

OUTSIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

Spinoza on affective difference

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Abstract: In this paper I explore Spinoza's view that people are differentiated by their affects. Spinoza seems to hold that differences of feeling reflect differences of essence, with the implication that people whose desires, emotions, and communicative abilities diverge significantly from those of their peers cannot share their essence and are excluded from human nature. This implication is troubling because the category of people who "disagree in nature" appears to cover children, addicts, the severely disabled, and those who are seriously ill. These individuals, on Spinoza's account, cannot join the rational community, which is founded on intercommunication, agreement, and shared feeling. Starting with a single proposition from the *Ethics*, IIP57, I consider Spinoza's justification for this position and some of its implications. I argue that while Spinoza does believe that those who "disagree" profoundly with human nature are excluded from it, this exclusion is temporary and reversible, and carries no moral stigma. Those who are of strong character are rationally determined to educate and rehabilitate the excluded so they may join human nature and its ethical project.

Keywords: Spinoza, disagreement, human nature, affects, difference

The task for this intriguing project is to assess whether Spinoza's philosophy is worth pursuing as a way of life. What does Spinoza's programme allow us to do, and not do? Based on a conviction that any one proposition of the *Ethics* can be used to reveal the whole, I decided to open the text at random and take the proposition on which my finger landed as my starting point. The proposition happens to be one of my favourites:

IIP57: Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other.¹

On the face of it, this proposition tells us that people are different. We differ in essence, and we differ in what we feel. Indeed, our difference in feelings is proportional

¹ All in-text references are to *Ethics*, in Benedictus de SPINOZA, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985, tr. Edwin Curley. I follow Curley's abbreviation system, with part number in roman numerals followed by proposition (P), axiom (A), definition (D), corollary (C), scholium (S), or lemma (L) number, or demonstration (Dem.), preface (Pref.), or appendix (App.). The Definition of the Affects at the end of Part III is abbreviated Def.Aff.

to our difference in essence. This seems consistent with everyday experience: we feel ourselves to be distinct from others, precisely on the grounds of our individual feelings. But how are we to square this with Spinoza's statements elsewhere in the *Ethics* that we are largely *the same* in our affective responses to things, and that we participate in a shared human nature? Spinoza tells us in IIP57 that we differ in feeling, but only insofar as we differ in essence. The possibility remains that we do not differ in essence, or in feeling, to any great extent. This proposition therefore poses two questions of great importance to our emotional, social, and political lives: To what extent do we feel the same as others? And do differences in feeling really reflect differences in essence? The demonstration and scholium to this proposition, taking up a little over one page of text, force us to confront the role of shared feeling in our conception of harmonious communities, and the place of those who feel differently.

First Spinoza tells us that this proposition is evident from IIA1". That axiom, part of the digression on physics, states that "all modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body." When one body has an impact upon another body, the effect follows from the natures of both bodies. When a stone hits a window, the effect depends on how heavy the stone is, and how brittle the glass is. The same glass would be differently affected by different stones, and the same stone would have different effects upon hitting brick, plastic, or water. Different kinds of bodies differ in nature – another word for essence – and how they are affected depends on their own nature and the nature of what they interact with. An "affect", for Spinoza, is a feeling, but the term refers more broadly to changes which increase or decrease a body's power (and the ideas of these changes) (IIID3). So the essence of a body, along with the essence of the body it interacts with, determines how it is changed, and how its power is increased or diminished. That is, how a body feels is determined partly by its own essence, partly by the essence of the body that affects it. IIP57 follows from this.

However, Spinoza thinks it necessary to demonstrate this proposition in a different way, from the nature of desire. At IIP9S Spinoza defines desire as "appetite together with consciousness of the appetite". Appetite is the striving of an individual's mind and body to persevere in its being. At IIP6-7 Spinoza explains that the striving of each thing to persevere in its being is the "actual essence" of the thing. Appetite can therefore be understood as "the very essence of man" (IIP9S), and desire as an individual's essence, together with consciousness of that essence. For that reason Spinoza is able to say, in IIP57Dem., that desire is the essence of each individual. Therefore, to the extent that individuals differ in essence, they differ in desire, and in all those affects that relate to desire (such as longing, emulation, and anger). Other affects are not types of

desire, but types of joy (such as love and self-esteem) or sadness (such as pity and fear). Yet joy and sadness are the increase and decrease of our power to act (IIIP11S), and our power to act is our striving to persevere in our being (IIIP7Dem.), and our striving is our essence, and our essence is desire: this means that joy and sadness are the fluctuations of desire. This string of equivalences means that to feel joy is to feel our desire, our *very essence*, aided or increased, and to feel sadness is to feel our desire (that is, our essence) restricted or diminished. Our joys and sadnesses are essence-specific, because they are the waxing and waning of our own being.

