

**WHAT SPINOZA CAN TEACH US TODAY ABOUT NATURALIZING ETHICS:
PROVINCIALIZING PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS AND FREEDOM WITHOUT FREE WILL**

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In this essay I will introduce publicly the project I have been developing for the past year on naturalizing philosophical ethics via a critique of standard modern Western ethics as theologically driven. This project aims to expose standard philosophical ethics as originating in, and as still beholden to, a number of dogmatic Christian theological theses mandated in the thirteenth century and perhaps in an even earlier Christian anthropology. Thus I challenge the claim of modern philosophical ethics to universality and reframe it, instead, as an expression of an unacknowledged Christian cultural provincialism.

I propose that standard philosophical ethics in both its Analytic and Continental versions maintains and secularizes, and thereby disguises and bolsters, a miraculous view of the human person which is inherent in the voluntarist notion of free will. For that notion presupposes a human person who, as it were, intervenes from 'above' into nature and history on the analogy of the way that God intervenes miraculously in biblical creation and history. The freedom of the will entails a human person who is not **of** nature and history but instead has powers to transcend the natural and historical and social character of human life. It sets as the human ideal an absolute mastery over the self and the world. A few recent scholars have recognized that free will is a "mystery" but none, as far as I know, has recognized its religious origins and character and traced its origins to Christian doctrine or biblical understandings of the divine. The doctrine of the freedom of the will is problematic because it both mis-describes the human person and also has negative personal, social, and public policy consequences. Assigning to the individual complete responsibility for his or her triumphs or failures aggrandizes the privileged and blames the poor and needy for their situation. It suggests that all solutions are individual rather primarily social and systemic.

The doctrinal mandate of radical voluntarism harks back to the Church Condemnations of 1277 of Judaeo-Arabic Aristotelian naturalism. That we can choose our actions *ex nihilo* or *de novo* (the latter is the philosophical view that we *originate our actions* whether they are chosen from alternatives or not, see Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O'Rourke, and David Shier editors, *Freedom and Determinism*, M.I.T. Press, 2004, p. 6), the voluntarist thesis in some form, is an idea dependent on a deep Christian anthropology because a person is *converted* to Christianity thus making Christianity

normatively *an identity one chooses* rather than one that one is born into. Thereby Christian identity is defined as rejecting the natural facts of birth and context and replaced by a choice articulated in the language of ‘*born again*’ and ‘*converted to*’. To wit, it is the rite of Baptism which initiates and defines the Christian, and Baptism represents the ‘*choosing of Christianity*’ even and especially symbolically and not literally since most Christians are baptized in infancy. Baptism as the mode of Christian identification is precisely a *symbol of conversion* for that was (and remains) its function in the Judaism from which the custom was borrowed. For Jews, only those converted to Judaism, are *immersed* but *all Christians are immersed*, that is, all Christians take on Christianity symbolically from some prior (unsaved) state. Being born again implies an anti-naturalism insofar as one symbolically rejects an identity emergent from one’s natural and historical contexts but, instead, chooses one. It is this deep anthropology which, I believe, gets replayed and transformed in dogmatic theology and haunts philosophical ethics even today.

Harry Austryn Wolfson, the great historian of medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophical theology, recognized that the freedom of the will as defined by the Western philosophical tradition was in fact a theological doctrine assigning a miraculous status and capacity to the human mind and personality. Wolfson maintained that the entire Western medieval philosophical-theological tradition was defined by its embrace of a miraculous notion of the will whose original adoption was an attempt to reconcile Greek philosophical and Hebrew Biblical traditions. According to Wolfson all three Western religious traditions effected this compromise, a compromise initiated in his view by the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo, in the first century and dismantled by the Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, in the seventeenth. Wolfson regarded Spinoza’s philosophy as a deconstruction of the reconciliation of Greek and Hebrew traditions into their original components. (Charles Taylor similarly sees Spinoza as a revival of a form of Greek philosophical paganism.)

