
Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart: On the Possible Mysticism in Spinoza's Ethical Theory

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In “*Spinoza and Philo, The Alleged Mysticism in the Ethics*,” Steven Nadler argues against any mystical interpretations of Spinoza, going so far as to say categorically that “there is no mysticism in Spinoza’s philosophy”.¹ Nadler criticizes what he sees as the erroneous view that “Spinoza is seen not as the inheritor of the Cartesian devotion to clear and distinct reasoning, nor of the Jewish intellectualist tradition of Maimonides and Gersonides, but as the descendent of the mysticism of Philo of Alexandria and of the later kabbalists”.² Nadler goes on to argue that Spinoza’s “arch-rationalist” philosophy and epistemological commitments are incompatible with such mystical notions as the infallibility of god, and the limitedness of the human intellect.³ However, I think Nadler’s claim may be too strong, certainly his categorical one, for it seems possible that one could compare Spinoza to kabbalists and mystics because of his metaphysical views, not his epistemological ones. And while I agree with Nadler that there are serious doubts regarding any kind of mysticism in Spinoza’s epistemology, Spinoza’s metaphysical views might allow for a mystical interpretation.

In this paper I shall offer the beginnings of a mystical interpretation of Spinoza’s metaphysics and ethical theory. I hope to show that there is a gap in Nadler’s argument that I aim to exploit: that because Spinoza’s metaphysics may allow for mystical

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interpretation, and because his ethical theory is derived from his metaphysics, a mystical interpretation of Spinoza's ethical theory could be promising. It is not my aim to offer a full account of Spinoza's ethical theory, nor even a fully satisfying interpretation. Rather, I hope to show primarily that something like a mystical thought could be at work in Spinoza. I will begin with a brief response to Nadler before turning to a discussion of Spinoza's metaphysical and ethical views. Finally, I will compare Spinoza's ethical theory to the teachings of the Jewish Wisdom tradition presented by contemporary writer Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault. In doing so, I hope to both offer further support for seeing something like mysticism at work in Spinoza, and to gesture at what kind of more traditional moral theory Spinoza could offer.

Nadler rightly understands that 'mysticism' can mean many different things in many different contexts. As such, he adopts a narrow definition of mysticism as the target of his paper. For instance, he is not concerned with the "first-hand spiritual relationship" the mystic might have with god.⁴ Rather he holds that "the mysticist is someone who argues that the human intellect or reason cannot, by itself and through its own natural devices, provide one with a knowledge of God – neither of God's existence nor of God's essence – or of the higher metaphysical truths that derive from God".⁵ I think he is quite right to argue that there is no mysticism *of this kind* at work in Spinoza. For, it seems clear that Spinoza's commitment to the principle of sufficient reason alone is enough to cast serious doubts on such a claim, not to mention Spinoza's explicit claim that we can, and indeed *must*, be able to understand god with our minds alone. Nadler quotes Richard Mason on this issue:

"Any philosopher who tells us that all individuals in different degrees are animate, that 'we feel and experience that we are eternal' or that an intuitive intellectual love of God arises from an eternal form of knowledge has to be open to mystical readings, justifiably or not. But any mysticism [in Spinoza] is held in a firm grip. It is not mystical vision but logical proofs that are said to be the eyes of the mind. The love of God is to hold chief place in the mind; but it is clear and distinct understanding, not mystical illu-

mination, which is to be the route to that love”⁶

Notice that the mysticism that is “held in a firm grip” here is distinctly epistemological – logical proofs rather than mystical vision; clear and distinct understanding rather than mystical illumination. But what about Spinoza’s metaphysical and ethical views? Indeed, what about this “love of God”? Nadler seems unconcerned with this point. While it may be naïve to compare Spinoza to kabbalah (at least on Nadler’s account), I’m certainly not the only one who suspected that there may have been a connection.⁷ In her book, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong concludes her discussion of Spinoza with the following:

“Indeed, Spinoza had only used the word ‘God’ for historical reasons: he agreed with atheists, who claim that reality cannot be divided into a part which is ‘God’ and a part which is not-God. If God cannot be separated from anything else, it is impossible to say that ‘he’ exists in any ordinary sense. What Spinoza was saying in effect was that there was no God that corresponded to the meaning we usually attach to that word. But mystics and philosophers had been making the same point for centuries. Some had said that there was ‘Nothing’ apart from the world we know. Were it not for the absence of the transcendent En Sof, Spinoza’s pantheism would resemble Kabbalah and we could sense an affinity between radical mysticism and the newly emergent atheism.”⁸

