



Consciousness and Value: Enactivist Insights *Spinoza as a proto-Enactivist?*

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On the menu

- This presentation discusses aspects of enactivist theory, in the context of the philosophy of Spinoza (1632-1677)
- In the foreground:
 - two key dualities in philosophy:
 - mind-body
 - value-fact
- Proposals:
 - although normally discussed separately, there are interesting parallels and linkages between these two problem-areas
 - both Spinoza and Varela can be seen as developing an ‘**ethicalized naturalism**’ which provide satisfactory ways of addressing problems in both areas

Elements of presentation

1. Introduction
2. Two contemporary philosophical problems:
 - A. A foundation for Ethical thinking
 - B. Explaining Consciousness
3. Freedom/Autonomy as a mediating notion to help with both the problems of Ethics and of Consciousness
4. Spinoza as a proto-enactivist

1. Introduction: Spinoza

Liberation from the Cartesian Mind-Set

- It's become very fashionable in recent philosophy and cognitive science to state that thinking about mind and body took a fundamentally wrong turn with the thought of Descartes:
 - Damasio (*Descartes' Error*), Dennett ('Cartesian Materialism'), Ryle ('Descartes' Myth'), etc.
- Spinoza (1632-1677) was the original post-Cartesian 'refusenik'.

- Spinoza offers a distinctive account of mind, bound up with a distinctive ethical framework
 - His main work – *Ethics* – combined both of these.
 - Some would say (uncharitably) that the work destroyed both ethics and mind, and a lot else besides...
- (NB See Appendix for a summary of main elements of Spinoza's *Ethics*.)

Some dates

1596 Descartes born

1610 Galileo adopts
Copernican view of
planetary motions

1632 Locke born

1642 Newton born

1650 Descartes dies

1632 Spinoza born
in Amsterdam

1656 Spinoza excommunicated
by Portuguese synagogue in
Amsterdam

1670 Spinoza moves to The
Hague

1677 Dies

Posthumous works published,
including *Ethics*.

Spinoza as anti-schismatic

- Spinoza lived in a violently schismatic time
 - (even in normally tolerant Holland his friends the De Witt brothers were hacked to death by a rabble because of their liberal religious views).
- Spinoza's instinct was to bridge gaps and reconcile schisms:
 - God versus Nature;
 - Necessity versus Contingency;
 - 'Thought' versus 'Extension';
 - Determination versus Freedom;
 - Reason versus Passion;
 - Truth versus Error;
 - etc.

Today's schisms...

- Spinoza's approach can be used as an inspiration to bridge some of today's schisms:
 - fact versus value;
 - mental versus physical;
 - freedom versus determinism
 - objectivity versus subjectivity

Spinoza's *Ethics*

- Spinoza's *Ethics* offers a picture of how the human mind (and Mind in general) is to be viewed in relation to the natural, physical world.
- He sees the study of mind and of ethics as deeply interrelated.
- It proposes a *naturalistic* view of mind and of ethics

Ethicalizing Naturalism: Naturalizing Ethics

- Spinoza's view might be called ethicalized naturalism.
- 'Naturalism' in science is usually taken to have little or no relation to ethics: it normally gives a picture of the world as it is, not as it ought to be
- 'Naturalism' in ethics is the view that one can derive, from considerations about the nature of the world, and of human beings, conclusions about what is valuable, about what we ought to do.
 - This is generally considered to be a logical fallacy:
 - G.E.Moore called it 'The Naturalistic Fallacy' (1903)

Themes

- There are a number of important themes in Spinoza's *Ethics*:
- We'll concentrate on three of these:
 - Mind
 - Ethics
 - Freedom
- I'll argue that these themes are particularly relevant to enactivism

2. Two contemporary problems: **Ethics**; Consciousness

Ethics and consciousness closely linked in Spinoza's theory

- I will show how Spinoza's theory is closely bound up with two important areas of inquiry in philosophy
 - The nature of ethics
 - What are the right moral values for a person to adopt?
 - The nature of consciousness
 - What is it that explains the special nature of consciousness in a person?

