

# *ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM*

*JULIANA MERÇON<sup>1</sup>*

## **RESUMO**

A filosofia de Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) tem oferecido a estudiosos contemporâneos da ética ambiental uma valiosa fonte de inspiração. Pesquisadores como Arne Naess, por exemplo, têm usado a firme crítica de Spinoza ao antropocentrismo como uma base teórica para a formulação de uma ética eco-cêntrica. Neste artigo, argumentarei que a apropriação que Naess faz da filosofia de Spinoza para justificar que o não-humano é depositário de 'valor intrínseco' contém problemas. Meu objetivo principal é o de elucidar o sentido no qual a crítica de Spinoza ao antropocentrismo não contradiz uma visão da ética que seja fortemente centrada no humano.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ética ambiental, Spinoza, antropocentrismo.

## **ABSTRACT**

The philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) has provided contemporary environmental ethicists with invaluable inspiration. Scholars such as Arne Naess, for instance, have used Spinoza's resolute critique of anthropocentrism as a theoretical basis for the formulation of an eco-centric ethics. In this paper I argue that Naess' appropriation of Spinoza's philosophy in order to justify that the non-human are depository of 'intrinsic value' contains problems. My main objective is to elucidate the sense in which Spinoza's critique of anthropocentrism does not contradict a strongly human-centred ethical view.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental ethics, Spinoza, anthropocentrism.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, Australia, and lecturer at the Instituto de Investigaciones en Educación, Universidad Veracruzana, México. Email: [juliana.mercon@uqconnect.edu.au](mailto:juliana.mercon@uqconnect.edu.au)

Since the publication of the *Ethics* in 1677, Spinoza's philosophy has been interpreted in a multiplicity of forms. Convergent yet also broadly antagonistic lines of commentary constitute the history of the reception of Spinoza's ideas. In Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, for instance, a book first published in 1697, Spinoza was portrayed as an atheist. Bayle's criticism of the 'abominable morality' that derived from an ever changing God, inherently contradictory, became the predominant interpretive trend in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (to the extent that refuting Spinoza's system became a requirement for the acquisition of the title of theologian in Germany). In contrast, influenced particularly by Heinrich Heine's *Philosophy in Germany*, originally published in 1835, the literary Romantic movement acclaimed Spinoza as a pantheist. The identification between God and world was thus not interpreted as a downgrading of the divine but as a praise of nature. Goethe, for instance, writes fondly of Spinoza in his autobiography describing himself as an "enthusiastic disciple, his most decided worshipper".<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous reception of Spinoza's philosophy during the two centuries that followed his death was later shadowed by philological and historiographic studies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup> and by the precedence given to ethico-political readings in the last five decades.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most recent and original chapters in the history of Spinozist scholarship involves the application of Spinoza's ideas to the field of environmental philosophy. Despite the fact that the magnitude of the socio-ecological crisis we now endure was unimaginable in the seventeenth century, various philosophers have found proficuous inspiration in Spinoza's thought, reconfiguring the atheism/pantheism divide. Searching Spinozism for invaluable contributions that may assist us in the urgent task of rethinking our relationship with the environment certainly amounts to a justifiable and meaningful endeavour. It seems that more than any other modern philosopher, Spinoza was concerned with the ontological bases of ethical positions and with the consideration of humans as part of nature. The human illusion of transcending the natural order and constituting a domain

<sup>2</sup> "Spinoza Renaissance" is the expression assigned to the philosophical dispute over Spinozism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The correspondence between Jacobi and Mendelssohn is at the origin of the pantheist ("Pantheismusstreit") reinterpretation of the *Ethics* and the subsequent renewed general interest for the Dutch philosopher. Goethe, J.W. (1971), p. 262, cited in Lloyd (1996), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> With the notable work by C. Gerbhardt and H. Wolfson.

<sup>4</sup> Such as those by A. Matheron, B. Rousset, A. Tosel, A. Negri, and E. Balibar.

of their own – an *imperium in imperio* – was severely criticised by the Dutch philosopher for whom the true understanding of interdependence and integration corresponds to a powerful, active and virtuous life.

In spite of the variety of significant ideas that could be further explored in order to demonstrate the relevance of Spinozism to environmental ethics, the focus of this paper lies on a very particular issue: the dispute over interpretations of Spinoza's critique of anthropocentrism and their ethical implications. Amongst the most acclaimed Spinozist views that have been broadly adopted in the attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for some trends of environmental ethics is *a certain* resolute condemnation of anthropocentrism. The stress is deliberate here since my objective in this paper is to demonstrate how Spinoza's critique of anthropocentrism is not absolute. In opposition to interpretations defended by some environmental philosophers, I argue that the attribution of 'intrinsic value' to non-human individuals and resources ironically results from an anthropocentric projection. In other words, that which is denounced by some environmental philosophers as the philosophical and practical error to avoid is, in fact, the very problem they reinstate through their alleged theoretical solution.

