

**PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY AS AN  
ALTERNATIVE TO PSYCHOTHERAPY.  
THE RELEVANCE OF SPINOZA'S  
PHILOSOPHY FOR EDUCATION,  
PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

**FILOSOFÍA PRÁCTICA COMO ALTERNATIVA  
A LA PSICOTERAPIA. LA RELEVANCIA  
DE LA FILOSOFÍA DE SPINOZA PARA  
LA EDUCACIÓN, LA PSICOLOGÍA  
Y LA PSICOTERAPIA**

MIRIAM VAN REIJEN

**Abstract**

*In the year 1970 the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze published his book Spinoza: Practical Philosophy. Deleuze had noticed that a lot of philosophers and 'common people' had re-discovered the positive impact that Spinoza's philosophy could have in their personal, daily lives, though he also notes that this is something that has happened before. In my contribution I defend that this is not due to a simplification or popularisation of his philosophy, but to the contrary, it is the effect of his metaphysics itself, written down in his Ethics, if you accept them. I defend also that Spinoza's philosophy isn't difficult to understand (his opponents and contestants always did very well!)*

*but –still– difficult to accept. Nowadays there are even some psychotherapeutic methods making use of Spinoza's philosophy, especially his philosophy of the passions, but because of this it sometimes loses its philosophical stake. In my contribution I defend and show how it is possible to work as a philosopher using Spinoza's philosophy, in daily life and with everybody, for instance against feelings of guilt and anger.*

**Keywords:** affects and passions, *akrasia*, *conatus*, critics on the Stoics and on Descartes, debate on free will, impotence of reason, practical philosophy, psychotherapy, spinozistic therapy.

### Resumen

*En el año 1970, el filósofo francés Gilles Deleuze publicó su libro Spinoza: filosofía práctica. Deleuze se percató de que muchos filósofos y 'personas comunes' habían redescubierto el impacto positivo que la filosofía de Spinoza podía tener en su diario vivir; si bien señala que esto es algo que había pasado antes. En mi contribución, defiendo que esto no se debe a una simplificación o popularización de su filosofía, sino que, por el contrario, es el efecto de su metafísica misma, formulada, sobre todo, en su Ética; en el caso de que uno la acepte. Defiendo también que la filosofía de Spinoza no es difícil de entender (¡sus oponentes y impugnadores siempre lo entendieron muy bien!) sino que es –todavía– difícil de aceptar. En el presente hay incluso algunos métodos psicoterapéuticos que hacen uso de la filosofía de Spinoza, especialmente de su filosofía de las pasiones; pero desde esta apropiación a veces se pierde la apuesta filosófica misma. En mi contribución deseo defender y mostrar cómo es posible trabajar como filósofo usando la filosofía de Spinoza en la vida cotidiana y con todos, por ejemplo, en contra de los sentimientos de culpa e ira.*

**Palabras clave:** afectos y pasiones, *akrasía*, conato, críticas a los estoicos y Descartes, debate sobre el libre albedrío, impotencia de la razón, filosofía práctica, psicoterapia, terapia spinozista.

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‘Psychology without philosophy is blind.

Philosophy without psychology is empty.’<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

There are numerous reasons or causes for the renewed interest in Spinoza’s philosophy, which at the same time shows the different perspectives from which Spinoza can be viewed. Spinoza’s philosophy turns out to be surprisingly current. As a philosopher, he described the nature of man, his conscious and subconsciousness, his urges and desires, and the relation between thoughts and passions, long before Freud, modern psychology, and psychotherapy. Spinoza shows a philosophical way to suffer less from the passions and become wiser and at the same time a happier person. In the past thirty years, philosophers have taken interest in Spinoza’s philosophy of the affects due to the attention towards emotions in philosophy in general and the rise of a practical and even therapeutic branch of philosophy in particular.

Developments in neuroscience have led to an interest in Spinoza’s philosophy of emotions, and also in his opinions on body and mind, on

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<sup>1</sup> James Gibson Hume, in: *Psychological Bulletin* (1909).

consciousness and on free will. It seems Spinoza already knew that human consciousness and thought correspond with physical processes. He describes how we imagine, learn and forget without being an autonomous subject and without free will. Also, his idea of egoless happiness can be linked to eastern schools of thought, even though he was most likely unfamiliar with these. All this makes Spinoza's philosophy also current and relevant on a personal level, in the individual pursuit of a happy life, and also on a social level, for a better understanding of human relations. Therefore, Spinoza seems to be of great relevance also for psychology, psychotherapy and education. Practitioners and teachers can directly benefit from Spinoza's philosophical insights.

But how does this widespread interest, not in the least from 'laymen', relate to the often-heard opinion that Spinoza is so difficult? It is certainly no novelty that Spinoza attracts non-philosophers and non-intellectuals in general. First of all, it is important to make a distinction between being difficult to read, difficult to understand, difficult to accept and difficult to practice. This distinction may explain an interesting difference between supporters and opponents of Spinoza. Contrary to the first category, for centuries the latter did not complain about Spinoza being so difficult to understand. Criticising him, it appears they understood him very, very well! They just don't agree with him and they don't accept his ideas, because these ideas they 'could not easily digest' as Willem van Blijenbergh writes in his first letter to Spinoza, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1664. It seems that Spinoza's philosophy is more criticized because of going against prevailing views and ideas, not to mention against common practices, than for being so difficult to understand. And even agreeing with his philosophy and living by it may be two different things. Spinoza himself describes the ancient phenomenon of '*akrasia* (impotence of reason or weakness of will), also referenced by the title of one of my books on Spinoza: 'The mind is willingly, but the flesh is stronger'. This is also the motive of a famous character from classical myths and tragedies, Medea, to whom Spinoza refers several times in his *Ethics*. When she is about to kill her children, to take revenge on her unfaithful husband, she cries, saying: 'I see what's right, and choose what's wrong'. So, I dare to pose that it is not Spinoza's philosophy that is difficult, on the contrary, Spinoza's

philosophy is simple, and can even make daily life simpler... if you truly share his ideas, and practice them. Spinoza's philosophy is clear, plain, consistent and logical. Maybe what he writes is too simple, too good to be true. Spinoza reduces everything to the core, the *conatus*, the striving to persevere in one's own existence. He removes all unnecessary subjects, a lot of them to which he refers to as 'thought things' or *ens rationes*. Only what exists in reality is important; contrary to what should be, or what could have been, or what we preferred or would have wanted... 'Thought things', which are general ideas, norms, prohibitions and prescripts, only exist in the mind, not in the world. Knowing this, not purely theoretically, but as an intensely felt and integrated insight, can prevent a lot of mental distress, because it takes away the grounds for troublesome emotions, for the passions.

