The value of benevolence: Spinoza and perfectionism

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Abstract

This thesis examines Spinoza’s claim that rational benevolence is crucial to human well-being (‘the rational benevolence claim’). According to Spinoza, rational benevolence is rational in two senses. First, it involves using reason to guide benevolent actions. Second, it involves the promotion of the rationality of other people. In order to assess the rational benevolence claim, we need to know what human well-being is. Spinoza holds that well-being consists in the perfection of human nature. Aristotle and the Stoics are the most illustrious proponents of perfectionism. However, their respective accounts have been criticised so severely that many have concluded that perfectionism about well-being is implausible.

This thesis argues that Spinoza’s perfectionism avoids the traditional objections to the accounts of Aristotle and the Stoics. Nevertheless, Spinoza’s own account, particularly his doctrine of agreement in nature, which underpins his rational benevolence claim, has attracted criticism. The thesis defends the rational benevolence claim in the following ways. First, the thesis shows that Spinoza avoids the traditional objections to perfectionism. Second, the thesis argues that there are available replies to the objections to Spinoza’s doctrine of agreement in nature.
Thesis declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Jason Tillett and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Abbreviations

Spinoza

E   Ethics
TEI  Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect
GMW  God, Man and his Well-being
MT   Metaphysical Thoughts in Parts I and II of Descartes’ ‘Principles of philosophy’
PT   Political Treatise
TPT  Theological-Political Treatise
L   Letters

Abbreviations for sections from the Ethics of Spinoza

App   appendix
Ax   axiom
C   corollary
Dem   demonstration
D   definition
Lem   lemma
P   proposition
Pref   preface
S   scholium
Post   postulate

Aristotle

NE   Nicomachean Ethics
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Stoics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>De Fin  Cicero, <em>De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DL     Diogenes Laertius, <em>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ep     Seneca, <em>Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LS     A. A. Long &amp; D. N. Sedley, <em>The Hellenistic Philosophers</em></td>
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<td>ELP   Bernard Williams, <em>Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy</em></td>
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