Arne Naess' voice is crucial in this context for his leading influence in a particular environmental ethics strand and for his attempts to use Spinoza's philosophy as a theoretical foundation for the 'deep ecology' movement. In broad agreement with de Jonge (2004), I argue that Naess' appropriation of Spinoza's philosophy in order to support an 'eco-centric' ethics contains a series of problems. In order to put forward my own particular views on this matter I will: 1) briefly present Naess' view on the matter of non-human intrinsic value; 2) argue that for Spinoza (and in contrast with Naess' reading) Nature is 'value-neutral'; 3) clarify the senses in which, according to Spinoza, we are equal and different to non-human beings; and 4) offer a new basis for the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak anthropocentrism' as I elucidate the sense in which Spinoza manages to combine a morally strong anthropocentrism and an epistemological view of humans as not central in Nature.

### THE “DEEP ECOLOGY” MOVEMENT

The term ‘deep ecology’ was first coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in a conference in Bucharest in 1972.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the novelty of the expression, it is important to note that the theses associated with the deep ecology movement were not entirely original. Much inspiration was drawn from Aldo Leopold’s *Land ethic* and his idea of enlarging the “boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land” (1942, p. 219). Another precursor was Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, where the poisoning of the environment by pesticides was thoroughly denounced.<sup>6</sup> Lynn White, a posterior promoter of deep ecology, had also suggested what would then become some of the movement’s guidelines in his founding article *Historic roots of our ecological crisis*.<sup>7</sup> Christian and Marxist orientations were criticised and the Franciscan ideal of equal respect to all creatures was praised in that text.

Naess (1973) explains that the notion of depth is used to contrast with a ‘shallow’ ecology movement whose objective is to “fight against pollution and resource depletion [and] to increase the health and affluence of people in the developed countries”. With the purpose of advancing a deeper view and relationship with the environment, deep ecology exhorts followers to ‘biospherical egalitarianism’, emphasising the importance of diversity and symbiotic relations. It is maintained that the flourishing of all life forms and human self-realisation are conditioned by our acknowledgement of interconnectedness and interdependence, and the actions that derive from this understanding should be able to implement radical changes in economic, technological, and ideological structures. The decrease of human population and the effective protection of ecological diversity through the institution of animal rights and other policies are among the proposed measures of the deep ecology agenda. The first of a series of eight principles of the “deep ecology platform” states that

The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent

<sup>5</sup> See Naess, A. “The shallow and the deep. Long-range ecology movements”, *Inquiry*, 16, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, R. *Silent Spring*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962.

<sup>7</sup> White, L. “Historic roots of our ecological crisis”, *Science*, 155 (1967), p. 1203-1207.

value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes (Naess and Sessions, 1993).

As shown by this first principle, the cultivation of a non-anthropocentric perspective lies at the core of deep ecology. Naess and the American philosopher George Sessions turned to Spinoza in order to find the necessary philosophical support for that view.<sup>8</sup> Naess claims that “Spinoza’s philosophy provides the best framework for a contemporary philosophy of nature inspired by the ecological movement” (1977, p. 45). Among the various formulations and tenets of Spinozism, the Norwegian philosopher highlights that: 1. Spinoza’s formula God or Nature - *Deus sive natura* - protects us against dualisms such as human/nature that lie in the heart of our unsustainable uses of natural resources; 2. his faith in the ultimate harmony of the desires of free human beings in free communities furnishes guidelines for political activity; and 3. his stress on the interconnectedness of all things supports long-term ecological perspectives and a decent behaviour towards forms of life which are other than the human. In the following sections I discuss some of the Spinozist ideas which Naess claims to have furnished him with the philosophical frame for a pungent critique of anthropocentrism.

#### *NATURE’S AMORAL NATURE*

Far from the scandal and philosophical turmoil generated when Spinoza first stated the identification between God and Nature, this conceptual insignia of his system now lies at the hub of much positive consideration. Nevertheless, if, on one hand, Spinozism is no longer banned for its atheist connotations, on the other, contemporary thinkers such as Naess seem to incur the Romantic risk of sacralising (and humanising) Nature. The Norwegian philosopher suggests that akin to the *Deus sive Natura* of Spinoza, the conception of nature that informs deep ecology is “not the passive, dead, value-neutral nature of mechanistic science” (1977, p. 46). Passivity and inertness are adjectives that are not pertinent to Spinoza’s notion of nature, as

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Naess, A. Freedom, emotion and self-subsistence. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975; Naess, A. “Spinoza and ecology”, *Philosophia*, V 7, N 1, 1977, p. 45-54; Session, G. “Spinoza and Jeffers no man in nature”, *Inquiry*, 20, 199, p. 481-528.