But maybe there are reasons that make it difficult to properly understand Spinoza's philosophy.

a. Firstly, Spinoza never assumes man as he should be, but always as he is, much like Machiavelli, whom he joins on this matter. He describes man in the perspective of the entire nature, because a person 'who does not understand man in all, does not understand man at all,' as Hegel wrote somewhere. So, Spinoza's notions are always descriptive, concrete and real, and never normative.

b. Secondly, Spinoza often uses fundamental concepts in a way clashing with both traditionally philosophic and everyday language. He himself points out this fact explicitly, and if this is not noticed, it will lead to misconceptions and incomprehension. Examples of this include: Spinoza's 'right and wrong' never is moral or ethical, it refers always to what is useful for or opposes the perseverance of our own existence. 'Perfect' is what is totally real; 'right' equals might; 'free' equals necessary going on, what cannot be held up.

c. Thirdly, Spinoza provides both philosophical and pragmatic arguments for his ideas, as can be seen for instance in his discussion of the human passions. From Spinoza's philosophy of the affects, the passions are the most accessible and also most interesting for psychology and

education, because they are important in daily life. The whole theory of the affects forms the core of and is set in the centre of Spinoza's philosophy. Not just in the *Ethics*, where it is literally in the middle, in part 3, but in all his works, the central role of the emotions is highlighted. And this philosophy of the affects is based on the concept, or better, on the reality of the *conatus*. By this, Spinoza also criticises current morals. In the *Ethics*, part 3, proposition 39, he writes that good and evil are nothing but certain kinds of happiness and sadness. So ethical notions are based on affects, instead of the other way round. Spinoza sustains an absolute ethical relativism, and this is based on a naturalistically objective 'good for us'. To experience something as good or bad is radically subjectivist, as it regards an individual *judging* something as advantageous or disadvantageous to what somebody strives for, and also because it regards the individual possibility to be mistaken in this judgement. These mistakes arise from limited knowledge or experience, and so, following Spinoza, they could never have been otherwise. Enjoying the sunlight seemed good (because it felt nice), until somebody became aware of the risk of skin cancer (because this risk feels very bad). In twentieth century philosophy and ethics the school of 'emotivism' followed this spinozistic idea.

In the context of this article it is important that from this idea it also follows, that the relation between affects and mind, emotions and ratio, feelings and thought, forms the core, not only of the basis of the explanation of the origin of the affects, but also of the 'cure' for the passions. It illustrates Spinoza's practical and even therapeutic goals. As can be seen in the composition of the *Ethics*, his ultimate aim is to bring about a shift, from impotence to power, and from sad passions to joy and happiness. This theme of a road that needs to be traversed can be seen in all of his works: to go from superstition to true religion (TTP), from ignorance to true knowledge and insight (KV and *Ethics*), from impotence and slavery to power and democracy (TP). That maybe another reason why there are few philosophers more appealing to so many different kinds of people and to so many people with no academic training.<sup>2</sup> There is a special and

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, G. (2001). *Spinoza: filosofía práctica*. Barcelona, Tusquets.

apparently paradoxical link between the geometrical manner of writing in the *Ethics*, and the possibility of concrete and practical implications of Spinoza's philosophy in everyday life.

## **2. Spinoza's philosophy is radical - and just therefore, practical**

First I will highlight a little bit more some philosophical aspects of Spinoza I already mentioned, before treating the concrete and practical implications of his philosophy in everyday life. Spinoza's philosophy is radical and, precisely because of this, maybe contrary to what most people think and believe, is very practical. I sustain that Spinoza's philosophy is not difficult to understand, but yes, it is radical, subversive and contrary, even in present times. He was different from his contemporary philosophers, and he still is from ours. Spinoza was one of the first few to take modern science –still at an early stage almost four hundred years ago– seriously and therefore reached at fundamental conclusions. Spinoza's philosophy is radical and practical, because it is founded in anti-anthropomorphism, anti-anthropocentrism and anti-finalism. His philosophy is a radical determinism, because he is a determinist even related to the (human) mind, and to so-called mental acts. Spinoza subscribes to radical monism, much like he does to radical ethical relativism.

But contrary to what is commonly said, Spinoza is not an unequivocal rationalist. In fact, a fundamental idea in his philosophy is the impotence of reason, for the flesh (the body, the passions) is stronger. Spinoza actually takes this true nature of man into consideration, which explains why ignorance, superstition and passions always play a large(r) role. The power of the ratio is restricted at two fronts, or from two sides, making it a limited power. At the 'bottom' reason is restricted by the urge for self-preservation and by the imagination (the first way of 'knowing') and the 'upper side' of reason is restricted by intuitive knowledge. And there is no way that someone only by its own effort can reach this third superior way of knowledge, that has sufficient strength to overcome and prevent the sad passions; Spinoza does not shows a way of how we can acquire

this kind of knowledge, it cannot be learned or taught. Reason alone isn't enough, it fails as a motivating force. That's why Spinoza concludes at the end of the *Ethics*: 'If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, still, it can be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.'

### **3. Spinoza's explanation for the 'impotence of reason', or 'the human bondage'**

Since antiquity, the word '*akrasia*' has been used in discussions to refer to the impotence of reason. In modern philosophy, the problem of '*akrasia*' has once again become the subject of study and discussion. It was brought back into philosophy in 1969 by philosopher Donald Davidson, through the attention to choice theories and theories on acting in scientific philosophy, and recently in the philosophy of mind.<sup>3</sup> In daily life and folk-psychology, the term 'weak will' is used for this phenomenon and the notion of the 'weak will' and is also a well-known theme in Christian philosophy. It plays a large part in Augustine's idea of what constitutes a sin. Sins are by definition committed knowingly. The decision not to sin is entirely dependent on the will. The stories of saints who were tempted, but resisted are legion. The idea of sinning is linked to failure, to weakness. But weakness of what? Of the will, but not of the reasoning will. It is full of good will, after all. As the saying goes: the mind is willing, but the flesh is weak. However, in reality, this is *not* the case. In real situations where the saying applies, it is actually the flesh, that is to say, the body, the desire, the passion, that was stronger than the will or reason. This is Spinoza's explanation for the 'impotence of reason'.

I will provide two examples of 'popular psychological' formulations, rephrased in accordance with Spinoza's philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson, D. (1980). 'How is weakness of the will possible?' In: *Essays on actions and events*. Oxford, Clarendon.



