

SPINOZA'S MISTAKE: THE DESIRE FOR ETERNAL JOY

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Abstract: In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza presents the knowledge of God as the Supreme Good, and this is because he sees this knowledge as the only possible source for a continuous and eternal joy. Spinoza will never change his mind about the intuition that only the knowledge of God can provide eternal joy, and he will remain faithful to this understanding of the Supreme Good and its supreme desirability. The following reflections are devoted to exploring in detail Spinoza's motivations in the *Treatise*. The purpose is to uncover the mistake that undermines Spinoza's overall solution to the problem he faces, and ultimately affects the main goal of his philosophical project. The mistake can be spelled out quite straightforwardly: no affect (including love and joy) can be eternal. The most interesting aspect of this mistake is not what it affirms, but the reasons behind it that pushed Spinoza to blindly embrace it for his whole life. Bringing into relief this mistake is not a way of dismissing Spinoza's philosophy. On the contrary, a great thinker is one who makes great mistakes, and from them much can be learned.

Keywords: desire, eternity, intellectual love of God, salvation, Spinoza

As long as sentient beings don't truly understand the world's gratification, danger, and escape for what they are, they haven't escaped from this world—with its gods, Māras, and Brahmās, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans—and they don't live detached, liberated, with a mind free of limits.

Anguttara Nikāya, 3.105

1. Rethinking the first step

Spinoza decided to devote himself to philosophy when he was in his twenties. A record of this conversion is preserved in the first paragraphs of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE), written arguably around 1658, but clearly presenting something that had happened years prior. Spinoza describes a deep existential crisis that concerned the whole way in which he was living (his *intitutum vitae*) and how he attempted, and eventually managed, to radically change it. Spinoza stresses that this change was profound and very difficult to accomplish. It somehow left a permanent stamp on his subsequent philosophical career. It was the turning point that convinced him to devote the rest of his life to the cultivation of knowledge. He will never turn back from the path he undertook then.

In the *Treatise*, Spinoza presents the knowledge of God (somehow differently phrased) as the Supreme Good. This is because he sees this knowledge as the only possible source for a continuous and eternal joy. Despite the fact that Spinoza's later thought will undergo several changes, including about how to best seek and achieve the knowledge of God, Spinoza will never reconsider the intuition that only the knowledge of God can provide eternal joy, and he will remain faithful to this understanding of the Supreme Good and its supreme desirability.¹ However, precisely this view that will never be questioned or doubted again is what hides the deepest problem of his whole philosophical and existential journey.

Spinoza seeks a source of eternal joy. Later in the *Ethics*, this quest will be phrased in terms of *intellectual love of God* (E5p33), which is eternal and provides ultimate beatitude and satisfaction. Commentators have been perplexed by this notion of intellectual love, often dismissing it as either something quasi-mystical or utterly unintelligible.² Given

¹ See details on the evolution of Spinoza's moral thought in Andrea SANGIACOMO, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

² Jonathan BENNET, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1984, pp. 369-375 is extremely negative about Spinoza's account of intellectual love of God. After having dismissed the whole of Spinoza's argumentation on this point, he concludes that 'it looks as though some passive affect—of fear or hope or excitement—clung stubbornly to the man and overcame his reason' (*Ivi*, p. 375). Bennett's negative attitude is not helpful in understanding the problem entailed by Spinoza's position, but the problem is real and, indeed, it is rooted in a passive affect (although it is none of those mentioned by Bennet). Toni Negri, in his famous *L'anomalia selvaggia* (published in 1981, now in Toni NEGRI, *Spinoza, Derive e Approdi*, Roma 1998), stresses the 'ascetic tension' in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, opposed to a contrary 'materialist' tension (*Ivi*, pp. 218-230). By trying to show how the ascetic tension does not ultimately escape the materialist framework that (according to Negri) Spinoza has

the more technical treatment that the intellectual love of God receives in the *Ethics*, one could think that any issues that come with this notion might remain confined within a corner of Spinoza's system. After all, some readers might just be uneasy with Spinoza's conclusions in the fifth part of the *Ethics* about eternity, and be even relieved by thinking that such speculations are not the most important part of his philosophical contribution, which would rather be his monism, or (as stressed many times recently) his theory of the affects. The third and fourth parts of the *Ethics*, with their emphasis on striving and desire, on the workings of the passions, and the complex interplay of intersubjective emotional networks, might be seen as the liveliest and most relevant contribution that justifies taking the *Ethics* seriously, despite the clouds that surround the rather exotic *amor dei intellectulius*. Unfortunately, the puzzlement raised by the intellectual love of God is but the symptom of a more fundamental issue, which first emerged in the opening paragraphs of Spinoza's earliest work. This issue is inseparable from the problem of desire and striving, and the pitfalls they entail. While the intellectual love of God might not ultimately work as a solution, appreciating the problem that it addresses reveals why one cannot be content with the realm of desire, or (at least) why Spinoza himself was not content with that. Exactly because the *Treatise* offers a less elaborated philosophical context to outline what that intellectual love (not yet even called in this way) might be, it reveals the underlying motivations that originally led Spinoza to seek it, and embark in his life-long project of devoting himself to cultivate that love as the Supreme Good. These motivations are intimately bounded with the shortcomings of desire and the dangers it entails.