Naess rightly argues. Yet, denying the ‘value-neutrality’ of nature and attributing to Spinoza the idea that the all-encompassing reality is essentially moral are positions that require more rigorous arguments which Naess has not provided.

Spinoza’s God or Nature is by no means imbued with anthropomorphic characteristics. It is not a superlative human - it has no will, no goodness, no interest or moral faculty. It acts from the same necessity from which it exists (EIV Pref),<sup>9</sup> and its incessant action equates the production of all existent things. For Spinoza, nature is this productive process itself - or *Natura naturans* – just as it is the effects of that activity – or *Natura naturata* (EI P29 S). In neither case can nature be defined as moral or capable of exerting any moral judgement or act. In fact, it seems that attributing moral and other human capacities to nature is a questionable attitude that might derive from strongly embedded teleological fictions. How would Spinoza allow us to see that connection?

In the appendix to part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza famously contends that the common and illusionary version of human freedom is built upon three combined root causes: our innate ignorance of the causes of things, our striving for our own advantage, and the fact that we are conscious of this striving or appetite. We think of ourselves as free, because we are conscious of our volitions, but ignorant of the causes by which we are disposed to wanting and willing. Not understanding the efficient causes of our activity, we move on account of an end which we believe will favour us, and utilise this final cause as an explanation for our actions. This habit of explicating the present by means of the future is then projected onto other things in Nature and to an anthropomorphised notion of God as creator.

The common prejudice according to which “all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end” is thus turned into a hyperbolic superstition that maintains “that God himself directs all things to some certain end” (EI Ap) – that end being the advantage of humans - since ‘God has made all things for humans’ - what also implies that humans

<sup>9</sup> The following abbreviated notation will be used in reference to Spinoza’s *Ethics*: EI (II, III, IV, V) for *Ethics*, Part I (Roman numerals refer to the Parts of the *Ethics*); A for axiom; C for corollary; D for demonstration (or definition if followed by an Arabic numeral); Post. for postulate; P for proposition; Pref for preface; S for scholium (Arabic numerals denote the lemma, proposition or scholium number); Ap for appendix; Def Af for definitions of affects; Exp for explanation. Citations from the *Ethics* are quoted from *The Ethics and other works. A Spinoza Reader*. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

should worship this benefactor god. Despite “daily experience showing that conveniences and inconveniences happen indiscriminately to the pious and the impious alike” (*ibid.*), Spinoza remarks that people do not on that account give up their long-standing prejudice. Instead, they continue to believe in a willing God who created their eyes for seeing, plants and animals for food, and all natural things as means to their own advantage. Spinoza warns us that this doctrine - which explains the operation of natural things through their final causes - is a distortion of nature for what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely. Since nature “acts from the same necessity from which it exists” and “does nothing on account of an end” (EIV Pref), from the perspective of the whole of nature, things simply are and cannot be said to express any good or evil. In other words, nature is nothing but an ever changing amoral reality.

Naess and other environmental philosophers of our days would fully acknowledge the problematic implications of conceiving a world ‘made for humans’. What, however, does not seem to be entirely realised is that by extending a moral view to non-human individuals and to the whole of nature they are actually projecting teleological goals or ideals onto that which, in a Spinozist sense, is already perfect, or, to use a Nietzschean phrase, is beyond good and evil. The power of rational understanding plays a pivotal role in Spinoza’s project: his philosophical intention is to demystify ordinary myths whose apparent effect is to place human conduct outside the realm of nature. In sum, the objective to which Spinozism aspires – and that is doubtfully assumed by Naess – is to *naturalise ethics* and not to moralise nature.

