

Philosophy as Therapy and Philosophical Anthropology
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After struggling with several attempts to write a vision statement, I decided a confessional tack might help me to communicate a bit better what my thoughts are about social epistemology. I am a philosopher (an apprentice one at that) rather than a social scientist. But, more than that, I'm really the kind of philosopher more focused on a personal ethics than I am on how society functions. My research topic is on philosophical therapy, sometimes called "philosophy as a way of life" (Pierre Hadot's framing), an ethics of self-cultivation or *eudaimonistic* ethics (maybe you can throw virtue ethics in there too).

My entry point into all this was work by Keith-Ansell Pearson and Michael Ure on Nietzsche's engagement with Hellenistic thought during his middle-period (*Human All Too Human, Dawn, The Gay Science*), engagement with the practical ethics of the Stoics, Epicureans and Skeptics (Ure 2009; Ansell-Pearson 2011). I'm now trying to work through similar themes in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, focusing on questions such as: What kind of therapy does Spinoza offer? How does Spinoza's therapy differ from say, the Stoics, in light of his own understanding of nature? The confessional part here is that I find myself working on this topic, less so out of pure curiosity, and more because I think I'm trying find a cure for some perceived deficit in my ability to cope with just the more mundane aspects of life, like getting out of the house on time, paying my bills, and so on. I'm trying to self-medicate with philosophy, if you will.

One important idea that I've just barely begun to scratch the surface on is that all notions of philosophical therapy presuppose some kind of philosophical anthropology. The whole notion of *akrasia* and overcoming it towards some kind of *eudaimonia* (well-being) implies that there has to be some kind of on-going practical exercise that develops the kinds of habits that make you a more capable person. These practical exercises are what Foucault refers to as "technologies of the self" and what Pierre Hadot refers to as "spiritual exercises" (Foucault 1990; Hadot 1995). This makes the human being something messier than the more common libertarian assumptions of agency I find implicit in a lot of philosophy where everything seems to follow straight-forwardly in the kind of sequence where belief->judgement->decision->action->consequence just seems to be obvious to some writers and where some kind of pre-given sense of self-control has already been assumed.

For an impulsive person like myself, I've had to come to terms with the reality that I'm more often than not guided by emotions than rational calculation and that the external world (and my own mind) can potentially derail me at any moment. So I'm lead to question, I think more than others, a model of human agency where a free mind imposes itself on the body as its instrument. So what that seems to suggest to me is that a proper understanding of agency requires starts with an honest working out of a philosophical anthropology that can explain these failures of self-control.

The Stoics

One place to look at how this plays out is in Stoic therapy. The Stoics thought that a good life was one in which the practitioner of Stoicism *apatheia*, a state of being “without passion”. The three pillars of Stoic education—logic, metaphysics, ethics— are all directed towards the achievement of an eventual transformation of one's character such that one would respond rationally to a situation rather than emotionally. But to understand *why* the Stoics viewed *apatheia* as a desirable state of being, you have to dig a bit deeper and excavate their philosophical anthropology and view of nature.

First, the Stoics refer understand the human mind to be a unity, contrary to Plato and Galen who maintained a tripartite conception of the soul. Stoic mind—the *hegemonikon*—is composed of a set of cognitive judgments, which means that, for the Stoics the passions are reducible to judgements with a propositional form.

Second, the Stoics regard the passions as irrational because of their view that the cosmos is providentially ordered by a rational *logos*. Passions are irrational because they follow from judgements we make from the standpoint of animal parts with in nature.

Third, because the human is essentially *animal rationabile*, the full expression of our human potential is to bring all the judgement of our mind in accordance with the rationality of the cosmos, that is, all judgements are indifferent (and even affirming of) the unfolding of natural “rational” necessity, that is fate. Passions have no place in a rational human being because they express judgements that are invested in an account that is contrary to fate (Sellars 2006).

But the issue with Stoic therapy is that, while it acknowledges that the life condition of the Stoic sage is something difficult to achieve, it nonetheless relies on the possibility that from the outset we have at least some kind of power outside of our animal nature that allows us to assent or dissent to the unfolding of fate. That one small assumption then suggests that Stoic therapy, while difficult, is within the power of the individual to eventually achieve over time. We tend to call this self-help nowadays.

It also seems problematic that such assent can occur without some emotional motivation and in general the Stoics devalue passions as resources in our motivation and a source of well-being. The sources of modern libertarian individualism in the history of philosophy can be traced back to the kind of opposition of reason and passion found in the ancient world, a view that has downplayed the importance of relationships and community in human life, and a view that has also functioned to marginalize the place of women in philosophy (Lloyd 2002). But more important here is that the Stoics appear to fail by their own standards; that is, there is some part of human nature that exists outside of the cosmos as a whole, a power that is capable of intervening and modifying our animal dispositions.