Notice that the above quote seems to support my claim that something like mysticism could be seen in Spinoza’s metaphysics. For, as Armstrong asserts, were it not for the lack of the metaphor of ‘En Sof’ in Spinoza, his metaphysics would resemble those seen in kabbalah. And recall that while Nadler has in mind many of the epistemological views common in mystical traditions (and for Nadler, especially those in the thought of Philo), in the case of the above quote the comparison drawn between Spinoza and kabbalah is about metaphysical claims, not epistemological ones. Perhaps then Nadler’s working definition of mysticism is too limited for him to offer a persuasive case for the claim that “there is no mysticism in Spinoza’s philosophy”. And recall that

while Nadler is not concerned with the “first-hand spiritual relationship” that the mystic may have with the divine, I hope to show later on that Spinoza may have precisely such a relationship in mind in his account of human participation in the divine. Perhaps Nadler’s argument could be made stronger if he were to account for this point.

Admittedly, much depends on what exactly ‘mysticism’ means here. So how do I understand mysticism? And more to the point, how does this relate to Spinoza’s ethical theory? To offer a full account of mysticism, or a particular mystical tradition would unfortunately be beyond the limited scope of this paper. For my purposes, it is enough to say that since there is no ‘mysticism’ as such; there are only mystical traditions, I will understand mysticism both in the metaphysical sense as seen in kabbalah and in the ethical sense of self-transformation in the ancient Jewish Wisdom tradition as presented by Bourgeault. To be specific, issues such as spiritual self-transformation, and human participation in the divine will be of key importance for my interpretation. I hope that both of these senses, and the connection between them become clearer as I continue. I will now begin my discussion of Spinoza’s metaphysics.

To quote Nadler once again, “an unreasonably brief summary of Spinoza’s metaphysics is required here”.⁹ For reasons of brevity, I too must offer a brief and simplified account of Spinoza’s metaphysics. In short, Spinoza is a substance monist, and he holds that the universe is one infinite, necessarily-existing substance (‘substance’ here is understood in more or less the same sense that Descartes understood it). Spinoza calls this substance “God or nature”.¹⁰ Of course, this god is not the anthropomorphic god offered by most interpreters of Christianity, for instance. Rather, it is simply *all that is*. However, this is not to diminish god’s significance, as we will see. To continue, this god has an infinite number of what Spinoza calls “attributes,”¹¹ two of which are “thought”¹² and “extension”.¹³ In addition, Spinoza holds that all things that exist are manifestations or “modes” of this god.¹⁴ As such, the bodies of human beings are a mode of extension, while our minds are a mode of thought. It may be difficult to wrap one’s head around just what this god might look like, and it might seem

silly to most of us today. If I may joke for a moment in the hopes of demonstrating this view – perhaps the reader could imagine filling out that form at the psychiatrist’s office that attempts to determine if the prospective patient suffers from a mental illness (for surely we all know *that* form). And at the box that asks, “Do you ever feel like you are god?” the correct answer for the Spinozist would seem to be “yes” (albeit with a lengthy list of qualifications, the most important of which is that everybody else is god too).

Before considering Spinoza’s ethical theory proper, I would like to emphasize several aspects of his philosophy that serve to frame his ethical views. It is important to first say that for Spinoza, ethics is not so much about how we ought to act in a given situation, but rather with “the right way of living”.¹⁵ Spinoza sought to improve people’s lives and their characters by furthering their knowledge, and in particular, their self-knowledge. He hoped therein to bring people peace of mind as they may come to see themselves as aspects of nature existing in harmony with nature. In addition, he thought that human beings are bound or constrained by our inability to control and check the emotions, and that it was our task to find a way to overcome this “bondage” and to realize an autonomous life of freedom.¹⁶ Of course, ‘freedom’ for Spinoza must be qualified, for in light of his necessitarianism Spinoza held that there was no ‘free will’ as such. However, he argued that freedom still exists, and he defined it as the capacity for a thing to act on the basis of its own nature, more or less unconstrained by external causes. On his account to act on the basis of this freedom is to be ‘active,’ rather than ‘passive,’ and it is most desirable to be active. Freedom as activity here relates to one of the most important aspects of his philosophy: that of the doctrine of “*conatus*” or “striving.”¹⁷ Spinoza writes “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its existence,” and he goes on to write “the striving [conatus] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing”.¹⁸ In short, this striving becomes an *a priori* activity of each entity, and this striving *is the very essence* of that entity.

