Spinoza's analysis of his imagined readers' axiology

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Abstract

Before presenting his own account of value in the *Ethics*, Spinoza spends much of EI*Appendix* and EIV*Preface* attempting to refute a series of axiological 'prejudices' that he takes to have taken root in the minds of his readership. In doing so, Spinoza adopts what might be termed a 'genealogical' argumentative strategy. That is, he tries to establish the falsity of imagined readership's prejudices about good and bad, perfection and imperfection, by first showing that the ideas from which they have arisen are themselves false. Many elements of this genealogy, however, remain unclear. First, both the nature of the metaethical prejudices Spinoza believes we have been labouring under, and the metaphysical prejudices that he takes to have given rise to them, continue to attract widespread disagreement. Although much less commented on, it is also not entirely obvious why Spinoza takes the one to have engendered the other. In this article, I attempt to clarify Spinoza's reasoning in both of these respects, ultimately concluding that Spinoza offers us two accounts of how this process has occurred, the first beginning from an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence, the second from more secular, perhaps more purely Aristotelian metaphysical tradition.

Key Words:

Spinoza, value, axiology, good, perfection, teleology, final causes.

One way we might understand Spinoza's metaethical project in the *Ethics* is as comprising of two parts. On the one hand, Spinoza devotes a portion of his philosophical energies to delineating his own theory of value, which is to say, his own account of the nature of certain value-laden terms, terms

like ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘perfection’ and ‘imperfection’, ‘order’ and ‘confusion’ and so on.[1] However, Spinoza also spends a considerable amount of time trying to disabuse his imagined readership of various axiological ‘prejudices’ that he takes to have taken root within their understanding of value – ideas like the notion that values belong ‘to the nature of things’ and that they are something ‘positive in things, considered in themselves’ (EIV*Preface*).

It would be wrong to think that these twin facets of Spinoza’s metaethical thought can be entirely disentangled. Spinoza does not confront his imagined readership’s theory of value merely as a philosophical aside or rhetorical flourish, rather he seeks to found his own theory of value on the broken rubble of his contemporaries’. Thus, for Spinoza, it is precisely because, following his critique, we know values are *not* something ‘positive in things, considered in themselves,’ that we also know they *must* be ‘modes of thinking, i.e. notions we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another’ (EIV*Preface*). (Spinoza appealing here to the law of the excluded middle).

Given its importance in his wider moral philosophy, therefore, understanding the content and grounds of Spinoza’s critique his imagined readers’ axiology becomes vital if we are to make sense of his wider ethical thought. Yet, several elements in Spinoza’s analysis remain unclear. For example, in order to refute his supposed interlocutors’ claims about value, Spinoza employs what I have described elsewhere as a ‘genealogical’ argumentative strategy. That is, Spinoza tries to establish the falsity of imagined readership’s prejudices about good and bad, perfection and imperfection, by first showing that the ideas from which they have arisen are themselves false.[2] However, even if Spinoza is reasonably explicit about where our prejudices about value have originated from (most notably, the idea that ‘all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end’ – EI*Appendix*), and where they have ended up (the

[1] Here I intentionally leave out terms such as merit and sin, praise and blame, which I take to bring into play questions of moral responsibility which are largely extraneous to my discussion here.

[2] Rumbold, “Spinoza’s genealogical critique of his contemporaries’ axiology”.

idea that good and bad are something 'positive in things, considered in themselves'), the steps by which he imagines we have been led from the one to the other are far less obvious.[3]

One possibility we may quickly rule out, perhaps, is that there is any direct logical entailment between the two. After all, we seem to be able to hold the notion that 'all things act on account of an end' perfectly well without also being committed to the thought that good and bad are something 'positive in things, considered in themselves' (EIV*Preface*). Yet, if the one set of ideas do not follow from the other in anything like an analytic connection, how are they connected?

Despite a wealth of excellent work on Spinoza's own theory of value, much of it recent,[4] this aspect of his thought has generally received very little attention. In this article, I attempt to clarify Spinoza's reasoning here by considering it in-depth.

Such a project draws us into heavily contested territory. For example, in order to clarify the nature of the connection Spinoza draws between what he takes to be our *metaphysical* 'prejudices' and our *metaethical* ones, we first need a clear view of what those prejudices were. Yet the identity of Spinoza's target in these passages – both metaphysical and metaethical – continues to be a site of considerable disagreement within the literature, both with respect to their philosophical content (the

[3] Note: here and elsewhere, simply for ease of explications, I shall sometimes refer to these ideas as, e.g., 'our' prejudices about good and bad, or our metaphysical prejudices. Needless to say, however, all such references are clearly intended to refer to those 'prejudices' Spinoza took to be prevalent among his contemporary, seventeenth-century readership, rather than any to which we, his modern audience, might subscribe.

[4] For a good recent collection see Kisner and Youpa, eds. *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*. See also Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*; Curley, "Spinoza's Moral Philosophy"; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*; Frankena, "Spinoza's 'New Morality"; Frankena, "Spinoza on the knowledge of good and evil"; Mattern, "Spinoza and Ethical Subjectivism"; Garrett D,. "Spinoza's Ethical Theory"; Jarrett, "Spinoza on the Relativity of Good and Evil"; Miller, "Spinoza's Axiology"; Nadler, *Spinoza's 'Ethics': An Introduction*; LeBuffe, "Spinoza's Normative Ethics"; Youpa, "Rationalist Moral Philosophy"; Youpa, "Spinoza's Theories of Value"; Kisner, "Perfection and Desire: Spinoza on the Good".

bare facts of the propositions under discussion), and their historical resonance, (the extent to which they are shared by any given writer past or contemporary to Spinoza's intellectual environment). Moreover, insofar as we seek to define the kinds of axiological positions Spinoza *attacks*, we are also inevitably drawn into a further set of disagreements about the kinds of positions he *defends*. After all, if we are to save Spinoza from inconsistency, we do not want to have him critiquing something at one point only to endorse it at another. From a naïve desire to elucidate just one aspect of Spinoza's moral philosophy, therefore, we can quickly be drawn into discussing a vast stretch of his writings, along various aspects of its historical context.

In light of this, therefore, it is perhaps inevitable that, given the confines of space, I am only able to offer a limited justification of many aspects of my reading of Spinoza's moral philosophy in much of what follows. If there is a virtue to such a truncated analysis, however, I take it that it resides, in part, in at least allowing for a coherent reading of the text, which is to say, one which makes sense of Spinoza's reasoning with respect to his imagined readers' axiology as a whole.

Having explained what I aim to do and at least some of its attendant problems then, let me finally offer a brief note on what I will *not* do.

As I see it, the principal aim of this article is philosophical explication. That is, my main purpose here is to provide an unambiguous statement of i) what Spinoza took his readers to believe about values like good and bad, and ii) the chain of 'reasoning' (not exactly the right term) that, in Spinoza's view, led them to believe those beliefs. Partly for reasons of space, however, one thing that I will not be doing is considering whether any of Spinoza's contemporaries actually believed any of the beliefs Spinoza attributes to them, or whether they believed any of those beliefs for the reasons he theorises. In other words, I shall not be examining whether Spinoza's critique of his readerships' axiology was a *fair* one.

Of course, this is not to say that this article will be entirely without historical claims. Plainly, if we are to understand the *content* of Spinoza's claims about his readership's prejudices, we need to make at least some reference to the intellectual milleu in which he wrote. However, although I take all of the historical claims I shall make in what follows to be accurate in so far as they go, they are not intended

as a substitute for a more comprehensive survey of the rich and diverse philosophical environment in which Spinoza is working – for which, if the reader is interested, I advise them to explore other recent scholarship.[5]

The article is structured as follows. I begin, in Section One, by outlining Spinoza's account on his axiological target, that is, those prejudices about value he takes a substantial proportion of his readership to endorse. In Section Two, I then detail those teleological theories that Spinoza takes to have engendered that position. Finally, in Section Three, I attempt to reconstruct the line of reasoning (again, not a perfect word) that, in Spinoza's view, led us from the one set of ideas to the other. I shall argue that, for Spinoza, this propagation has occurred through two distinct causal paths, each beginning from slightly different starting points. First, in EI*Appendix*, Spinoza claims our axiological mistakes have arisen from distinctly theist philosophies, our early endorsement of an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence ultimately leading us to endorse certain prejudices about the metaphysics of value. Later, in EIV*Preface*, I argue that Spinoza changes to tack, this time showing how a more secular, perhaps more purely Aristotelian metaphysical tradition, may have also led us to adopt 'prejudicial' views about the nature of perfection and imperfection, good and bad. After considering the import of both these moves, I then conclude in Section Four.