#### *EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE: CONATUS’ SPECIESISM*

At this stage, an attentive reader could point to an apparent paradox that emerges from the aforementioned ideas: If Spinoza conceives nature as an amoral reality, but insists that humans are part of nature, how can we then be considered moral beings? Two complementary approaches are here called into consideration: one perspectival and the other epistemological. Firstly, as we have previously remarked, it could be said that from the perspective of the whole of nature, things and events simply are – they are not good or bad, but merely existent. Nature is not a teleological operation; it does not seek any end, it does not lack completeness, it is not comparable to

any other reality, but corresponds to the full realisation of necessity. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of humans,<sup>10</sup> whose essence is their *conatus* or striving to persevere in existence,<sup>11</sup> reality is not perceived as perfect and effort is exerted in order to attain states of greater satisfaction. Since “there is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful (...) by which it can be destroyed” (EIV A1), the endeavour to remain in existence, against all adversity, is the primary drive that informs the human perspective. The rational understanding of our socio-physical environment is for Spinoza the most useful tool we can implement in order to expand our powers and enhance life. The more adequate the understanding we have of reality, in other words, the more we are able to know the causes or determinations of things, the more we can act in accordance with that knowledge, expanding our powers and enhancing our life.

Morality participates in the quest for the conditions that will favour human life. In spite of the fact that other living beings also strive to continue in existence – and, in that respect, individuals of all species are equal – the particular processes through which individuals attempt to maintain and enlarge their powers differ significantly. Thus, if on one hand humans have no privileged position in nature, trying to continue alive and being susceptible to annihilation just as any other living organism, on the other hand, that lack of privilege does not imply that humans share forms of understanding or a sense of morality with individuals of other species. In fact, it is often the case that the survival of individuals from one species entails the extinction of individuals from other species, and even from one’s own. Total complementarity is simply not possible from the viewpoint of finite beings.

According to Spinoza, only humans are part of a moral community. Good and evil cannot but be conceived where there is accordance of rights and obligations.

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<sup>10</sup> For Spinoza, human individuals, like other individuals in Nature, are modes or modifications of the substance (i.e. Nature) and not substance themselves. Substance here is not defined in Aristotelian terms as individuals (in the case of primary substances) or species (secondary substances), or as in Descartes for whom mind and matter are also substances. For Spinoza, substance is “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (EI D3). In this sense, there is only one substance, that is, God or Nature.

<sup>11</sup> See EIII P6 (“Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being”); and EIII Def Af 1 (“Desire is man’s very essence”) and EIII Def Af 1 Exp (“By the word *desire* I understand any of a man’s strivings (...) which vary as the man’s constitution varies”).

(...) In the state of nature, wrong-doing is impossible; (...) nothing is forbidden by the law of nature, except what is beyond everyone's power. (...) Therefore wrong-doing cannot be conceived of, but under the State — that is, where, by the general right of the whole dominion, it is decided what is good and what evil, and where no one does anything rightfully, save what he does in accordance with the general decree or consent (*Tractatus Politicus* II 18, 19).

Despite the fact that human and non-human beings may seek their own advantage, moral judgements can only occur within a community led by norms and ideals. This is why morality, as a product of human sociability, carries the mark of our singular epistemological position. Our limited intellect and body prevent us from knowing all the causes of the reality we inhabit. Our mind cannot adequately grasp the whole of our own situated experience and is infinitely less capable of knowing the whole of reality. Unable to understand much of what occurs, and how exactly life can be mutually enhanced, rules are made necessary and ideals of peaceful coexistence reinforced. Notwithstanding our limited nature, we can certainly comprehend some of the socio-physical processes that shape our lives. If we knew everything and acted in accordance with that knowledge, morality would be superfluous. Conversely, if we knew nothing at all, being blindly and completely determined by forces of which we had no understanding, morality would equally have no place. It is our intermediate position - as beings that are capable of reasoning but incapable of grasping the whole of reality - that makes morality a vital component of sociability.

Spinoza's strong affirmation of a human-centred morality might seem at odds with his acclaimed rejection of anthropocentrism. According to Lloyd (1980), the awkward complementarity between these two ideas throws into question the assumption held by many environmental ethicists that condemning human exploitation of the environment implies enlarging the moral community to include the non-human. Nevertheless, a rejection of anthropocentricity in morals is often juxtaposed with a definite anthropocentric way of perceiving the non-human. This theoretical situation seems to generate a sense of incongruity: it is as if we attempted to render morality less anthropocentric by humanising non-human individuals. A more

coherent position made available by Spinoza, nonetheless, would not involve the attribution of intrinsic value to the non-human, but the attentive consideration of non-human individuals and systems as objects of moral concern.