Subjectivity

- In each area (ethics and mind) there is a particular kind of *subjectivity* that has been identified by philosophers
 - Subjectivity in ethics
 - The idea that ethics consists of ultimately of personal choices: I don't seem to find values in the world: in some sense my moral views are my own creations.
 - Subjectivity in consciousness
 - Our individual consciousness seems to have a special subjective – first-person – nature

Objectivity

- But within both fields there is also a strong pull towards a kind of 'objectivity':
 - Objectivity in ethics
 - The idea that there are core moral values (e.g. equality, freedom, etc. versus tyranny, rule by strong over weak) which must in some way be objectively correct
 - Objectivity in consciousness
 - The idea an individual person's consciousness must have an inherent reality, and is a part of the natural (material) world-order, so should be explicable in those terms.

The subjective-objective split in consciousness

- When I have a conscious experience, the *feel* of the experience (*what it is like*) seems to be different (or differentiable) from all the physical conditions outside and inside my body that condition the experience
- Yet the ‘feel’ clearly has a real (‘objective’) existence – so how can this subjective reality be made to cohere with the objective reality of physical existence?

Levine: The 'explanatory' gap between consciousness and science.

- “...we have no idea how we could really explain – *in the sense of make intelligible to ourselves* – how it is that certain *physical or functional configurations have conscious mental features.*”
- Joseph Levine: 'Anti-Materialist Arguments, Influential Replies'
 - (Velmans and Schneider eds *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness* p. 376)

Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647-52)



This sculpture represents a vision described by St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish Carmelite nun, in which an angel repeatedly pierced her with an arrow, transporting her to a state of ecstasy.

Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria,
Rome

The subjective-objective split in ethics

- My ethical judgments (and other less momentous value-judgments) don't seem to refer to anything tangible in the world: values seem to come from "inside" one's self, rather than to be read off from reality.
- Yet it seems to be part of the content of a moral belief – e.g. "*genocide is wrong*" – that it is objectively validated or validatable.
- But how can ethical judgments be made to cohere with objective reality?

Objective values?

Sophie Scholl – Die letzten Tage (Sophie Scholl - The Final Days)

- 2005 German film directed by Marc Rothemund.

- It's about the last days in the life of Sophie Scholl, a young member of the student Anti-Nazi group the White Rose. She was arrested for distributing protest leaflets in a university lecture hall, and executed by the Gestapo on February 22, 1943.
- In a key scene from the movie she has a conversation with her Nazi interrogator about the fundamentals of ethics:
- Each proposes, with apparently equal sincerity and intellectual integrity, a set of moral values which are in radical moral conflict.



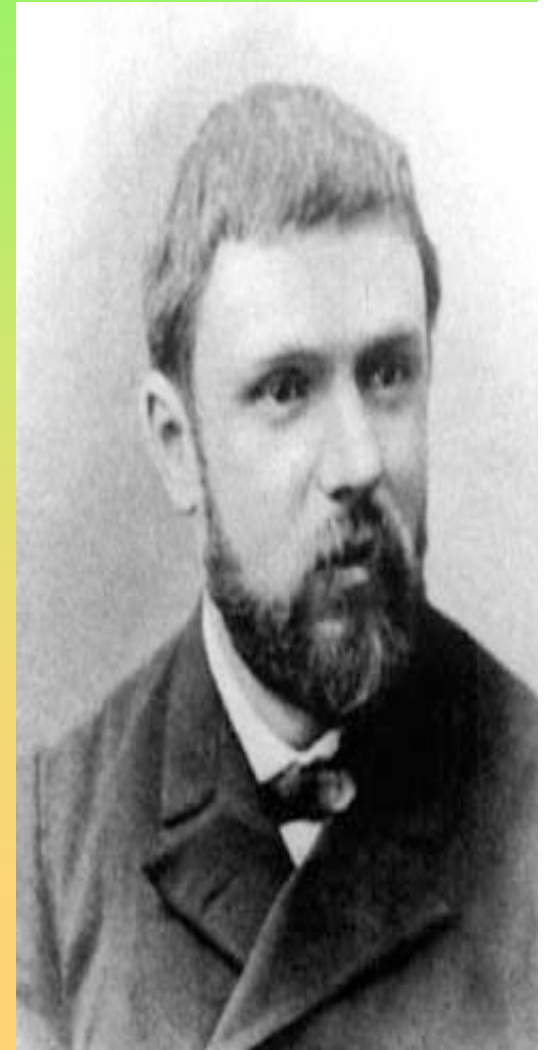
Poincaré: The gap between ethics and science

“There can be no such thing as a scientific morality. But neither can there be an immoral science. The reason for this is simple: it is – how shall I put it? – a purely grammatical matter.