1. Our Misconceptions about Value

What kinds of claims about value does Spinoza think we, his imagined readers, tend to endorse? Perhaps the first thing to say here is that Spinoza does not look to challenge just one axiological position but several. Over the course of the *Ethics,* he variously questions the idea that there is an 'order in things'; that order is something 'in Nature more than a relation to our imagination'; that notions such as good and bad, beauty and ugliness and so on are among 'the chief attributes of things'; that the

[5] See, for example, Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism*.

'nature of a thing' might be 'good or evil, sound or rotten and corrupt'; that 'Nature sometimes fails or sins and produces imperfect things'; that imperfection might imply 'something lacking in [things] which is theirs'; and that perfection and imperfection, good and bad, indicate something 'positive in things, considered in themselves' (EI*Appendix*; EIV*Preface*). To these we might add Spinoza's objections to the idea that good and evil 'exist in Nature' (as opposed to 'in our understanding') from his earlier *Short Treatise* (STIch10p6), and the idea that things are 'good or bad in themselves,' (something he differentiates from the idea things may be good and bad in themselves insofar as they 'move' one's mind), from his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE, §1).

Of course, it is worth highlighting that in bundling these claims together as *axiological* positions we are also assuming something else: namely, that Spinoza had a robust conception of those properties we would now recognize as values (good, bad, order, confusion, beauty, ugliness, perfection, imperfection and so on) *as values* and thus, sometimes at least, intended to talk about axiological positions, or the metaphysical status of values, in general, rather than the nature of this or that specific value, or value pairing (e.g. good/bad, perfection/imperfection). This assumption might be put under pressure. For example, it ought to be noted that, among his list of properties we (his modern audience) might normally consider values (e.g. good/bad, perfection/imperfection etc), Spinoza also includes one pair we wouldn't: 'hot' and 'cold'.

At times, it can also seem as though Spinoza sees the kind of properties we would today collectively categorize as values – goodness, perfection, beauty and so on – as each possessing their own metaphysical status, with few things being true of all of them. For example, in EI*Appendix* Spinoza tells us that 'the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, or incompatible with, human nature'; a lesson he follows up shortly afterwards in EIId5, where he explains 'By reality and perfection I understand the same thing'. Yet if this seems to assert things can be more or less perfect entirely independently of their meaning for, or relation to, human beings, *that* claim appears to be in stark contrast to his view of good and bad, where we are told, in EIVd1, 'By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us'.

However, even if, on occasion, it appears that Spinoza did want to make certain claims about specific values (whether or not we think his claims about perfection or imperfection fall under that category), it also seems clear that he also believed that there are at least some claims we can make about values in general. Moreover, the mere fact that Spinoza discusses certain properties that we would not normally consider as values (e.g. hot and cold) at the same time as discussing those we would, does not necessarily mean he did not believe that there are certain things we can say about this family of properties in general (whether we label them as 'values' or something else).[6]

If, then, Spinoza did intend to contest certain axiological claims about the metaphysical nature of these kinds of properties, claims that would apply equally to, for example, perfection/imperfection just as they would to good/bad, or order/disorder, what kind of claims did he have in mind? For many commentators, the main idea at stake here is the thought that values are fundamentally 'objective', which is to say, that they exist, in some sense, 'out there in the world'.[7] I think this gloss is useful to a point. However, I also think that characterising Spinoza's axiological target in this way can lead us to miss certain nuances in his position. In what follows, therefore, I think we would do better to understand the target of Spinoza's critique as made up of two claims, both of which are often understood as playing a part in an 'objective' conception of value but which might also be teased apart. In what follows, I refer to these as *Metaethical Thesis 1* (MT1) and *Metaethical Thesis 2* (MT2).

According to MT1:

[6] The biggest piece of evidence we have for this, of course, is the fact that in the Ethics, and elsewhere, Spinoza regularly talks about certain common prejudices that hold across our understanding of these items: that they have a common ancestry, that lessons that we have learnt with regard to some of these properties (e.g. perfection/imperfection), can be taken over to others (good/bad) and so on.

[7] See, e.g., Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 293. Similar glosses are given by Curley, Nadler and Lord, among numerous others. (Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 120; Nadler, *Spinoza's 'Ethics'*, 215; Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 107).

MT1 – values are things borne by certain objects and actions.

According to MT2

MT2 – the existence and valence of x's value does not depend upon any object or action other than x.

As I understand it, MT1 best characterised as a claim about the metaphysical *status* of value – that is, the place of value, with respect to other things. Specifically, according to MT1, whatever values are, they are the kind of things that, where they exist, exist as things that cling to or inhere in other things within Nature. This, then, is what I take Spinoza to mean when he refers to the idea that values are something 'in things', or that they are of the 'chief attributes' of things (EI*Appendix*), or that they are something 'in Nature' as opposed to 'in our understanding' (STIch10p6). Such a notion also connects to Spinoza's various gestures towards the view that values are things possessed by individual things. Thus, if we say values are things that are in some sense borne by certain objects or actions, we might also think that there is a sense in which those things *possess* value; that, as Spinoza puts it, values 'belong to the nature of a thing' (EIV*Preface*).

Where MT1 makes a positive claim about metaphysical status of value then, MT2, by contrast, makes a negative claim about the determinants of value. That is, as I read it, MT2 asserts that, whatever the value of x *is* determined by, it is *not* determined by any objects or actions other than x itself. Significantly, this includes the idea that it is not determined by the aims, beliefs, projects and desires of human beings.[8]

One useful (albeit somewhat anachronistic) way of thinking about this idea, perhaps, is by way of G. E. Moore's notion of the 'intrinsic' value. As Moore explains in the *Principia Ethica*, one way in which we might test whether a state of affair is of intrinsic value is through a 'method of isolation',

[8] Although, here I leave open the possibility, as I think Spinoza does, that a thing's value might be determined by God's will. By 'any object or action other than x', therefore, I mean, any *natural* object – or, as the scholastics would put, it any *created* object – other than x; a set which I take to *include* human beings, but *not include* God.

whereby one considers whether a universe containing only that state and no other would be good: if so, it is of intrinsic value; if not, then it is not.[9]

Of course, the reference to 'intrinsic' value here can confuse matters. At Spinoza's time of writing, for something to have 'intrinsic' value would not be, as Moore would have it, for it to have value simply by virtue of its intrinsic properties but rather for it to have value irrespective of its propensity to engender other goods. On the latter conception then, x being *intrinsically* good is properly contrasted with it being *instrumentally* good, that is, good by virtue of the goods it helps to bring about; not, as in the former conception, with the notion of being good by virtue of something other than x's intrinsic properties.

However, it would seem clear that Spinoza is more interested in something like Moore's idea of intrinsic value than the seventeenth-century conception. For example, one place we might see Spinoza's interest in this distinction is in EIVp19 when, referring back to EIV*Preface*, Spinoza writes: "But no action, *considered in itself*, is good or evil (as we have shown in the *Preface* of this Part); instead, one and the same action is now good, now evil" (my italics). Despite the possibility of confusion, and the threat of anachronism, therefore, Moore's conception looks a useful guide to the kind of position in which Spinoza is interested.[10]

[9] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 142, 145–47, 236, 256. See also Vallentyne, "Intrinsic Properties Defined".

[10] Another boon of using Moore's conception of intrinsic goodness, rather than a seventeenth-century conception, perhaps, is that it also allows us to distinguish between the idea that something may be valuable by virtue of its intrinsic properties and the idea that its value may be determined by its relations to other objects or actions – something that would not be possible using a seventeenth century conception of intrinsic value. As Hurka explains, on the older conception of intrinsic value, it was possible for something to be intrinsically good and for that goodness depending on certain relational properties. Thus, a belief's being true, something necessary for its being knowledge, might increase its intrinsic value; or a pleasure being that of a bad person, might make it worse. By contrast, by conceiving of a thing's intrinsic value as the value it had by virtue of its intrinsic properties, Moore's

On my reading, then, it is to MT2 that Spinoza intends to refer when he talks about the idea that x is valuable 'in itself', or 'considered in itself'. And it is to the conjunction of MT1 and MT2, that he intends to refer when he speaks about the idea that values are something 'positive in things, considered in themselves' (EIV*Preface*). (The conjunction of MT1 and MT2 being the idea *both* that i) values are something borne by objects and actions, *and* that, ii) insofar as a given object or action bears such values, it does so irrespective of the way the rest of the world is organised.) Finally, I take it that it is *both* the conjunction of each of these claims together, and each claim considered separately, that Spinoza has in mind when he seeks to undermine his imagined readerships' 'prejudices' about value.