– The notion of the ‘weakness’ of the will is caused by believing more in the reality of moral norms instead of in the reality of facts. Following Spinoza these norms are just ‘thought things’ instead of real things. In daily life, in reality, the so-called ‘weak will’ always appeared to be the one that, in fact, won. The idea of weakness and failure is caused by thinking in terms of what ‘should be’, ‘should have won’ or what ‘is proper’ instead of thinking in terms of what needed to be, because it is caused, or of urge, craving and desire. So, guilt, remorse and moral responsibility are symptoms of pride and arrogance. And the belief in a free will is the source of this pride. Following Spinoza, who doesn’t believe in a free will, pride denotes a great lack of self-knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This is caused by not viewing oneself in the factual here and now, but having in mind other people in these circumstances or oneself in different circumstances. Those other people or ‘I in a different position or situation’ could have acted differently. But, upon close inspection, in *this* same situation and at *this* same moment I could only act in *this* manner. To know oneself as always making the necessary choices in the current circumstances, negates the notion of failure. Knowing others to be in the same aspect as I am, without free will, without knowing what I don’t know, not realizing or remembering what I don’t realize and remember, also without the possibility to choose or do otherwise, prevents irritation, anger and hate. Thinking in terms of ‘I should or I would do...’ and at the same time not acting according to that idea, causes frustration and envy. The words ‘would’ and ‘should’ only express an intention or a conditional kind of willing. A certain thing is only desired *if* something or another person is being so or will be so, or *if* something or another person were not the case or the person right now. Not the concrete ‘I want this in this situation’, but the ‘I would... if..., if..., if..., if..., if I were another person’ or... if the situation was different. Being aware, knowing, recognizing, why one does *not* act on something, so, knowing the cause of this, prevents this frustrating way of thinking and therefore feeling bad.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ethics*, III. Def. XXVIII.

In general, anyone who thinks he or she ever acted differently from what he or she preferred can rest at ease: this is impossible. This notion only shows a lack of self-knowledge, a lack of knowledge of true motives and working causes. Does anyone ever think he or she has hurt someone? That means unjustly viewing themselves as the cause of something that is not in their control. Again, a sign of improper pride. Nobody has the ability to control people and cause their emotions like that. There has to be some kind of interaction, some interplay of forces. Who doesn't acknowledge this misunderstands one's own part, the part of others and the part of the circumstances. Moreover, someone who also feels guilty about this, isn't aware of the motives or causes that necessitated the action. The imaginative choice between 'either doing something for oneself or for somebody else only serves to provide a dilemma of 'failing one's duty or failing one's own interest'. Thankfully, all this is only an apparent contradiction, assuming an inexistent, isolated, abstract individual. Humans are so fundamentally social that the motive for helping other people has always a motivation in the person itself. It is possible to concretely do something for someone else, such as picking up their groceries, but the underlying motivation for this is always self-interest.

At the beginning I wrote that contemporary philosophers like Donald Davidson are still occupied with the *akrasia* phenomenon and the explanation behind it. In my opinion, their approach is not far removed from Spinoza's explanation. According to Davidson, *akrasia* is explained and justified by giving reasons for acting, but not the best reasons. Following Spinoza, this is only possible, as a good or the best reason—which for Spinoza always means what is *considered* as a good or the best reason—lacks at the same time a causing force, which the other force (which is not the 'best' reason) does possess. Even when the act conflicts with what should be done, the physical force in many cases prevails.

And following Spinoza, these inadequate ideas, superficially speaking, concern some apparent contradictions of body (what actually works and happens) and mind (norms, will, ideas). But in fact both, what we experience and call 'body' for Spinoza is always a unity of body-mind,

and what we call mind (thinking) is in fact also at the same time the working of the body, for instance, brain cells. The inadequate ideas have a negative impact on the peace of mind, happiness and efficiency. Spinoza's take is a philosophical one, concerning truth and having adequate ideas, and only to a lesser or minor extent the practical disadvantage and discomfort of adequate ideas. Philosophy is about being aware of the real causes of everything, and of knowing how and why human beings act on a factual level. To prevent frustration, knowing the causes of why one does *not* act or didn't act in a different way, is even more important, and it fits also into the original purpose of philosophy: 'know thyself', know your own opinions and motivations, be aware of what you really wanted, that's to say, what you really did or did not want.

To summarise: for all these notions on acting in concrete circumstances, what people think appears to be 'imaginative' on a double level. These notions do not correctly display reality. People neither understand the constitution of their bodies, nor that they are fundamentally driven by passions, the manifestations of a fundamental drive, the *conatus*, which controls their actions.

Spinoza provides an adequate explanation of how it can be that people know what is good and do what is bad. The explanation ultimately lies in the impotence of reason, that is, leaving the classical assumption of man as 'animal rationale'. A clash of forces between two manifestations of the same urge, or the same (conscious) desire, takes place. One of these is imagined or experienced to be good, the other to be bad. According to Spinoza, the distinction is in fact between useful, pleasant and good on the one hand, and harmful, unpleasant and bad on the other. If we do not acknowledge this, we get the impression things often go wrong. Spinoza's explanation and adequate notion of this is as follows: body and mind are one and the same thing, this can only be understood when we know the (abilities and functioning) of the body; the desire we do not acknowledge as desire of the same body-mind union is stronger, but it is not accepted. Spinoza's explanation is therefore grounded in his notion of a unity of body and mind.

Spinoza always considers weak, small, imperfect and inadequate to be relative, in relation to something else, and only to us. The *conatus*, the striving, is always the same pursuit to persevere in existence and to realise oneself. But this pursuit is manifested differently in different things, and also in different people and even within a human body – which in itself consists of units, depending on the nature (composition) and affectation by the outside world.<sup>5</sup> In case of conflicting affects, one affect might be considered a decision of the mind, while the other might not, leading us to speak of a passion versus a ‘will’. After all, all that is not attributed to the body may be attributed to the independent operations of the mind, that is, the free will. We have seen that Spinoza himself has the opinion that the body is capable of much more than we think. But regardless of that, what we call a decision is at the same time a ‘decision’ of the mind as well as a ‘desire’ of the body. That is to say, they are the same thing.<sup>6</sup> There is always only one principle at work; however, people can interpret it as a conflict and if one side prevails, they can also think they would rather have acted on the alternative, and that this would have been better, and they should not have chosen what they chose (for themselves), ‘because they are aware of their pursuit, desire... but not of the causes’ of their (often conflicting, unable to be realised simultaneously) drives. Especially when those drives are given different names, such as longing, motive or will, and some (will, for instance) are considered more, and others less as belonging to oneself. However, they are all manifestations of a *conatus* which wants to persevere, and the strongest prevails.<sup>7</sup> Superior strength, superior motivation, may be caused by several things, which we are not necessarily aware of. Some of the potential causes Spinoza names include the proximity of something in time and/or space, the certainty that an event will or will not occur, its affective charge, the associations linking one thing to another, all sorts of estimates and memories.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ethics* III, p51, p57, obs.; EIII, p17 obs.; EI, Appendix; EII, p14 up to and including p16; EIII, p2, obs.; EII, p2, obs.; EIII, p15.

<sup>6</sup> EII, p2, obs.

<sup>7</sup> EIV, p7.

