

## Reply to Yitzhak Melamed

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Many thanks to Yitzhak Melamed for his thoughtful and insightful comments. Thanks also to the *Leibniz Review* for the opportunity to respond. I will address briefly each of the issues that Melamed raises.

### (1) *The Relationship between Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of God*

Spinoza makes many bold claims about knowledge, virtue, and the knowledge of God, which are difficult to reconcile. This issue is further complicated, I think, by the fact that on Spinoza's theory of knowledge minds can possess both self knowledge and the knowledge of God in degrees. The interpretative claim of mine with which Melamed disagrees is indeed a strong one that is not, even to my mind, unambiguously supported by the text. I do think that I present it in this spirit in my book. I begin the paragraph following the controversial claim, "Although I find it attractive, one might well accept the general point that the knowledge of God is closely related to self-knowledge in the *Ethics* without finding this particular interpretation persuasive." I think that this sentence still captures the way I feel about the issue: reasonable people might disagree but, all things considered, it is best to think that for Spinoza any human mind with any knowledge of God will also have self-knowledge.

With that qualification, then, the texts that I think support my strong claim are those that suggest that a mind without any self-knowledge would lack all power, and so not strive at all or, in other words, exist. The clearest of these, which I also cite in my discussion of this issue in my book, is in the demonstration to 4p56: "He who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of the foundation and consequently of all virtues...such a person does not act from virtue at all." A person who does not act from virtue at all, for Spinoza, is in a tight spot, metaphysically speaking. Virtue, after all, is identical with power (4d8). If to lack all virtue is to lack all power, Spinoza might as well say that a person who does not act from virtue does not act at all. I think that Spinoza *does* in fact say this at 4p20: "The more anyone strives and is able to seek what is useful for him, that is, to preserve his being, the more he is endowed with virtue; and, on the other hand, the more anyone neglects what is useful for him, that is, to preserve his own being, to that extent he lacks power." It is clearly implied from Spinoza's identification of individual activity, *conatus*,

with human essence (3p9), that a person who lacks all power is unable to act at all and will no longer exist. The scholium to 4p20 shows, moreover that Spinoza recognizes this implication. It is an account of the various ways in which human minds that lack power cease to exist.

There is textual support, then, for attributing to Spinoza a view on which some self-knowledge is a condition for existence. My claim that any person with the knowledge of God has self-knowledge follows trivially from this conclusion. However, putting the claim in that form makes some sense of the various passages (notably 4 Appendix 4) in which Spinoza closely associates self-knowledge with the human knowledge of God. Finally, the position that *some* self-knowledge is a condition of existence is consistent both with the passages of Part 2 which indicate that most of us lack *substantial* self knowledge and also with any plausible interpretation of what it means to know God's essence in 2p47. Indeed the demonstration to that proposition depends upon our knowledge of ourselves (however imperfect) as a basis for the conclusion that we know God's essence. It runs, roughly: all of us know ourselves, however imperfectly; since anything known is known through God, then, we have an adequate knowledge of God's essence.

## ***(2) Death and Fear of Death in Spinoza***

I am sympathetic with Melamed's view, on which Spinoza's presentation at least suggests that the free man propositions should motivate us to move closer to the states that they describe. The principal claims in my book are consistent with this interpretation. They are that the propositions are primarily diagnostic tools and that, as such, they do not straightforwardly require the action that they describe.

Take the case of 4p67, which Melamed is right to find distinctively Spinozistic.<sup>1</sup> One might well come to understand that a free man does not think about death and derive motivation of a kind from that understanding without also concluding, "I should now follow the rule 'don't think about death'." Even setting aside the strong determinism of Spinoza's psychology, few would think that adopting such a rule would be a good means to attaining such a state even if they were convinced that it would be a good state to attain. What, then, is one who is properly motivated by 4p67 motivated to do? Generally, and I believe that Melamed would agree with this characterization, the fact that there are very few universal prescriptions in the *Ethics* reflects an emphasis in Spinoza on the importance of one's particular circumstances to an understanding of what one ought to do. All of us will be better off to the extent that we approach the state of the free man. The actions that any one

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of us should take to approach that state, however, will be to a significant degree a function of each person's causal character and circumstances.

### **(3) *Why should we care about other human beings (or at least, not eat them)?***

Here again Melamed and I agree about a great deal. Certainly the main lines of Spinoza's thought (including as we have seen his conception of virtue) depend upon a theory of individual essence rather than of species essence. In my book I emphasize the puzzles that this poses for Spinoza's perfectionism. Melamed is absolutely right to point out that it also poses problems for Spinoza's remarks about animals. Spinoza's naturalism about mind certainly suggests that whatever he concludes about animals from the fact that they lack power, he ought also to conclude about human beings of a similar degree of power.

I would like to clarify one point about the relationship between Spinoza and other, especially Aristotelian, perfectionists. Although I do as Melamed notes take Spinoza to be unusual among perfectionists, I do not take his emphasis on individual essence to present problems for him as a perfectionist. On the contrary, many of the most damaging objections to perfectionism take as a target the dependence of perfectionism on an account of human essence. Because (or, to be more cautious, to the extent that) perfection for Spinoza is an optimal degree of power--a species neutral notion--Spinoza is immune to the objection that there is no distinctive human essence; to the objection that, if there is, it is something ethically trivial; and to the objection that morality concerns agency and personhood rather than humanity. Because I think that these are good objections, I find Spinoza's perfectionism and the theory of virtue that accompanies it more appealing than alternatives that emphasize human essence and the human character traits that contribute to it. This is not a position that I defend at length in my book. I would not however want my argument there that Spinoza's perfectionism is distinctive to be taken to imply that I also think it is poor.<sup>2</sup>

### **(4) *Teleology and Free Will***

On this point, my book seems to have been unclear. I apologize. I did mean to raise the topic of human teleology in my introduction. It is one that is important to Spinoza's account of ordinary beliefs about good, evil, and God in Part 1, Appendix. It is also important, as Melamed mentions, to understanding Spinoza's theory of *conatus* and his moral psychology. Finally, as Melamed notes, it is a topic that has

been the focus of recent scholarly attention.

I fully agree with Melamed, however, that human actions are just as necessary as God's actions. In a way our *conatus* is God's power and our actions are God's actions, as Spinoza writes in the demonstration to 3p6. Therefore, no strong distinction between the causal laws that characterize God's actions and those that characterize human actions is defensible.

I did not mean to take a definite position on human teleology in my book. Indeed I remain undecided about whether, as Melamed suggests, Spinoza sets out explain away human teleology or whether he offers an account of human teleology that is consistent both with the determination and necessity of human action and also with his rejection of teleology in God. It is my view, however, that this second, compatibilist position is the strongest account of human teleology that one might reasonably attribute to Spinoza. I take the account of the function of the ends of human desire in Chapters 6-8 of my book to be consistent with either of these interpretations. In stating that teleology involves choice in my introduction, I should have stated clearly that I do not take choice inherently to involve a lack of necessity and contra-causal freedom of the will.

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> I agree also that this is a crucially important point of contrast with Hobbes. I am persuaded by the work of Bernard Gert, however, that fear is part of rationality for Hobbes. See, Gert, "Hobbes on Reason," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2001): 243-257. So, rather than emphasizing the instrumentality of reason in Hobbes, I would make the contrast stark: fear of death is wholly rational for Hobbes but wholly irrational for Spinoza.

<sup>2</sup> I do argue for the plausibility of Spinoza's views in "Spinozistic Perfectionism," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27:4 (2010) 317-333.