“If the premises of a syllogism are both in the indicative, then the conclusion will equally be in the indicative.

“In order for a conclusion to be able to be derived as an imperative, at least one of the premises would also have to be imperative.

.....



Poincaré – continued

“Now general scientific principles, postulates of geometry [etc.] can only be in the indicative mood; and truths of experience will also be in that mood.

“Let the most subtle dialectician try to juggle with these principles howsoever he will... whatever he derives from them will be in the indicative.

“He will never obtain a proposition that says: Do this, or Don't do that – that's to say, a proposition which either confirms or denies any moral principle.

Henri Poincaré, 'La Morale et la Science',
Dernières Pensées, Paris: Flammarion, 1913.

The Gap between the Gaps

- Traditionally the *'is-ought' gap in ethics* and the *'explanatory' gap of consciousness* have been pursued separately.
- OK - they seem to be different problems:
 - one is a problem of *justification*
 - (of ethical conclusions, given non-ethical premises);
 - the other is a problem of *explanation*
 - (of mental phenomena in terms biological or other physical processes)
- But in fact (as to some extent we've seen) there are *profound points of analogy* between the two problem areas.

Styles of response to each problem.

- (a) Denying that the tension exists
 - (a1) by denying the existence or the gravity of one of the alternatives;
 - (a2) by denying that there really is a tension between the two alternatives
- (b) Accepting that the tension exists
 - (b1) optimists: thinking the dilemma can be resolved;
 - (b2) pessimists: thinking the dilemma can't be resolved

A methodological question...

SHOULDN'T WE STUDY THESE THREE PROBLEMS SEPARATELY?

Putnam on Integration

“... I believe that the unfortunate division of contemporary philosophy into separate ‘fields’ (ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, philosophy of logic, philosophy of mathematics, and still others) often conceals the way in which the very same arguments and issues arise in field after field.

“For example, arguments for ‘antirealism’ in ethics are virtually identical with arguments for antirealism in the philosophy of mathematics; yet philosophers who resist those arguments in the latter often capitulate to them in the former.

“We can only regain the integrated vision which philosophy has always aspired to if at least some of the time we allow ourselves to ignore the idea that a philosophical position or argument must deal with one and only one of these specific ‘fields’.” [Emphasis added.]

- Putnam, H. (2004). *Ethics Without Ontology* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

3. How Spinoza's theory of Freedom helps to resolve the problems

- Enactivist theory can offer an important contribution to solving both these problems,
 - and can do so within a unified framework.
- Much work has already been done on the problem of consciousness, but the area of ethics is still largely uncharted territory.
- Looking at Spinoza we can find some helpful leads in how to develop enactivist theory in the appropriate directions.

