing [*Unaquaeque res*]....”. Indeed, in Letter 58 Spinoza openly discusses the *conatus* of the stone which “as far as in it lies” strives “to continue in motion” (S 284).

(and not the other way around) is one of Spinoza's most important methodological principles and arguably one of his most significant innovations. The principle is expressed most clearly in the definitions of Substance and Mode (E1d3&5) which make the modes dependant on substance both for their existence and for their conceivability. This principle is also the conceptual grounding of Spinoza's crusade against anthropomorphism.

It is not easy to summarize all the errors, illusions and misconceptions that Spinoza finds to be results of anthropomorphic thinking. In the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics* Spinoza lists “good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness” as notions that result from people's belief that “everything that happens, happens on their account”, and that everything is valued by its usefulness for human beings (II/81/27). This list is far from exhaustive.

Spinoza presses the charge of anthropomorphism against both philosophers and theologians, both Jews (whom he describes as the most “accustomed to grant all things human attributes”<sup>26</sup>) and Christians (whom he criticizes for believing that “God took upon himself human nature”<sup>27</sup>). Here I will concentrate on four issues that seem to me the most crucial for Spinoza's battle against anthropomorphism: the critique of scripture, teleology, the problem of evil, and the critique of morality.

**VII. *The Critique of Scripture.*** - The claim that scripture describes God in vulgar, anthropomorphic, terms prevails both in the *TTP* and in Spinoza's correspondence.<sup>28</sup> In fact, however, this is the *less* innovative aspect of Spinoza's discussion of anthropomorphism. Indeed, Spinoza explicitly attests:

I have never seen a Theologian so dense that he did not perceive that Sacred Scripture very often speaks of God in a human way (Letter 21 | IV/132/22).

The claim that scripture frequently describes God in human terms in order to be accessible to

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<sup>26</sup> Spinoza, *Hebrew Grammar*, trans. Maurice J. Bloom (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 73.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the first two chapters of the *TTP* and Spinoza's correspondence with Van Blijenbergh (Letters 18-24).

the masses was not only a major theme in medieval Jewish philosophy (especially in Maimonides and his followers), but it had also been a central hermeneutic principle in the early Talmudic literature, which relentlessly warns the reader that “Scripture speaks in the language of commoners”. In this respect, Spinoza’s biblical criticism contributes little new.

**VIII.** *The Critique of Teleology.* - At the beginning of the appendix to part one of the *Ethics*, Spinoza states:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God (II/78/1-6).

Being aware of their appetites - and ignorant of the causes of their appetites - people believe that their actions are freely determined by the purposes they set for themselves (E4Pref| II/206-7). They also believe that other intelligent beings act in a similar way. When they find various things in nature that are useful for them and know that these things were not created by human beings, they feign the existence of gods, and assume that the gods created those things for the sake of man. Being ignorant of the nature of these gods, people assume that they are just like them, though much more powerful. Thus, they try to satisfy the gods with gifts, offerings and prayers (E1App). This, *in nuce*, is Spinoza’s analysis of the genealogy of religion.

For Spinoza, this kind of thinking is a mixture of illusion, ignorance and *hubris*. God acts for the sake of no end (E4Pref| II/207/1), and nature neither exists nor acts for the sake of man. Of course, human beings can use non-human individuals for their own advantage, but these non-human individuals can just as well use humans for their sake. There is nothing more *natural* in a human being eating a cow, than in a lion devouring a human being, or even in one human being eating another. None of these individuals was created for the sake of another.

For Spinoza, the most crucial error of teleological thinking seems to be the inversion of the infinite-finite relation. When people believe that God acts for the sake of man and in order

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to be praised by man, they make the infinite depend on the finite; furthermore, to the extent that God, allegedly, acts in order to attain something he lacks, teleological thinking makes the infinite God - imperfect:

This doctrine concerning the end turns nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect (E1App| II/80/10-14).