*MORAL ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND HUMANS' NON-CENTRAL  
POSITION IN NATURE*

Bryan Norton (1984) noted how the ambiguity of the term 'anthropocentrism' has misled the debate around some important issues in environmental ethics. He proposed that a distinction be made between 'strong' and 'weak' forms of anthropocentrism. 'Strong anthropocentrism' was then defined as a view in which unquestioned or unexamined felt preferences are determinant of value. The lack of reflection upon an individual's strongly anthropocentric preferences makes the indiscriminate utilisation of nature as a sort of storehouse of raw materials less susceptible to criticism. On the other hand, 'weak anthropocentrism' denotes a type of recognition that felt preferences can be either rational or not - congruent with considered preferences and ideals or not - thus promoting an open ground for criticism of value systems which are abusively exploitative of the environment. Considering these two views, Norton goes on to argue that weak anthropocentrism provides environmental ethicists with two key resources: it allows rational ideals of harmony with nature to be used as a basis for the critical examination of exploitative conduct, and it permits values to be conceived through a process of inquiry and formation, having human experience as an important source.

I will not engage with Norton's proposal but use it as an excuse in order to suggest that, from a Spinozist perspective, the adjectives 'strong' and 'weak' used in his distinction would perhaps have to be reversely applied. As I provide reasons for this proposed modification, I also intend to further elucidate the apparent paradoxical convergence between Spinoza's refutation of a certain anthropocentric perception and his defence of a human-centred morality.

As previously argued, Spinoza's ethical project is fundamentally anthropocentric: it assumes that ethics is a human system and strategy that has the survival and well-being of humans as its central objective. Nevertheless, in order to know and affirm one's greater good (and the centrality of this ethical quest), an understanding of one's non-central

position in Nature is required. According to Spinoza, our rational understanding of the causal nexus between things allows us to perceive the socio-physical relations of interdependence of which we are a partial product and producer. The more we understand the connections in which we participate and of which our body and mind are an effect, the more power of thinking and acting we exercise. For this reason, a powerful or 'strong' human individual is not one who perceives his own self as an isolated substantial unit, but one who 'centres' his thinking upon the ever changing causal situations that explain external events and one's own dispositions. In order to truly increase our power, thus having our own good at the centre of our inquiry and attitude, we would have to adequately understand our non-central position as *a part of a complex whole* which Spinoza calls Nature. Ultimately, the understanding of interdependence equates knowing that my own good relies on the equal flourishing of other humans. In this sense, it would not be distorting to affirm that a 'strong anthropocentric' view is one whose centre is the very understanding of the relational network that engenders, maintains and enhances human life.

In contrast, human weakness lies in illusions of isolation and self-sufficiency, in a conception of the world that does not take into account the constitutive interdependence of humans, non-human beings and natural resources. The understanding of causal connections has little participation in this weak form of anthropocentrism. Immediacy substitutes reasoning as our responses ignore the chains of events that cause the situations in which we are immersed. Centred on an atomic notion of individuality, one's power of thinking and acting is made hostage of an overwhelming reality that is not effectively comprehended. Nature is perceived as a provider of goods and services whose processes are perceived as cut off from one's own actions. The epistemological shift from a state of 'weakness' - or passive reception of ideas and practices - to a state of 'strength' - or greater understanding of relational processes - implies an ethical change. The more we rationally conceive of our socio-physical reality through a complex understanding of causality the more we are able to morally act, fostering individual and communal powers that affirm their position of interdependence in nature.

'Strong anthropocentrism' as it is here reconstructed allows us to make the connection between one's power or strength and the necessary participation of a series of non-human entities, natural resources and ecosystems in the maintenance of human life. The

sustenance of our existence and well-being is understood as a consequence of our mindful interactions with the environment. The utilisation of resources and other forms of life is thus open to scrutiny and the search for rational justification.

### *FINAL REMARKS*

In spite of the limitations of this brief discussion, I hope that Spinoza's view on anthropocentrism has become clearer. The uncommon association between a firm critique of human-centric conceptions of nature and the defence of ethical anthropocentrism may seem puzzling, but it is also significant in demonstrating how theoretical efforts whose purpose is to offer fundamentals for environmental protection do not need to venture into complicated moral fields. In fact, the ascription of intrinsic value to the non-human as an attempt to enlarge the moral community can be interpreted, from a Spinozist perspective, as a serious anthropocentric projection that – far from rendering clarity or greater understanding of our position in nature – mystifies our role in the construction of ethical and political principles that guide our actions in relation to the environment.

The stress posed on this theoretical problem should not, however, prevent us from recognising that the noble ideals and effective actions of deep ecologists in protecting against greater environmental devastation are generally worth of praise and active support. By no means should the challenges that philosophers and scientists face in their pursuit for frames of knowledge that assist in the guidance of our conduct create obstacles for action. Restraining the accelerated environmental destruction and actively engaging in more thoughtful forms of sociability and relations with nature is a task that cannot await a theoretical closure. The reconstruction of our place in nature is a pressing ethical task that may determine the very fate of our planetary life- supporting systems.

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