constructed, Negri fails to understand the actual problem that both tensions underpin and share (which is *The* problem that Spinoza is struggling to solve, unsuccessfully). Ferdinand ALQUIÉ, *Le rationalisme de Spinoza*, Puf, Paris 1981, tackles the problem entailed by the intellectual love of God from a different perspective, aiming at showing Spinoza's failure in reconciling a number of dualistic tensions (finite and infinite, God and creatures, love and knowledge), which (in Alquié's reading) is the landmark of Spinoza's whole philosophical struggle. For a more positive treatment of Spinoza's account of intellectual love in the *Ethics*, see Remo BODEI, *Geometria delle passioni. Paura, speranza, felicità: filosofia e uso politico*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1991, pp. 337-363. Bodei nicely reconstructs how Spinoza's discussion fits within the broader early modern context and tries to show the wider ramifications that link Spinoza's account of intellectual love to the other themes of his philosophy. These aspects notwithstanding, Bodei does not seem to discern the actual problem that lurks in Spinoza's discussion. Bernard ROUSSET, *La perspective finale de l'Éthique et le problème de la cohérence du Spinozisme. L'autonomie comme salut*, Vrin, Paris 2005, pp. 131-157 attempts a more systematic reconstruction and justification of the theory of intellectual love, by interpreting it as 'the pure and simple conscious enjoyment [jouissance consciente] of oneself, in one's own activity, in virtue of one's own essence, and independently of any another reality' (*Ivi*, p. 144, translating from the original French).

The following reflections are devoted to exploring in detail the first steps of Spinoza's existential turn and its motivations in the *Treatise*. The purpose is to uncover the mistake that undermines Spinoza's overall solution to the problem he faced, and ultimately affects the main goal of his philosophical project (and indirectly any similar attempt). The term 'mistake' is used to signal something that is not consistent within the rules and commitments of a given system. Spinoza's mistake is not just embracing a position that someone else, starting from different assumptions, would find problematic. It is a mistake because it goes against Spinoza's *own* beliefs, and yet he does not see it (he could not), in the same way in which one might not see a grammar mistake while writing one's own thoughts down. The mistake can be spelled out quite straightforwardly: no affect (including love and joy) can be eternal. However, the most interesting aspect of this mistake is not what it affirms but the reasons behind it that pushed Spinoza to blindly embrace it for his whole life. Bringing into relief this mistake is not a way of dismissing Spinoza's philosophy. On the contrary, a great thinker is one who makes great mistakes, and from them much can be learned.

2. Danger and escape

Spinoza presents his existential struggle at the start of the TIE. The text is dense and needs some careful unpacking in order to appreciate all its facets:³

[A] After experience taught me that all things [*omnia*] that frequently happen in common life are vain and futile [*vana et futilia*],

[B] seeing that all things I was afraid of were neither good nor bad in themselves [*nihil neque boni, neque mali in se habere*] except insofar as they affected the mind [*animus movebatur*],

[C] I eventually decided to investigate whether there could be something that was a genuine good [*verum bonum*], accessible by itself [*sui communicabile*], and that (having abandoned all the other goods) could alone affect the mind; even better, if there was something that, once found and acquired, could provide a constant and supreme joy for all eternity [*continua, ac summa in aeternum fruere laetitia*]. (TEI, §1)

The first consideration [A] presents the main problem: all things (*omnia*) are vain and futile (*vana et futilia*). Spinoza does not derive this claim from reasoning, but from

³ All the following English translations are mine, letters in brackets are added to facilitate discussion. Original texts are those provided in Baruch SPINOZA, *Opera*, im auftrag der Heidelberger akademie der wissenschaften herausgegeben, C. Gebhardt, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1925.

common experience.⁴ In order to understand this problem, one should first grasp *why* it would be possible to say that all things are vain and futile. Is this what one learns from one's own experience? Arguably, many readers would already find some resistance against this claim, especially given the universality with which it is stated. Spinoza himself struggled with it, as it will become clearer later. For now, the only hint towards better understanding the reasons for this judgment is provided by the alternative that Spinoza is seeking, namely, [C] some good that is able to provide 'a constant and supreme joy for all eternity'. By contrast, then, one can infer that Spinoza's experience of all things at this point is based on the fact that they are *not* constant, they do not provide supreme joy, namely, eternal joy. In fact, *because* things are not permanent or constant in nature, any joy derived from them is doomed to change. Moving from experiencing some form of joy to losing it cannot be felt as a joyful change in itself. In this sense, all worldly joy is indeed quite sad and doomed to revert into sadness. To support this point, Spinoza remarks [B] that things are good or bad not in themselves but depending on how they 'move the mind' (*animus movebatur*). Affects (including happiness) are dynamic processes and they arise out of how the mind reacts to objects and events. Since objects and events experienced in common daily life are impermanent and changing, it is unsurprising that the resulting affects will be equally impermanent and changing.