Turning now to Spinoza's ethical theory proper, he argued that the path to an autonomous life, free from the bondage of the emotions lay in two related concepts he called the "intellectual love of god," and "blessedness".¹⁹ Briefly, this blessedness is a state of joy that arises out of the act of the intellectual love of god. And the intellectual love of god involves furthering one's knowledge of oneself and of god. What makes this love joyful is simply that it is pleasurable. However, once again this is not to diminish its significance! For Spinoza held that the love of god is the most constant and pleasurable of all emotions. Spinoza makes clear his search for precisely this joy at the outset of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*:

"After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as my mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected - whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity."²⁰

Put simply, the "true good" here that was to offer the "greatest joy, to eternity" is the knowledge of god. This point can be seen in the following passage: "the mind's highest good is the knowledge of God, and the mind's highest virtue is to know God".²¹ This is because god is the highest 'object' of knowledge, and it is the goal of the mind to further its own knowledge. Thus the eternal joy of blessedness arises in the perfecting of one's knowledge of god, for this perfecting of knowledge allows the mind to fulfill its nature and become more active, and to thereby further its freedom. Moreover, Spinoza holds that in the intellectual love of god one's own knowledge begins to resemble god's knowledge. This is because the intellectual love of god is the product of what Spinoza calls the "third kind of knowledge" or "intuition," a full account of which is beyond the scope of this paper.²² For my purposes, it is enough to say that 'intuition' is

something like scientific reasoning and discovery (not the kind of ‘intuition’ we might speak of in ordinary language). This ‘third kind of knowledge’ allows us to understand the nature or essence of an entity, and in doing so, we come to know each entity *more like god does*. Furthermore, and this is a key point, in pursuing the intellectual love of god, one also *becomes more god-like*, and furthers her own divine nature as she participates further in the infinite intellect of god. In “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory,” Don Garrett discusses this human participation in the divine:

“Human beings stand, for Spinoza, in an intimate relationship both to God-or-Nature... This implies, on the one hand, that human beings cannot act independently of, or separately from, God's own activity, and that every human action must be conceived as a manifestation of nature; but it also implies, on the other hand, that there is a prospect for a kind of direct participation in the divine”²³

Indeed, this “intimate relationship” with god and “direct participation in the divine” seem to suggest the kind of “first-hand relationship” with god that Nadler is decidedly not considering. And it is precisely this point of divine participation that first sparked my interest in the possible mysticism at work in Spinoza.

But on Spinoza’s account, not only do we participate in the divine, we also *love* the divine and are in turn *loved* by it. This is because in the intellectual love of god, we come to love god as an object. But because *we too* share in god, we also love ourselves as aspects of god through god’s own loving of *itself*. In other words, we love god through the love with which god loves itself and with which god loves us. Richard Mason is right to point out that this love of god is achieved through reasoning and understanding, not through mystical illumination, yet our participation in the divine, and in this divine love seem strikingly mystical nonetheless.

Turning now to how Spinoza’s ethical theory is derived from his metaphysics, notice that in the *Ethics*, the metaphysics offered in the first three books support, and perhaps even necessitate the ethical conclusions offered in books four and five. And as I continue to argue, the seemingly mystical nature of these meta-

physical claims could show support for a mystical interpretation of Spinoza's ethical claims. On this point Garrett writes:

“The centrality of ethics to [Spinoza's] philosophical project is unmistakable in the title of his most systematic presentation of his philosophy: *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*... The *Ethics* seeks to demonstrate a broad range of metaphysical, theological, epistemological, and psychological doctrines. Most of these doctrines, however, either constitute, support, or elucidate the premises for his ethical conclusions”²⁴

I pointed out earlier that Spinoza's ethical concern was primarily with the right way of living, and not with what actions are morally permissible or impermissible. This is not to say that he was entirely unconcerned with questions of moral action, yet Spinoza seems at first glance to present something of an ethical egoism. For his concern is only with each individual's own striving, and there seems to be no obvious concern for the wellbeing of others. This can be seen in the following passage from the *Ethics*:

“Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it therefore demands that every man should love himself, should seek his own advantage (I mean his real advantage), should aim at whatever really leads a man toward greater perfection, and, to sum it all up, that each man, as far as in him lies, should endeavor to preserve his own being”²⁵

But notice that there might be an implicit concern here for how we ought to treat others. For if each thing strives to preserve itself (or further itself), and if each thing *shares* in the same divine nature, then in a sense furthering one's own nature is furthering another's, and furthering another's nature is furthering one's own. Moreover, recall that it is in each entity's nature to strive in this way; it is its very *essence* to strive! While Spinoza's exact view here may be tricky to parse, he may still have the resources to offer at least something in the vein of a traditional moral theory. Although, as I mentioned earlier Spinoza offers unfortunately little by way of an account of this view in the *Ethics*. And so it is

at precisely this point that a comparison to the view presented by Bourgeault may prove useful.