**IX. *The Problem of Evil.*** - Spinoza has a simple and clear-cut solution to the problem of evil that at first may appear similar to traditional theodicy, such as Leibniz's: the idea of evil is merely a result of the limitedness of human thinking. But when we ask Spinoza to elaborate, we will get a response radically different from any orthodox theodicy. According to Spinoza, when human beings say that a certain particular – whether it is an act, a person, or an event - is evil, what they actually do is to compare the particular at stake with a certain perfection it *could* have, and judge that it *could have been* better. To put the same idea in Spinoza's own words, evil “is only a privation of a more perfect state” (Letter 19| IV/91/3). In order to judge that the particular at stake could have been more perfect, we compare the particular to a universal under which it falls. Realizing that the universal is much better (“more perfect”), we judge that the particular is evil. However, Spinoza argues, the use of universals is a mark of the limitedness of human cognitive faculties. Universals belong to a certain cognitive compensation mechanism which allows to function properly in spite of the strict limitation of our perception and memory which cannot conceive a great number of particulars with all their characteristics. Thus, for example, when we see seven flying monsters, we form the concept of a “flying monster” in order to avoid the difficult task of conceiving these seven particulars with all their detailed characteristics.<sup>29</sup> When *God* thinks of particulars he does not conceive them through these abstract universals, but rather knows them directly in their particularity (Letter 19| IV/92/1; Cf. E4Pref| II/207/19). Knowing that the particular at stake could not act otherwise, God does not judge it to be lacking

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<sup>29</sup> For Spinoza's account of universals, see E2p40s1.

anything that would naturally belong to it. Thus, Spinoza argues that privation and evil “can be said only in relation to our intellect, not in relation to god’s” (Letter 19 | IV/92/20). From God’s perspective, says Spinoza, appetite to the good belongs to the nature of a ‘wicked’ person no more than it belongs to the nature of a stone (Let. 21 | IV/129/1). In other words, for Spinoza, ‘evil’ could be attributed to Hitler no more than it could be attributed to any rock.

Had Spinoza witnessed the great earthquake in Lisbon, his response would have been straight and simple: there was *nothing* evil in that event. The land of the city was just exhibiting its particular nature, and it was *as perfect as it could be*. To say that the mass death that resulted from that event was evil is to make the erroneous comparison between a particular (‘the land of Lisbon’, or a certain person who perished in that event) and a universal (‘land’, or ‘humanity’, respectively), and falsely conclude that the particular lacks a perfection which naturally belongs to it.

**X. Spinoza’s Amoralism.** - Given the title of Spinoza’s main work, and the fact that a considerable parts of the book deals with the improvement of human conduct, one may be surprised to find Spinoza described as an ‘amoralist’. Nevertheless, this title is recurrently ascribed to Spinoza, and I believe, rightly so.<sup>30</sup> For Spinoza’s “moral theory” is essentially nothing but a *theory of prudence*. It begins with a clear, egoistic, foundation, and proceeds to show that a prudent egoist would in many respects behave in a way that would be *judged* as righteous by common morality, and that he would adopt characteristics that fit the common understanding of virtue.<sup>31</sup>

As I have already mentioned, in the appendix to part one of the *Ethics* Spinoza includes *good* and *evil* in the list of prejudices which result from the belief that man is the end of nature

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<sup>30</sup> Spinoza himself clearly expected the charge of amoralism to be brought against him. See E4p18s (II/223/21-4): “I have done this to win, if possible, the attention of those who believe that this principle--that everyone is bound to seek his own advantage--is the foundation, not of virtue and morality, but of immorality”.

<sup>31</sup> For a helpful discussion of Spinoza’s egoism, see Michael Della Rocca, “Egoism and the Imitation of the Affects in Spinoza” in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (eds.), *Spinoza on Reason and the “Free Man”*, 123-47.

(E1App | II/78/10 and II/81/30). Following the list, Spinoza provides a short elucidation of the common understanding of good and evil:

What conduces to health and the worship of God, they have called *good*; but what is contrary to these, *evil* (II/81/35).

Spinoza's own definition of good and evil - though it excludes the relevancy of the worship of God - does not radically differ from the above, common, understanding of these two notions:

By Good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us [*Per bonum id intelligam, quod certo scimus nobis esse utile*].