The several decades of scholarship since his death on all three philosophical traditions have exposed that Wolfson erred in claiming that all three Western religious-philosophical traditions embraced the reconciliation of Greek and Jewish thought in a miraculous doctrine of the freedom of the will. For it is now clear and generally accepted that nearly all the Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophers (with only a couple of notable exceptions) maintained an Aristotelian and Stoic naturalist view of human action rather than a miraculous one. And Spinoza, rather than deconstructing the ubiquitous medieval reconciliation of Greek naturalism and Hebrew miracle, instead, modernized Judaeo-Arabic naturalism by updating its Aristotelian-Stoic determinist basis in the light of early modern breakthroughs in science. For Spinoza all causes are in webs of relation and systems nested within systems, the social and natural being continuous and the human deeply embedded within the larger webs, both contributing to them and expressive of them. It was medieval Christian philosophical theology alone that embraced the miraculous freedom of the will, the isolation of the self to enable its self-origination or self-invention, which in modernity was reinterpreted in secular guise and re-contextualized within a modern scientific and philosophical framework, principally by Descartes and Kant. The freedom of the will implies that the human person is taken out

of the causal system and is not subject to normal scientific causal explanation. While the Augustinian notion of the direct intervention of God into the human soul to bolster the will through Grace was eliminated as too theological and miraculous for inclusion in the modern philosophical understanding of ethical action, the underlying conception of the human person as itself capable of a God-like independence from nature and history was retained and disguised

The miraculous character of the free will haunts standard philosophical ethics to this day because its original Christian theological presuppositions have not been exposed and acknowledged and therefore brought to conscious awareness so that they can be reexamined and reevaluated. For it is the medieval Christian tradition of philosophical theology that triumphed and became the basis of modern philosophical ethics rather than Judaeo-Islamic naturalism and the Spinozist modernization of it. In fact, the latter was roundly rejected not only by medieval Christianity in the 13th century but also again at the inception of modern philosophical ethics. Philosophy thus reasserted in the early 20th century, first by G.E. Moore, the (miraculous) power of the human person to wrest the self from nature, history, context, community, relationships, and natural endowments as the sine qua non of ethics; and that view remains the standard foundation of philosophical ethics today. Descartes characterized it as the 'indifference' of the will (that is, to all its natural endowments and historical location) and in the early 20th century the challenge to this conception of the person as atomic and self-inventing was attributed to Spinoza and anathematized. Philosophy, unbeknownst to itself, is still fighting ancient theological battles with Islam and Judaism and also still engaged in a battle to repudiate Greek naturalism (in its Spinozist version).

In his 1905 book, *Fives Types of Ethics Theory*, C.D. Broad, following up on a suggestion of G.E. Moore, presented Spinoza's ethics as outside the limits of all legitimate ethical theory because of its foundational determinism and naturalism. For Spinoza had committed what Moore regarded as the 'naturalistic fallacy', a fallacy that in and of itself was said to undermine the possibility of making ethical claims or judgments. Spinoza's ethics thus was held to vitiate ethics rather than to explain it. Upon the outcasting of Spinoza, the entire edifice of modern ethical theory stands. Spinoza still occupies the outside, the dangerous and prohibited beyond whose boundary must not be approached let alone breached. Most of the secondary literature on Spinoza's ethical theory by his philosophical partisans tries to defend Spinoza from the charge of having committed the naturalistic fallacy. It argues that Spinoza's modern excommunication from philosophy is unfounded and should be rescinded and makes the further case that his philosophical ethics should be reconsidered as within the boundaries set by Broad.

I propose that the modern philosophical 'ban' on Spinoza has, ironically, had far more serious consequences than the rabbinic excommunication of Spinoza in the 17th century for it is a reprise of the Church's 1277 Condemnation of central theses of Aristotelian and Stoic radical naturalism, precisely the kind of naturalism exemplified by Maimonides and taken over by Spinoza. The 1277 ban not only prohibited Catholic scholars from holding naturalist determinist positions about the will (maintained by Maimonides and nearly all medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers and later elaborated

by Spinoza) but also mandated in their stead a number of voluntarist dogmas advocating a radical version of the freedom of the will. Thus it is the conservative Catholic theological response to the 13th century influx into Christendom of Judaeo-Arabic philosophical naturalism in translation under the rubric of 'Averroism' which is replayed in Moore's and Broad's casting out of the determinist naturalism of Spinoza but this time without any conscious awareness of the underlying Christian theological presuppositions driving the move. Thus Spinoza, ironically, was cast out of the modern ethical canon for holding what amount to non-Christian views. As a result, standard philosophical ethics today remains unconscious of its dependence upon an underlying Christian philosophical anthropology to which it is unquestioningly committed.