Spinoza's problem is his growing weariness for all these changing things, which might provide some fleeting joy, but because of their impermanent nature will inevitably also lead to dissatisfaction. Since this mutability is not something one can avoid or prevent, as taught by experience, and the joy they might bring is poisoned by the unavoidable sadness of separation and uncertainty, all things are vain and futile. Hence, Spinoza's quest for something that could provide eternal joy instead.

At this point one might raise the common objection '*enjoy the moment!*' This objection, however, is no objection at all, and is fully inscribed within the existential scenario that Spinoza describes. Why should one hurry to 'enjoy the moment' if not because one is aware, on some deeper level, that things are going to change fast, beyond one's control, and that change is not going to be experienced as a source of happiness? If this inconstant and changing nature of things would in itself be a source of joy, then one would not need to 'enjoy the moment' (i.e. enjoy what is nice *when* it is nice, before it

⁴ On the notion of experience in Spinoza's thought and for a detailed analysis of the prologue of the TIE, see Pierre-François MOREAU, *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*, Puf, Paris 1994. Moreau nicely stresses (*Ivi*, pp. 56-63) the way in which Spinoza's reference to experience (and the whole construction of the prologue) is a way of creating a common ground between his voice and the reader, by omitting personal details that cannot be shared and focusing instead on what everybody can experience.

goes away), since the whole process of becoming would be in itself the actual source of joy. However, this process of becoming necessarily entails also the becoming of one's affects of joy and happiness, and the becoming-other of joy is its turning into sadness (at least for the fact that the past joy is no longer present). Spinoza draws attention to this broader unsatisfactoriness of experience, despite its including some fleeting joy or happiness. What is unsatisfactory in these worldly affects is precisely their being only fleeting, hence, *vana et futilia*.

In the next paragraph, Spinoza explains that despite seeing this problem, he seriously struggled before resolving to actually do something about it. He did see that taking this challenge seriously (abandoning the fleeting joy of common life, searching for an eternal source of joy) would have required him to completely reshape his whole life, including his values. Spinoza acknowledges:

I was pondering [*olvebam animo*] whether it would have been possible to find a new way of living [*institutum*], or at least reach some certainty about it, without having to change the order and rule of my common way of life [*ordo et commune vitae meae institutum*]; but I often attempted that in vain [*frustra*]. (TIE §3)

It is at this point that Spinoza gets into the details of why the common way of life (*institutum vitae*) is structurally unable to provide lasting satisfaction. Spinoza reflects on a trope that is common from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, about the three kinds of goods that are mostly sought by common people: sensual pleasures (*libidinem*), honours (*honores*) and wealth (*divitias*).⁵ This discussion makes more explicit that the main problem with the common way of life (and its attachment to these three kinds of goods) is precisely its reliance on something that is essentially impermanent and inconstant.

Regarding sensual pleasures,⁶ for instance, Spinoza remarks:

They captivate the mind so much that it seems that it is enjoying something really good [*adeo suspenditur animus, ac si in aliquo bono quiesceret*], and this completely prevents the mind from thinking about anything else [*quo maxime impeditur, ne de alio cogitet*]. But after having enjoyed these pleasures, a profound sadness [*summa tristitia*] follows, which (if it does not captivate [*suspendit*] the mind) afflicts the mind and makes it dull [*perturbat et hebetat*]. (TIE §4)

⁵ Concerning the connection between Spinoza and Aristotle's discussions, see Frédéric MANZINI, *Spinoza: un lecture d'Aristote*, Puf, Paris 2009, pp. 55-83.

⁶ The reflection upon honours and wealth is similar, although in this case Spinoza reflects more on the social and relational components of these goods, and how pursuing them might lead people to put their life in danger.

The realm of sensuality is dominated by the tendency to become absorbed in sensual contents. Absorption makes the mind completely immersed in the object of enjoyment and captivated by it (*suspendo* literally means ‘to hang up’, hence, to remain fully hooked to the sense object), *as if* it were enjoying a genuine good. However, since the sense objects are doomed to change, also the enjoyment they provide is going to fade away. Spinoza then remarks that after the moment of enjoyment, a great sadness follows. This is not necessarily a moral sense of shame or guilt (although that might also occur), but it is simply the result of the cessation of the previous enjoyment. No cessation of a happy state can be experienced as happiness in itself. Hence, this sadness does not depend on some implicit moral assumption about why sensual pleasures are bad, but by the ontological instability of sensual pleasures. As Spinoza remarks, this sadness is as strong as the previous enjoyment, and it equally absorbs the mind, or at least perturbs it. Spinoza brings to light a structural shortcoming of sensual pleasures in general, something that depends on their nature as such, and will be inevitably present in *any* form of sensual enjoyment (hence the generalization: *omnia vania et futilia*).