#### 4. The case of Medea

I will expand on the case of Medea, since it provides an opportunity to show a lesser-known aspect of Spinoza, namely his involvement in the seventeenth-century Amsterdam theatre scene. In the seventeenth century, numerous plays based around Medea were written, especially in Amsterdam, in the circle Spinoza was associated with, or at least was familiar with, such as that of Rembrandt and Vondel. Jan Six I wrote a Medea play in 1648. The second time it was published, in 1679, it contained a Rembrandt etching depicting Jason's and princess Creusa's wedding. Lodewijck Meijer (1629 – 1681), who founded the Amsterdam drama society *Nil volentibus arduum* in 1669, and was a close friend of Spinoza's, also wrote a Medea play.

Medea's remark 'I see what is better and consider it better, but I choose what is wrong...' from Ovidius is quoted verbatim three times in *Ethics*.<sup>8</sup> In the third part of *Ethics*, discussing the affects, Spinoza uses it in an extensive argument that the body is capable of doing many things, without the mind making a decision or being involved (i.e. subconsciously), and that the body does all sorts of things that the mind (even when it is aware) cannot stop.<sup>9</sup> This means there are always forces at play, a balance of power, with both poles being manifestations of desire.

Because people are affected in several ways at the same time, they can also desire several things at the same time. The same individual that wants to lose weight can still be affected by appetite. Spinoza realises that the habit of using different words to describe manifestations of the same urge, depending on whether the urge is attributed to the body or the mind, can cause an additional conflict.<sup>10</sup> The actual conflict is the occurrence of two things that both cause desire, but cannot be realised at the same time. This is worsened by naming one of these things 'good'

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<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII, r. 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> EIII, p2, obs.

<sup>10</sup> EIII, p9, obs.

and the other ‘bad’; one thing a will (mind, reason), the other a desire or urge (body). The idealistic hierarchy of body and mind that follows from this (what the mind wants is better than what the body desires) is opposite to the actual balance of power, in which the stronger party always prevails, which is in most cases (for several reasons) bodily desire.

Spinoza always cites Ovid in a context where the impotence of reason is placed opposite the body, the imagination, the passions, everyday life. Is it possible for a person to live based on reason alone? Spinoza denies this. Reason cannot control, suppress or eliminate the passions, but Spinoza does not consider this a sign of weakness or shortcoming. This phenomenon, which everyone has experienced, has –like everything else– a cause; it can be explained and understood, meaning derided or abhorred, and one should not feel guilt or annoyance because of it.

Spinoza states that Medea truly could not act in any other way. No one ever could. Nothing could ever have happened in any other way. The ‘potential’ that does not or did not happen is a pointless category to Spinoza. Thinking you really want to do something without doing it is an illusion, as is thinking you really need to do something and not doing it. But at the same time, all these inadequate ideas cause passive and sad affects. Passive, because they originate in a lack of the personal active power of rational thinking. And sad, because they double all misery, since the notion of failure is added to the fact of (not) having acted, and the idea of ‘should have done so’, and these conflicting ideas, knowing what you should have done, and at the same time knowing that you in fact didn’t, causes the feeling of guilt. For Spinoza, everything that is done, even a supposed negative or harmful act, always expresses the life force, the urge to persevere, perfectly. This is manifested by Medea’s struggle and that of many men and women who have done the same thing. Medea knows and says that it is worse for her to have to live with the pain and humiliation that was inflicted upon her. She must do something to be able to look herself in the face again. ‘I do know the harm I am about to do, but wrath is more powerful than deliberation’ she says in Euripides’s play. She acts the only way she can act.

Immediately after Ovid's citation 'I see what is good and praise it for that; yet I strive for what is bad', Spinoza quotes from *Ecclesiastes*.<sup>11</sup> 'For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.'<sup>12</sup> According to Spinoza there is no reason for grief for those who are wise. The form of knowledge meant here is different from that of *Ecclesiastes*. In this context, Spinoza uses it to support the Medea motif. The second type of knowledge, reason, multiplies grief when the knowledge is not acted upon. This is showcased by the person acknowledging that 'agreements must be kept', but this is not the case for the person who is aware of and accepts that she couldn't have acted otherwise. This is a more profound self-knowledge, following from the power of the intellect that Spinoza describes in *Ethics V*, and is the true Human Freedom.

But both, Medea and *Ecclesiastes*, make a remark which shows still imagination, and no insight in reality. 'Knowledge multiplies grief' (*Ecclesiastes*) only holds true if 'knowledge' is interpreted as knowledge of a fact (having killed her sons) and together with the inadequate idea that she shouldn't have done this, is the origin of her blaming herself for this. In general: grief is always caused by knowledge of the second kind (factual knowledge), together with a way of normative thinking, instead of accepting what already happened. Thus this is only possible when there is no true knowledge of the third kind, i.e. intuitive knowledge, or insight and thus acceptance of what already happened, because it couldn't have happened otherwise. So, only insight leads to acceptance and tranquillity, factual knowledge does not. Having knowledge of the third kind, one (Medea) realises they could not resist to act upon what she saw as the better thing, even though they didn't know why. Everything that happens to be there, and works out, personal inclinations and limitations are accepted as a caused and given fact. To be clear, this refers only to everything that has already happened, or that somebody

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<sup>11</sup> EIV, p17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ecclesiastes* I, 18; cf. *Paul to the Romans*, 7/15 and 19.

has already done. There is no definite choice or legitimation on beforehand. Spinoza's philosophy is deterministic, not fatalistic. Fatalism is in itself an inadequate idea, and a symptom of pride, because one presupposes already to know the future, before it has happened or was realised.

To summarize, Spinoza's 'solution' to an ancient philosophical problem is possible, because he does not make three classical assumptions. 1) Man is not essentially rational, 2) there isn't something like a free will and 3) there doesn't exist an absolute (moral) good or bad. Spinoza does not distinguish between knowing and wanting, between wanting, desiring, and being driven to. This means there is no actual knowing to complement desire, but one desire prevails over the other, the winning party being what is desired most. He acknowledges the factual occurrence of 'knowing without doing', but he does not acknowledge any norm of 'should or should not have'. There is no 'higher' and 'lower'. This is also why he does not consider it a weakness to 'give in'. He sees the impotence (of reason, of knowledge) to carry out what is known to be better as a sign of superior power of another factor. The explanation from impotence/weakness (of reason and/or will) is only nominally opposite to Spinoza, who shows the power of external influences, the imagination and the passions. The practice is the same, but like with the passions, it is about understanding (as a power) instead of abhorring or deriding (as a weakness).