A Cartesian Approach

With Descartes, you find a similar view to that of the Stoics. Descartes is often attributed the kind of libertarian individualism that informs neo-liberal economics and ideology, which is a little unfair to Descartes but potentially how he has been received. If one consults *Passions of the Soul*, one will find a view where the body becomes the locus of habit formation. Descartes views the body as a complex machine, one that communicates sensory information to the brain via animal spirits running through the nerves. Without the intervention of mind, the body is an automaton, reacting instinctively and habitually to environmental stimulus. The passions of the soul are the impressions received by the nervous activity of the body communicated via the pineal gland. Since mind and body are separate “causally independent” substances (which Descartes was eventually called out on by Elizabeth of Bohemia), the mind has the same degree of freedom to assent to these passions that the body/brain does not have. As well as having this degree of freedom over its received impressions, Descartes also believed that mind had the power to influence the habitual tendencies of the brain, eventually retraining these responses over time like a dog-owner retrains their canine friend (Lloyd and Gatens 1999). As with the Stoics, but perhaps more so, we find Descartes relying on a notion of a mind outside of nature capable of imposing its will on the natural order of things from without.

On Spinoza

Spinoza can in some ways be thought of in some ways a critic of the idea that human beings have some pre-given power of a relatively free mind capable of imposing itself on the body and its emotions. Rather than just understanding Spinoza's rejection of “free will” as following from his deterministic metaphysics, I believe it makes more sense to interpret his view here in light of his philosophical therapy in *Ethics IV, V*. Spinoza's view here is that we not purely automatons caught in an illusion of free will, but rather, that this illusion makes overestimate what is in our own power and blinds us to a whole other network of supporting causes that need to be in place in order for us to bring about any kind of effect.

We are not *completely* determined, however, because we embody a quantum of God's active power of determination, a power that is distributed immanently throughout the manifestations of nature. As well as this, Spinoza's naturalism revalues the place of passions in human agency, treating them as conditions of our self-preservation and striving, working to aid rather than prevent our human flourishing (Armstrong 2013). Overcoming the illusions of free will, our tendency to overestimate our own power, requires first of all understanding the laws that govern our pre-reflective imaginations. Spinoza's view of human psychology has drawn the attention of contemporary brain science for understanding the workings of cognition to be driven by emotion rather than opposed to emotion (Damasio 2004).

Spinoza's philosophical anthropology calls into question the self-help paradigm, posing the question of whether “therapeutic outcome” is one achievable by one's solitary effort. In agreement with West's discussion of how alcoholics enlist the support of community (Alcoholics Anonymous) to change themselves (West 2014), Spinoza believes that best

thing that we can do to increase our power as human beings is to form communities that work to increase the mutual advantage of its members. By developing social attachments with each other, we are able to form new affects that can restrain the sad passions that disable us, and foster joyful passions that enable us, in pursuit of our own personal ends (Lefebvre 2006; Armstrong 2009). In short, we enlist the help and support of others to help ourselves. But in order to be even to get to the point where we are capable of thinking well-enough to undertake an effort towards better understanding our own cognition, a whole range of social relations need to be in place for such a project to be even possible. Susan James has written on the subject of Spinoza and social epistemology, asserting that the whole project of personal knowledge depends upon access to education and an induction into a community of inquiry (James 2011).

For this reason, Spinoza offers a promising starting point for working out a philosophical anthropology, one that is both at in accord with a psychological conception of the human and a sociological one. Moreover, how we are we supposed to read the Stoic dictum “live according to nature” today, when our conception of nature is so thoroughly different to that of the ancients? Ironically, by insisting on a more naturalistic re-embedding of the human in nature in a nature that rejects divine providence, the notion that we have to live according to our own *human* nature remains the only option we are left with. By attempting to take a non-anthropocentric view of ourselves, one which science enables, we may gain a more accurate and powerful understanding of who we actually are and how we might work that to our advantage. As Nietzsche writes: “Error has transformed animals into men; is truth perhaps capable of changing man back into an animal”. The point here need not be regressively anti-humanist but rather, I take it to suggest that we have to get real about human nature before we can properly explore our possibilities.

Philosophical Anthropology

What I believe the task of philosophical anthropology will involve (at least the naturalist kind I'm interested in), will be the development of a more integrated understanding of what the various psychological and social sciences. But *knowing* does not automatically equate to doing and it will probably be the case that if we are to derive any benefit from our understanding, we will need to embrace that we are at a pre-reflective level less than rational. For that reason, we might need prosthetic aids embedded in our environment, social institutions, rituals, myths, aesthetics, to activate our potential in empowering ways.

I find the kinds of ideas to found in cognitive science summed up in books like Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow* and Robert N. McCauley's *Why Religion is Naturalism and Science is Not* present a view of the mind in which the primordial mind of our pre-historic past stubbornly resists our attempts to think rationally and objectively at all times. (Kahneman 2011, McCauley 2011) McCauley's view, in particular, works as a cognitive science argument for *why* science must be a social enterprise insofar as the best way to keep our cognitive bias in check is to be held accountable to a community of peers, since we are less capable of subjecting that accountability to ourselves.

The kind of view of mind on offer here is one that can serve well as an explanation as to why we need a social epistemology, but it may also serve as a useful philosophical tool for assessing the credibility of more macro-level social theories. Of course, the macro may behave according to its own rules and no doubt it will also impinge upon and shape the personal. But looking for a philosophical anthropology through the lens of a therapy may give us clues about how the social shapes us since it looks at the conditions of possibility for shaping ourselves.

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