

Ends

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
Professor Geoff Pynn
Northern Illinois University

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In the Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues vigorously against two “prejudices” that he thinks constitute “great obstacles to men’s understanding the connections of things”. The first:

NATURAL ENDS. Natural things act on account of an end.

The term “end” in this context means *purpose* or *goal*. Spinoza is not denying that some actions can be understood in terms of ends, or, to use Aristotle’s term, *final causes*. Indeed part of his argument is that “all men want to seek their own advantage”. What he is denying, rather, is that final causes play any *fundamental* explanatory role in the natural world. The only “real causes,” as he puts it, are what Aristotle called *efficient causes*; i.e. the immediate, proximate sources of particular instances of change or stasis (e.g., one billiard ball striking another, or the cables supporting the roadway in a suspension bridge).

Spinoza thinks this prejudice typically shows up in a more specific guise, a particular idea about *what* ends natural things are directed towards:

GOD’S PURPOSE. God directs natural things to the benefit of man.

Spinoza writes as if NATURAL ENDS and GOD’S PURPOSE are really just two sides of the same coin, but this is too strong. Aristotle, for example, would have endorsed the first and rejected the second. Nonetheless, Spinoza is vehemently opposed to them both. Not only do they prevent us from seeing the true nature of reality, they give rise to further prejudices about “good and evil, merit and wrong-doing, praise and blame, order and confusion, beauty and ugliness, and other things of this kind” (Bennett, 18).

The argumentative structure of the Appendix is as follows:

1. Explain the origin of the prejudice
2. Argue against the prejudice
3. Show the pernicious effects of the prejudice

THE ORIGIN OF THE PREJUDICE

For Spinoza, our belief in NATURAL ENDS arises from two factors. First, we are “born ignorant of the causes of things”; i.e., we enter the world not knowing why things happen. Second, we “want to seek [our] own advantage and are conscious of wanting this” (Bennett, 18). As a result, when we become curious about why things happen the way they do, we take the idea of a final cause — which we get from our awareness of our *own* basis for acting — as our basic model of explanation for *everything* in nature:

So the only explanations they look for are ones in terms of final causes—in asking ‘*Why* did that happen?’ they are asking ‘*For what purpose* did that happen?’—and when they have heard *that* they are satisfied, having nothing more to ask.

Thus from our ignorance of true causes and our understanding of why *we* act as we do, we assume that nature can be fully explained in terms of final causes.

Moreover, when we start to ask about the final causes of things in nature, we notice that many things in nature benefit *us*. We have “eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish” (Bennett, 18-19). This realization leads us to think that the final cause of things in nature is ... to benefit us! Since we didn’t put those things there for our own benefit, we conclude that someone else must have done so on our behalf.

1. First argument: God lacks nothing

- (a) If God acts for the sake of an end, then God lacks something.
- (b) God is perfect and hence lacks nothing.
- (c) So, God doesn’t act for the sake of an end.
- (d) Problem: can’t you act for a purpose without thereby lacking something? (E.g., playing a game, listening to a symphony.)

2. Second argument: Nothing is explained

- (a) Explaining something in terms of God’s purposes eventually brings us to “the haven of ignorance,” i.e., the will of God (Bennett, 20).
- (b) Response: even if we don’t know God’s ultimate purposes, that doesn’t mean God doesn’t act for purposes!
- (c) Rejoinder: sure, but Spinoza isn’t presenting this as a reason for thinking that God doesn’t act for ends; rather, he is showing that those who purport to explain things in terms of God’s ends are not actually explaining anything at all.

3. Third argument: from the PSR (not in the *Appendix*; suggested by Michael Della Rocca)

- (a) Suppose God acts for the sake of X, where X is a finite mode.
- (b) From the PSR, there must be an explanation for why God acts for the sake of X instead of for the sake of Y.
- (c) But there’s no non-arbitrary reason God would have for doing this.

- (d) So, God doesn't.
- (e) Problem: couldn't God act for the sake of *each* finite mode?
- (f) 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.

The results of these prejudices

1. We habitually evaluate things in terms of their benefit to us. Spinoza thinks that this is the ultimate origin of our evaluative notions:
 - 'good, bad, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness'
2. Since we assume GOD'S PURPOSE, we conclude that whether things benefit us has some significance independently of our own experiences of them. We think that calling things good, bad, etc. can help us to *explain* them.
3. But this is a mistake: our evaluations reflect nothing about things themselves. In fact, these notions concern nothing more than "a relation to our imagination" (Bennett, 21).
4. This mistake leads people to question God's perfection. (Questions like: "why are things so rotten that they stink? so ugly that they make us sick? why is there confusion, evil, and wrong-doing?" Bennett, 22)
5. Given our belief that we are free, this mistake also leads us to think that the notions of "praise and blame and sin and merit" have some explanatory significance. They don't.