By reflecting in this way, Spinoza realizes that what he is facing is a profound existential alternative: *either* keep pursuing sensual pleasures, honours and wealth, *or* search for an eternal source of joy. This is an *aut-aut*:

I saw that all these things were obstacles to my search of a new way of living. Even more, they were so opposite [*opposita*] to it that it was necessary to abstain from one or the other. I then had to investigate what was most useful for me. Indeed, as I said, it looked as if I was leaving the certainty of a good for another good that was yet uncertain. But after having reflected [*incumbueram*] some time on this issue, I realized that if I gave up all these things in order to find out this new way of living, I would have given up a good that was uncertain for its own nature [*bonum sua natura incertum*] (as it can be gathered from what said) in order to attain a good that was not uncertain in itself (indeed, I was looking for a permanent good [*fixum bonum*]) but only with respect to achieving it. With a constant meditation [*assidua meditatione*] I concluded that, provided I could make a firm resolve, I would have abandoned things that were certainly bad for something that was certainly good [*mala certa pro bono certo ommitterem*]. (TIE §§6-7)

At this point, Spinoza keeps meditating assiduously on the dangers of the three commonly sought goods. This danger is their inherent uncertainty. They do seem ‘certainly good’ for one habituated to be fully absorbed in the common way of living, but they are not, as Spinoza’s reflection reveals. The struggle between abandoning these goods and gaining a yet unachieved eternal good is only a matter of ‘being able’ to achieve the eternal good or not. Considered in itself, however, the choice is between something that is *certainly bad* and something that is instead inherently good.

In this way, the focus shifts on whether Spinoza himself would actually be able to achieve that eternal good, once he resolves to pursue it. The text takes a dramatic tone:

I saw, indeed, that I was in an extreme danger, and I was forced to find a remedy [*remedium*], albeit uncertain, with all my strength [*summ̄is viribus*], like someone afflicted by a mortal illness [*letali morbo*] who, foreseeing the certainty of death if no remedy is found, strives with all his strength to find a remedy, even uncertain, because in that all his hopes rest. But all those goods that common people seek, not only do not offer any remedy to preserve our being [*esse conservandum*], but they are often an obstacle, and they are frequently the cause of the ruin of those who possess them, and always the cause of the ruin of those who are possessed by them. (TIE §7)

The trajectory of Spinoza's meditation so far can be summarized in the threefold progression of 'gratification', 'danger', and 'escape'. The reflection starts with acknowledging that yes, there is some gratification in the goods commonly sought. However, they are somehow poisoned in themselves: the danger they entail is their own changeable and uncertain nature, which implies that any joy gained in dependence on them will inevitably turn into sadness. On this basis, Spinoza seeks the escape from this existential conundrum, which he finds in seeking an eternal object that might be the basis for eternal joy. It is only when the understanding of the danger somehow outweighs the appealing of the gratification that Spinoza firmly resolves to put all his energies in seeking the escape. This is when he is finally able to leave behind his previous life and convert to philosophy. This conversion has nothing mystical or religious, but it is simply the firm resolution to gain access and cultivate the knowledge of that object that might provide an eternal joy. As the rest of Spinoza's *Treatise* shows, it is only via *knowing* this eternal object ('the union of the mind with the whole of nature', TIE §13) that one can enjoy it. Hence, the foremost task for Spinoza is to purify the intellect and gain adequate knowledge (TIE §16).

Before moving on, Spinoza makes one final remark, which is also the most important one. Speaking of the dangers connected with pleasures, honours, and wealth, he writes:

[A'] I realized that all these evils [*mala*] originate from the fact that all happiness [*felicitas*] or unhappiness consists only in the quality of the object [*qualitate objecti*] with which we are bound by love [*adhaeremus amore*].

[B'] Indeed, no fights [*lites*] will arise from something that is not loved, there will be no sadness [*tristitia*] if one loses it, no envy [*invidia*] if someone else possess it, no fear [*timor*], no hatred [*odium*], etc., in one word: no perturbations of the mind [*commotiones animi*]. All of these certainly happen in connection with those things that can perish, such as those we discussed.

[C'] But love for an eternal and infinite thing [*amor erga rem aeternam, et infinitam*] satisfies the mind with pure joy [*sola laetitia pascit animum*], and it is devoid of all sadness [*tristitiae est*

expers]. And this is surely desirable and to be sought with all of one's strengths [*valde est desiderandum, totiusque viribus quaerendum*]. (TIE §§9-10)

Spinoza somehow rephrases his opening reflection. He starts again [A'] by stressing the downside of commonly sought goods, now phrased in terms of 'evils', and he connects them with the objects themselves that are the focus of common people's quest (sensual pleasures, honours, and wealth). This quest is now spelled out more explicitly in terms of 'love' (*amor*) for these objects.