By Evil, however, I shall understand what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good [*Per malum autem id, quod certo scimus impedire, quominus boni alicuius simus compotes*] (E4d1 & 2).<sup>32</sup>

Along the same line that takes 'good' and 'evil' (as commonly understood) to be human prejudices, Spinoza includes 'just' in the list of anthropomorphic predicates which we erroneously ascribe to God.<sup>33</sup>

The most fundamental doctrine of Spinoza's "moral theory" appears already in the third part of the *Ethics*. This is the famous doctrine of the *conatus*:

The striving [*conatus*] by which each thing strives to preserve in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing (E3p7).

In the fourth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza relies on the doctrine of the *conatus* in order to claim that since the *conatus* is the essence of man, human *virtue* is nothing but human *power* (E4d8 and E4p20d). Thus, the more a person strives to persevere in his being - and does so *prudently* - the more he is virtuous. The more an act strengthens a person's power to preserve himself, the better this act is. In the TIP, Spinoza embarks on a very similar line in claiming that an individual's right - no matter whether this individual is a human being, an animal, or a state - extends as far his power does.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See E2p29s for equally self-centered definitions of 'praise' and 'blame': "*The Joy with which we imagine the action of another by which he has striven to please us I call Praise. On the other hand, the Sadness with which we are averse to his action I call Blame*".

<sup>33</sup> *Theological Political Treatise*, Chapter 4, p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> See *Theological Political Treatise*, Preface and Chapter 16.

It is important to note that Spinoza does not limit the identification of right and power only to the state of nature. Even in the political state, the supreme right of the sovereign is nothing but a reflection of its supreme power.

With regard to political theory, the difference between Hobbes and myself, which is the subject of your inquiry, consists in this, that I always preserve the natural right in its entirety, and I hold that the sovereign power in a State *has right over a subject only in proportion to the excess of its power over that of a subject*.<sup>35</sup>

When Spinoza advises the sovereign to promote the wellbeing of all his subjects,<sup>36</sup> he is merely providing a council of *prudence*. A state that promotes the wellbeing of all subjects - thinks Spinoza - is more stable, and less likely to go through internal turmoil. Therefore, a prudent sovereign will seek to promote the general good - or at least, will make the impression that he does so - *for his own sake*.<sup>37</sup>

Admittedly, from this very egoistic foundation of his practical philosophy, Spinoza derives much advice that we would willingly embrace. He suggests that we should treat other human beings - or at least the wisest among them - in a just and honorable way, since in nature there is nothing more *useful* to us than the friendship of others - wise - people (E4p18s). However, think about the following situation. Suppose the commander of an extermination camp was a strict Spinozist. Was he doing anything wrong according to Spinoza? - It was within his *power* to kill 10,000 people a day, and therefore, this act would seem perfectly within his *right*. Of course, one may say that killing 10,000 people is not very prudent: one risks the revenge of the families and friends of those executed, and it is also imprudent because this commander could *use* these thousands of people (or the wisest among them) as friends. But, is this really what we mean when we say that it was wrong to be a commander of an extermination camp? -

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<sup>35</sup> Letter 50 | S 258 (Italics mine). Cf. *Theological Political Treatise*, Chapter 16, p. 177, and Chapter 20, p. 223.

<sup>36</sup> See *Theological Political Treatise*, Chapter 16, p. 178: "In their own interest and to retain their rule, it especially behooves [the governments] to look to the public good".

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Curley's reading of Spinoza as the "most Machiavellian of the great modern political philosophers" ("Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan", in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 315).

Do we merely mean that it was simply imprudent and not conducive to one's own advantage?

### **Third Part: Spinoza's Radical Naturalism.**

**XI. *No Dominion within Dominion.*** - In the course of modern philosophy, we find a central, humanistic, stream of thought which attempts to secure for humanity a distinguished place, elevated above nature. Spinoza, to my mind, is a foe, not a friend, of this tradition. In the preface to the third part of the *Ethics* Spinoza famously criticizes those who

conceived man in nature as a dominion within dominion [*imperium in imperio*]. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows [*sequi*], the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself (II/137/10-15).

