

SPINOZA AND MERLEAU-PONTY ON HUMAN EXISTENCE

ABBA LESSING

Spinoza has two characterizations of existence. In the first, existence is always a necessary property of being which is the cause of itself, by which Spinoza means being "whose essence involves existence."¹ As Wolfson shows, *causa sui*, "that whose essence involves existence, and "necessary existence" are all formulations which characterize the same fact about God, namely that he must necessarily exist.² Necessary existence implies that God is self-sufficient in this existence and therefore is totally actualized in this condition.

In Spinoza's second characterization, existence is defined not in terms of the logical consequence of a particular essence but in terms of power. In the first characterization existence is a natural consequence of essence. In the second, existence is a particular project. For Spinoza, human existence belongs to the latter sort of existence.

Contemporary existentialism rejected the first characterization of existence. For Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, human existence precedes essence and therefore is neither a consequence of a general *raison d'être* nor issues from the particular nature of human beings. By rejecting Spinoza's first characterization, existentialism unfortunately has not explored his second formulation of existence, even though Merleau-Ponty makes a valiant start in the right direction. In this paper I briefly wish to delineate the fruitfulness of such an exploration. This involves moving somewhat away from Spinoza's ontological proofs to his less well-known psychology of human emotions of Books III and IV of the *Ethics*.

The heart of Spinoza's delineation of human emotion is his formulation of the *Conatus* Principle: "Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persevere in its being."³ Existing is a desire, project, and built-in power. It is the primordial desire and effort of every individual to preserve, maintain, persevere, and assert his existence in the future. Within the existent lies a desire and power to preserve and present himself in a definite and determinate manner. Such a project involves self-maintenance and self-conservation.⁴ The force of the *conatus* is both self-protective and self-assertive. Every individual thing wants to maintain himself in the face of external threats and take-overs, but the *conatus* is more than just the desire for self-protection. It is also the desire to present and proclaim individual identity and this desire supports all human life in the on-going process of being human.

In his *Short Treatise*, Spinoza distinguishes between two sorts of *conatus* principles. There is a *conatus* for the whole of nature as well as

conatus for each particular thing in nature. The first he calls "General Providence," the second, "Special Providence."⁵ The function is the same for both: "The striving to maintain and preserve existence."⁶ There are at least two peculiarities to be found here. The first is the fact that Spinoza thought it necessary to designate a *conatus* for the whole of nature, i.e., God. If God's existence follows necessarily from his essence, God does not need to strive to either assert or maintain his existence. Furthermore, God does not need to preserve his existence from external challenges and threats because nothing outside God exists. It is not surprising that in the *Ethics* this entire discussion is omitted; the *conatus* is only associated with individual things, particularly human beings and, as a principle of individuation, simply does not apply to God. The other peculiarity is Spinoza's name for the *conatus* in the *Short Treatise*, i.e., "Providence" (*Voorzienigheid*). It suggests care and foresight, even divine guidance. Spinoza goes so far as to equate God's Providence with God's Will in a letter to William van Blijenbergh. Again this aspect of the *conatus* disappears in Spinoza's treatment of the principle in the *Ethics*.⁷

There he characterizes the *conatus* in a number of different ways. In terms of mentality *per se*, the *conatus* is called "will."⁸ In terms of the unity of body and mind, it is called "appetite."⁹ When we are aware of this appetite, the *conatus* is experienced as "desire" as such.¹⁰ Clearly this desire is a power because it provides the energy behind my very capacity to act and be who I am. In Proposition VII of Part III Spinoza goes so far as to stipulate that this power *is* my identity: "The effort by which each being endeavors to persevere in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself."¹¹

Emotional life either helps or hinders this existential effort. My power to actively be myself is for Spinoza either increased or diminished by emotions. In fact this is precisely the way he defines emotions: "By emotions I understand the modifications of the body by which the power of acting of the body itself is increased, diminished, helped or hindered . . ."¹² The desire to persevere in my existence is not itself an emotion but the "standard of measurement" with which I comprehend them.¹³ Feelings that diminish my power of action, thereby preventing me from maintaining myself, place me in bondage. Those that contribute to my experience of my own powers call on me to celebrate existence.