Spinoza then [B'] reflects that the negative emotions that constitute the danger of these objects all depend on the fact that someone *loves* those objects. Without being bound by love, one would not be affected by what happens to these objects. In other words, objects are changeable and uncertain, but one can be dragged by them and become involved with them (thus experiencing all sorts of negative emotions on account of their uncertainty) only because (and insofar as) one is emotionally bound to them (because one 'loves' them, in the broader sense of the term 'love'). The way in which Spinoza phrases this point is interesting because it does not only restate the general principle (mentioned at the beginning, TIE §1 [B]) according to which things can be good or evil only insofar as they affect the mind (i.e. insofar as there is some emotional tie with them), but he also acknowledges that *without* experiencing any form of emotional involvement, one would be unable to experience any unwelcomed affect (no 'danger' could be experienced).⁷

⁷ There seems to be a conceptual tension in Spinoza's discussion between (i) his claim that good and evil are not intrinsic properties, but they only depend on the way in which objects affect the mind; and (ii) his claim that all evil depends on the quality of the objects with which one is bound by love. The tension can be reconciled by keeping firm the first point (i), and interpreting the second (ii) as the fact that objects that are *impermanent* cannot possibly satisfy one's love because they are ontologically doomed to become otherwise and hence to alter the same love one nourished for them. In this sense the 'quality of the object' that Spinoza considers is not any particular quality that defines a certain object as such and such, but rather the more general feature (common property) that all objects subject to becoming equally share, namely, their being impermanent. In turn, this impermanence is not experienced as evil in itself, but only insofar as objects are experienced as objects of love. In this sense, the 'evil' discussed by Spinoza is already encountered within the emotional horizon of one's affects. For a fuller discussion of Spinoza's account of good and evil and how Hobbes might have influenced its evolution, see Emanuela SCRIBANO, *Spinoza e la conoscenza del bene e del male*, in Camilla HERMANIN and Luisa SIMONUTTI (eds.), *La centralità del dubbio. Un progetto di A. Rotondò*, Olschki, Florence 2011, pp. 571–598; ID., *La connaissance du bien et du mal. Du Court Traité à l'Éthique*, in Chantal JAQUET and Pierre-François MOREAU (eds.), *Spinoza Transalpin. Les interprétations actuelles en Italie*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 2012, pp. 59–78.

Spinoza concludes [C'] that the escape must then consist in cultivating love for something that is eternal and infinite (*rem aeternam, et infinitam*) because this sort of object will avoid the problem of changeability and uncertainty, and thus provide that 'eternal and continual joy' mentioned since the opening of the *Treatise*.⁸ The phrasing makes it clearer that the *object* itself must be eternal and infinite in order to be a suitable basis for an eternal and continuous joy (this point was implied but not explicitly stated at the beginning). Knowing something about Spinoza's later thought, it is quite clear that he is thinking about *God* (or nature). More importantly, however, Spinoza stresses that this object of love is something worth striving for and pursuing since it is something that can genuinely satisfy one's desire for joy.

3. The impossibility of an eternal affect

Spinoza acknowledges that the pursuit of changeable things is dangerous and leads to unhappiness because being bound with something uncertain is necessarily experienced as a source of suffering and sadness. While it takes some effort and assiduous meditation to realize the truth of this point, Spinoza sees that the solution to this condition consists in finding a different *object* to be bound to, an object that being eternal and infinite in itself can support an equally eternal and infinite joy. This object (or the perspective of this eternal joy) is the Supreme Good, the best one might possibly desire.

That is Spinoza's mistake. Spinoza does not see that *no affect can be eternal, nor arise conditioned by an eternal cause*. Spinoza himself has already remarked that affects (including joy) are dynamic processes (they 'move' the mind). It does not take the *Ethics* to see this point (although the whole of the third part of the *Ethics* is built on it). No affect by itself is a static condition, eternally given, or even unchanging while experienced. Affects are like sound waves: they originate, grow, and cease. Experiencing any affect *is* experiencing this sort of change or becoming. Searching then for an 'eternal' joy is searching for an affect that is not an affect. In all rigor (and Spinoza is up to it), 'eternity' here does not mean 'indefinite temporal duration', but rather being *beyond* the sphere of time (hints at this in TIE §102). In the sphere of eternity (whatever that might be),

⁸ A further advantage of the love for God is that it solves the problem of other forms of love directed at perishable and scarce goods that cannot be shared. An infinite object would allow an inexhaustible form of possession and avoid competition. This sort of reasoning is fully encompassed within the main line of thought presented so far (an eternal love is the best way of satisfying desire without having to escape from the domain of desire as such) and has been more fully explored by Hasana SHARP, *Love and Possession: Towards a Political Economy of Ethics* 5, "NASS Monograph", 14, 2009, pp. 1-19.

there cannot be any change or process taking place, hence affects cannot be experienced. Spinoza himself will be the first to exploit this point to challenge the anthropomorphic image of an eternal God who is subject to affects of anger or love. And yet, Spinoza holds on to the idea that *he* could experience an eternal joy if (insofar as) his mind realizes its ‘being united with the origin of the whole of Nature’ (TIE §13).