In a moment, I want to move on to considering Spinoza's account of those metaphysical prejudices that he takes to have engendered metaethical ideas like MT1 and MT2. However, before I do so, it is perhaps worth stressing again that this interpretation of Spinoza's metaethical target is likely to meet with some opposition. For example, on one prominent reading of Spinoza's metaethics, Spinoza wants to endorse a 'relativist' position on value, that is, one in which things are not simply good or bad but good or bad relative to P.[11] Such readings look friendly to the notion that Spinoza wanted to reject MT2, especially if rejection of MT2 is supposed to leave open the possibility that the existence and/or valence of x's value may depend upon object or action other than x. However, many of those who endorse relativist readings also appear to take Spinoza to have endorsed, rather than rejected, something like MT1. Thus, on many relativist readings, Spinoza wants to deny the idea that things can be 'intrinsically' good or bad, or good and bad without reference to any other thing, but he wants to hold

conception allows us to identify cases in which a thing retains its value irrespective of its relations to other states. See Hurka, "Moore's Moral Philosophy".

[11] See, e.g. Jarrett, "Spinoza on the Relativity of Good and Evil".

on to the idea that values are things that are borne by certain objects and actions. The point is simply that they are properties those things bear by virtue of their relationship with other things.[12]

By asserting, then, that Spinoza wanted to reject *both* MT1 and MT2, we are taking a substantial position on Spinoza's own metaethical position in precisely the way outlined in the introduction to this essay – one which raises a host of further questions about how any such rejection might fit with, for example, his broader, normative ethics. Again, these are important areas for discussion, ones which I consider at length elsewhere.[13] However, as flagged earlier, they are not ones which I am able to discuss here.

2. THE SOURCE OF OUR MISCONCEPTIONS

[12] For example, Miller appears to endorse something like this view when he writes that, for Spinoza, 'such knowledge is relatively valuable—its value is relative to our essences as rational, knowing beings—but it is also objectively valuable—no matter what we think or feel it is good for us.' (Miller, "Spinoza's Axiology", 170; cf. Nadler, "Spinoza in the Garden of Good and Evil", 69). To a certain extent, Youpa might be seen to hold a similar view, insofar as he takes part of Spinoza's axiology can be captured by the following claim: "Val2: In so far as a person is free, what has value is whatever is known to lead to the perfection of his or her essential characteristic(s); something has disvalue in case it is known to diminish or impede the perfection of his or her essential characteristic(s)". However, Youpa also rejects Miller's relativism, writing: "I believe it is potentially misleading, if not inaccurate, to suggest that Val2 is relativistic in any non-trivial sense. Val2 is relativistic only in the sense that any theory that is not self-evidently true is relative: the truth of any such theory is relative to, or depends on, something other than the concepts involved in the statement of the theory." (Youpa, "Spinoza's Theories of Value").

[13] See Rumbold, "Spinoza's Projectivist Ethics".

Assuming, for the sake of argument, then, that MT1 and MT2 do describe Spinoza's principal metaethical target, how best might we characterise the metaphysics that, according to Spinoza, has given rise to these ideas, that is, the 'suppositions' that 'all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end', 'that God himself directs all things to some certain end' and that 'Nature acts for the sake of an end' (EI*Appendix*, EIV*Preface*)? Again, this continues to be a site of considerable disagreement in the literature.[14] To try and give a sense of at least some of the relevant issues here, let us take each of the preceding claims in turn, starting with the idea that 'all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end'.

On the surface, Spinoza's target in this instance looks explicit. Given his reference to the idea of things acting 'on account of an end', we know the metaphysics he has in mind is a teleological one, which is to say, one allows for the possibility of things being directed or orientated toward a specific end, which they act in order to bring about.[15] Moreover, his identification of 'natural things' as the subject of this ends-directedness tells us that this is an unthoughtful teleology as opposed to a thoughtful one, that is, one in which end-directed action may be undertaken by unthoughtful or 'natural' things, as opposed to 'thoughtful or 'intelligent' agents.

Within the broad domain of unthoughtful teleology, though, Spinoza's description of his contemporaries' position is ambiguous between a few ways in which an unthoughtful agent may be ends-directed. That is, we might take unthoughtful agents to be ends-directed either (i) in the sense that they form part of a system that, as a whole, is directed to single, ultimate end; or (ii) in the sense that

[14] See e.g. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*; Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza"; Bennett, "Spinoza and Teleology"; Garrett, 'Teleology in Spinoza"; Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality"; Lin, "Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza"; McDonough, "The Heyday of Teleology and Early Modern Philosophy".

[15] For clarification, by a 'teleological metaphysic', I mean – here and in what follows – what Viljanen refers to as a teleological 'ontological framework', which is to say, the idea that things operate in service of a given end, not, as Viljanen puts it, 'a certain scheme of explanation in which items are explained by citing their (beneficial) future effects'. Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*, 133.

each individual agent acts with respect to its own, agent-specific ends, ends which may or may not be compatible with the ends of other agents and which may or may not be in service to a single, ultimate end. In what follows, I shall refer to the former kind of unthoughtful teleology as 'remote unthoughtful teleology', and the latter as 'proximate unthoughtful teleology'.[16]

In referring to the idea that 'all natural things act on account of an end' then, was Spinoza intending to refer to a metaphysic of *proximate* unthoughtful teleology or *remote* unthoughtful teleology, or both? Again, scholars are divided. For Carriero, Spinoza can be read as addressing, at least partly, a metaphysic of proximate unthoughtful teleology.[17] For Garrett, Spinoza only intends to address a kind of remote unthoughtful teleology.[18]

One of the reasons this debate is important is because of its ramifications for our understanding of Spinoza's location within the history of ideas and, in particular, his relationship with Aristotle and later Aristotelianism.

[16] To avoid confusion, it is worth noting that this terminology is also used by Aquinas, albeit in a different sense to how I use it here. Thus, when Aquinas uses this distinction, he typically intends it to differentiate between those ends a thing ultimately pursues (remote ends) and those intermediary ends that a thing is required to pursue in order to reach that ultimate end (proximate ends). Thus, a physician might mix medicine (the proximate end) for the sake of improving the health of a patient (the remote end). However, as explained above, on my account, to say that something is pursuing a proximate end does not necessarily imply that it is simultaneously working towards an ultimate end, only that it is working to its own end, one which may or may not also contribute to some ultimate end. For more on this see: Aquinas, *Sent*. II, d. 36, q. 1, a. 5, ra 5; Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ra 9; a. 7, ra 8; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 1, a. 3, ra 3; q. 12, a. 3, cor. Also Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*, 217-8.

[17] Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality".

[18] Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism", 313.

For his own part, Aristotle explicitly endorsed a metaphysic of what we have been calling proximate unthoughtful teleology. On Aristotle's account, all changes enacted by natural things, including generation, are fundamentally ends-directed; *an* 'end' (τέλος) being that for the sake of which a thing is, or acts, and *the* end being precisely the realisation or actualisation of that which exists in a thing in potency. Thus, insofar as natural things change with their quantity, or change with respect to their substance, they act for the sake of an end. In change pursued by natural agents, such ends will typically be a distinctive 'activity' (ένέργεια) relating to that thing's kind; that is, a sort of being in action or internal functioning.[19]

Aristotle's position on *remote* unthoughtful teleology, however, is more mixed. On the one hand, Aristotle was ready to accept the possibility that some individual natural things may be directed toward a remote or overall end, as well as a proximate one. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, for example, he famously declares happiness to be man's final end: 'that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else'.[20] However, at the same time, Aristotle also held that some things happened for no end whatsoever; one example being an eclipse of the moon.[21]

If we assume, then, that Spinoza *did* intend to address in his critique a metaphysic of proximate unthoughtful teleology, we leave open the possibility that he *may* have intended to address (and hence ultimately reject) a broadly Aristotelian position. Alternatively, if we assume Spinoza *only* intended to address a kind of remote unthoughtful teleology (as in Garrett's reading), this possibility is rendered off the table.

Of course, complicating the picture further, the conclusion that Spinoza *did* intend to address proximate unthoughtful teleology does not necessarily commit us to the view that he also intended to

[19] Cf. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, 86-8.

[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a30-34

[21] For example, on Aristotle's account, numerous events, like an eclipse of the moon, did not occur for the sake of a final cause. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1044 b 12.

address *Aristotelianism*. As will be further detailed in a moment, by Spinoza's time of writing, various writers had endorsed various conceptions of proximate unthoughtful teleology, some favouring straightforwardly Aristotelian positions, others endorsing it for other reasons. However, irrespective of whether Spinoza's did intend to address a broadly Aristotelian metaphysic or not, there seems good reason to think that his attack on the idea that 'all natural things act on account of an end' *was* intended, at least in part, as a rejection of proximate unthoughtful teleology.