PROPOSAL

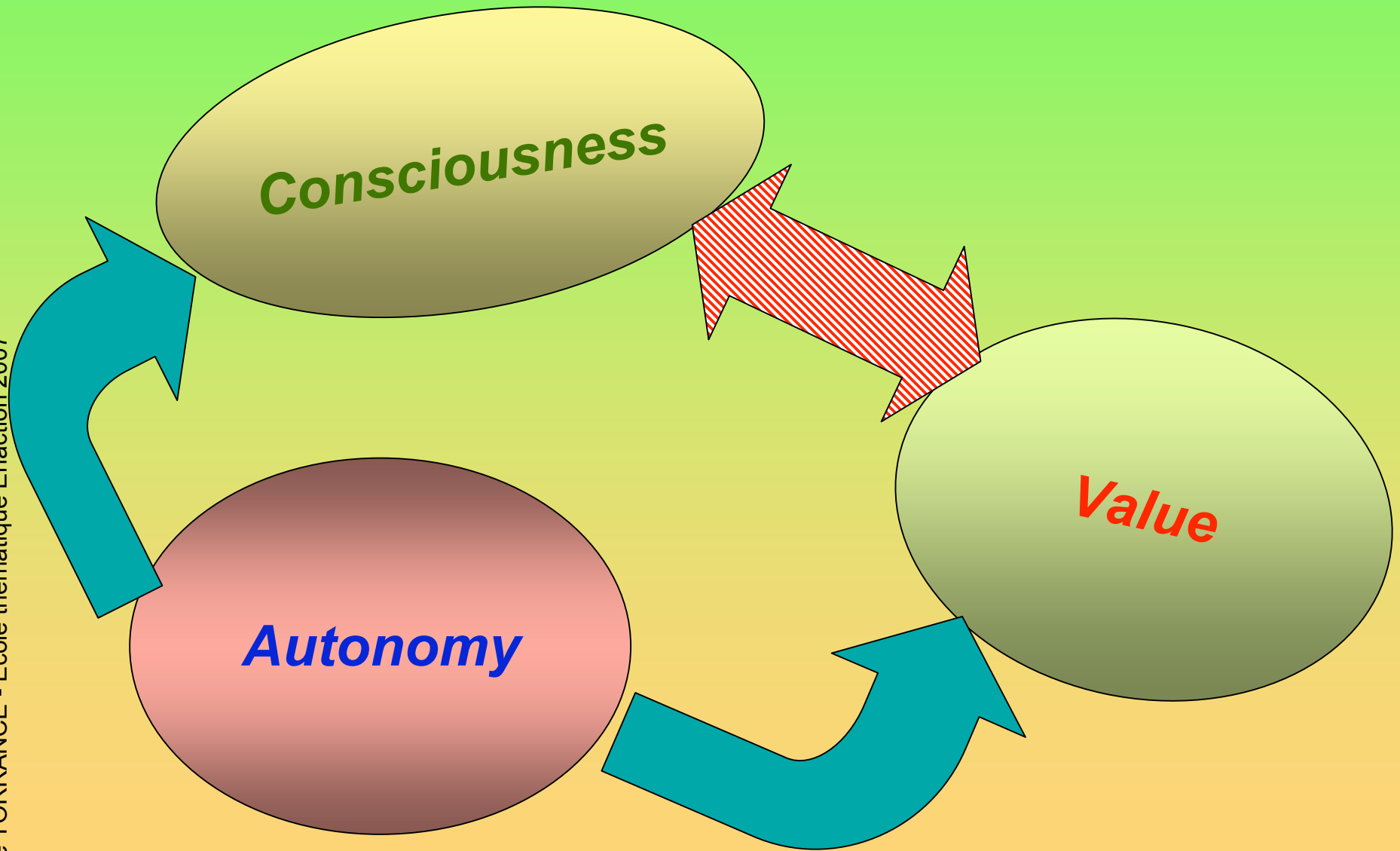
I want to suggest that we can derive from the philosophy of Spinoza an approach which will give us

- a sense of the way ethics, when rightly understood, turns out to be strongly enmeshed in issues to do with the understanding of mind;
- and conversely, a sense that our thought (*and science*) about mind (and about consciousness in particular) turns out to be deeply ethical in character

Freedom as a mediating domain for making progress on both problems

- I'll argue that useful light can be shed on both problems by looking at a third well-known problem – the problem of *free will and determinism*.
- Spinoza's theory of freedom (or *autonomy*) is an important precursor of (some strands of) the enactive account of autonomy

The main shape of the argument.



Spinoza on Freedom as will

- For Spinoza the mental order and the physical order were *different manifestations of the same reality*.
- So the mental could not intervene in the physical or vice versa
- Thus 'freedom' in the sense of the actions of a will controlling events in the physical world (as in Descartes) is impossible.
 - Our apparent experience of ourselves as freely choosing agents stems from our ignorance of the causes of our acts.

A Double Unfreedom.