Whether it is the capacity to act *freely, morally, rationally*, or have *self-consciousness*, Spinoza denies that any of these characteristics separate humanity from the rest of nature. Human bodies follow precisely the same laws that govern the body of the snail, and ideas of human bodies (i.e., human minds) are governed by precisely the same laws that govern the mind of the snail.

In the midst of his discussion of the human mind in the second part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza notes:

The things which we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other Individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate. For of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the idea of the human Body. And so, whatever we have said about the idea of the human Body, must also be said of the idea of any thing (E2p13s | II/96/26-32).

One bold implication of this passage is that snails - and, apparently, rocks as well - are self-conscious. Since for Spinoza self-consciousness is nothing but having a second-order idea of the body, Spinoza would *have to hold* that snails are self-conscious. In the passage above, he states explicitly that all things have minds (i.e., ideas of their bodies), and since the doctrine of parallelism - "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of thing" (E2p7) - commits him to the view that all ideas have their parallel second-order ideas, it

seems that all bodies - snails and rocks included - have their own second-order ideas, and are, thus, self-conscious.

A view which states that snails know God, and that the snail's mind is eternal may seem even more striking. However, when we look closely at Spinoza's proofs of the doctrines that the human mind has an adequate knowledge of God (E2p45-7), and of the eternity of the human mind (E5p22-23), we see that both proofs rely on very general considerations about the relation of individual minds to God. There seems to be *nothing* in these proofs which is peculiar to the human mind, and apparently nothing that would not allow a construction of similar proofs regarding the snail's mind. To view snails and rocks as having adequate knowledge of God as well as eternal minds is indeed quite daring, but it seems to be a clear result of Spinoza's strict naturalism, which denies *any* chasm between human and non-human individuals in nature.

Spinoza does recognize that different particulars have different natures, and though they all strive to persevere in their being, each particular does it in its own way:

Though each individual lives content with his own nature, by which he is constituted, and is glad of it, nevertheless that life with which each one is content, and that gladness, are nothing but the idea, or soul [*anima*], of that individual. And so the gladness of the one differs in nature from the gladness of the other as much as the essence of the one differs from the essence of the other (E3p57s).

Spinoza also acknowledges that there is a difference of *degree* between the intelligence of the snail and that of human beings (and between the intelligence of any two individuals, in general). He takes this difference to be the mental parallel to the physical difference between the complexity and capabilities of the snail's body and those of the human body:

[I]o determine what is the difference between the human mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, that is, of the human body... I say this in general, that in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. And from these we can know

the excellence of one mind over the other. (E2p13s | II/97/7)

Spinoza relies on the same, general, principle in order to explain the difference in mental capacities between children and adults (E5p39s | II/305/25). Thus, the difference between man and other animals is of the same kind (though, apparently, stronger) as the difference between two people, or *any* two individuals.<sup>38</sup>

**XII. Spinoza's Speciesism.** - Given Spinoza's denial that human beings are qualitatively elevated above the rest of nature, it is interesting to view Spinoza's strong objection to vegetarianism:

The law against killing animals is based more on empty superstitions and unmanly compassion [*muliebri misericordia*] than sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us the necessity of joining with men, but not with the lower animals [*brutis*], or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them as they have against us. Indeed, because the right of each other is defined by his virtue, or [*seu*] power, men have a greater right against the lower animals than they have against men. Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensation. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects (E4p37s1).

As one can easily see from this passage, Spinoza refuses to invoke any *metaphysical* difference that grants humanity a special value. His argument against vegetarianism is simple and straightforward. Assuming that

(1) Human beings are more powerful than other animals (premise)

and that

(2) Right is identical with power (premise),

we can conclude that

(3) Human beings have more right against other animals (from (1) and (2)).

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<sup>38</sup> That Spinoza considered animals to be - to some extent - rational can be also seen from his talk about "the animals which are *called* [*dicuntur*] irrational." (My emphasis. E3p57s | II/187/5).

Having more right against weaker beings “allows” us to use them for whatever purpose we prefer. Yet, since,

(4) The best way to use another being is to join it in friendship (premise),

we could have thought that

(5) It is best for us to use other animals (or any weak beings) as friends (from (3) and (4)).