In *The Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault offers an interpretation of Jesus as a teacher in the Jewish Wisdom tradition, that is, a teacher of self-transformation.²⁶ She argues that the ascetic path of the Far East isn't the only path to 'enlightenment,' and that Jesus took an altogether different path, that of 'Kenosis,' or the radical giving of oneself to others. Bourgeault holds that while the ascetics would attempt to 'store-up' their spiritual energy, so to speak, and to climb higher 'up' the ladder to enlightenment, Jesus went the opposite direction: he climbed 'down' the ladder, giving away all of himself at every step. And as Bourgeault points out, it only cost him everything – including his life.

At the heart of Bourgeault's interpretation is the view that Jesus preached a method of self-transformation that involves the awakening of a non-dual consciousness. Bourgeault argues that human beings are stuck in a 'binary' worldview of good/bad, black/white, commonly called the ego, though Bourgeault herself prefers the now dated computer-age metaphor of "the egoic operating system".²⁷ She puts this thought nicely when she describes the ego as a "grammar of perception" that creates labels, and separates the world into categories.²⁸ Readers may notice that the 'death of the ego' is championed in many Eastern and New Age schools of thought, though I would add that it is often poorly understood. To her credit, Bourgeault doesn't simply dismiss the ego, she recognizes its usefulness. She holds that the egoic form of perception is often necessary for our navigation of the ordinary world. But, she insists, the ego creates a grand illusion of separateness that prevents us from realizing our divine natures. Bourgeault argues that Jesus teaches us to transcend, or 'upgrade' (to continue the unfortunate metaphor) the egoic operating system and move toward a non-dual consciousness.

So what exactly is 'non-duality'? In short, non-duality teaches us that there is simply *no separation*. There is no separation between humans and god, and no separation between humans and humans. This non-duality is the notion of 'oneness' that is often preached in Eastern and New Age schools of thought, and

For instance, I still recognize myself as distinct in some sense from the tree outside, or from ‘the other,’ so to speak. This is why the ‘egoic form of perception’ is still useful. Indeed, we require the egoic form of perception in order to be efficacious in the world. What non-duality really seeks to emphasize is the *shared essence* common to all beings.

Bourgeault describes this form of non-dual consciousness as “seeing with the eyes of the heart”.²⁹ In the Wisdom tradition, ‘the heart’ does not refer to the Western notion of the heart as simply one’s feelings or emotions, rather it is a metaphor for a kind of spiritual perception that includes wisdom, a sense of unity, subconscious perceptions, creativity, the analytic mind, intuition, emotions, etc. These faculties are lumped under one name, ‘the heart,’ as a way of pointing out that they are meant to work in harmony. This may seem cheesy to those not steeped in mysticism, but I ask the reader to enter into the spirit of the view for a moment.

Seeing with the eyes of the heart, then, means seeing *without separation*. It means adopting the perspective of god and oneness, and seeing others *as oneself* and oneself *as others* (recall that Spinoza may have a similar thought about our shared divine natures). Indeed, loving thy neighbour simply *as oneself*. Bourgeault clarifies that “... this does not mean that you see God as an *object* (for that would be the egoic operating system), but rather, you see through the eyes of non-duality; God is the seeing itself”.³⁰ Notice that Bourgeault’s use of ‘god’ here and throughout the text, doesn’t seem to suggest the anthropomorphic god of ordinary Christianity. Instead, it seems that she has in mind a god similar to the god of Spinoza and the god of the mystics; a god that is *everything*.

It seems then, that as we further ‘see with the eyes of the heart’, we may further realize our divine natures through recognition of other beings as part of the divine. Likewise, seeing with the eyes of the heart could perhaps bring about something like the joy of Spinoza’s notion of blessedness. For as Bourgeault stresses, non-dual consciousness is one path to peacefulness of mind and heart, and this peacefulness may bring about emancipation from the bondage of emotions.

