

God Says “Yes” to Same-sex Love

John Dewis,
M.A., Claremont Graduate University

Intro: Spinoza Primer

Spinoza’s *Ethics*¹ is a religious text in the limited sense that it 1) defines God, 2) articulates his relationship to man, 3) enumerates the implications of this relationship to provide an account of morality. Unlike inspired texts, however, the *Ethics* eschews a personal or transcendent God in favor of a monistic universe. “God” is a word humans come up with to describe what is really the whole of the cosmos and us in it. So it doesn’t make any sense to look for any independent source of morality. Moral authority will come from us and our reflection on what it all means. God is a source of moral insight only insofar as the cosmos includes the mind of this or that human who has such insight. We do not yet know what a human is, but we are learning.

For Spinoza, good and bad are categories developed by humans to describe those things that we do and do not desire. And a desire is just what we perceive when an idea in the mind is affirmed by reason. A moral “yes” or “no” is based on logical affirmation or denial of our ideas. This is very different from a conventional understanding of morality as a check on natural appetites. For Spinoza, appetites

¹ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* in *The Complete Works*, trans. by Samuel Shirley (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2002)

are already part of the causal integrity of the universe, and we are busy making rational sense of them. Calling them “good” or “bad” is part of this process.

A moralist typically fears for the world if we threw morals out the window. But morality seen as a natural, logical development might be even stronger than morality handed down by God. For Spinoza, if you want to know what the world would look like left to our own devices, just look around. If you want to know why we think something is good, look at what you want, and ask yourself why you want it. Knowing why it appears that you want something will let you identify its cause and call it good. One question we get to ask, then, is: what should we want?

I did not set out to answer, “What would Spinoza think of gay marriage?” It is a strange thing to ask an early-modern philosopher. Rather, in the course of reading Spinoza, I was prompted to ask two related questions:

1) The body is an organ of intellect for Spinoza: everything we know is known through it. Considering one of the more spectacular things we do with our bodies: what do we come to know by having sex?

2) Spinoza claims that we know things through similarity, not difference. He calls this basis for knowledge the recognition of “common notions.”² Given that the body is the only way to know things, by Spinoza’s lights, why are we not having sex with people more like us, and more specifically people of the same gender?

My claim is that Spinoza’s *Ethics* does indeed provide an account of behavior that expects same-sex partnerships, insofar as they follow from 1) the role the desiring body plays in rational understanding, and 2) the epistemological requisite of common notions. On Spinoza’s account, we might rather ask why it is that

² 2p38c (“*notiones omnibus hominibus communes*”)

civilization has persisted so long without incorporating same-sex partnerships into its mainstream conception of the good.

I will suggest one of my afterthoughts upfront about why it hasn't happened sooner. Same-sex love has long competed directly with another human aim: reproduction. Children, as it happens, satisfy both of the above criteria at once: 1) an explanation of sex, 2) the manufacture of common notions. Spinoza thus provides a metaphysical account of reproduction that tracks standard evolutionary biology: a rational explanation for why a creature would both enjoy the act of reproducing and deem it a high moral good. And also why our children look, and are, somewhat like us.

That same-sex partnering challenges the social institution that secures the production of children could be a reason why moral intuitions have tended to forbid it. It certainly tracks popular *ad hoc* fears, even if they are bigoted or outdated. The conservative intuition that heterosexual couples "secure the survival of the species" might for instance merely be articulating our hidden individual metaphysical aims. The persistent taboo against homosexuality might not stem from species-concern, but from a deeper fear that one less familiar way of satisfying these same basic aims is directly at odds with another more popular one.

As we'll see, Spinoza's account of morality points to the ultimate success of same-sex partnering for many of the same reasons that it points to the success of reproduction. It is therefore very likely that once reproduction is unlocked from heterosexual coupling, that the curve of acceptance for same-sex partnering should be very steep. (Particularly in a world where "species-concern" might shift its focus

to overpopulation.) Another candidate for coming to know ourselves and the universe has been waiting in the wings.

I'll provide a little more back-story for the two questions above, speculate on how Spinoza might answer them, and show how same-sex partnering emerges unbidden as a moral mandate in the *Ethics*.