Self-assertion is characterized as a natural love (*natuurlijke liefde*) in *The Short Treatise*.¹⁴ Joyfulness (*blijdschap*), Spinoza argues, has its origin in this natural love of oneself.¹⁵ The desire to exist is enjoyable, and nothing within me contradicts or opposes it.

In fact, for Spinoza, there is nothing negative or opposed to the *conatus* to be found within the individual. Self-destruction and suicide are the

result not of my own nature but of emotions which take over my essential nature.¹⁶

In Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes the *conatus* the principle theme of his delineation of virtue and happiness. He puts it very clearly:

The foundation of virtue (*virtutis fundamentum*) is that endeavor itself to preserve our own being, and that happiness (*felicitatem*) consists in this—that a man can preserve his own being.¹⁷

And

The more each person strives and is able to seek his own profit, that is to say, to preserve his own being, the more virtue does he possess.¹⁸

And finally

No one can desire to be happy, to act well, and live well, who does not at the same time desire to be, to act, and to live, that is to say, actually to exist (*actu existere*).¹⁹

These three propositions share the same philosophical content: well-being means to fully exist. Happiness and virtue cannot be added to existence; they *are* existence. To be fully present in the world—this is the foundation of ethical life. To maintain and preserve myself in the face of my own emotional onslaughts—this where the heart of the matter lies.

Merleau-Ponty throughout his writings refers to existence as a “movement.” Existence is neither a property, condition, nor a “fact” about human beings. Human existence is “the movement of existence.”²⁰ To exist, for him, means to enact certain meanings and perform certain actions which together give me the sense of being an incarnate being bound to the world and other people by a personal style rather than generalized condition. As he puts it in his *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves toward personal acts.²¹

The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually exclusive external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.²²

I don't exist either as pure object or subject. My existence is the manner in which I enact the unity of these dimensions. For Merleau-Ponty, the body does not exist, it expresses existence.²³ To exist is to have a style of being myself to which my body, as an instrument of expression, contributes.

The content of this style is human action, particularly those pre-reflective and pre-theoretical motions with which I make myself, the world, and others familiar and meaningful, the history of my own development in actions and reactions.

The heart of human existence for Merleau-Ponty lies in movement and motility, both made possible by the fact of my own incarnation which provides me with immediate avenues for expressing myself. Movement is

bodily existence. Existence is bodily movement.

Against the Cartesian tradition, Merleau-Ponty argues that existence is established with certainty through enactment and movement of the human body. I define my existence in terms of my capacity for motion. I know that I exist as soon as I begin to move and know pre-theoretically that I can do it. “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can,’ ” argues Merleau-Ponty.²⁴

In his analysis of human sexuality he points out that The body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence comes into its own in the body.²⁵

I think it is safe to assume that this is the case not only in sexuality but in all human experience. Existence comes into its own in the body because it is with the body that I enact my existence in the detailed, sometimes precise, sometimes ambiguous, *concreta* that constitute my own individual life.

My movements throughout my life are not at random; they belong to a series of intentions, desires, feelings, thoughts and signs with which I make my way through life. I am awakened to the world by my desire to move and my conviction that I *can* move. Watching a seven-month-old baby learning how to crawl, sit up, and stand demonstrates this concretely. The baby moves purposefully and thus is able to sense himself and his own existence through his own motility. To exist means to develop a growing knowledge that he *can* enact his purposes, realize his intentions and fulfill his needs.

What remains to be done is to briefly summarize where Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty meet in their characterizations of human existence.