Spinoza reminds us however that

(6) The natures of other animals is significantly different from ours (premise),

and therefore,

(7) We cannot communicate with animals (from (6)).

But since,

(8) Communication is a pre-condition for friendship (premise),

it is clear, that

(9) We cannot use animals as friends (from (6)-(8))

From (3), (4), and (9) we can finally conclude that

(10) Since we cannot use animals as our friends, we can – and may – use them in any other way.

It is not hard to detect here the principles of Spinoza’s egoistic “ethics” (seeking one’s own advantage) and politics (the identification of right with power). This time, however, they are applied to a group - human beings - rather than to a specific individual. To the extent that this group has any *power* over another group, it has the *right* to use members of the other group “at their pleasure.” Fortunately, Spinoza did not believe that there are species of human beings that are superior (even only in a degree) to other humans;<sup>39</sup> for otherwise, Spinoza should have been counted among the founder of modern racism. Yet, were I a young child, an autistic person, or even someone who refuses the friendship of B.d.S., I would think twice before becoming his neighbor.

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<sup>39</sup> See *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 3, p. 37.

## Epilogue

**XIII.** In the current paper I have not touched upon several important issues that are relevant to Spinoza's critique of humanism. Of such a kind are Spinoza's reason for supporting democracy, his rejection of the separation of state and religion, and the extent to which Spinoza's metaphysics allows him to talk seriously about a unified human nature (i.e., a nature or essence that is shared by all human beings). Also, I have mostly avoided evaluating Spinoza's claims. My aim here was to shatter a popular myth that celebrates Spinoza as a hero of modern humanism and liberalism. The Spinoza I see is far more complicated and dark. I do find his criticism of humanistic hubris extremely important and powerful, and there are at least *parts* of this criticism that I would like to accept. But there are also the other sides (primarily those dealing with morality) which I find quite uncanny. Whether Spinoza's criticism of the human hubris can be separated from his view of morality is, I think, a crucial question.

The four aspects of Spinoza view of humanity discussed in this paper - man's marginality, the illusions resulting from anthropomorphic thinking, Spinoza's strict naturalism about human beings and his amorality - do not logically necessitate each other; one can consistently adopt each of these positions while rejecting the other two. Yet, they do, I believe, fit and support each other. When taken together they constitute a certain comprehensive view, which cannot be concluded from any of these doctrines alone. This comprehensive view neither ridicules nor eliminates (as Hegel tends to think <sup>40</sup>) man, but rather attempts to remind man of

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<sup>40</sup> "[In Spinoza] The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever; according to Spinoza what is, is God, and God alone. Therefore the allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God. They say: if God is the identity of mind and nature, then nature or the individual man is God. This is quite correct, but they forget that nature and the individual disappear in this same identity; *and they cannot forgive Spinoza for thus annihilating them.* Those who defame him in such a way as this are therefore not aiming at maintaining God, but at maintaining the finite and the worldly; *they do no fancy their own extinction...*" (Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, vol. 3, pp. 281-2.

his rather humble and limited place in nature. In a word, it cuts short any talk of *human dignity* (insofar as this dignity is not shared by snails and rocks as well). A nice way to illustrate this point is by contrasting Spinoza's view of humanity with the opening lines of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798):

The fact that the human being can have the "I" in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living being on earth. Because of this he is a *person* [*Person*], and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person – i.e., through rank and dignity [*Rang und Würde*] and entirely different being from *things* [*Sachen*], such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes.<sup>41</sup>

Hardly a single claim is true - Spinoza would respond. Man is endowed by no special unity of consciousness, no personality or rationality (which are not shared by other beings), and therefore, no preeminence or distinguishing dignity.

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Italics mine). Hegel is fully aware of Spinoza's critique of modern humanism and pays very close attention to most of the issues discussed in this paper. Hegel notes that in Spinoza's system there is "an utter blotting out of the principle of subjectivity, individuality, personality, the moment of self-consciousness in Being (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, 287).

<sup>41</sup> Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15 [Ak. 7:127]. For a recent endorsement of the view which grounds "the distinctive dignity of human beings" in human self-consciousness, see Manfred Frank, "Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism" in *The Modern Subject: Conception of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 80.