The Body

Spinoza is a monist. He one-ups (or one-downs) Cartesian dualism by saying mind and body are just two ways of perceiving one unitary substance. It stands to reason, since they are really the same thing, that what affects the "body" will have a corresponding effect in the "mind" and vice-versa.

His monism also motivates the more radical claim, that the sole object of the mind is the body and nothing more.³ That's all you get. One repercussion is that familiar theological and philosophical concerns about the body are voided. A Christian warns against demands of the body and calls it sin; Berkeley says not to trust the evidence of our senses and calls it fiction. In both cases the body is discredited as misleading the mind.

In Spinoza, the body *is* the mind, so any misleading is very thorough-going. Rectifying "inadequate conceptions," as he calls them, might just entail doing something different with your body. This body-intellectualism pushes in two directions at once:

In proportion as a body is more apt than other bodies to act or be acted upon simultaneously in many ways, so is its mind more apt than other minds to perceive many things simultaneously.

³ 2p13p ("*Ergo obiectum nostrae mentis est corpus existens, et nihil aliud*")

But,

In proportion as the actions of the body depend on itself alone and the less that other bodies concur with it in its actions, the more apt is its mind to understand distinctly.⁴

Expanding my body's activity generates more thought; restricting activity *to* my own body ensures that its thoughts are actually mine, and more distinctly understood. We want to know what it's like to be in contact with every bit of the universe we can get hold of, but we don't want a hurricane of confusion or self-destruction. The more activity your body has, and the more this activity can be conceived as really happening to your body, the more you come to understand your causal embeddedness in the universe, and the closer you are to seeing yourself from the standpoint of the universe, or as Spinoza calls it, under the aspect of eternity.

Perhaps one surprising constraint:

The human mind has no knowledge of the body, nor does it know it to exist, except through the ideas of the affections by which the body is affected.⁵

Since the human mind does not have knowledge *of* the body, but *is* the body, the only way to come to know what we are at all is by seeking to be affected by other bodies.

It should not be surprising if a certain high percentage of our time and energy is spent hoping to affect and be affected by other bodies. What kinds of bodies are best sought to maximize intelligible contact with the universe?

Common Notions

⁴ 2p13s

⁵ 2p19

Everything is traceable back to the one unitary substance. Although all bodies are therefore alike in certain respects, we understand our own body best when we recognize those things affecting us that are similar to us. By proposition in Spinoza:

The mind is more capable of perceiving more things adequately in proportion as its body has more things in common with other bodies.⁶

My understanding of another human, for instance, is greater than my understanding of a dog. It is hard to say on what grounds this could be so, other than shared notions. If we want to know the dog better, we either get down on all fours and try to play like he does, or we make him sit and shake like we do. Otherwise, there is a chasm of unintelligibility between man and man's best friend: we don't extend the same rights to him, nor do we put our highest stock in him.

There is no individual thing in the universe more advantageous to man than a man, who lives by the guidance of reason. For the most advantageous thing to man is that which agrees most closely with his nature.⁷

The kinds of bodies we have the most hope of knowing, and through which we have the most hope of knowing ourselves, are those that most resemble our own.

This works against our romantic intuitions about love as the attraction of opposites and an adventure in difference. But it also means that when these romantic traditions are in play, it will be on account of some similarity that we actually understand one another. Montagues are not Capulets, but Romeo and Juliet are both disaffected children of aristocrats who also have in common that they are forbidden from seeing each other.

⁶ 2p39c

⁷ 4p35c1

Sex between members of the same gender is also an example of seeking to consummate sameness under prohibition. It follows without hindrance that we should expect male bodies to pair with other male bodies, and female bodies to pair with other female bodies. It is hard to reconstruct an embodied index of commonality in any more basic way than to notice that genders have common physical and psychological features, and that this would have nontrivial implications in Spinoza's metaphysical deduction.

It is worth pointing out that the push is still in two directions: 1) that we seek to be affected by things *prima facie* most similar to ourselves, and 2) that we seek to identify those common notions among things that might appear dissimilar. It is hard to predict how frequently or intensely the desire for gender sameness, in the absence of historical barriers, will move like a wave through humanity. Liberal democracy in America has certainly secured the institutional wherewithal to facilitate its adoption and set the gears in motion long ago by enshrining equality and liberty as basic moral goods.

