

Handout 12: God and Purpose

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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In the Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza denies that God acts for the sake of a “fixed goal,” and in particular that God acts for the sake of humanity. His argumentative strategy is twofold:

1. To explain the origin of the mistaken belief that God acts for the benefit of humanity.
2. To demonstrate that it is unreasonable to believe that God acts for any purpose.

Now Spinoza does think that God has a will, and so he thinks that, in some sense, God does *act*. You might think that it’s incoherent to describe something as acting with no purpose at all. Spinoza might concede that there is some sense in which God acts for a purpose: God acts with the intention of *being God*. But this would be the only sense in which Spinoza would allow that God acts for a purpose.

1. The origin of the mistaken belief that God acts for the benefit of humanity.
 - (a) We act for our own benefit.
 - (b) We find that many things in nature benefit us.
 - (c) We conclude that someone created those things in order to benefit us.
2. Arguments against the view that God acts for a purpose.
 - (a) First argument (AW 162a): God lacks nothing
 - i. If God acts for a purpose, he must be “seeking something he lacks.”
 - ii. God is perfect and hence lacks nothing.
 - iii. So, God doesn’t act for a purpose.
 - iv. Problem: can’t you act for a purpose without thereby lacking something?
 - (b) Second argument (AW 162b): Nothing is explained
 - i. Explaining something in terms of God’s purposes eventually brings us to “the sanctuary of ignorance.”
 - ii. Problem: even if we don’t know God’s ultimate purposes, that doesn’t mean God doesn’t act for purposes!

- (c) Third argument: from the PSR
 - i. Suppose God acts for the sake of X, where X is a finite mode.
 - ii. From the PSR, there must be an explanation for why God acts for the sake of X instead of for the sake of Y.
 - iii. But there's no non-arbitrary reason God would have for doing this.
 - iv. So, God doesn't.
 - v. Problem: couldn't God act for the sake of *each* finite mode?
 - vi. Response to the problem: maybe that's just the same as acting for the sake of *being God*; after all, each finite mode follows from God's essence.

- 3. The results of this mistaken belief
 - (a) We habitually evaluate things in terms of their benefit to us. Spinoza thinks that this is the ultimate origin of our ordinary evaluations of things as "good" and "bad"
 - (b) When we think that God / Nature acts for our benefit, then we conclude that whether things benefit us has some objective significance.
 - (c) But this is a mistake: our evaluations reflect nothing about things themselves.
 - (d) Spinoza denies that "good" and "bad" refer to anything objective.