My comparison between Spinoza and Bourgeault's respective views may prove useful for a variety of reasons.³¹ First, the view she presents seems compatible with Spinoza's own view in several manners – the teaching of self-transformation, the recognition of shared divine natures, the similarities between their respective understandings of 'god', the desire for peace of mind. Second, it may shed some light on how Spinoza could avoid charges of ethical egoism, through the seeing of oneself as another and another as oneself.³² Third, it hints at something like a moral theory based upon the mutual recognition of shared divine natures. Of course, on this point, Bourgeault's aim is not to present a moral philosophy, nor is she writing as a philosopher, but her discussion of non-dual consciousness is helpful in this regard nonetheless. For perhaps an ethics of non-duality could offer something like a maxim of compassion and empathy that seeks to emphasize what transcends difference – that is, our shared divine natures. And finally, it might help to situate Spinoza's philosophy within the framework of another mystical tradition, that of the Jewish Wisdom tradition.

In this paper, I hope to have shown that something like mystical thought could be at work in Spinoza's metaphysics and ethical theory. Contrary to Nadler, I have argued that Spinoza's "arch rationalist" philosophy might not be a barrier to all mystical interpretations of his work, particularly in light of Spinoza's assertion that human beings can participate in the divine through the intellectual love of god. I have argued that because Spinoza's ethical theory is derived from his metaphysics, a mystical interpretation of his metaphysics could support further mystical interpretation of his ethical theory. I have shown several ways in which Bourgeault's views could help clarify Spinoza's. However, I have only presented here the first steps toward a fully satisfying interpretation of the possible mystical elements in Spinoza. It is the topic of a much larger paper to draw out the implications of any such mysticism in Spinoza, and it is a matter for historians to determine just how much mysticism truly is at work in his philosophy.³³

Notes

1. Steven Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo: The Alleged Mysticism in the *Ethics*," in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232.
2. Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo: The Alleged Mysticism in the *Ethics*," 232.
3. *Ibid.*, 232.
4. *Ibid.*, 235.
5. *Ibid.*, 235.
6. Richard Mason, as quoted in Nadler, 233, brackets by Nadler.
7. Though, as Nadler writes "this temptation to see in Spinoza's metaphysics a mystically inclined pantheism...perhaps deriving from kabbalah, has remained despite Spinoza's own harsh dismissal of kabbalists as 'triflers [nugatores] whose madness passes the bounds of my understanding'" (Brackets by Nadler, Nadler, 233). Spinoza might reject kabbalists as 'triflers' but the similarities between his own view and theirs remain striking. I'm not sure there is a clear answer regarding Spinoza's assertions here in light of these similarities. At the very least, more scholarly work ought to be done on this issue.
8. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (New York: Gramercy Books, 2004), 313. "En Sof" (or "Ayn Sof", meaning something like "unending") refers to the metaphorical 'tree of life' in kabbalah through which all things emanate.
9. Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo: The Alleged Mysticism in the *Ethics*," 243.
10. Spinoza, *Ethics* IV.Pref
11. *Ethics*, I.D6
12. *Ethics*, II.P1
13. *Ethics*, II.P2
14. *Ethics*, I.D5

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15. *Ethics*, IV.App
 16. *Ethics*, IV.Pref
 17. *Ethics*, III.P7
 18. *Ethics*, III.P6; *Ethics*, III.P7
 19. *Ethics*, V.P32.Cor; *Ethics*, V.P42.Proof
 20. Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, 1.
 21. *Ethics* IV.P28
 22. *Ethics*, II.40.S2
 23. Don Garrett, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 270.
 24. My addition in brackets, Garrett, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, 268.
 25. *Ethics*, IV.P18.S, brackets in original
 26. Recall Spinoza's own emphasis on an ethics of self-transformation.
 27. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind: A New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 33.
 28. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 34.
 29. *Ibid.*, 35.
 30. Brackets in original, Bourgeault, 46.
 31. There are of course, several points of departure between Spinoza's view and Bourgeault's. Notably, while Bourgeault seems to stress that non-duality requires us to 'see' entirely without separation, Spinoza's own account may not allow this. In short, this is because Spinoza's substance/mode metaphysics requires us to view everything as interconnected in one substance, but also as distinct and finite natures of that same substance. Perhaps, there truly isn't much difference between the two views here, for as I proposed earlier, the goal of non-duality is really to encourage us to "see without separation" as best we can. And of course, the 'egoic form of perception' is still useful for Bourgeault. Notice too that for Spinoza, god is still an 'object' of love, while for Bourgeault god is not an object, rather god is the act of "seeing itself".

32. Admittedly, if there is altruism in Spinoza's view, it is of a weaker kind. For, while Spinoza need not deny that altruism exists, the origin or foundation of that altruism will ultimately be found in the striving of a single agent to preserve itself.

33. I wish to thank the editors of *Episteme*, Holly Hudson, and Kyle Grimsrud-Manz, for their helpful comments. And I wish to thank Curtis Sommerlatte for his guidance on an early version of this paper.

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