ADDITIONS:

- “The human intellect is deceived simply by its own nature, and feigns everything from the analogy of its own nature, not from the analogy of the universe” – Let. 2 (IV/8/33).
- Kant, Groundwork 4:434: Price vs. Dignity (for Spinoza – is there anything priceless? No.)
- Maimonides as possible source of many of these doctrines (though for Maimonides, a rational person is distinct from the animals).
- Can Spinoza speak about the nature of a certain ‘species’ such as human mind? - Wouldn’t it be a use of universals, rather than knowing things through their particularity?
- How does Sp.’s faint notion of metaphysical freedom fit his extensive talk about freedom of thought/expression? (See TTP Ch. 4 (S. 49-50))
- Criticize Curley, SM, 128: Only human beings have ideas of ideas.
- All things have conatus (E3p4-7), therefore, all things have affects.
- Three elements of Spinoza’s “moral theory”: a. Egoism, b. Virtue, c. Intellectual consequentialism (‘Do what results in extending your knowledge’. Cf. Maimonides and Maimon). I think a is more fundamental than b. What’s the role of c?
- Can E3p27c1 explain why we can communicate only with humans?
- E4p45d: To destroy another human being is evil (apparently because he could be better used).
- E5p36s: Intellectual love of God=God’s love of men (Why men?).
- The WHOLE book is called Ethica because for Spinoza the ultimate good is the knowledge of God. Thus, part 1 of the Ethics deals with the ultimate good.
- Wilson, “Objects, Ideas and Minds”, 104 n. 2: “Many things that have ‘minds’ in Spinoza’s system are not in any degree self-conscious”.
- Wilson, “Objects, Ideas and Minds”, 107: All bodies have minds.
- Wilson, “Objects, Ideas and Minds”, 109-110: “Will it [Spinoza’s theory of ‘minds’] not fail to make sense of the specific phenomena of human mentality by attempting to construe the human mind as just a circumscribed piece of God’s omniscience? [No. it is simply an human-centered

philosophy].

- Wilson, "Objects, Ideas and Minds", 116: Wilson argues against Curley's claim that only human minds have ideas of ideas.

- Wilson, "Objects, Ideas and Minds", 119: All minds have adequate ideas of the common notions and of God's essence. Wilson calls it an awkward result.

- We punish criminals just as we exterminate poisonous snakes [no responsibility]. - CM II, viii [I/265/23].

- Blij: if Spinoza is right, "men would become beasts" - Let. 20 (S 143)

- Blij: Spinoza makes men dependent on God just as elements and plants - Let. 20 (S144). Spinoza responds (Let. 23. S 167): the Angel and Mouth are equally dependent on God, yet they have different essence [namely, all things are equally dependent]

- Blij: In created nature, only humans have knowledge - Let. 20 (S 147).

- Blij : " According to Spinoza, "why not secretly kill the man who gets in my way"? (Let. 20 (S 144).

- Spinoza does not support harming people for one's own sake in usual circumstances. But, on certain circumstances (such as achieving knowledge through abuse/harm to people) he's likely to support it as it leads to the ultimate good.

- For Althusser on Marx's anti-humanism, see Badmington (ed.), *Posthumanism* (p. 32).

- Read again Harvey, Portrait of Spinoza.

- TTP, Ch. 6: - G82: Miracles and egocentrism: "we" are dearer to God. "Humanity is nature's most important part". (perhaps motto for section/paper).

#### Possible Additions:

- Re 'acosmism': For Spinoza, finite things have always a limited, self-centered, and therefore distorted, perception of the world. Finite things can only rarely have adequate self-knowledge and only when they relate themselves to the infinite (and realize their limitedness).

- In the Aristotelian world-view there was more continuity between humans and other living beings (various souls) than in Descartes. One can see Spinoza as returning to the Aristotelian view and making it even more continuous.
- Check Althusser: 'Sur Spinoza' in Essay in Self Critique (Seven Smith claims I'm "provocatively restating" his views. Am I?).
- Amoralism: Two separate issues: 1. egoism. 2. knowledge is the good.