## **5. Relative impotence of reason**

According to Spinoza, reason is not powerful enough in itself to suppress or replace imagination, tradition and passions. But even this impotence is always relative. There are also many examples of how new information, factual knowledge and logical thinking can correct and subvert imagination and superstition. But it will be clear that Spinoza is not a rationalist as far as the power of reason is concerned. He can, however, be considered a rationalist as regards his trust in reason for its capacity of knowledge, to know what is beneficial and what is harmful in relation to a goal. This is an instrumental form of rationality. But knowing benefit and



harm, as true as the knowledge may be, many times is of no use against desire and passions.

Likewise, pursuing a personal advantage is difficult, according to Spinoza even impossible, to give up, but it is quite possible to change one's view of what is advantageous. In his opinion on self-interest and altruism, Spinoza also differs from Christianity. The story about the miser Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* can serve to make clear what Spinoza means by this possible change. At first, he –short-sightedly– considers it in his own interest to make as much money as possible, meaning he must exploit his servant and live a poor life. After a dream that makes him realise there is more to life than money, he considers it –well-understood– in his own interest to treat others better and lead a more enjoyable life. His urge to pursue his own interest has not changed, only his view of what constitutes his interest.

I will make a short return to the capability of knowledge of the second kind. When new information is provided, this is a process in which affections of the body, such as seeing, hearing or reading, are registered by the mind which is the idea of the body. We now know that connections in neural networks do change because of this, for instance by becoming thicker. It is possible, and even perceptible, that something that was desired before, suddenly stops being desirable. After reading that scientific research has linked solar radiation to skin cancer, innocently enjoying the sunlight feels less natural. This way, giving up something that was desired before is not as frustrating, because it comes with awareness of how things work, and the change is experienced to come from within. Because of new information, about the price or effort something will take, something else may become more desirable. People are 'more than willing to trade their idea for a better one', as long as they can think they were the one to change their mind. So in these examples, it is not a question of suppression or control, not even of emotions. One passion may suppress another, especially hope and fear, as Spinoza states.<sup>13</sup> Information has an effect,

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<sup>13</sup> EIV, p7.

or it doesn't, and both cases have an underlying cause. We have concretely seen that the stronger party always wins and for acting motives, this is no different. No one keeps to a promise they think causes a larger disadvantage than it does an advantage.<sup>14</sup> No one does one thing, while wanting to do another. No one acts differently from what they truly want, which is not the same as saying 'I would'. 'Would' is not a part of the will; what you truly want is shown by what you do. From two evils, the lesser is always chosen.<sup>15</sup> To summarise: to Spinoza, a weak will does not exist. Everything that happens is an expression of power, is positive, is real. The other, what would have been done, what should have been done and the like are mere ideas, resolutions, ideals, norms, in short a form of '*ens rationale*', a thought thing. Life always prevails over teachings.

## 6. Spinoza's criticism on the Stoics and Descartes

It's possible to illustrate the difference between the Stoics, Descartes and Spinoza related to the Medea-case in one-liners. Epictetus tells Medea: just don't desire that man (Jason), that desire is actually an irrational notion, be reasonable and you will have no problems. Descartes tells Medea: you know what is right, so don't look for vengeance, be strong, though your will is weak, you know what is right, you have to resist, because you are able to. Spinoza on Medea: even if she knows what is right, she could not act in any other way than to desire so much and thus be avenged.

Spinoza distinguishes several kinds of thinking and knowing, all with a different relation to feeling and doing, or being other ways of 'feeling'. Reason, the *ratio*, alluded to by the Stoics and Descartes, can be true and therefore useful, but it is not the kind of thinking or knowing that controls the affects. It is too cerebral, too general for that; it is 'only' true. The problem is the impotence of true notions, of reason, in relation to something else. But this does not come from a blameable human weakness.

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<sup>14</sup> TP II.12.

<sup>15</sup> TP III.6.

Spinoza actually considers impotence non-existent: everything that is 'not' or 'un-' is not there. Everything that exists has power (to exist), but this power is always related to (is always more or less than) the power of something else, and what has most power always win. This force, even in human considerations and calculations, is not an expression of free will or decision-making, but a mechanical occurrence that can be explained. From a certain viewpoint it might be said that both forces are 'inherent' to an individual, so regardless of which choice is made, one always acts as oneself. Still, Spinoza makes a distinction between passive and active, externally urged versus internally urged. Forced by outside powers, or driven by one self. The difference is not hard to see: reasonable thought and knowledge is a force from the inside, one's own power of thought. Someone knows they could not act differently, that they have done the best they can. The feeling of guilt that sometimes prevails, that cannot be argued or reasoned away, is based on norms taught in upbringing. The voice of the parents internalised to the point where it becomes a 'second nature'. As we have seen earlier, Spinoza is extreme, even radical, in his position that all that is destructive for the individual, physically as well as mentally, can only come from the outside, never from the inside.<sup>16</sup> A foreign force may prevail over one's own inner force, which always strives for perseverance, but can be beaten, again, both physically and mentally, by a stronger power or influence.

When applied to the passions, the following can be drawn from this: directly controlling the passions through reason is impossible, according to Spinoza: 'An affect can only be conquered or removed by another affect, opposite to and stronger than the one that is to be conquered.'<sup>17</sup> Also, 'True knowledge of good and evil, considered the truth, can temper no affect, though it can only do this when it is considered an affect in itself.'<sup>18</sup> The knowledge in question here is not the *ratio*, the second form of knowledge, but the third, intuitive form.

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<sup>16</sup> EIV, p20 up to and including p26.

<sup>17</sup> EIV, p7.

<sup>18</sup> EIV, p14.

I will discuss that Spinoza seems to be in accordance with the stoic philosophy of the passions. However, Spinoza disagrees with the stoic opinion that determining one's own thoughts depends on one's own choices, as he argues: the mind is willing, but the flesh is strong. So, unlike the stoic philosophers, Spinoza does not believe that the passions can be avoided entirely.

### **7. What could be a spinozistic therapy?**

I claim that Spinoza is in accordance with cognitive therapy, as far as he writes about the origin and nature of affects and passions. Spinoza does not abhor the passions, but tries to understand them 'as if they could be grasped like lines, planes or bodies'. And for him, understanding always means: to know or to recognize the cause.

There are two facts that determine the human condition: on one hand, the place of man as a single modus in the whole of nature, on the other, man's pursuit for self-preservation. This combination provides a scientific explanation of both the origin and nature of the passions. The human body, which is very complex, is influenced and affected by exterior factors in many ways. The experiences of the factual influences caused by exterior factors are referred to by Spinoza as affections. In this, man plays an objective part, passive, in a neutral sense, not harmful or painful. All other things (rocks, plants, animals...) are influenced in a similar manner. But these influences are consequential for the perseverance in existence the *conatus* strives for. This consequence may be positive, neutral or negative, meaning the pursuit of perseverance is enforced or stays the same or is hindered. This goes for man as much as it goes for rocks, plants or animals. In both people and animals, this experience of a perceptible exterior influence causes a sensory perception of pleasure or displeasure. An affect is nothing but a sensation of the body perceived as enjoyable (pleasure) or harmful (pain). If the mind is the idea of the whole body, the affects are the ideas of the sensations of the body. Spinoza calls these two primary feelings (which are ideas by themselves) happiness and sadness, or pleasure and displeasure.