Perhaps the most significant piece of evidence we have here is Spinoza's description of his contemporaries' belief that 'natural things act for the sake of an end' as a metaphysic of 'final causes'. As he puts it in EI*Appendix*, 'not many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions'. This is significant, for at Spinoza's time of writing, to refer to a metaphysic of 'final causes' was not to refer to a metaphysic of *remote* unthoughtful teleology but to one of *proximate* unthoughtful teleology – each thing's 'final cause' being its proximate end, and the cause of all the other causes by which it existed and acted.[22] In Aristotle's original account, this identification between a thing's end and its final case was taken to follow from the very nature of a cause. As he explains in his *Physics*,

> ...we call [something] a cause as [being] the end; this is that for the sake of which – e.g. of walking, health. For, why does one walk? We say, "in order to be healthy," and speaking so we think we have given the cause.[23]

To a certain extent, commentators like Garrett, who read Spinoza as making space for the possibility of proximate unthoughtful teleology are willing to concede this point. However, according to Garrett, it is still possible to read Spinoza's reference to final causation as referring *only* to remote unthoughtful teleology, claiming it may be 'implicitly restricted to the denial of final causes *considered*

[22] For more on this see Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality", 113.

[23] Aristotle, *Physics*, 194b32-5.

as ends that are set before God-or-Nature'.[24] Admittedly, this is a possibility. However, it is not what we might call a *plain* reading of the text; which is to say, it is not the way we would normally think Spinoza's contemporaries would have interpreted such statements. Rather, all other things being equal, we would normally think they would have read Spinoza as referring to proximate, rather than remote unthoughtful teleology.[25] The real question, therefore, is: is there any further reason why we might think that Spinoza's intentions are different from the norm? Which is to say, that all other things aren't equal, and that Spinoza's intention was to make a somewhat oblique reference to remote unthoughtful teleology?[26]

[24] Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism", 313.

[25] Certainly, this is how we imagine such readers would have read other seventeenth century writers when they refer to final causation. Thus, when Descartes, for example, asserts that 'it is not the final but the efficient causes of created things that we must inquire into' (Descartes, *Principles*, I, 28, CSM I 202); that 'we shall entirely banish from our philosophy the search for final causes'(Descartes, *Principles*, I, 28, CSM I 202); and that 'the customary search for final causes (is) totally useless in physics' (Descartes, *Meditations*, IV, CSM II 39); our natural assumption is that he is referring to a metaphysic of proximate thoughtful teleology. (Indeed, this is certainly how Garrett reads Descartes in this instance: cf. Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism", 326). Moreover, this is not just because we know that, as it happens, Descartes was otherwise committed to a kind of remote unthoughtful teleology, and thus to deny final-causation-understood-as-remote-unthoughtful-teleology would be contradictory, (although that helps!), but rather simply by virtue of the fact that proximate unthoughtful teleology is the kind of ends-directedness to which most of Descartes' contemporaries would have associated with a metaphysic of final causation.

[26] All this, it should be said, runs directly counter to Garrett, who argues that Spinoza's references to final causation ought to be taken as references to a metaphysic of remote, rather than proximate unthoughtful teleology 'unless support for the more radical reading is forthcoming from other features of Spinoza's texts'; Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism", 315.

Garrett provides us with two key arguments here: first, that Spinoza endorses a kind of proximate unthoughtful teleology by virtue of his doctrine of the *conatus;* and second, that Spinoza endorses thoughtful teleology. Unfortunately, once again there is not the space to enter into Spinoza's theory of the *conatus* here (a running problem!). Suffice to say, however, that I tend to view the *conatus* in Spinoza's metaphysical psychology as a non-ends-directed striving, analogous to Descartes' *conatus ad motum*,[27] a reading which means Spinoza would have been free to deny proximate teleology while simultaneously endorsing the kind of striving captured by the *conatus*.[28]

The question of thoughtful teleology is perhaps more complicated. On the one hand, of course, appealing to Spinoza's arguments with respect to thoughtful teleology as a way of motivating his view on unthoughtful teleology might seem a little odd. For most seventeenth century writers – indeed, many writers prior to the seventeenth century – the mechanisms behind thoughtful and unthoughtful teleology were entirely distinct, the first occurring when an intelligent agent intentionally directs their action toward the fulfilment of a chosen end, itself elected following a process of cognitive deliberation; the second occurring when an agent, predisposed by nature to act in service of some specific end, is caused by that end to act in service of it without the engagement of any cognitive faculties.[29] Regardless, then, of whether Spinoza actually did endorse thoughtful teleology,[30] it would seems strange to suggest that

[27] Cf. Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza", 48.

[28] For more on this, which has also been referred to as the 'inertial reading', see, Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*; Carriero, "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza"; McDonough, "The Heyday of Teleology". For a (somewhat) dissenting voice see Sangiacomo, "Teleology and Agreement in Nature".

[29] For an important contribution to this tradition see e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk3, ch. 2.

[30] Again, a site of scholarly dispute - Curley and Garrett arguing that Spinoza did endorse thoughtful teleology (Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza: The Issue of Teleology"; Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism"), Carriero and Bennett arguing that he did not (or at least, according to the latter, should not have)

his commitments on *that* matter would have implications for his conclusions with respect for unthoughtful teleology; for, normally speaking, one might easily endorse the former while at the same time rejecting the latter.[31]

However, Garrett's point here is a little more nuanced, his argument being that Spinoza's model of thoughtful teleology – his understanding of how intelligent agents come to direct their action toward a given end – itself depends on what Garrett interprets as an unthoughtful teleological processes: specifically, the *conatus*. According to Garrett, then, in respect to both unthoughtful and thoughtful end-directed behaviour, Spinoza sees the *conatus* – itself interpreted as ends-directed – as driving a 'general teleological selection process', by which states of affairs are selected and produced 'on the basis of their typical or presumptive consequences'.[32] Correspondingly, insofar, as we deny, *contra*-Garrett, that the *conatus* was ends-directed, we are forced to either: i) explain how a non-ends-directed striving might result in thoughtful teleology; ii) explain how Spinoza accounts for thoughtful teleology without reference to the *conatus*; iii) deny that Spinoza endorses thoughtful teleology.[33]

My own view here is that, against Garrett's warnings, Spinoza intends to take the second path – or, to put it another way, I think Spinoza has an account of how we select certain ends to pursue that is not (primarily) informed by the *conatus*. One place we might see this, perhaps, is in Spinoza's description of how a person's value judgements may themselves bring about their motivational states. Thus, as Spinoza puts it in EIVp19, 'From the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by, what he judges to be good or evil.' As Youpa has emphasized, what we see here is Spinoza's effort to establish some situations in which reason can lead someone to perform certain

(Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality" ; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*; Bennett, "Spinoza and Teleology").

[31] Cf. Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza", 41.

[32] Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism", 325-7.

[33] Carriero essentially takes this, third path. See Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality", 132-144.

actions.[34] Moreover, from this, we might surmise that Spinoza is able to establish a process by which thoughtful agents intentionally direct their action toward the fulfilment of a chosen end, itself elected following a process of cognitive deliberation, without relying on the *conatus*, be it ends-directed or no.

All this, of course, is only to establish that at least one of Spinoza's metaphysical targets in the *Ethics* is a metaphysics of proximate unthoughtful teleology. We might easily agree with Garret, however, that *another* of Spinoza's targets is a kind of remote unthoughtful teleology. This seems clear enough from Spinoza's references to the idea that 'Nature acts for the sake of an end' (EIV*Preface*) and 'Nature has no end set before it'.

Next, let us turn to Spinoza's reference to the claim that 'that God himself directs all things to some certain end'. Happily, this is one aspect of Spinoza's thought upon which almost all commentators agree: namely, that it is a direct reference to the doctrine of divine providence. To briefly review this position, the doctrine of divine providence is the thought not only that all things are ends-directed (either in the sense of proximate or remote teleology or both) but that all things are directed to their end *by God*, who is himself working for the sake of an end in so directing things.

One way of understanding the doctrine of divine providence, then, is a claim about the *source* of ends in nature, the claim being that their source lies in God, rather than in nature itself. A classic statement of this idea is provided by Aquinas. As he recounts in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

> All things are subject to divine providence, not only in general but even in their own individual selves. For since every agent acts for an end, the ordering of effects towards that end extends as far as the causality of the first agent extends… the causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being, not only as to constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles; not only of things incorruptible,

[34] Youpa, "Spinoza's Theories of Value".

