

# Brief Overview of Spinoza's Rational Self-Interest Theory

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Typically, both defenders and critics of (some version of) “ethical egoism,” as well as more “neutral” authors simply claiming to present the theory, present things as if our *self-interest* is generally something that competes with, or comes at the cost of, the interests of others. This assumption can be challenged, and indeed was strongly challenged by someone like Spinoza over 300 years ago.

Before elaborating on this, it is worth noting, as Rachels mentions in the chapter on “Ethical Egoism,” that there is an important distinction between “psychological egoism”—which assumes or asserts that each person *does in fact* pursue their own self-interest either exclusively or primarily, a *highly* debatable claim as far as it goes—and *ethical egoism*, which is fundamentally a claim about what we *ought to do*, specifically, that we *ought to be (exclusively or primarily) self-interested*. While in its own right, this distinction is an important one, this overall way of presenting ethical egoism in particular is misleading: for one thing, it tacitly assumes that our self-interest is something that inherently must compete with, or will have to be opposed to, the interests of others. There are almost never *arguments* presented that defend this important assumption; and moreover, it is not even clear *why* this would be true in general.

Among other things, Spinoza would challenge this assumption in the strongest terms. For Spinoza, pursuing one's self-interest was in fact the very *foundation* of ethics, and was held to be something the pursuit of which was the most effective way of securing the interests of others like us (i.e., other humans), and vice versa. So the idea that one could “pursue his or her own self-interest *exclusively*”—which is how Rachels describes ethical egoism—would have been regarded, by Spinoza, as highly suspect. To be a little over-simplistic for the moment: Spinoza would say that to the extent that you were *truly* serving your interests, you would already be directly serving the interests of others. (If, on the other hand, it were really the case that a particular “interest” you pursued was *exclusively* yours, and yours alone, in that it served no others (or even did a disservice to or harmed them), Spinoza would simply dispute that this was really in your interest. We'll see *why* in a moment.)

Rachels admits that, for a general ethical egoist, they can hold that “*sometimes* your interests will coincide with the well-being of others, so you'll help yourself by helping them,” but Spinoza would go much further and argue that, fundamentally, serving the interests of others was ultimately always (or nearly always) already the best and only way of securing your (true) self-interest, and vice versa.

Let us agree then to call the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza's peculiar brand of “ethical egoism” an “ethics of power” or “rational self-interest,” in order to properly differentiate it from what Rachels discusses as ethical egoism. However, fundamentally,

it is a theory that aims to ground ethics in self-interest, but to do so through arguments about *metaphysical* positions concerning “Nature” as a whole, as well as claims about how *reason* or *rationality* works, rather than on dubious speculations about “human psychology” or mostly unsupported “scarcity” assumptions (i.e., that our interests must necessarily be in competition with other people’s interests, since apparently the objects of our interests are “scarce”).

The chain of reasoning that leads Spinoza to his account of *rational self-interest* as the foundation of ethics is much too long, complicated, and ramified to cover in this course (let alone in a portion of a single class meeting). But I will try to summarize the main line of Spinozistic thinking as far as self-interest (or ethical egoism) is concerned. Because of space, I cannot present any of the arguments in detail, and will take much for granted (that he proves throughout his famous text *The Ethics: Demonstrated in the Geometrical Order*, which you are encouraged to consult in your own time or later on in life), choosing instead to indicate the main ideas and line of thinking in rough form.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental idea is that, according to Spinoza, reason/rationality “demands that everyone seek their own advantage, love themselves,..., and that everyone strives to preserve their own being and increase their power as far as they can” (*Ethics*, IVP18S). This is a claim that Spinoza ultimately aims to ground, again, not on claims about *psychology*, but on positions about how “Nature” as a whole works. Ultimately, for Spinoza,

1. Reason “demands nothing contrary to Nature.”
2. But it is contrary to Nature for someone (or any entity) *not* to seek its own advantage.
3. Therefore, reason demands that everyone seek their own advantage.

Out of context, this might seem rather flimsy. But to realize the power of this argument, we must first look more closely at what Spinoza means in referring to something being “contrary to Nature.” The next, and closely related, thing to consider is what is meant by “seeking one’s own advantage.” And to understand this latter idea, we also need to understand what Spinoza takes to be “good,” which is ultimately something that depends on his (still) revolutionary understanding of *power*. Let us tackle these in reverse order.

First,

“By ‘good’ I shall understand what we certainly *know* to be useful to us”  
(*Ethics*, IVD1).