When people experience these affects it is almost inevitable for them to get an impression (an idea of an affect) of the cause of this primary feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The idea of the cause we might have for this can be correct or mistaken. Spinoza refers to this distinction as active (when the idea is correct) or passive (when it is mistaken). In the latter case, we are not acting or understanding. The mistake can be the idea that ‘the other person should not have done this or that...’ and from this idea arises the blaming something or somebody else, as if the other person was the cause instead of just the occasion. Examples from everyday language that arise from this mistake are ‘you are hurting me’ and ‘you make me angry’.

The untrue idea of something or somebody else being the cause of one’s own sadness implies a judgement based on ignorance and a lack of understanding for others. It causes irritation or worse, hate. In this relation, it is important to note that not having judgements, including on human passions, does not mean that you are submitting yourself to everything that comes your way. Here it’s not about acceptance in the sense of leaving everything as it is. On the contrary, understanding is not only the prerequisite for happiness in the sense of inner rest and peace, but also for intervening more effectively. Do we judge the water when it rises? We can take more effective measures when we know what causes the water to rise. Or take a rabid dog: Spinoza says, we don’t judge it on a moral level, but we do put it down. The same reasoning could be made for human diseases, and even for unwanted human behaviour.

Actual neuroscience seems to agree with Spinoza. The main similarities regard the total unity of body and mind and the biological or neurological foundation of the primary feelings of pleasure and displeasure, and with it, all affects and passions. Based on the above, I will now discuss Spinoza’s philosophy or theory of the affects as a cognitive emotion theory, comparing it with other opinions on the emotions, considering it possible to change, eliminate, or evade emotions. Spinoza offers several remedies against the negative passions. From using one passion against the other, which can prove to be disadvantageous, the therapy comes down to using the power of thought. First of all, knowledge can be used against superficial

and false opinions. Secondly, reason is able to understand the passions themselves. It can observe how the mechanism of their origin works. It can understand the origin of the own passions. This prevents people from thinking of other people and things as the cause. Thirdly, there's the deeply felt insight in the perspective of eternity.

### **8. Spinoza's radical philosophical therapy compared with the Rational Emotive Therapy**

There is a fundamental difference between philosophising about emotions like the Stoics and Spinoza on the one hand and the theory of Rational Emotive Therapy on the other. Spinoza's therapy is more radical as well, not just on an elemental level, but also because negative emotions do not only lose their edge, but are removed, or better yet, transformed into stable joy. My conclusion is that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between philosophically regulating emotions on the one hand and, on the other, psychotherapies such as the Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), which claims to be based upon the philosophy of, among others, stoicism and Spinoza.<sup>19</sup> He confines himself to analysing the underlying ideas and makes a strict distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas.

Spinoza focuses less on the function and the practical effect of a thought or feeling. He does acknowledge the functional use of negative emotions such as fear, guilt and compassion. But Spinoza distinguishes two fundamental ways of being motivated to act: reason and a passion. The same practical effect, or even better, can always receive the same results by acting motivated by reason instead of by a passion. Because the factual result is a product or effect from the action, not from the inner motivation to act. But he denies that only the passions can have this function: 'Any

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis, A. (1994). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy. Revised and updated*. New York, Carol Publishing Group. Robertson, D. (2010). *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy*. London, Karnac Books Ltd.

deed we can be driven to commit because of a sensation that is a suffering, we can also be driven to commit by another cause.’<sup>20</sup> He denies, with the Stoics, that a passion is necessary, and thus the only way, to act. Seneca, a stoic philosopher who wrote much about anger, and Spinoza, both consider it possible for the passions to be functional. But only certain people need the function of an emotion for this, not just anybody! Just compare having a passion like anger with ‘drinking for taking in courage’, or being angry, just to dare to say something. These examples show that the passions are only of use to those who lack courage and insight. Others don’t need them, as they act upon insight (understanding) and courage, being aware of what they really want to do or not, and of being aware of what would be better to say or to do or not for others.

Seneca (to name a stoic philosopher who wrote much about anger) and Spinoza both consider it possible for the emotions to be functional.<sup>21</sup> But only certain people need emotions for this. It is comparable to taking in Dutch courage (just to dare say something, an example from Seneca) or a toothache (taking away the fear of going to the dentist). The examples show that the emotions are only of use to those who lack courage and insight. Others do not need them, as they act upon the insight (understanding, noticing) that they do or do not want something or that it would be better to say or do something anyway.

The Philosophical cognitive therapy does not aim to fight emotions. That would only be a treatment of the symptoms. This is about radically eliminating the cause, the source. The purpose is not to ‘(learn to) deal with emotions’. Moreover, there is another fundamental distinction to be made between the philosophical idea of the tackling of the emotions on the one hand and, on the other hand, the psychotherapeutic way such as Albert Ellis’ Rational Emotive Therapy. The RET claims to be based upon the philosophy of, among others, stoicism and Spinoza. But

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<sup>20</sup> EIV, p59.

<sup>21</sup> Seneca, L. A. (1928). *On Anger*. In: *Moral Essays*. Vol. 1. Trans. John W. Basore. London, W. Heinemann.

philosophical cognitive therapy does not aim to fight emotions. That would only be a treatment of the symptoms. The practical philosophy of the Stoics, and more consistent, of Spinoza, is about radically eliminating the cause, the source: irrational ideas, opinion. So, the purpose of practical philosophy is never to '(learn to) deal with emotions'. That's why this method, really based on Spinoza's philosophy and the Stoics, is more radical. Not just on the fundamental philosophical level (the challenge to the *irrational opinions* that causes the passions), but also because negative emotions do not only lose their edge, but are removed, or better yet, transformed into stable joy.

The most important difference between practical philosophy and the RET consists in the fact that in the RET four criteria for rationality are used. But only one of them is a philosophical criteria, that of the truth, and that is exactly the only one I'm working with as a philosopher! The other three criteria are practical, pragmatic or functional ones. Nevertheless, a highly metaphysical system as Spinoza's radical philosophy, just working with the truth and only the truth, proves to have more consequences in practice than whatever other theory or therapy.