> but also of things corruptible. Hence all things that exist in whatsoever manner are necessarily directed by God towards some end…[35]

If Spinoza's identification of the doctrine of divine providence as one target of his critique seems plain, however, one final, open question for us to deal with is how he saw his targeting of this idea in respect to his earlier targeting of proximate and remote unthoughtful teleology. Specifically, whether he took himself to be attacking any given articulation of those theories *or* just that articulation which saw proximate and remote unthoughtful teleology as dependent upon a prior commitment to the doctrine of divine providence.

Again, part of the reason that this is significant is because it has important implications for the scope of Spinoza's critique and the kind of authors with whom he might have imagined himself to be engaged. For example, one characteristic of Aristotle's conception of proximate unthoughtful teleology is that it asserts such a metaphysic independently of any reference to the doctrine of divine providence. As Walsh explains, Aristotle's original teleological metaphysic is properly characterised as 'immanent' and 'natural', in the sense that the goals that explain the parts and activities of a system are goals pursued by the system itself.[36] In other words, there is no external 'source' to a thing's end, they occur naturally. By contrast, as is clear from the extract above, Aquinas offers a conception of proximate and remote unthoughtful teleology according to which the 'ends' we recognize in nature – both those possessed by individual things (proximate unthoughtful teleology) and the ultimate end followed by things in general (remote unthoughtful teleology) – are established by God.[37] In this way, Aquinas might be seen to draw

[35] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I,q22, a2.

[36] Walsh, "Teleology", 118-121.

[37] Aquinas's worry here was not so much *how* the ends of natural agents could be enacted (for, like Aristotle, Aquinas saw final causality as covering this territory) but rather how the ends that unthoughtful agents undoubtedly pursued arose to begin with (see e.g. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q6, a3). Here Aquinas sees a strong dis-analogy between unthoughtful and thoughtful teleology. In the case of thoughtful teleology, the source of the end pursued by the agent is clear: that is, they are elected by the agent themselves, typically after a period of

his metaphysics closer to Plato than to Aristotle.[38] His teleology is properly characterised as 'transcendental' or 'extrinsic', in the sense it is dependent upon the work of a divine being.[39]

In attacking a metaphysic of proximate (and remote) unthoughtful teleology, was Spinoza intending to target a 'immanent' and 'natural' metaphysic, one asserted independently of the truth or falsity of the doctrine of divine providence, or a 'transcendental' or 'extrinsic' one, one whose truth or falsity is taken to depend on the claim that 'God himself directs things to some certain end'?

In a recent article, Sangiacomo presents a strong argument that we ought to interpret Spinoza as solely intending to address the latter. Specifically, in Sangiacomo's view, Spinoza's arguments are best understood as directed towards the kind of late-scholastic account of final causes put forward by Adriaan Heereboord (1614–1659), Franco Burgersdijk (1590–1635) and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617): one which explicitly rejects the possibility of end-directed action absent cognition and thus holds that all end-directed behaviour manifest by unintelligent agents (of which such writers take there to be a great deal) is the result of God's providential direction of all things toward the good.[40] One way we can see this, Sangiacomo contends, is that all Spinoza's arguments against proximate unthoughtful teleology progress from an attack on the notion of an intentional providential God, a line of argument

'deliberation'. However, given the lack of similar psychological capabilities on the part of unthoughtful agents, the same could not be said in the case of unthoughtful teleology. Rather, it appeared that the ends pursued by unthoughtful agents arose spontaneously, making unthoughtful agents like arrows aimed toward marks without the intervention of an archer.

[38] Plato, *Timaeus*.

[39] Walsh, "Teleology," 118-121. For one early modern proponent of the same idea, see, e.g., Boyle, "Disquisition About the Final Causes of Natural Things".

[40] Sangiacomo, "Aristotle, Heereboord, and the Polemical Target". In suggesting Heereboord as the possible source of Spinoza's description of his contemporaries' teleological beliefs, Sangiacomo here follows Wolfson. Wolfson, *The philosophy of Spinoza*. Vol 1, 425.

that would have been devastating to those endorsing Heereboord's 'transcendental', 'extrinsic' teleology yet would have left Aristotle's 'immanent', 'natural', conception untouched.

Personally, I find myself still largely unpersuaded by this line of argument. On the one hand, Sangiacomo is surely right that Spinoza's anti-teleological arguments are most *successful* when imagined to be directed toward the kind of account of final causality endorsed by Heereboord, as opposed to Aristotle. However, as Viljanen argues, when considered in the wider context of Spinoza monistic metaphysics as a whole, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Spinoza's main argument in EI*Appendix* is, after all, directed against *all* finality, that what he is interested in is 'overthrowing a whole metaphysical tradition and replacing its ontology with a new, adequate one', rather than restricting himself to solely those teleological metaphysics dependent upon a celestial director.[41] Moreover, it is perhaps worth stressing that if one subscribes to the belief that proximate and remote unthoughtful teleology is simply impossible without the intervention of an intelligent actor (i.e. God) – as many of Spinoza's contemporaries', including Heereboord, did – then Spinoza's critique would have been taken to undercut unthoughtful teleology *simplicter*, rather than only transcendental, extrinsic teleologies (immanent and natural teleologies being effectively incoherent for other reasons).

Overall, then, I tend towards an inclusive reading of Spinoza's metaphysical targets in EI*Appendix* and EIV*Preface*, one including not only the doctrine of divine providence and remote unthoughtful teleology, but proximate unthoughtful teleology; similarly one including not only the immanent and natural teleologies of Aristotle, but also the transcendental, extrinsic teleologies of Heereboord and Suárez. Within all of this, however, I do think Spinoza leaves room for the possibility of thoughtful teleology, and end-directed behaviour by intelligent agents.[42]

[41] Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power,* 123.

[42] On the recommendation of one of this article's two anonymous reviewers, for further German scholarship on the debate about Spinoza's metaphysical target, please see: Schnepf, "Von der Naturalisierung der Ontologie zur

3. The Connection Between Our Mistakes about Metaphysics and Our Mistakes about Metaethics

If the previous two sections sought to identify Spinoza's metaethical and metaphysical targets, the next question is in what sense does Spinoza think our adherence to the latter has propagated the former? As trailed in the introduction, I take Spinoza to offer two distinct arguments here, one in EI*Appendix* and another in EIV*Preface*. To help bring out the contrasts between the two, let us look at each of these passages in turn.

3.1 EI*Appendix*

Spinoza opens EI*Appendix* by confidently claiming that the 'all the prejudices' he undertakes to expose – i.e. MT1 and MT2 – 'depend' on the idea that 'all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end' and that 'God himself directs all things to some certain end', which is to say, the doctrines of proximate and remote unthoughtful teleology and divine providence. However, as intimated earlier, when he eventually returns to this thought toward the end of the *Appendix*, he gives relatively little explanation as to how this has occurred.

Perhaps the main argument Spinoza offers here is that our notions of value have arisen partly as a result of our prior adherence to an anthropocentric species of divine providence, which is to say, the idea that *in* directing all things towards their end, God is acting for the sake of human beings. Thus the reason people commonly 'imagine' that good and bad, order and disorder are among the 'chief

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Naturalisierung der Ethik: Spinozas Metaethik im Kontext spätscholastischer Entia-moralia-Theorien", and Schmid *Finalursachen in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine Untersuchung der Transformation teleologischer Erklärungen*.

attributes of things' is 'because...they believe all things have been made for their sake' (EI*Appendix*). Defending this claim, he gives the following argument:

> After men persuaded themselves that everything that happens, happens on their account, they had to judge that what is most important in each thing is what is most useful to them, and to rate as most excellent all those things by which they were most pleased. Hence, they had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness… (EI*Appendix*)

Now, before we look at this passage in detail, it is worth noting that, for many of Spinoza's contemporaries, there would have been something a little odd about his identification of the origins of *their* account of value as the idea that 'everything that happens, happens on account of human beings', for that was far from the most prevalent view of divine providence held at his time, much less what 'men commonly supposed'. To be sure, there was a long-standing Judeo-Christian tradition which claimed that all things had been made for the sake of human beings.[43] As Maimonides recounts (writing centuries before Spinoza), such a position had a long tradition even at his time of writing, being well-supported in the Bible, in verses such as "He formed it (viz., the earth) to be inhabited" (Isa. xlv. 18); as well as "And spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in" (Isa. xl. 22).[44] However, there was also a competing, possibly more popular tradition – again supported by scripture,[45] endorsed by Maimonides[46] and, more contemporary to Spinoza, Descartes[47] – that held that all things were made by God not for

[43] See, e.g., Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, Part II, Section I.

[44] For more see Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III, ch 13.