Before moving any further, it might be helpful to dispel worries that might arise by considering the later developments of Spinoza’s thought. Does not Spinoza claim in the *Ethics* (e.g. E5p37s) that the *intellectual love of God* is the supreme form of beatitude, happiness and freedom? Yes, he does of course. Spinoza also acknowledges (same E5p37s) the difficulty to some extent since he signals that speaking of ‘joy’ (and love is a kind of joy) in this case becomes improper. The key remark, however, is the following: ‘if joy [*laetitia*] consists in a transition towards a greater degree of perfection, beatitude [*beatitudo*] must surely consist in the fact that the mind is endowed with that perfection itself’ (E5p33s). Spinoza then admits that the intellectual love of God is better understood as a form of beatitude in which there is *no* transition towards higher degrees of perfection, but it is the actual enjoyment of a given (maximum) degree of perfection that the mind can achieve. Hence, this beatitude, properly speaking, is *not* an affect. However, earlier on in the *Ethics*, Spinoza did have a good reason to think that affects essentially *are* transitions between different degrees of power. In general, affects are caused by the way in which the body (and the mind) are affected by other modes, namely, they are caused by *change* (affectations are changes). This change can be for the better or for the worse, and this gives rise to the whole variety of emotional life. Granted. The point is that a static degree of perfection does *not* entail any change (it does not arise from any *affection* of the mind or of the body since the mind is already within God and God cannot affect the mind as an external mode would do). Beatitude cannot be an affect because it is not an affection of the mind. Even more importantly, the mind could not even *know* this beatitude since Spinoza himself demonstrates that the mind can know itself or other things only by knowing how its body (or the mind itself) is affected: ‘the mind knows itself only insofar as it perceives the affectations [*affectionum*] of the body’ (E2p23). This theorem explains the importance that the affects assume in Spinoza’s discussion since it is only via affects (affectations) that the mind can know itself. The problem with beatitude is that it cannot be an affection, hence (on Spinoza’s own terms), the mind cannot really know it.⁹

⁹ Jimena SOLÉ, *Being a Spinozist Today. Some Considerations on Eternity, Happiness, and Philosophy*, in this section of “InCircolo” (pp. 418-428) rightly argues that, according to Spinoza, ‘eternity’ means

Surely, the mind can *strive* to know things based on the third kind of knowledge (E5p25), and in virtue of that it can achieve the supreme degree of perfection that the mind can reach (E5p27). In this case, the mind *does* experience a supreme form of happiness because the more it knows through the third kind of knowledge, the more its perfection increases. Here, there is change in the mind and the process of knowing does happen in the realm of duration, while the mind is enduring and changing. The joy associated with the third kind of knowledge, thus, is a genuine affect since it entails a genuine transition between a lower and a higher degree of power (E5p27dem). Spinoza moves from this remark to link the third kind of knowledge with the intellectual love of God. The connection is provided by the fact that the third kind of knowledge is based on an adequate idea of God itself from which the essences of singular things are derived (E2p40s2). Insofar as the mind is enduring in its striving to know things according to the third kind of knowledge, the intellectual love of God surely follows (because the joy associated with the third kind of knowledge has God as its condition, since that knowledge requires God at its foundation). However (and that is the problem), Spinoza's own theory does not allow for the transformation of this love into an eternal affect, namely, something that can exist, be known, and experienced outside of duration and becoming. From the point of view of eternity, there can be no *striving* and without striving there cannot be any affect, joy and love included. Spinoza makes an unwarranted jump from the fact that one can experience an affect of joy associated

necessity, and in this respect dynamic processes might be eternal, insofar as they are necessary. Although this is correct, it is not sufficient to solve the problem at stake here. On the one hand, the fact that a process is 'eternal' in the sense of being necessary means that it is necessarily the case (given the nature of God or substance) that at a certain point of the infinite network of finite modes (E1p28) a certain connection of modes will take place in a certain way. This means that it is necessary (it is an eternal truth) that at this point of the network of causes, this particular event takes place in this particular way. From this perspective of eternity-as-necessity, the event remains conceived as a process (albeit a process that occurs necessarily). If the event remains a changing process, then any affect associated with it will also remain a changing process. Hence, this view cannot grant access to some unchangeable affect. Spinoza's quest is precisely about this sort of unchangeability, which is seen as a remedy against the impermanence of all other worldly events and affects. On the other hand, thus, Spinoza acknowledges that the intellectual love of God is a form of beatitude that represents the pick of perfection that the human mind can ever reach (E5p33s). Spinoza is the first to stress that the desirability of this affect is connected with his unchangeability, its not being a process anymore. Although his account of eternity does make room for the possibility, in general, of conceiving processes as eternal (in the sense of being necessary), this does not entail that he aims at ruling out unchangeability from eternity. This unchangeability is the most valuable aspect of the intellectual love of God, although unfortunately it shows that this intellectual love cannot be really a love, in the sense of an affect (precisely because it is conceived as unchangeable).

with an eternal object (intellectual love of God generated by knowing things through the third kind of knowledge) to the conclusion that since the object of love is eternal, *love itself* can be eternal as well. Unfortunately, if this intellectual love and the joy it provides cannot be eternal, then it is changeable and uncertain as all other affects; hence, it is included among all those things that are *vana et futilia*. The solution is no solution at all.

