
OVERCOMING THE PASSIONS IN SPINOZA: A BUDDHIST READING

U. Vinayaparla and John Giordano
Assumption University of Thailand

ABSTRACT

Spinoza's philosophy and Buddhism have often been compared based upon their tendencies towards seeing the world as a single order and moving beyond our passions and desires. But the comparison of these philosophies also creates interesting problems. One problem is the way we relate to this order itself. In Spinoza we achieve enlightenment when we recognize that we are a part of a single substance which has its own order and necessity. This leads us to transcend the bondage of our passions through reason. And when we reach the highest level of the intellectual love of God, we show kindness on all beings still trapped in this bondage. Buddhist enlightenment is the recognition of the dependent origination of all things. It is a larger order of causality which we are a part. We suffer within this order through our attachments so our goal is to eliminate our attachments. When we see the world in this way, we do not judge through the categories of good and evil and we show compassion to all living creatures still in the state of ignorance. So there are obvious similarities. But a major difference in these two approaches is differing ways they regard the order itself. Spinoza focuses on the *love* of this order – intellectual love of God – which leads

him affirm non-judgment and kindness. And Buddhism focuses on the *non-attachment* to this order which leads to compassion. Comparing and contrasting these two philosophies is valuable because it allows a deeper understanding of the Buddhist role of compassion as a special kind of (non-passive) passion which breaks the suffering of others. It also clarifies elements of Spinoza's philosophy which are not easily understood, for instance, his claim that pity as a useless emotion.

Keywords: Spinoza, Buddhism, Dependent Origination, Compassion, Pity

Substance and God

Spinoza's idea of a single substance is the heart of his philosophy. This is in contrast to Descartes' philosophy which posits two substances: thought and extension. This single substance is also equated with God or nature. God according to Spinoza is a substance which exists by itself and is the cause of itself. Spinoza describes the notion of substance that "By Substance I understand 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".¹

Thought and extension are merely attributes of this single substance. In a way this is reminiscent of the tradition of divine names in philosophical theology. Spinoza writes that substance consists of infinite attributes, "each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence."² And that it "necessarily exists."³ That is why, Spinoza can claim in the famous proposition 15, ethics 1 that "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God".⁴

This also means that God is a necessary order. For instance Spinoza writes that "God is the immanent and the transient cause of all things".⁵ "God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one".⁶ "In Nature there is nothing contingent, but all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and act in a certain manner."⁷