[45] See Colossians 1:16: 'For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him'

[46] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III, ch 13.

[47] Descartes, R, *Letter to Chanut – 6 June 1647,* CSM III 321. 'We may say that all created things are made for us in the sense that we may derive some utility from the; but I do not know that we are obliged to believe that man

the sake of human beings but for the sake of God. It is possible, of course, that Spinoza's intention here is to reference some ancient, pre-theoretic folk-view of ends in Nature, held long before a more studied, deocentric view of divine providence had come to prominence. Yet, at the same time, we ought to recognise that, for many of his readers at least, there would have been something slightly jarring about Spinoza's analysis: his critique would appear to assert that their views about value sprung from a metaphysical position many would not recognise as their own.

Let us put a pin in this thought for the moment and turn to the main substance of his argument. Reviewing the passage, there is little doubt that Spinoza's line of reasoning is confused and confusing. In the extract, Spinoza seems to claim his contemporaries' somewhat naïve endorsement of an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence has led them, by an understandable (if not entirely defensible) line of reasoning, to formulate notions such as good and evil and, presumably, to view them as among the 'chief attributes' of things. Yet quite how this line of reasoning has progressed is somewhat obscure. For example, one thing Spinoza seems to claim is that part of our thinking on this matter is bound up in our perception of things as useful to us and, in particular, our understanding of a thing's value *in terms* of its utility. Yet how this links up to either the notion of divine providence or to a metaethical thesis like MT1 or MT2 is far from obvious.

Unfortunately, this is also one point where the historical record is of relatively little help. That is, nothing in the work of those who adhered to an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence would seem to explain why Spinoza might think that his contemporaries' endorsement of *that* metaphysical position would lead them to endorse something like MT1 and MT2 (as far as I am aware, that is). To be clear: there are certain respects in which the teleological views held by Spinoza's contemporaries could be said to have led them to endorse certain metaethical positions (albeit when combined with

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is the end of creation. On the contrary, it is said that 'all things are made for his (God's) sake,' and that God alone is the final as well as the efficient cause of the universe. And in so far as created beings are of service to each other, any of them may ascribe to itself a privileged position and consider that all those useful to it are made for its sake'.

certain other beliefs about the nature of a specific range of values). However, as we shall see in a moment, these chains of reasoning relate first and foremost to a far more secular (and more general) position on ends in Nature – specifically, an Aristotelian conception of proximate unthoughtful teleology – rather than divine providence, whether anthropocentric or deocentric.

Thus, the passage in EI*Appendix* is troubling for a number of reasons. Despite the various inadequacies in Spinoza's mode of presentation, however, I think the broad lines of his critique are plain enough. The point where Spinoza confuses matters, perhaps, is when he claims that, as a result of our prior endorsement of an anthropocentric divine providence, we 'had to judge that what is most important in each thing' as 'what is most useful to them', which is to say, to a judge a thing's value in terms of its utility. This, I think, puts the argument Spinoza wants to make exactly the wrong way round. What Spinoza wants to say is that, as a result of our prior endorsement of an anthropocentric divine providence, we have come to judge a thing's utility or agreeableness as something 'important in each thing'; which is to say, as evidence of, or identical to, its goodness, or excellence. Let us call this *Move One*. From here, I think what Spinoza then wants to say that it is as a result of our conception of a thing's utility as ethically significant that we have come to view goodness and badness (and other values) as something 'positive in things, considered in themselves'. Call this *Move Two*. Reconfigured thus, the kind of reasoning *Spinoza* takes to be lying behind his *readers'* train of thought is much more readily apparent.

The key point in Move One, it seems, is Spinoza's characterisation of anthropocentric divine providence as the idea that 'everything that happens, happens on our account'. What adhering to an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence gave people, on this analysis, is a view of the world according to which no events occurred by chance and all events could be understood as loaded with some deeper, divinely-ordained purpose. Adopting this approach, when human beings then began to find things that were particularly useful to their purposes, or particularly pleasing to them, the immediate thought was not that 'it-just-so-happens that, to human beings, x is useful' but rather that 'x was created in the way it was created so that it might be of use'. In other words, a thing's usefulness was not a happy accident, it was specifically designed to be useful as part God's more general orientation of all things

toward the benefit of human beings. Moreover, because all this expressed *God's* intentions for us, the fact that any given thing *was* useful ought not to be understood merely as a fact about how it might feature in the purposes of human beings but as something of ethical significance. Useful things were not just useful, they were something *good*, they had an excellence to them. Thus, from a starting assumption that 'everything that happens, happens on account of human beings', one might see how people began to think of thing's utility as evidence of, or identical to, their goodness.

So how, then, did we get from here to the further thought that goodness and badness (and other values) ought to be thought of as among the 'chief attributes of things' (i.e. Move Two)? Again, we can easily imagine how this view came about. The central thing to bear in mind here is that, if we assume that certain things have been created by God in such a way so as to be useful to human beings, then we might similarly conclude that whatever utility any given object *has* should be properly understood as a property or 'attribute' *of* that object, conferred on it by God as part of his design (just as He might make it red, say, or heavy). Moreover, insofar as we deem properties like 'utility' as ethically significant – that is, as a marker of a thing's 'goodness' – we might similarly understand the various ways in which objects are ethically significant as reflective of some fundamental characteristic given to them by God in the process of creation. And assuming we say all *this*, it is a relatively short step to the view that goodness and badness themselves *just are* something 'positive in things, considered in themselves', or MT1 and MT2.

On Spinoza's account, then, the problem with anthropocentric divine providence –aside from its falsity, that is – is that it has engendered a certain way of looking at the world, a view according to which nothing happens by chance and everything has its place in a wider, divine plan. And it is this way of thinking, Spinoza argues, that, when combined with a few further additional premises, has then given rise to the idea that things are, in themselves, good and bad, ordered and disordered, beautiful and ugly.

Placed against its historical backdrop, of course, there are several elements in this line of analysis that are a little odd, not least Spinoza's identification of an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence as the foundation stone of his contemporaries' view of value, (the latter of which many would endorse, yet the former of which many would undoubtedly reject). However, I think Spinoza

may be doing something rather interesting here, particularly when one views his critique against the tenets of voluntarism, one of the more popular metaethical theories of his day.

According to the voluntarist viewpoint, all goodness ultimately depends on God's will. Jean Calvin, for example, might be seen as endorsing a voluntarist metaethics when he claims in his *Institutes* that 'what is righteous' depends only upon the will of God.[48] Similarly, Descartes endorses a voluntarist line when he argues in his *Sixth Set of Replies* that 'the reason for their goodness depends on the fact that [God] exercised his will to make them so'.[49]

What Spinoza does in EI*Appendix* is to turn this doctrine completely upside-down. On Spinoza's account, it is not by virtue of God's intentional will that things are good but rather by virtue of our beliefs about God's will that we have (mistakenly) come to believe in the goodness of individual things. Thus, far from our understanding of, and faith in, God guiding us to what is good (as the Calvinist might claim), it is precisely our malformed and mistaken understanding of God and his purposes that has led us to perpetuate a malformed and mistaken understanding of the goodness of individual things and indeed, of goodness itself. In this way, then, faith – at least of the kind that many of Spinoza's contemporaries would profess – is not the solution where ethics is concerned, it is part of the problem, it is a shroud blinding us to the ethical realities of the world: namely, that the world and all its contents bear no moral properties whatsoever (at least, in the way described by MT1 and MT2).

3.2 EIV*Preface*

If Spinoza's argument in EI*Appendix* requires a little reconstruction, happily the analysis he offers of the relationship between his contemporaries' metaphysics and their metaethics in EIV*Preface* is much more straightforward. On this occasion, Spinoza leaves matters of divine providence and its

[48] Calvin, *Institutes*, III xxiii.2.

[49] Descartes, *Sixth Set of Replies*, CSM II 294.

relationship with questions of good and bad, order and disorder, to one side. Instead, he focuses on the connection between our beliefs about perfection and imperfection and our prior commitment to what I have described as proximate unthoughtful teleology. He begins this analysis by first exploring what he takes to be a traditional and commonsense definition of the terms 'perfect and imperfect'. Originally, he explains, these terms referred to the extent to which something was complete, or 'carried through to the end which its Author has decided to give it' (EIV*Preface*). Such ends are typically models or exemplars Authors set before themselves as goals to work towards. The models, in turn, usually being 'universal ideas', that is, concepts constructed from particulars of one species or genus. Properly speaking, therefore, to say a thing was perfect was to say it embodied the model or exemplar the Author had in mind when they initially undertook the project.