From this it seems we should understand that each individual has its own distinctive essence: its own striving to persevere in its own being. Such a striving could be similar to the striving of other individuals, but it could not be *the same striving*. Two individuals cannot strive to persevere in the same being. Or can they? In the physical digression, Spinoza explains that disparate bodies unite to form one body when they “communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner” (IIA2"D). The union of bodies consists in this constant communication of motion: even if bodies are added or removed, the union persists, and the unified individual “retain[s] its nature, as before, both in respect to substance, and in respect to mode” (IIL4Dem., cf. IIL7). Each composite body is a mode with a distinctive “nature”: its own rate of motion that is communicated amongst its parts (IIL1). The nature of a thing, for Spinoza, normally means its essence. If that is the case here, then a composite body has one essence defined by a single impulse of striving and desire. This unified striving determines the motion that is constantly communicated amongst the parts of the whole, so that every part strives alike.² In Part IV Spinoza shows how the composite body provides the structure for political community. He describes two individuals of the same nature joining together to compose a more powerful unified individual. In a famous passage, he writes:

Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; [and] that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all. (IVP18S)

The implication is that a group of inter-communicating human beings strives and moves as one individual to preserve its being. Multiple people share in this unified

² It is not certain that Spinoza understands striving in terms of motion, but it is at least plausible that *conatus* (in the attribute of extension) generates the beginnings of physical motions and actions, as it does for Hobbes. See Thomas HOBBS, *Leviathan*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974, ch. 6, p. 119.

striving and essence. Just as Hobbes conceives the commonwealth as an “artificial man”, Spinoza conceives a political community as a unified body of one mind.³

In the passage above, the need for “agreement in all things” is striking. Since desire is essence along with consciousness of that essence, it follows that members of a composite body have the same desire and the same consciousness of that desire; and what we desire is maximal agreement among us. Surely it follows that we feel (and want to feel) the fulfilments and frustrations of desire in common too: we feel the same joys and sadnesses. Here it is important to note that in IVP18S, Spinoza imagines a composite individual made up of “individuals of entirely the same nature”. Those who agree in nature are good for each other (IVP31), and only those who are governed by reason agree entirely in nature (IVP35). Therefore, a composite individual of highly rational people – the rational community – will “agree in all things” and strive collectively for the common good (IVP37). This community, so long as its capacity to reason is maintained, is unlikely to feel many passions, since those arise with inadequate ideas and diminish the “agreement in nature” that unifies it (IVP32). There are, however, “active affects” such as tenacity and nobility that arise from the mind conceiving adequate ideas and its own power to think and act (IIIP58): the rational community feels those affects. It feels contentment in its own being, love of God, and desire for greater knowledge. Importantly, a rational community feels confidence (*securitas*) in its own power to preserve itself. These feelings reflect the community’s adequate knowledge and increased power, and the *communication* of these joyful affects is part of the constant communication of motion undertaken by its component members.

Spinoza’s ideal community is made up of people who are highly rational and who can therefore agree entirely in nature. Since all bodies agree in certain things (III.2), any body can, in principle, join a composite individual with any others, but their capacity to cohere with it depends *either* on the extent to which their rate of motion already agrees with the whole, *or* on the extent to which one or more bodies can determine their body to adapt its rate of motion to their own. So human groups can form, and share the same essence, striving, desire, and active affects, if the individuals composing them are already highly rational, or if one or more individuals have sufficient power to cause others to go along with them. A successful community strives and feels together, and its striving and feeling are constantly communicated, affirmed, and furthered amongst its members: those who are not highly rational are carried along with this movement through the management of their feelings. A disparate group of

³ *Ivi*, ch. 16, pp. 217-21. See also *Political Treatise* III.2 in SPINOZA, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 2016, p. 517.

people, low on reason and high on passions, can also form a composite individual, but the members' "disagreement in nature" (IVP33) means its being is unlikely to be sustained. The parts of the whole, each one feeling and causing affects specific to its own essence, will fail to communicate effectively and will work against each other. The odd rational person in this group, "among men who do not agree at all with his nature, ... will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself" (IVApp.VII).