Okay, but what does it mean for something to be “useful to us”? Spinoza’s entire theory is deeply grounded in a sort of “physics”—a far-reaching and subtle theory of *bodies* and their *powers*. Spinoza thought that everything that happened was ultimately an encounter between bodies that led to a greater or lesser “force of existing” (or “power to act”) in the parties involved in the encounter. What we think of as, for instance, our “emotions,” in addition to so many other things, were to be understood as just a particular pattern of change in our body’s “ability to communicate motion.” Built on the foundation of this “materialism,” Spinoza held that whatever is “useful to us” is ultimately to be regarded as “that which increases our body’s *power to affect* (and be

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<sup>1</sup>The book *The Ethics* consists of 5 parts, and while everything works together, as a system, the parts of greatest direct bearing on questions of ethics are Parts 2,3, and 4.

affected by) a greater number and diversity of beings, while preserving our own being.” So, for instance, poison would be “not good” since it would decisively destroy our body’s power to communicate motion, indeed to be at all. However, the same poison might act very differently on another (non-human) body, for which it might then be “good.” Thus, it is true, in Nature you won’t find “goodness” or “badness.” Yet that does not mean “everything is subjective,” or something like that. It simply means, as Spinoza observed, that “precisely speaking, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are notions that have sense only to the extent that they are understood in relation to manner in which a particular body (and mind) is affected by, and understands itself to be affected by, another body or group of bodies.” Again, this does *not* make Spinoza a “relativist” or “subjectivist”—it simply means that Spinoza was careful to point out that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are not *objects* to be found in Nature, but are rather *relations*.

Because everything ultimately came down to power, for Spinoza, living ethically is thus ultimately about living with a greater diversity and intensity of affects (characteristic changes in our body and its ability to communicate motions), and attaining a greater sphere of influence. In short, to be ethical is to be *powerful*. But we should be very careful here: “power” here is *not* to be understood in the “crude” sense of “powerful figures” (like politicians and media moguls), but more as a matter of having trained one’s body (and thus mind) to be capable of affecting (and being capable of being affected by) the greatest number and diversity of entities, and with the greatest intensity.

In this sense, by a really “powerful” person one should think less of the President or a celebrity—many of whom would *not* be regarded as truly powerful, in Spinoza’s sense—and more of some person capable of communicating with and affecting a great number and diversity of types of people and (even non-human) entities, and with the greatest intensity, combined with a great capacity to be receptive or responsive to a greater number and diversity of changes in the affections of different entities in Nature. In other words: the “image” of an ethical person would be one who was capable of doing many things with their body, feeling and thinking many things, and being receptive to a great many things. Whatever increases *this* particular sense of power—you might think of it as a sort of “complexity” of our body—is what is ultimately “most useful/advantageous to each of us.”

On this theory, any encounter with another body or bodies that could increase or decrease our body’s (and so our mind’s) power, especially those encounters that were likely to be repeated, was one with *ethical import*. This might seem strange, but it means that, unlike a theory like Utilitarianism, for which the “canonical” ethical situation involved more extreme choices of how to act in “life-or-death” situations, Spinoza’s ethics is one that encourages the notion that all kinds of “everyday” encounters with both human and non-human bodies have ethical import. For instance, Spinoza would regard each of the following situations (and many, many more) as a matter of ethics:

- we take a certain medicine every day
- we are researching a virus and exploring its effects, in a controlled setting, on different organisms
- we consistently eat a certain way
- we listen to or make a certain kind of music
- we spend time with a person who usually produces in us a certain emotion (sadness or happiness, etc.)

- we move into a home that has led paint on its walls
- we choose to watch a TV show instead of learning something new.

For Spinoza, all that a situation needs to involve in order to be (at least potentially) *ethical*, is a non-negligible change or series of changes to our body’s powers. Spinoza thought (for reasons I don’t have space to outline) that the concept of “choice” was effectively irrelevant to whether or not a situation was ethical. (In fact, more strongly, he thought that “choice” was fundamentally an illusion—yet nearly every situation was of ethical importance.)

Now, according to Spinoza, *we* (and everything in Nature, in fact) are constantly striving, in our own unique ways, to preserve and increase our powers (to affect and be affected by other things in the most “complex” way). All of our actions are ultimately driven by the peculiar desire to preserve and increase this power to act. Spinoza calls this particular universal desire the *conatus* of a being. It is the “most natural” since it is ultimately what each being in Nature cannot help but do, and the particular way in which it does it most directly defines what that being *is*. Each being’s characteristic ways of trying to maintain and increase its power to act on other things, is something that is being “actively developed” from the moment it exists until the moment it ceases to exist. Moreover, as Spinoza notes on numerous occasions,

“No one can desire to act or live well, unless they at the same time, and more fundamentally, desire simply to be, to act, and to live, that is, to continue to actually exist” (*Ethics*, IVP21).

It follows, Spinoza argues, that the desire to “preserve one’s own being and seek one’s own advantage” is in fact “the first and only *foundation* of all virtue” (IVP22C). This is also something, Spinoza believes, we have an *absolute right* to pursue—in fact, it forms the foundation also of any legitimate claim we might make to having any particular “right.”

Ultimately, this self-interest or desire to “seek one’s own advantage” is fundamentally *rational*, according to Spinoza, and is not at all to be regarded as incompatible with desiring this also for other human beings. In fact, as deeply social creatures, not only does our well-being and survival depend greatly on the level attained by other humans, but because of the great similarity between our *individual bodies* and those bodies of other human beings in particular, we will be most able to affect and be affected by other humans—thus, humans in particular afford us with our greatest opportunities to preserve and increase our power to act. So ensuring that other human beings preserve and increase the power and complexity of their bodies is of direct interest and benefit to each of us individually. Because of this, “the good which everyone who seeks virtue (power) rationally wants for himself, he also desires for other humans” (IVP37). Thus, our “advantage” is not at all something regarded as “scarce,” or as the object of competition, presenting your self-interest as something that came at the cost of the interests of the whole. On the contrary: the more you increase your body’s power (complexity), and truly attain what it most to your advantage (that which increases your power to act and be affected by more things), the more you yourself will be useful to other human beings; and, correctly understood, the more complex and powerful the bodies of all human beings become, the greater facility you will have in striving to preserve and increase your own body’s powers.