With perfection understood in these terms, Spinoza then argues that, following our belief that Nature 'does nothing for the sake of an end', we were naturally led to believe that 'Nature sometimes fails or sins, and produces imperfect things'; that things could be imperfect by virtue of lacking something 'in them which is theirs'; and that perfection and imperfection, good and bad were themselves something 'positive in things, considered in themselves'.

The line of reasoning here looks clear enough. Following our adherence to proximate unthoughtful teleology, Spinoza seems to want to claim, human beings unsurprisingly came to view natural things as attempting to produce or instantiate some model or exemplar, just as a thoughtful Author does when undertaking a project. Given our everyday concept of perfection, however, this unwarranted expansion in the range of things we took to be end-directed likewise implied an expansion in the range of things could be said to be perfect or imperfect. Thus, just as an artificial product might be considered 'imperfect' insofar as failed to meet its Author's original intention, natural things might also be considered imperfect insofar as they did not embody the model or exemplar *we* imagined *they* were working towards. From this, then, we get the first prejudice Spinoza contests: the thought that, in such cases, 'Nature itself has failed or sinned', and 'left the thing imperfect' (EIV*Preface*). More pressingly, however, such patterns of thought also seem to prompt the idea that perfection itself may be something borne by objects and actions. According to the principles of this system, objects and actions

bear degrees of perfection simply by virtue of something which, as Spinoza puts it, 'is theirs', namely their own success or failure in pursuing their own ends. As such, perfection itself becomes something things can be said to 'possess'. In a similar way, perfection and imperfection also become something that things have, 'considered in themselves', for in a world containing x and x alone, x would still carry a degree of perfection because it would still be at a given point on the path towards its ultimate end.

In EIV*Preface*, then, Spinoza goes a long way to helping us understand how a prior adherence to proximate unthoughtful teleology, when coupled with a common understanding of perfection, could yield something like MT1 and MT2. Importantly, this is also a story that many of those adhering to such a metaphysic would have recognised. For example, for those subscribing to certain Thomist traditions, perfection consisted in a thing's actuality. As Aquinas had originally put it in his *Summa Theologiae*, 'created things are…called perfect, when from potentiality they are brought into actuality, this word, "perfect", signifies whatever is not wanting in actuality',[50] and 'a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality'.[51] Again, Aristotle proves the source of this account. For Aristotle, to be perfect was synonymous with being complete, with both words sharing the same Greek verb (*teleios*). Moreover, since, on Aristotle's view, a thing is complete or perfect in virtue of its 'achieving' its end,[52] and since, by virtue of Aristotle's underlying metaphysics, a thing's end is its actuality or an activity specific to its nature, for an Aristotelian such as Aquinas, a thing is 'complete' or 'perfect' to the extent that it is actual, which is to say, to the extent it achieves its end by performing an instance of its specifying potentiality. Thus, an acorn could be said to be 'perfect' or 'complete' once it exists as an oak tree, (that is, once it both achieves its end and realises its potency to exist as an oak tree by actually existing as an oak tree), just as an artefact made by an intelligent agent is 'complete' or 'perfect' to the extent that it embodies the goal the agent initially intended in creating it.

[50] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q4, a1

[51] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q4, a1.

[52] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

All this looks to reflect key moves in Spinoza analysis. Spinoza's description of his contemporaries' axiology as one in which perfection and imperfection are 'something positive in things, considered in themselves', and in which nature sometimes 'fails' or 'sins', would also have rung true for any readers from this tradition. For example, on the latter point, Aquinas emphasises that the fact that something acts for the sake of an end makes it open to certain kinds of evaluation which would not be appropriate if that thing were not acting for the sake of an end. As he puts it, we do not attribute fault to an agent, 'if the failure is related to something that is not the agent's end' (say, if a grammarian fails to heal someone), but 'we do find fault with things done according to art, for instance, when the grammarian does not speak correctly, and also in things done according to nature, as is evident in the case of the birth of monsters'.[53] On Aquinas's view then, to say that a grammarian is imperfect insofar as they do not speak correctly, or that a natural thing is imperfect insofar as it brings forth 'monsters', is not necessarily to make any normative judgment about them. However, to say that a grammarian failed to achieve perfection in their efforts to speak correctly, or that a natural thing failed to achieve perfection in its efforts to procreate, is to make a normative judgement, which is to say, it is to find fault in the effectiveness of their actions to bring about their intended end.

If this much looks relatively straightforward, however, there is one aspect of Spinoza's broader critique that is a little more puzzling. That is, towards the end of EIV*Preface,* Spinoza appears to jump from a set of conclusions about his readers' 'prejudices' about perfection to a set of conclusions about their understanding of good and bad. Thus, from concluding that 'perfection and imperfection…are only modes of thinking', Spinoza goes on to assert that 'as far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves'. Now, at this stage in Spinoza's argument, one might question on the basis upon which Spinoza makes this move. That is, why is he so sure that he can make the same conclusions about good and bad that he has made about perfection?

Again, the historical record can be of help here. For it seems clear enough that, for many of Spinoza's readers – specifically those who held what McDonald has termed the 'Nature Approach' to

[53] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* bk 3, ch 7.

goodness – a similar story to the one Spinoza had been telling in EIV*Preface* with respect to perfection and imperfection could have been told with respect to their conception of good and bad.[54]

To say a little more about the philosophical background here: the Nature Approach describes a philosophical position on the metaphysics of goodness promulgated in different forms, and to different degrees, by writers extending from early Christians (such as St Augustine, 354–430 C.E.), through late medieval philosophers (such as Philip Chancellor, c.1160–1236; Albert the Great, c.1200–80; and St Thomas Aquinas, 1225–1274), and, eventually, to latter-day scholastics and scholars closer to Spinoza's time of writing (such as Franciso Suarez, 1548–1617). According to this tradition, goodness is taken to consist in a state intrinsic to natural things, or, more properly, to supervene on the actualisation of a thing's specifying potentialities. The account arose out of two commitments characteristic of the Approach's description of value: first an Aristotelian metaphysics of proximate unthoughtful teleology according to which each thing is directed in its movement from potency to actuality by the actualisation of what exists in it in potency (already discussed); and second, a certain conception of goodness in which the good is identified with the notion of an end (or IGE as I will refer to it here).

The roots of IGE again lie in Aristotelian thinking. For Aristotle, the identification of a thing's good with its end could be seen by first reflecting on commonalities in the goods of particular things. Thus, since '[e]very art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good', the good is properly thought of as 'that at which all things aim'.[55] From here, Aristotle then considers a short step to the conclusion that a thing's end must also be its good; for since 'ends' are that for the sake of which a thing is, or acts, and since that for the sake of which all things act is the good, a thing's good is naturally identified as its end and *the* good is similarly identified as the end of all things.

[54] MacDonald, "The Relation between Being and Goodness".

[55] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094d1-2.

Given our present purposes, however, the real significance of IGE lay in the fact that, when tied to Aristotle's metaphysics of proximate unthoughtful teleology, it gave rise to a number of first and second-order ethical doctrines. Although he was writing centuries before Spinoza, Aquinas offers a good guide here to the relevant positions.[56]

On Aquinas's conception, the first thing IGE did was fix the *content* of a thing's good. Thus, given that each thing's end is its actualisation, and each thing's end is also its good, the final good of each thing is its 'full actualisation'. From here, one could also understand *the final good of human beings*: since each thing's final good is its full actualisation, the good for human beings consists in the actualisation of the potentialities that belonged to them by virtue of their nature as human beings.