The double push of common notions also means that liberal social movements often rely on less obvious commitments to social conservatism. For example, a social movement that seeks to radically redefine marriage also thereby strengthens monogamy; and a movement that wishes to ennoble same-sex couples is also gender-essentializing.

Spinoza rarely mentions marriage or gender or children in the *Ethics* (except to say it would be hard to believe we were ever babies if we didn't extrapolate from

parallel cases).⁸ Even man as a distinct creature remains undefined, except as a thinking thing.⁹ It should come as no surprise that Spinoza also defines God as a thinking thing, if everything, thus establishing the first-order common notion between us and the universe.¹⁰

Love

If you had a room full of creatures, they'd organize themselves via mutual recognition. Like creatures know one another by recognizing consistent and myriad affections of the body. Drawn to its logical conclusion, not just the species, but also the sex of an organism might maximize these affections.

Love is defined unromantically by Spinoza as “pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause.”¹¹ The external causes we are capable of most adequately conceiving are those based in some common notion. When that notion is coupled with the notion of pleasure, we have love. I will list four excerpts from the love propositions so the cascade might speak for itself:

(i) From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, towards which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion.¹²

(ii) If the nature of the external body is similar to our own body, then the idea of the external body in our thinking will involve an affection of our own body similar to the affection of the external body.¹³

(iii) If anyone has done something which he imagines affects others with pleasure, he will be affected with pleasure accompanied by the idea of himself as cause; that is, he will regard himself with pleasure.¹⁴

⁸ 4p39s

⁹ 2a2

¹⁰ 2p1

¹¹ 3p13s

¹² 3p27

¹³ 3p27p

¹⁴ 3p30

(iv) If we love something similar to ourselves, we endeavor, as far as we can, to bring it about that it should love us in return.¹⁵

One maximizes his power and his pleasure by seeing himself as the cause and effect of the pleasure of one similar to himself.

Is there a worry here that love is mere narcissism? Is whatever I know about another body reducible in some way to my own? Perhaps. But what part of me, in turn, is not reducible to some part of the universe?

The same body that is the sole object of your mind, and the preoccupation of your own amorous aims, is also merely an object of nature (or God) constituting thoughts in the mind of nature (or God)—namely the thought of you. And the thought of you is very inadequate in the mind of nature (or God).¹⁶ It is consistent with the earlier claim that we have very little idea what we are, or of what we are capable. Our existence, such that it is, is known mostly to ourselves; apart from our persistence as ourselves, it is already ontologically reducible to a tangle of external causation. The best we can hope for are more and more adequate proxies—parents, children, lovers, friends. A humbling narcissism.

Conclusion

Seeking to understand the affections of my body through another similar body is more consistent with romantic notions of love as being lost in another person, or the Biblical notion of marriage as one-flesh.

If two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.¹⁷

¹⁵ 3p33

¹⁶ 2p30p

¹⁷ 4p18s

Same-sex love is one obvious way of meeting Spinoza's epistemological aims, and reckoning with our metaphysical condition. His own best stab at answering what it all means is based on a monistic account of existence, wherein knowledge is an index of bodily similarity, and where love is a causal understanding of pleasure. Developmental psychologists report something akin to this in children, when we pass through phases of same-sex fascination. Drawn to its logical conclusions, Spinoza presents same-sex partnering as a real and significant possibility for how one might spend one's adulthood as well.

If the ideal proxy for investigating the ways that you are like the universe is in fact another version of yourself, it is exciting to imagine that a 17th-century exiled Talmudic scholar anticipates the possibility of meeting, knowing, and loving your clone. If the highest desire of the mind is to know oneself through a body that is both yours and not yours, it's hard to avoid the feeling that same-sex partnering might span a conceptual gap between traditional heterosexual partnering and another kind of reproduction altogether, and one that the world might not be prepared to entertain, although we know it's coming.

One of the strange aspects of not knowing what a body can do, or what a mind can think, is that Spinoza's ethics is sometimes disconcertingly post-human. At least human as we think we know us. Spinoza has no metaphysical account, for instance, of the generation of the body to begin with, and only a very mystical account of its death, and no set division of labor for how one body comes to produce another.

Only source cited below, by Book and Proposition# (Example, 2p38c = *Ethics*, Book 2, Proposition 38, Corollary)

Bibliography

Spinoza. *Ethics*. In *The Complete Works*. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Hackett: Indianapolis, 2002.