Philosophy can also contribute to solve real problems by the clarification of ideas and the introduction of distinctions. This is because philosophy can be helpful in framing the problem in a proper way, which is a necessary condition for solving whatever problem. Practical philosophy can be used to trace and expose disguises of these real problems, disguises that originate in thought. The distinction between real and seeming problems is partly based on the assumption of the distinction between 'is and ought'. Hume postulated: from being (nature) one can't derive any 'being obliged to' (in social action): norms therefore can't be founded by facts. Machiavelli writes that he wants to 'start from the actual reality of things, and not from the fictitious idea of it; from the way people live, and not from the way they should live'. Once more: that's why Spinoza's philosophy is to be summarized as 'understand people as they are and not how they should be or how you would like them to be!'

The reduction of seeming problems to real problems in the rational-emotive therapy also takes place in psycho-analysis, and in neuro-linguistic



programming. These are three kinds of more or less philosophical psychotherapies – ‘talking cures’ – in which language, and also ‘self-talk’ is examined critically.

## 9. Comparing the Stoics, Spinoza and Sartre

The stoic philosophy also gives a philosophical explanation and argumentation for a theory on the origin of emotions that can be put to practical use. Epictetus wrote: people suffer (emotions) not because of events (reality) but because of their ideas (thoughts) of this reality. Reality is always what is. However, Spinoza disagrees with the stoic notion that determining one’s own thoughts depends on one’s own choices, as he argues: the mind is willing, but the flesh is strong. Unlike the stoic philosophers, Spinoza does not believe that the passions can be avoided entirely. This idea also corresponds with the findings of recent neuroscience.

The stoic idea of a distinction between situation (which is not in my power) and the accompanying thoughts (which would be in my power) is similar to Sartre’s philosophy on human freedom and responsibility in lack of freedom (the situation). And both correspond with the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, which, according to Descartes, is mostly expressed by belief in a free will as concerns the passions. Sartre constantly argues that we are responsible for all that we do and all that we are. Including our emotions, as he writes in *Sketch for a Theory of the emotions*. It is Sartre who states that the denial of free will and responsibility is a magical trick, is disavowal, and degenerated consciousness. That is, everything Spinoza thinks of the exact opposite.

Sartre, with his phenomenological theory of self-consciousness as a consciousness of one’s own body, was supposedly reaffirmed in his idea that all consciousness is self-consciousness. This notion corresponds with the findings of recent neuroscience. But at the same time, it clashes with his idea of human freedom as a free will and freedom of choice, founded in the self-consciousness. This is why Sartre remains a Cartesian dualist of body and mind (consciousness). Descartes’s error (Damasio) is also

one of Sartre's, as opposed to Spinoza's right regarding the radically monistic notion that the mind is the idea of the body, and free will is an illusion. Emotion is not a choice made by us, but rather an affect/effect that is produced 'through' us.

Is it still possible to do justice to the notions of free will that the stoics and Sartre hold? Their notion is restricted and inadequate, yet is still accepted by many and can be of functional use. I think this comes down to a different interpretation of the concept of (lack of) freedom. I can distinguish three different levels:

1. 'I am not free.' This is a remark based on everyday language, belief, thought and feeling. People often say: I had no choice, there were no other options. If you think and believe this, you do not feel free.

2. 'You are free, you're always free', Sartre argues. You have a choice in every situation, even when every choice has consequences. This means the notion from 1 does not hold true. Every action that objectively held an alternative stems from your own choice. If you know, realise and believe this, you will always feel free. This is a progression from 1 as regards both feelings and the possibility to act. That much is certain. But Sartre the philosopher says more: the fact that choice makes you feel free, means that 'man is free'. Philosophically, this is a strange leap.

3. People are not free, Spinoza posits in reaction to this. Feeling free is one thing, being free is another. Even when someone feels free when they think they are making a choice for themselves, it does not mean they are. No less than the sun actually disappearing, when it is observed setting behind the horizon. This is merely a natural (optical) illusion. Likewise, freedom can be felt where it does not exist.

It should be noted that the lack of freedom seen on the first level differs from the lack of freedom seen on the third. The first notion concerns the exterior restraints, which can indeed be laid aside. The third notion concerns inner restraints, they are what man has become, what can never be avoided. So the second notion of freedom is inevitable as regards experience, but does not display reality correctly.

## 10. Comparing Spinoza and Freud

Freud's work only contains a single passage on Spinoza, that is, on a 'Spinozian' school of thought. That passage is 'Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci'. Additionally, there are three known notes from Freud dating from 1931/1932 in which he answers questions about his relation to Spinoza. Although he generally expresses admiration and respect toward Spinoza, Freud's answers are somewhat cool. He does not make clear whether he has read any of Spinoza's works, but he does clarify why he does not want to get involved with philosophy in general and Spinoza in particular: he feels there is no need for a philosophical justification, he wants to attend the facts in an unprejudiced manner, and studying a philosopher only distracts from that.

Regardless of that, since the beginning of psychoanalysis and especially from the 1930s on, there have been many publications on Spinoza and the potential influence on and observed relation to psychoanalysis in general and Freud in particular. Initially affirmative and positive in tone, from the nineties on it became somewhat more critical. The similarities in Spinoza's and Freud's views on the world and humans are often observed. Both think in a radically determinist way, even concerning the human mind or psyche. This leads both to deny the existence of a free will; humans are no masters of their own brains. I will expand on this on the basis of four themes:

1. *Can the ignorance Spinoza writes of be linked to Freud's subconscious?* In the Appendix of *Ethics* I, Spinoza writes that 'all are inclined to find their own advantage and are aware of this. After all, this firstly means that people imagine they are free because they are aware of their wants and desires, but do not in their dreams think of the causes, driving them to want and desire, because they do not know these causes.' Spinoza also describes how people are content when they think they know the so-called purpose causes, and when they do not know those of others, they apply their own purpose causes to them. This is referred to as 'projection' in psychoanalysis. Spinoza's therapy corresponds with Freud's: make the subconscious conscious, to remove the power of

irrational motives. Spinoza explicitly names a number of ‘resistances’: education, culture, indolence, fear. Ignorance is fully related to physicality: ‘nobody knows what a body is capable of anymore...’,<sup>22</sup> which is why it is most obviously attributable to the operation of one’s own mind or conscious will. Moreover, for Spinoza, knowing what occurs is not the same as knowing the causes.

2. *If (the cause of) the problem is ignorance or lack of consciousness, it is no surprise to see the solution being sought in knowledge.* Yovel (1996) also refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s figure, but is actually of the opinion that Da Vinci and Spinoza and Freud share a passion for knowledge and take an analytical, not a moralising stance, and that sublimation (love for science as an effective satisfaction of the lust principle) is a form of liberation. In Spinoza’s works, he sees self-knowledge as emancipation, both in the TIE and in *Ethics*, and in Freud’s works, self-knowledge through therapy. However, the latter has a more modest target and focuses more on repression and resistance.