Spinoza *wants* the intellectual love of God to be eternal. This conclusion might indeed sound very desirable, but it cannot be philosophically true, especially in Spinoza's own system. Rather, it appears to be an inadequate idea based on that same desire of eternal enjoyment (which is a *passion*). Spinoza's later thought surely provides further developments that are missing in his early *Treatise*. However, in the *Ethics*, he sticks to the same general point, namely, to the same mistake: there can be an eternal affect of joy. This is a mistake not just from some alien perspective external to Spinoza's system, but (quite ironically) it appears as a mistake first of all within Spinoza's own system.¹⁰

The fact that Spinoza makes this mistake is not an accident or a careless leap. Spinoza himself declares the reason for it in the *Treatise*: his whole quest has been driven by *desire*, which strives for eternal joy, and it is ready to give up unsatisfactory worldly goods in order to obtain that Supreme Good (TIE §9). Worldly goods have some gratification, but they cannot fully satisfy one's desire, as soon as one ponders sufficiently about what even common experience teaches regarding the danger that inherently poisons them all. And yet, Spinoza does not give up the *desire* itself for an enduring and eternal joy (which is what worldly things cannot provide), but rather tries to seek a different object, an eternal one. If the problem is with change, let us change the object, let us find something that does not change. Unfortunately, if one would

¹⁰ In the *Treatise*, Spinoza does not draw refined conceptual distinctions between joy, love and desire. Hence, one might wonder whether the problem does not concern only *some* of these affects. However, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza will show that these affective components are all intimately connected: because of one's conatus (E3p7), one desires (E3p9s) to increase one's power of acting. This increase is experienced as a joy (E3p11s), and when it is associated with an external object as its cause, this joy becomes love (E3p13s). Since desire and conatus are actually the same ontological force, joy and love are just expressions of that force when it is affected in such a way so as to undergo an increase of its power of affirming itself. In this respect, being determined by one's love or by one's desire for joy is the same. Without desire (*conatus*) there could be no love because there would be no power that could be increased by an external object.

really reach the domain of the eternal, then desire itself would cease, and all affects with it, joy included. Even if one could realize eternity, one could not *enjoy* it.¹¹

Spinoza's attitude consists in looking in front of him, at objects. These are changeable and dangerous, but that other one (God) is eternal and infinite. Hence, it will deliver what these changeable objects cannot deliver. Spinoza's attitude reveals that despite all his struggle, he never came to question the underpinning assumption of all of this quest: desire itself. The fact that there is this desire for enjoyment is barely acknowledged, and never properly investigated. However, it is only by assuming the point of view of desire that the whole quest discussed so far can make any sense. If one looks deeper into this assumption, one can see that (as any assumption) it considers something as obvious that is far from obvious. Why should I enjoy anything? And why is enjoyment as such *good*? Sure, enjoyment *feels* good (that is what enjoyment is, it is its gratification), but *why* is this feeling something to be taken as the ultimate criterion to decide about one's life and existence? These questions are all the more pressing since Spinoza knows already that desire is *not* a reliable guide. In the case of sensual pleasures, he already detected the content-absorption syndrome that they foster, and how they profoundly disturb the clarity of the mind. Changing the object of desire (from sensual to intellectual) does not change the *nature* of desire itself, which still works in the same way, although perhaps at a subtler and more refined level.

Spinoza will never question the fact that desire does provide a valid standpoint to approach one's life and existence. This faith in desire is confirmed throughout all his works, and it triumphs in the *Ethics*, in which it is presented as the essence of human

¹¹ Notice that the idea of 'enjoying desire as such' (experiencing a form of desire that is pleasant *qua* desire and does not require any fulfilment) is a contradiction and cannot actually be experienced. All desire is aimed at a certain object that is not experienced as already present at the moment one desires it (even if this object is just the continuation of some currently experienced state; in this case that continuation is not yet experienced). If desire itself was genuinely its own object, then desire would cease on the spot because it would have obtained its goal. If desire is desire for something, then the pleasure or joy that might be associated with that desire is only inferred and projected on it by the anticipation of the pleasure that will arise out of the fulfilment of that desire (even if the fulfilment is not imagined to take place anytime soon). Hence, desire can never be experienced as such as inherently satisfying. Spinoza is aware of this fact insofar as he demonstrates that desire is an expression of one's *conatus*, which always aims at increasing one's current degree of power (E3p12) and never inertially rests in the current degree of power one has. Of course, it is possible to find satisfaction in a certain degree of power one has gained (this *acquiescentia in se ipso*, E3p30s, might be even based on reason, E4p52), but this does not entail that one's mind will cease to aim at something even higher (as proven by the fact that the supreme striving of the mind is to enjoy the intellectual love of God born out of the third kind of knowledge).

beings (E3 AD1: ‘*cupiditas est ipsa hominis essentia*’, desire is the essence itself of human beings) and all things in general (E3p7, the *conatus* of each thing is its actual essence). However, in the *Treatise* he did incidentally note an alternative option:

[B’] Indeed, no fights will arise from something that is not loved, there will be no sadness if one loses it, no envy if someone else possess it, no fear, no hatred, etc., in one word: no perturbations of the mind. All of these certainly happen in connection with those things that can perish, such as those we discussed. (TIE §9)

Spinoza lists all the dangers of the common goods and notices that they all depend on the fact that one *loves* (*desires*) them. No love (no desire), no problem. Then he moves on with his point about the need to replace changeable objects with an unchangeable one. What Spinoza does not see (and he cannot see it, given that he takes for granted the standpoint of desire) is that the genuine problem, the true danger he is trying to escape from, is *love* itself. It is *desire* itself because *that* is the cause of all troubles, as he himself admits.

At this point, Spinoza has an option: either abandon desire or change its object. He will strenuously invest the rest of his life in the second option. This entails undertaking a philosophical life and devoting himself to purify the mind in order to cultivate an adequate knowledge of God. Sure, this might be better than to keep seeking the common and poisoned goods. However, this is also a way of *not* considering the alternative, namely, giving up desire entirely. Because Spinoza does not see the danger in desire as such (but only in the objects of desire), he cannot even attempt this alternative.¹² As he suggests in the beginning (TIE §1), and will make clearer in the *Ethics* (E3p9s), ‘we do not strive for, want, have appetite for, nor desire [*conari, velle, appetere, neque cupere*] something because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary because we strive for, want, have appetite for, and desire something, we judge it to be good’. Desire is the judge of good and evil. Hence, within this horizon, desire cannot judge the end of itself to be genuinely good, nor can it see its own inherent danger. Just because seeing that danger cannot be desirable, it cannot lead to satisfy desires itself. This is also why, in his discussion, Spinoza will come to peace with the commonly sought goods, by accepting that pursuing them with moderation might be helpful (TIE

¹² MOREAU, *Spinoza. L’expérience et l’éternité*, pp. 176-180, develops a very interesting reconstruction of the existential meaning that *love* assumes in TIE §8-9. According to Moreau (translating from the original French): ‘love for perishable goods determines not only our actions, but also our desires, and even more our essence [ce qui fait l’essentiel de nous-mêmes]. [...] Since all that we do is oriented according to sequences of action, would anything remain if one suppressed these sequences? Given that one cannot suppress them, it is better trying to change their object’ (*Ivi*, p. 178).

§5 and §17). They remain to some extent a source of *some* gratification, and if this gratification can be obtained without having to undergo much danger, why not desire them? Desire is speaking.

However, Spinoza's enterprise is doomed. Eternal joy is a contradiction. Hence, the only option left is abandoning desire itself or, rather, challenging it in order to see the danger even in that desire. Spinoza did not go that far. Who did? Nobody who seeks common perishable goods ('enjoy the moment!' people) would go that way. Nobody who seeks eternal goods would go there either (both options ultimately share the same assumption, the same common ground and standpoint). The problem with challenging desire is that if desire is dismissed (admitting that this is feasible), then, what is left? Nothing then can be desired. From the point of view of desire, this sounds like death (which is precisely what, at the end of the day, desire is running away from). The essential mistake here is precisely this point of view. It is impossible to see the escape from desire while remaining fully immersed within the point of view shaped by desire itself. Desire will never let one escape from its grip. As Spinoza himself noted, desire 'captivate[s] the mind so much that it seems that it is enjoying something really good, and this prevent[s] the mind to think about anything else' (TIE §4).

And yet, desire does not want to suffer, it does not want to face the danger of sadness that it creates. There might be a sort of desire (a way of staying within it) that leads outside of it: the desire of ending desire, in order to end the inherent suffering associated with desire itself. However, undertaking this path preliminary requires becoming fully aware and penetrating the inherent danger (and thus suffering) of desire as such. Ultimately, desire does not want its own striving, it aims at peace, but it does not know where to find it; hence, it keeps spinning around, searching for objects to quench its thirst. If abandoned to itself, this is the only eternal and infinite experience that desire can ever know. The only way of escaping from this trap is to apply the same strategy that Spinoza applied to the three common goods: seriously meditate on their danger, *against* what might appear to be the case at first sight. Only by realizing that an eternal joy is *impossible*, can one find the resources to eventually look back at desire and wonder whether desire itself might not be the actual problem.

Spinoza is not the first or the only who made the mistake of searching for an eternal joy. This is a great mistake to make since it goes already a good stretch outside of the grip of the coarser forms of desire and suffering. Spinoza's theory of affects demonstrates better than anything else the *impossibility* of such an eternal joy. Much of the appeal of the idea of an eternal joy consists in considering that *possible*. Hence, Spinoza's theory of affects can be extremely helpful in realizing that no, unfortunately, that joy is a contradiction in terms. Spinoza's mistake thus forces one to realize the

impasse: it is impossible to go back to sensual pleasures, and it is equally impossible to move forward to an eternal joy. Where could I go?

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