The litmus of the rejection of Spinoza becomes not a sideline but in fact central to the self-definition of the entire tradition and practice of philosophical ethics, as Moore and Broad intuited but failed to grasp why. For they were in fact reinstating, (renaming, secularizing, modernizing, and universalizing) a canonical practice of Christian ethical reflection as it originally crystallized and was defined against just the Judaeo-Arabic naturalism and determinism that Spinoza, for his part, reclaimed, secularized, and modernized. Thus the modern practice of philosophical ethics with its various lines of development in the 19th and 20th centuries retains its character as emerging from Descartes and Kant as modernizers of the medieval Christian theological anthropology of the freedom of the will whose impetus was a rejection of precisely the radical naturalist wing of the religio-philosophical tradition exemplified and modernized by Spinoza, an insight glimpsed through a glass darkly by Moore and Broad.

When and why the standard modern discourses of philosophical ethics went wrong has been of concern to philosophers for more than twenty years, since Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981) raised the question and proposed an answer that is still hotly debated. According to MacIntyre, modern Western society has lost the rich and homogeneous cultural settings that make ethical life possible and discussions about the good life intelligible. MacIntyre proposed a turn away from a modernity that he considers too deracinated and fragmented to support a moral inquiry that could result in a degree of consensus; and a turn toward a revival of pre-modern (or, perhaps, merely romanticized) societal forms, or in their absence, the withdrawal into sub-groups where a shared life pointing to some ethical consensus is possible.

Contra MacIntyre and Charles Taylor and others who hold that the deracinated atomic person is the hallmark of modernity's philosophic break with its theological past, my critique exposes the problem with contemporary ethics as exactly the opposite, an insufficient understanding of the ongoing hold and use of the religious past in the standard conversations. While Alasdair MacIntyre's insight that modern philosophical ethics has lost a sense of its own originating context, its history and narrative, turns out to be in a sense correct, (*pace* MacIntyre) I argue that it is philosophy's Christian narrative and history that have been suppressed in modernity, rather than transcended in a broad universalism as philosophers claim. While MacIntyre claimed that philosophical ethics was dysfunctional because its attempt at universalism rendered it no longer able to grasp the homogenous cultural setting that originally made sense of it and justified its claims, I

propose that in order to maintain the myth of its own universalism, philosophical ethics has suppressed and continues to suppress its Christian presumptions and origins. Thus it is not that it is not Christian enough that haunts ethics (so MacIntyre) but that it is too provincially Christian!

Far from not being homogeneous enough to support an ethics, philosophical ethics is in fact too homogeneous, too culturally narrow. It is problematic in both its narrowness and its need to disguise from itself and from others its origins in order to claim universal applicability. But its deeper problem is that it is simply wrong. The doctrine of the free will is a mistaken account of the human person and one that entails unsavory consequences: a tendency to triumphalism, to blame the victim and aggrandize the victor; a failure to see moral actions as necessary consequences of natural and social systems and therefore to focus on punishment as vengeance and coercion rather than on wider understandings that could recommend more indirect ways to effect social and personal change; the rejection of compassion, empathy while not of pity. It has a tendency to devolve into individual arrogance and self-righteousness and into socio-political imperialism. Other religio-cultural viewpoints on ethics need to be looked at as potential resources for a cultural corrective.