3. *With Spinoza as well as with Freud, the road from self-knowledge and reason to liberation and recovery has its limits.* At the same time, both make clear and explain why reason alone is not enough. Spinoza writes that reason only works when it has become an affect in itself.<sup>23</sup>

4. *A short evaluation of the relation between Spinoza and Freud.* I think most similarities are found in the general notions on man and the world. The differences become more apparent when Freud uses specific scientific terminology: libido, death drive, subconscious, repression, resistance. Some authors observe a fundamental difference in the concepts of libido and *conatus*.

A distinction that I did not find in literature is the fact that according to Spinoza the *conatus* does not only exist in humans, but in all that is. Freud explicitly mentions humans and considers the libido to be a

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<sup>22</sup> EIII, p2, obs.

<sup>23</sup> EIV, p14.

psychological phenomenon, though biologically grounded. He also describes the libido as 'suppressed mental energy', while the *conatus* is nothing more than affirmation. The *conatus* is the urge to persevere in existence and is not inherently linked to 'pleasure'. The *conatus* is monistic, solely aimed at self-preservation, though it can succeed or fail, creating the primary affects of pleasure – displeasure. Freud's theory of instinct is dualistic and shifts his theory of libido versus ego to death drive versus life wish. The assumption of a death drive is not observed in Freud's work until later on, after 1920. He then assumed that the death drive and its aggressive manifestation were genetically decided and became sceptical about his own theory. For Spinoza, a 'death drive' is an inadequate idea, a *contradictio in terminis*, because the drive, the urge, is the essence of all there is. Most authors do not take Spinoza's view on the death drive too seriously, so the relation to Spinoza stays safe.

Another distinction that has been observed is that Freud, as a therapist, works in a more empiric manner. As a therapist, Freud stays practical and sober. His struggle is aimed at conquering an eternally-subconscious 'Es', against which the 'I' can only be fortified, after the conscience (Über-Ich) has been fought. At most, the purpose of therapy is to become a normal person through affectively supported self-knowledge. Spinoza's goal is 'redemption' and serves a higher purpose: knowing the Divine Nature, becoming a special person, experiencing intellectual love and realising one's own essence.

A final difference lies in Freud's more 'pessimistic' views. Spinoza and Freud share the wisdom, which consists of acknowledging reality, acknowledging the natural truth. But for Spinoza, this is not the highest, ultimate goal. Acknowledgement and acceptance are at the same time affective fulfilment and a participation in eternity. With Freud, the reality principle opposes pleasure. It removes illusions, which is painful, discordant and frustrating. Fóti calls this the difference between Spinoza and Freud: acceptance in pleasure or acceptance in pain.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Fóti, V. (1982). «Thought, affect, drive and pathogenesis in Spinoza and Freud». In: *History of European Ideas*, 221-236.

## 11. The actual debate in and with the neurosciences

### 11.1. *The PSR and the actual debate on 'free will'*

In reality and in Spinoza's philosophy, everything is based upon the PSR, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or the *conatus*. It is the 'urge to persevere in one's own existence' as a working cause, as an effect, as a manifestation of all that is, God or Nature. From this urge, and the fact that man is sometimes conscious of it, affects naturally arise. The really radical unity of body and mind manifests itself in the affects. That's why you can't call Spinozism a parallelism, and why there's no contiguousness of two entirely different things. In this union, the impotence of the mind, limited knowledge and partial knowledge of the truth are manifested, as nothing else but the 'idea of the body' itself. This unity explains why Spinoza's theory of knowledge is so related to the possibility of personal and collective happiness and welfare. It seems that there are two or three ways to happiness, but for whom, and under which conditions? What part do religion and imagination play in this, and what part the different forms of knowledge? And how does Spinoza's third form of knowledge, intuition, relate to eastern schools of thought, as regards wisdom and happiness? The belief in a road of knowledge, or more accurately of wisdom, is also often criticised. Spinoza is said to be a rationalist who, like the Stoics and Descartes advocates the suppression and control of emotions. But Spinoza argues that cognition, also as regards true knowledge, is actually insufficient and ineffective. This means Spinoza is not a rationalist in the same sense Descartes and the Stoics are, and Spinoza's similarities to and differences from recent neurosciences come up. Also Spinoza's connection and contrast with Freud's cognitive therapy and psychoanalysis can be discussed.

Spinoza recognizes a form of knowledge higher than that of reason. Reason has to be assimilated into intuitive knowledge as true and adequate knowledge, leading to quasi-religious emotions: the 'amor intellectualis Dei' and therewith a well-being (becoming whole) and durable happiness. This 'scientia intuitiva' transforms everyday emotions, and is thus

therapeutic. It is not mysterious but it is a reflexive and meditative self-knowledge, knowledge of oneself as a *concrete* individual. This knowledge is accompanied by acceptance, from which an experience of love for the primordial power and source naturally follows, and we know ourselves to be a natural manifestation of it. This can be compared to other, possibly better-known, notions and their effects, such as eastern religiosity and an insight and experience similar to scientific activity. Einstein called this a 'cosmic religious feeling', Freud referred to it as an 'oceanic feeling'.

### 11.2. *The PSR against Free Will*

With this notion of the PSR, Spinoza has a very modern, realistic and strong contribution to a highly topical debate, at least in The Netherlands today: Does free will exist? Throughout the centuries philosophers have offered various ideas on the relationship between mind and body, positing or denying the existence of a free will. Spinoza wrote about this difference of views that '...each will form universal images according to the conditioning of his body. Therefore, it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among philosophers...' <sup>25</sup> Currently it is not philosophers but neuroscientists who are leading the debate on free will, and they are still offering equally divided opinions. Spinoza also wrote that '...nobody as yet knows the structure of the body so accurately as to explain all its functions ... hence it follows ... that when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind which has command over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and are merely admitting, under a plausible cover of words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action and are not concerned to discover it'. <sup>26</sup> Is this 'true cause' now actually being revealed by the neurosciences? And what will be the practical consequences of such a discovery?

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<sup>25</sup> E II, p40, obs.

<sup>26</sup> E III, p2, obs.

Judging by a number of recent popular science publications and the debate in the media, it would seem that the principal obstacle against accepting neuroscientific research findings is the assumption of a free will. But is it possible that the neuroscientists are jumping to conclusions? The ‘arguments’ generally offered by them mainly turn out to concern the presumably far-reaching consequences of dismissing the existence of a free will.

Spinoza offered philosophical arguments against the existence of a free will, for instance in his letter to G. H. Schuller. In addition he also cleared away the supposed adverse consequences for our day-to-day individual and social life, for example in his correspondence with Van Blijenbergh. But Spinoza’s thoughts on the subject are still not heard in the current debate. I argue that at this stage the empirical results of neurosciences have not yet produced anything more convincing than what Spinoza already demonstrated by means of his conceptual analysis and logical reasoning.

*Vereniging Het Spinozahuis*



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