Let us now return to IIIIP57. "Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other." Following our discussion, the proposition has a different tone. It now appears that Spinoza is saying that individuals' affects differ only insofar as they differ in essence: that is, only if they disagree in nature. Only those who are low on reason and subject to strong passions are incapable of sharing a single essence and of feeling active affects in common. This implies a division between those who can agree in nature and those who cannot. This division is explored in the scholium. Spinoza states that to the extent that human nature differs from the nature of "the animals which are called irrational", so too do our affects. Our desires and feelings are different from theirs. Spinoza later asserts that this difference in nature means we cannot form a bond (that is, a contract) with non-human animals to strive collectively for the preservation of our being (IVP37S1). Each type of animal has its own nature, in which it feels a species-specific gladness; each one is "perfect" in terms of its own essence (IVPref.). It follows, first, that there is a "human nature" to which each human being's essence corresponds. Human essence is "an eternal truth" and therefore humans "can agree entirely according to their essence" (IP17S).⁴ Second, since the capabilities of each species are determined

⁴ There is considerable dispute in the literature about whether Spinoza understands human essence(s) to be particular or general, and whether he understands "human nature" to be real. Here, following IP17S, I assume that "human nature" is indeed an eternal essence in God, but holding this view (for which there is also counter-evidence) is not essential for the purposes of this paper, for the concept of human nature has the same social effects whether it is an eternal essence or an imaginary construct. For some discussion of this topic, see, for example, Don GARRETT, *Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal*, in Olli KOISTINEN (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 284-302; Mogens LAERKE, *Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence*, in Mark SINCLAIR (ed.), *The Actual and the Possible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017; and Karolina HÜBNER, *Spinoza on Being Human and Human Perfection*, in Matthew J. KISNER and Andrew YOUNG, *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, pp.124-42. For discussion of the significance of Spinoza's strict division of human from non-human affects for his political thought, see Hasana SHARP, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011.

by its essence, there can be no meaningful comparisons between them, and it would be irrational, for instance, to envy lions their strength (IIIP55S).

Spinoza's view that humans differ in essence and affects from other animals is plausible, certainly within the context in which he is writing. But Spinoza's next remark is less so. He suggests that the same kind of difference can hold between human beings: "from IIIP57 it follows that there is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a philosopher possesses" (IIIP57S). The drunk's affects differ from the philosopher's, meaning that their essences differ too. The implication is that the two cannot effectively communicate their motions as a composite individual, and cannot strive together. Each one is content in his own nature, and cannot compare his perfection to that of the other. The remark about the drunk and the philosopher is puzzling, first because in general Spinoza indicates that there is *one* human nature and *one* human essence; and second, because the broad message of the *Ethics* is that *all* people have the potential to gain understanding, overcome the passions, and become more rational. What prevents them from doing so is not their "nature", but external circumstances. Is the drunk, then, understood to be non-human? IIIP57S suggests that drunks and philosophers are of two different species, like horses and men. (As if to reinforce this point, Spinoza calls rational people "individuals of the same species" at IVApp.IX.) Spinoza clearly wants to draw a distinction between those who agree in nature and those who do not. But it is odd to do this in a way that presents the circumstantially disabled as having a nature so at odds with human nature that they cannot share the desires or goals of the latter.

On the other hand, drunkenness is not a permanent condition. Someone is "a drunk" only as long as their affects – and their actions and thoughts – are determined (in ways specific to their essence) by alcohol. Maybe Spinoza's point is that the drunk, *insofar as he is drunk*, is as incapable of joining a rational human community as a lion is; for the duration of his drunkenness, his affects, desires, and strivings are so different from those of others that, like a lion, he cannot communicate with them. The drunk is indeed "non-human" for these purposes. Young children similarly seem to be of a different species: it is difficult for "men of advanced years" to believe that infants are of the same nature as themselves (IVP39S). The implication, I think, is that there are human beings who, for some indefinite period of time, are unable to communicate their strivings and affects with others, and who are therefore perceived to be outside of "human nature". Such people are characterized by strong passions, imaginative, confused, or hallucinatory ways of perceiving, and severely restricted bodily and mental abilities. Spinoza calls this condition "unhappy":

[W]e live in continuous change, and ... as we change for the better or worse, we are called happy or unhappy. For he who has passed from being an infant or child to being a corpse is called unhappy. On the other hand, if we pass the whole length of our life with a sound mind in a sound body, that is considered happiness. And really, he who, like an infant or child, has a body capable of very few things, and [is] very heavily dependent on external causes, has a mind which considered solely in itself is conscious of almost nothing of itself, or of God, or of things. (VP39S)