For both, human existence is a matter of a sort of power which is neither organic nor purely intentional, therefore not reducible to functions of either the body or mind. The movement of existence for Merleau-Ponty enacts the essential unity of body and mind. Spinoza maintains a similar position in that the being which I endeavor to persevere in is a composite of body and mind.²⁶

For both, this power to exist is a primordial energy which allows me to develop the being that I am; that is to say, *the power of existence is the source of my identity as a human being*. The “I” is an endeavor to exist for Spinoza and the “I can” for Merleau-Ponty. For both, existence is a continuous task, defined first in terms of action rather than reflection. Self-realization is an ongoing process of being in the world.

Spinoza goes beyond Merleau-Ponty in showing that this very effort is our happiness, the “foundation of virtue.” Merleau-Ponty remains ethically neutral in his delineation of human existence.²⁷ Although Merleau-Ponty seems eminently successful in his characterization of the structures of lived existence, life for him only becomes ethical in the

particular decisions of the individual. Spinoza, on the other hand, is able to at least argue that the very effort to fully be in the world is its own reward and provides us with our well-being. In that sense, Spinoza gives us a human condition which potentially can be happy if we are able to existentially act out the realization that what is good about life is our existence.²⁸ Merleau-Ponty is condemned to keep human existence and well-being two separate and distinct projects. For me the greatness of Spinoza lies in his philosophical insistence that happiness and well-being involve one primary ontological project: to be myself in the world. For him, existence is an *ability*:

Inability to exist is impotence . . . ability to exist is power.²⁹ That power is the key to my well-being. What it unlocks is myself.

NOTES

¹ *Ethics*, I, Def. 1. (W. H. White translation, 1883).

² H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (1934), p. 127.

³ *Ethics*, III, 6.

⁴ David Bidney, *The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza* (1962), p. 86.

⁵ *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (1910), p. 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Letter XIX* (Wolf translation, 1928). This is not to suggest that God *lacks* power. In *Ethics*, I, 34 Spinoza suggests that "the power of God is His essence itself," but this follows not from *conatus* but the fact that God is both *causa sui* and cause of all things and therefore possesses a power which follows from his own essence. Cf. G. H. R. Parkinson, "Spinoza on the Power and Freedom of Man," *The Monist*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (October 1971). Parkinson delineates with great care the relationship between causation and *conatus* in Spinoza.

⁸ *Ethics*, III, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ethics*, III, 7.

¹² *Ethics*, III, Def. 3.

¹³ Wolfson's phrase, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹⁴ *Short Treatise*, p. 158.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ethics*, IV, 18 *Schol.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ethics*, IV, 20.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, IV, 21.

²⁰ *Phenomenology of Perception* (Colin Smith translation, 1962), pp. 88-89. The phrase "the movement of existence" appears throughout the pages of this work. Cf. also "The Battle over Existentialism," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Dreyfus & Dreyfus translation, 1964) pp. 72-73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166. Similar assertions accompany this characterization. "If we therefore say that the body expresses existence at every moment, this is in the sense in which a word expresses thought" (*Ibid.*). "The body is solidified or generalized existence and existence is perpetual incarnation." (*Ibid.*).

²⁶ Cf. Parkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 532.

²⁷ Since the emphasis is on freedom and socio-political commitment, this ethical neutrality seems almost a necessary concomitant of his position. It should also be remembered that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical method, phenomenology, itself avoids taking an ethical standpoint while the very intent of Spinoza's metaphysics is to characterize and define human well-being.

²⁸ For the entire existentialist tradition, existence is more often the source of despair, anxiety, and anguish than positive feelings about oneself. Kierkegaard, Sartre and the early Heidegger usually explain this in terms of the contingency of human existence; existence provides no foundation for any decision, nor is it itself founded on anything solid. I think, however, that another reason suggests itself, namely the existentialists *experience* their own existence as powerless, an emptiness which is there but displays no life or effort of its own. In this sense their descriptions of human existence emphasize impotent existence, which, at least for Spinoza, is existence already gutted by negative feelings about the worth of oneself.

²⁹ *Ethics*, I, 11, *Schol.*