In short: *your* advantage and the *common advantage* (of everyone)—when these things are understood in the right way and pursued rationally, where this means: we

*truly* understand how things work, and have understood and assessed correctly what will actually increase our powers and what will not—in fact coincide and do *not* compete.

As for the first claim from the beginning—that reason “demands nothing contrary to Nature”—this has to do with a long argument showing how nothing in Nature could ever desire to decrease or destroy its power (or, ultimately, its entire being). Spinoza is not ignoring things like self-destructive acts. He makes an argument that in Nature there are so many entities, each striving to preserve their being, so inevitably there will be a myriad of things more powerful than us whose powers are moreover incompatible with, or contrary to, our own. So in every such case of apparent “self-destruction,” what is really going on is this: “once we understand the causes, we see that the being had been completely conquered by external causes, acting on that being and against its own nature, but doing so in a way that is so effective, it can be difficult to detect any longer that it is no longer the self-same being acting for *itself*, but rather another cause or group or causes acting on and against it.” Considered in its own right, no entity could ever seek *for itself* to harm or diminish its own powers. If we *seem to* observe such a being doing so, what we are in fact observing is a being that has been so strongly “overpowered” or “overdetermined” by other causes or distinct entities whose powers are different from, and contrary to the preservation of, that being’s own powers.

In short, then, in a slogan of sorts:

The “right” thing to do is to do whatever accords most with our (natural) desire to *preserve and increase our power* to affect and be affected by a greater number and diversity of beings in Nature—a “self-interested” desire that, when understood correctly, will in fact always coincide with, and be inextricably dependent on, the defense and pursuit of *the interest of all entities* whose powers are similar to (or at least not contrary to) our own.

So, on Spinoza’s way of thinking, being an “ethical person” was a matter of developing (he would say “perfecting”) the powers of one’s body to the fullest, advancing the diversity of affects one could experience by advancing the number and sorts of bodies with which one’s body could “communicate its motions,” and understanding that the best way of serving other human beings and oneself was to cultivate these powers. Moreover, Spinoza thought that one of the greatest sources of power (and its diversification) at our (particular sort of human) body’s disposal came with the power of *understanding*.

It is easy to forget that knowledge is power—that does not mean that is *all* it is; after all, the fact that math got us to the moon exhibits one of the many and small ways in which knowledge is power—yet, it is obviously not the case that if a majority of people decided that math was wrong and they would instead teach a certain theory (i.e., it became “powerful” in a conventional sense), this latter theory could *not* automatically get us to the moon (no matter how influential it was among human beings). Lots of math is as powerful as it is precisely because it describes how parts of Nature *actually work*. Likewise, genuine understanding—of how Nature actually works—is immensely powerful, according to Spinoza, because it lets us “tap into” and “join forces with” the powers that already exist in Nature. Because human beings were uniquely poised—at least at this point in Earth’s history—to develop and communicate knowledge to and among one another, and because we all depended so thoroughly on the advances of others in doing so, aiding the powers of all human beings is always directly in each of our own interests.

In short, for Spinoza, becoming ethical is a matter of becoming powerful (in his nuanced sense); and becoming more powerful was a project most easily and effectively

achieved (and with the most lasting effects) when it involved changes that were established collectively by *many human beings*, over long periods of time, and working together. There is just not that much you can do, as an individual with very limited resources and alive for just a few decades, working alone, or working *against* others. That is ultimately why the interests of other human beings *are* ultimately your own. Advancing the powers of human beings as a whole, and working together with others on doing this, is your fastest track to advancing and preserving your own individual powers. So it is in your direct self-interest to constantly be striving to develop and advance the powers of all human beings.

In short, the idea that you could ever be truly “advancing your own interests” while undermining or challenging the interests of others was nonsensical to Spinoza. If you undermined or challenged the interests of others, this meant that fundamentally you were “decreasing” that being’s power to act. But in decreasing the power to act of a fellow human being, you would be diminishing the collective power of human beings and would simultaneously be depriving yourself of the powers and new affects you might have earned by getting you and them to “join powers.” Of course, if someone or something is truly trying to destroy you or your powers, you have every *right*, Spinoza thought—not necessarily *legally*, but much more strongly, *by reason*—to do what you need to do to preserve your own being and powers. However, Spinoza ultimately thought that a highly ethical and free being would be one that had become *so powerful and skilled* that they could afford, out of that strength and robustness, to ignore the initial threat and compel even things that initially tried to destroy them to ultimately “join forces,” after which they could start benefiting from the powers of that being by having *aligned interests*.

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