Someone whose body and mind are “unsound” is, for Spinoza, like an infant or a horse in being unable to agree in nature or communicate with others.⁵ All of us live through this condition in childhood, and any of us, in the grip of emotional breakdown, serious illness, coercive control, or substance abuse, may experience it again. Perhaps this is the meaning of Spinoza’s story of the Spanish poet, who in suffering amnesia is “changed into another nature entirely different from [his] own” (IVP39S). The poet loses his personal identity and with it his human nature. He regains the latter, not because he remembers his past life but because he remembers his native language: language is one of the ways in which we communicate our motions to each other and affirm our membership of a human community.

We must, therefore, reassess what it means to “disagree in nature” for Spinoza. The category of those who disagree in nature includes the envious, the ambitious, the resentful, the disdainful, and the self-regarding: those who suffer from the passions that make us troublesome to one another (IIIP55C). But this category also includes those who are, for some indefinite time, unable to agree or communicate effectively with others: young children, drug addicts, and the severely disabled. Spinoza suggests that people in these groups are perceived to stand outside of human nature. To be unable to agree with others is not necessarily to be disagreeable, but it is to be powerfully affected and determined by external causes in an irreducibly specific and uncommunicable way. To use a later (Kantian) idiom, it is to be outside the *sensus communis*, the realm of “common sense”. Those who disagree in nature disrupt the “consensus” that we all feel and want the same things: the sense of security which a strong community evokes.⁶ Spinoza suggests that we ward off the threat of this

⁵ The melancholic (depressive) person, for instance, is said to “disdain men and admire the lower animals” (IVP35S). I would like to thank Ruben Endendijk for drawing my attention to this passage and for prompting some of the ideas in this paragraph.

⁶ The idea of the community as a realm of “common sense” – that is, common feeling – is explored, differently, by Arendt and Rancière. See Hannah ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Harvester Press, Brighton 1982, and Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury, London 2015, tr. Steven Corcoran. I have compared Spinoza and Rancière on the subject of disagreement in Beth LORD, *Disagreement in the Political Philosophy of Spinoza and Rancière*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, v. 117 n. 1, year 2017, pp. 61-80.

disruption by conceptually excluding from human nature those whose strivings and feelings cannot be communicated in the rational community.

This does not sound like the Spinoza we love and approve of. Excluding children, drug addicts, the seriously ill and the severely disabled, and people with depression and dementia (among others) from human nature strikes us as objectionable and even abhorrent. Perhaps, at this point, we simply part company with Spinoza, just as we do when he claims that women are unsuited “by nature” for political office.⁷ However, there are two important points to add to this discussion. First, to perceive a person as standing outside of human nature does not amount to a judgment of inferiority. Indeed, it removes them from such comparisons of status and worth. Judgments about who is more or less virtuous or powerful can be made only between those of the same nature. This is what Spinoza means when he states at IIP55C that only “equals” can envy one another’s virtues and abilities. The drunk and the philosopher are not equals, because, *pro tem*, they are not considered as having the same nature. Like a man and a lion, they have different virtues, strivings, and abilities. The philosopher is therefore not superior to the drunk – or to the infant or the melancholic.

Second, Spinoza does not suggest that those outside of the rational community should be cast out of human society. On the contrary, it is good for the more rational to help those who are temporarily unable to agree with human nature to (re)accommodate themselves to it. That is because it is in the interest of the human community to increase the number and proportion of its rational members:

Nothing can agree more with the nature of any thing than other individuals of the same species. And so nothing is more useful to man in preserving his being and enjoying a rational life than a man who is guided by reason. ... [W]e can show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that at last they live according to the command of their own reason. (IVApp.IX)

It is not in anyone’s interest that any person should live outside of human society, like a hermit “among the lower animals” (IVApp.XIII). Rational people should therefore strive to educate those who disagree in nature, so that they may live as agreeably as possible within the community.⁸ This programme of education will be

⁷ *Political Treatise* XI.4, in SPINOZA, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 603. I discuss Spinoza’s exclusion of women in Beth LORD, “Disempowered by Nature”: *Spinoza on the Political Capabilities of Women*, in “British Journal for the History of Philosophy”, v. 19 n. 6, year 2011, pp. 1085-1106.