Although the freedom of the will, and the claim that such freedom is necessary to make ethical life possible, are still widely accepted across all philosophical practices and traditions, there are just now beginning to be some signs of discomfort with it and of a plausible alternative. As Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O'Rourke, and David Shier put it in the introduction (p. 3) to their 2004 (MIT Press) compilation of essays, *Freedom and Determinism*, which gives an overview of the state of the field:

Until recently, all parties in the freedom and determinism debate ... First, ... held that the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility was *free will*. Second, it was accepted that free will requires that persons have *alternatives* to at least some of their actions.

So even today “few philosophers accept determinism” and “the majority of contemporary philosophers agree that some kind of freedom –*moral freedom*—is required for moral responsibility” (Campbell, et. al., p. 6). Philosophical positions have been divided along these lines (Campbell, et. al., p.4):

Compatibilists believe that determinism is consistent with the *free will thesis*—the view that at least some persons have free will—whereas *incompatibilists* believe that it is not. *Soft determinists* are compatibilists who accept both determinism and the free will thesis, whereas *hard determinists* are incompatibilists who endorse determinism but deny the free will thesis. Finally, *libertarians* are incompatibilists who deny determinism and endorse the free will thesis.

The two respectable philosophical positions have been until recently either voluntarist incompatibilism or compatibilism, that is to say, either that there is a break or

indeterminacy in nature that enables the human will to be free or, instead, that nature is causally determined but free will is still compatible with that causal determinism. The uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics has been taken by many philosophers to bolster a causal indeterminism that could be used as evidence in support of free will and undermine causal determinism as the normative scientific position. The position thereby embraced has been called '*hard indeterminism*' (Campbell, et. al., p. 6). The latter seemed to be the final nail in the coffin of viewing scientific naturalism as forcing upon philosophers a hard determinism. One could embrace free will in ethics and still view oneself as having a modern scientific world view, even regard oneself as having a more contemporary scientific world view than a seemingly old-fashioned, pre-quantum theory causal determinist would.

But things have changed or are now changing. Quite recently some few philosophers are re-claiming hard determinism in the name of the most up-to-date contemporary science. That position is, of course, Spinoza's position (as well as that of Jewish and Arabic medieval philosophy) and Spinoza regarded the understanding and recognition of its truth as the *sine qua non* not only of a sophisticated scientific world view but also of a true and mature ethical point of view, a non-moralistic ethics. This is the perspective not of quantum physics but of a more relevant science to how our minds work, namely, of neuroscience. That science is deterministic and with that perspective, especially that of the neuroscience of the emotions, Spinoza is in full agreement and anticipated both many of its conclusions and also worked out many of the implications for a revision of ethics without praise and blame but with a complex multifaceted account of how and why we act the way we do, why we lay claim to our actions as our own and feel responsibility for them despite our determinism, and how we can intervene both in social systems to promote cooperation and also in our understanding of the necessary causes of our beliefs and emotions to initiate changes in our own feelings and actions. To come to grasp the full range of the social, natural, as well as personal causes of our desires and actions and those of others, rather than to see ourselves and others in isolation as uniquely originitive of ourselves and hence completely and utterly responsible and worthy of complete praise or blame, was, according to Spinoza, the mark of the mature ethical point of view. He regarded the most widely contextual view of the self and of others as not only the truest but the most humane and least self-serving because of its moral attitude of acceptance and compassion. While eschewing a judgmental and self-righteous posture, Spinoza's ethics at the same time provided an astute awareness of the irrationality and self-serving and often vicious character of much human motivation and action. He devoted two treatises to outlining recommendations for developing appropriate social, political, and religio-ideological mechanisms for limiting and channeling the worst human tendencies and for isolating wrongdoers. Although non-punitive, Spinoza's ethics is neither naïve nor relativistic.

My project described briefly here is to expose some of the underlying reasons why Western philosophers have been so reluctant to part with what amounts to a magical account of the human person as different from and above nature or the rest of nature (see Campbell, et. al, p. 310); why it feels culturally right to us; and why philosophers revert to it at the slightest opportunity. And then to develop in Spinozist fashion what ethics

would look like from a position within nature. As Spinoza proposed, our aim should be to understand rather than to praise or to blame and to use that understanding toward the furthering of social harmony and individual joy.