IGE also established *the extent to which something is good*. Since one way of conceiving of individual things was as at some point along a path towards realising its end or actuality and since, by

[56] A brief proviso about this: while the analysis I provide here is representative of Aquinas's thinking about value in the sense that it picks up a significant strand in his moral philosophy, it should not be taken as the sum total of his thinking on the subject. Like many of its proponents, Aquinas saw the Nature Approach as just one way of thinking about goodness, his ethics attempting to bring together several ethical traditions and resolve the tensions between them. For example, the most significant of these is Aquinas's partial endorsement of what MacDonald calls the 'Participatory Approach'. On the Participatory Approach, the relationship between being and goodness is conceived of in terms of being's dependence, both metaphysically and causally, on goodness. Unlike the Nature Approach, the roots of this approach lay in a peculiarly Platonist line of thinking. In his Republic, Plato had argued that all Forms and hence all being, participated in the good, in turn making the good metaphysically prior to being. Through MacDonald's analysis, this is easily differentiated from the Nature Approach I discuss in this paper. However, MacDonald also stresses that these two traditions did not develop separately. Rather, for most writers working in the Middle Ages the Nature Approach and the Participatory Approach were two parts of a single foundation, rather than two distinct foundations, (a view, he argues, that would later cause them to attempt to synthesise the two positions in ways which were sometimes fruitful, but occasionally calamitous). Aquinas was one writer who attempted such a synthesis. (see MacDonald, "The Relation between Being and Goodness," 15-16)

IGE, that end was that thing's good, one could also say that each thing *was* good to the extent that it achieved its end; or, more properly, a thing was good to the extent that it realised its nature by actualising the potentialities specific to the kind of thing it is. Ultimately, this engendered what MacDonald calls *a 'universality' thesis about goodness*: since everything is good to the extent that it realises its nature, and since everything that exists realises its nature to some extent, everything is good to a certain extent. Goodness is therefore universal in the sense that everything that exists (or has being) is, to some extent, good.[57] Echoing Augustine, Aquinas puts this as the thought that,

> Every being, as being, is good. For all being, as being, has actuality and is in some way perfect; since every act implies some sort of perfection; and perfection implies desirability and goodness…Hence it follows that every being as such is good.[58]

Most significantly, though, alongside these first-order claims, IGE also promulgated a certain view about the nature of value. First and foremost (at least for Aquinas), IGE implied *goodness shared a referent with being.* This gave rise to perhaps Aquinas's most famous metaethical thesis: that 'goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea'.[59] Here Aquinas reasoned that since the actualisation of a thing's specifying potentialities was, at least to some extent, its existence or being, and since the same actualisation of a thing's specifying potentialities also described the extent to which it was good, 'being' and 'goodness' refer to the same thing under two descriptions, 'differing only in idea'.[60] More relevant to our present purposes, IGE also implied *goodness was identified with a state intrinsic to natural things*.[61] Since for a thing to be good is for it to have realized its nature to some

[57] MacDonald, "The Relation between Being and Goodness," 6-7.

[58] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q5, a3

[59] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q5.a1

[60] Stump and Kretzmann, "Being and Goodness", 101.

[61] MacDonald, "The Relation between Being and Goodness", 5

extent, and since the properties by virtue of which a thing can be said to have realized its nature are, at least in part, properties intrinsic to the thing itself, goodness can be said to be identified with a state intrinsic to all things.[62]

What emerges from the Nature Approach, then, is a thesis about the supervenience of goodness on certain natural properties (to use Stump and Kretzmann's characterisation).[63] On Aquinas's conception, objects are good to the extent that they have the property of having actualised their specifying potentiality; however, at the same time, a thing's goodness is not identical to any natural characteristic of that thing. Take, for example, rationality. To be rational is an actualisation of a thing's specifying potency, thus to the extent that any given human being *p* possesses the property of having actualised their capacity for rationality, *p* is morally good; however that is not to say that rationality is itself goodness. Rather, goodness is a 'transcendental' property, one which supervenes on an objects actualisation of its specifying potentialities.

Given this intellectual background, then, one can see how *some* of Spinoza's contemporaries – at least, those subscribing to the 'Nature approach' – would have appreciated how *his* analysis of *their* understanding of perfection might also map across to *their* corresponding account of goodness. As with the link between their teleological metaphysics and their understanding of perfection, the key premise here is a certain preconception about the nature of the ethical value at stake: in this case, that goodness might be identified with a thing's end (IGE). Once this identification is made, though, assuming one started from a metaphysics of proximate unthoughtful teleology, a legion of ethical and metaethical propositions followed. Indeed, for those adhering to such a metaphysical framework showed not just what was good but what goodness was. Again it was revealed that goodness was something which

[62] MacDonald, "The Relation between Being and Goodness", 15. For Aquinas, the wider significance of this relationship lay in the fact it suggested that created goods are good in virtue of some intrinsic form inhering in the created goods themselves, rather in virtue of their relation to some extrinsic or separate form, such as God.

[63] Stump and Kretzmann, "Being and Goodness", 105-6.

'belongs to the nature of a thing', that relates to something about things 'which is theirs' (EIV*Preface*). It is something 'positive' and 'in Nature', as opposed to 'in our understanding', and inheres in Nature such a way that individual things might be considered good 'in themselves' (EIV*Preface*): i.e. MT1 and MT2.

Overall, therefore, we can begin to see why Spinoza feels so secure about jumping from a critique designed to debunk his contemporaries' view of perfection to one debunking their understanding of goodness. More generally, though, we can also appreciate just how different the analysis Spinoza offers in EIV*Preface* is to that he gives in EI*Appendix*. As we have seen, in EI*Appendix*, Spinoza's argument focuses on a theistic conception of ends in nature; his claim being that it is primarily by virtue of his contemporaries' beliefs about God and His purposes that they have come to see good and evil, order and disorder as something 'in things'. By contrast, in EIV*Preface*, Spinoza runs an entirely separate line of analysis, again claiming that his contemporaries' endorsement of MT1 and MT2 has arisen out of their commitment to the idea that there are ends in Nature, yet this time ignoring the role of God entirely and focusing instead on a purely Aristotelian conception of proximate unthoughtful teleology (one which, as we have said, could be allied to a doctrine of divine providence, as it was in Thomist traditions, or not, as it was in Aristotle's original conception). In EI*Appendix* and EIV*Preface*, then, Spinoza shows how the roots of his contemporaries' mistakes about value – i.e. their endorsement of MT1 and MT2 – may lie in *either* their beliefs about God's providence, or a more secular, Aristotelian conception of ends in Nature, thereby giving proponents of either (let alone both) doctrines, serious pause for thought.

For Spinoza, therefore, it is not that there is any necessary entailment between his contemporaries' metaphysics and their metaethics, as was mooted in the Introduction to this article. The movement from one set of ideas to the other is not, in this sense, analytic. However, neither is the connection arbitrary, it is not a chance combination of two unrelated ideas (cf. EIIp18s). Rather, in EI*Appendix* and EIV*Preface*, Spinoza argues that the one has 'given rise' to the other in a couple of ways, combining specific metaphysical doctrines with ideas such as the thought that divine providence imbues events in Nature with a certain extra significance; that a thing's utility can be understood as one

of its chief attributes; that perfection ought to be understood as a kind of completeness; that a thing's good might be identified with its end; and so on and so forth. Without these additional premises, of course, the path of reasoning from teleology to axiology is almost impossible to discern. Once we are furnished with them, however, we can appreciate both the content of Spinoza's critique and the threat it posed to his contemporaries' understanding of the world.

IV. Conclusion

In some respects, Spinoza sets up his account of value in the *Ethics* much like other early modern authors. Like Hobbes in his *Leviathan*, for example, Spinoza distinguishes his own metaethics by differentiating it from conceptions he takes to be popular amongst his readership. Where Hobbes contests the idea that there could be anything 'simply and absolutely' good or evil, or that one might take a 'common rule of good and evil' from 'the nature of the objects themselves',[64] Spinoza rejects the notion that good and evil indicate anything 'positive in things, considered in themselves'. However, in rejecting his contemporaries' views about value, Spinoza is more ambitious than Hobbes. He does not simply dismiss rival philosophies but instead makes an active attempt to refute them. To achieve this Spinoza first attempts to unpick their genealogy, to reveal the ideas from which they have arisen. The aim of this essay has been to elucidate precisely how Spinoza thinks this malign process has occurred. As has been shown, Spinoza offers two analyses here. First, in EI*Appendix*, where the path from a teleological metaphysics to MT1 and MT2 passes through an anthropocentric doctrine of divine providence and our mistaken assumption that a thing's utility has ethical significance. Second, in EIV*Preface*, the key connections lie between a metaphysics of proximate unthoughtful teleology, a specific understanding of perfection and the identification of a things good as its end. More generally,

[64] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 6; Hobbes, *De Homine*, ch. XI, 4, 47,

this analysis reveals the extent to which Spinoza sought to engage with the ideas and philosophies of his time. Over the course of his discussion about ends and value, we witness Spinoza-as-physician, diagnosing the source of his contemporaries' faulty thinking and teasing out the confused and mutilated strands of reasoning that have flowed from it. In so doing, Spinoza sets his philosophy apart from rival theories, drawing his readership away from those ideas he saw as dangerous. However, at the same time, he also binds his work ever tighter to its intellectual context. In attempting to rectify the ken of his readership, Spinoza grounds the *Ethics* in its time and place. It becomes a book not for all ages but a book of the seventeenth century, and the Dutch Republic, a book concerned both with timeless questions of God, the human mind and happiness but also with the 'inadequacies' of popular thinking, with the confused imaginings of the unenlightened, circa 1670.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Susan James, John Carriero, Sebastian Gardner and two anonymous referees for their many helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

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