⁸ Spinoza’s contribution to a theory of education has recently become a topic of interest. See, for example, Justin STEINBERG, *Politics as a model of pedagogy in Spinoza*, in “Ethics and Education”, v. 15 n. 2, year 2020, pp. 158-72, and Heidi M. RAVVEN, *Spinoza’s ethics of ratio: discovering and applying a Spinozan model of human nature*, in “Ethics and Education”, v. 15 n. 2, year 2020, pp. 232-46.

challenging, because of the communicative impasse between the rational and the ignorant. Furthermore, the rational must remain vigilant lest they fall prey to the passions of those they seek to help. Spinoza alludes to some of the difficulties of such interactions in the “free man” passages (IVP67-73). To guard against these dangers we must develop fortitude or “strength of character”, from which we rationally desire to preserve our being (“tenacity”) and help others to join in rational friendship (“nobility”) (IIIP59S). Fortitude, therefore, causes us to preserve “human nature” both in ourselves and in others, and is an effective shield against disagreement. It is also an effective shield against the *concept* of disagreement: the person of strong character knows that the perceived imperfections of others “arise from the fact that [she] conceives the things themselves in a way which is disordered, mutilated, and confused” (IVP73S). Her own increasing understanding leads her “to remove the obstacles to true knowledge”, including her own perception that human beings who disagree in nature are of a different species. It leads her to understand that people in these groups are indeed human and have potential to align their strivings and desires with those of the community whole. The community should strive to help them improve their bodies and minds to develop the affective and communicative capabilities through which they will realize that potential.⁹

In this life, then, we strive especially that the infant’s body may change (as much as its nature allows and assists) into another, capable of a great many things and related to a mind very much conscious of itself, of God, and of things. We strive, that is, that whatever is related to its memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect. (VP39S)

What goes for infants also applies to others considered “outside of human nature”. It is our task to understand and realize our human nature as perfectly as we can. We perform that task best by developing our reason and communicating our striving and active affects with others who do the same. We aim for a community of reasoning, striving, and feeling alike: a community of those strong in character, who share and communicate the active affects of fortitude – tenacity and nobility – among themselves. Spinoza recognizes that certain people may, for an indefinite time, appear to fall outside of human nature by virtue of being unable to agree in these ways. But this condition does not carry with it the denial of moral respect that we associate with “dehumanization”. Instead, it obliges others to help that person (back) into the rational community. If we, today, find the conceptual exclusion of certain people from human

⁹ By contrast, we owe no such care or consideration to non-human animals, since Spinoza sees no possibility of their communicating with us at all (IVApp.XXVI).

nature abhorrent, it is because other philosophical traditions have made moral worth contingent on human nature. Spinoza does not see things that way. Human nature is, after all, nothing special, and God does not privilege human essence above any other (IApp.). It is not better to be human than to be non-human. But it is better for human beings to agree in nature with as many as possible, to strive and to feel with as many as possible, and to encourage fortitude as widely as possible. We must use our powers to bring as many as possible into this communion.

A further word on feeling together. Spinoza thinks it is important that a political community enjoys shared feeling, a common *ingenia*.¹⁰ Nowadays, the *distinctiveness* of feeling is widely held to be important: taking seriously the irreducible specificity of feeling is a way of respecting the experiences and identities of specific, often marginalized, groups. Spinoza's approach, to get the people in such groups to assimilate their feelings and strivings to those of the dominant rational community, might be taken to be a strategy of universalization typical of Enlightenment philosophy.¹¹ While Spinoza does not assign lower moral status to the person who experiences different affects, he does believe that affective differences are ethically bad: they detract from rational thinking, and should be eliminated where possible. We strive, after all, "that whatever is related to memory or imagination" – including our affects – "is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect" (VP39S). It is entirely consistent with Spinoza's philosophy to accept affective differences and to support those experiencing them within a population. But it is not, I think, possible to live as a Spinozist and to uphold and preserve affective difference as a marker of one's essence – because that essence would, for Spinoza, be outside of human nature. Whether we want to be Spinozists might be determined by where we stand on that question.

References

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¹⁰ This theme is explored in Justin STEINBERG, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

¹¹ For the classic statement of this argument, see Iris Marion YOUNG, *Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship*, in "Ethics" v. 99 n. 2, year 1989, pp. 250-74. Susan James discusses how Spinoza's political philosophy accommodates difference in Susan JAMES, *Power and Difference: Spinoza's Conception of Freedom*, in "Journal of Political Philosophy" v. 4 n. 3, year 1996, pp. 207-28.

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