- Spinoza: Our existence as finite mental and physical beings provides us with a double unfreedom ('human bondage'):
 - (a) a dependence upon the physical conditions of our bodily, organic existence;
 - (b) an endemic inadequacy in our mental powers of thought and desire

Freedom as Self-Determination

- But on another level, Spinoza had a deep conception of the possibilities of individual freedom, conceived of as *individual self-determination*.
- Our actions are free to the degree to which they can be determined *by us as their authors*, rather than by external contingencies.
 - Freedom-as-self-determination is realizable through the exercise of reason and reflection:
 - To the extent to which we can reason from first principles; and have thoughts about the universal rather than the particular, our ideas will be adequate rather than inadequate:
 - the order of our thoughts will escape the arbitrary succession of particular events, and will achieve a relative adequacy that will increase our powers of intellectual and physical self-determination.

‘Active’ and ‘Passive’ Emotions

- A key aspect of our unfreedom at the mental level is our tendency to be engulfed in passive, or destructive, emotions
(hate, anger, frustration at unfulfilled goals, etc.)
- Freedom as self-determination will be manifested as an increased tendency to experience active, or self-enhancing emotions...
(love, joy, acceptance of the unavoidable, etc.)
- Active emotions are based on *adequate* ideas; passive ones on *inadequate* ideas.

How Spinoza's view of Freedom helps to resolve the gaps.

(A) Ethics

- For Spinoza there are no (valid) ethical prescriptions in the sense of duties or prohibitions that we are enjoined (by God? by Reason?) to follow
- This is because he sees the traditional domain of ethics as bound up with a presumption of free will that he rejects.
- Spinoza: the entire world order is fully causally determined. There are no causal 'holes', which would have to be true if traditional assumptions about ethical responsibility and blame were correct.

- Yet there is another sense of freedom that emerges from Spinoza's philosophy
Individual autonomy
- Although there is no absolute freedom, we can attain a great degree of relative freedom, as individual beings, or organisms
- This notion of autonomy allows for *a reshaping of ethics as an outline of the conditions under which individuals may increase their autonomy*

Freedom at the centre of Spinoza's ethics

- So for Spinoza 'freedom' is the key ethical term in Spinoza's philosophy, rather than 'goodness', 'right', 'duty', etc.

(See Stuart Hampshire, 'Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom', *Proc. British Academy*, 46, 1960.)

- In a Spinozistic setting, ethics becomes a set of statements of the conditions of freedom/unfreedom for individuals

How Spinoza's account of freedom is normative or prescriptive

- So, an adequate understanding of the nature of individuals and their place in the natural order necessarily carries a *prescriptive* force.
- In recognizing the conditions of my unfreedom and the possibilities of liberation, I will come to prefer freedom to unfreedom, and thus be drawn to act to increase the conditions favouring autonomy and diminish the conditions blocking it.
- So recognizing adequately *the facts* about the conditions of self-determination, will *necessarily trigger self-enhancing preferences*, actions and emotions.

- This is a way to bridge Poincaré's gap between the indicative and the imperative
- And a way to launch an ethical science?

Science and Normativity

- Today the prevailing view of science is of a study which is inherently *value-free*
 - this includes how sciences of the mind are seen.
- This is one of the most prominent exemplifications of the fact-value gap.
- In Psychology (for example) there seems to be a widespread feeling that, as a scientist one should avoid making value-judgments;
 - and that to do the latter is to step outside the boundaries of professional scientific responsibility...

Spinoza's ethicalized naturalism

- By contrast, one can see Spinoza's naturalistic world-picture as an 'ethicalized naturalism':
- Spinoza's way of presenting the conditions of freedom is simultaneously **descriptive** and **prescriptive** in character.
- Spinoza's account of mind allows us to see how a scientific-naturalistic view of the world, and of how our minds fit in it, has a normative, ethical view at its heart.

How Spinoza's view of Freedom helps to resolve the gaps.

(B) Consciousness vs the brain

- The problem with consciousness is, in part, how to reconcile our conception of (first-person) *phenomenality* with the objectivistic (third-person) view of the world (and humans in it), as understood by science.
 - This baffled 17th century thinkers as it does those of today.

Consciousness identified 'from the inside'??

- On the view favoured by some contemporary philosophers (Nagel, Chalmers, Jackson, etc.) one starts from intuitions about consciousness, which see consciousness ***as essentially identifiable only 'from the inside'.***
- But from this standpoint phenomenality will inevitably have to be *conceptually detachable* from all processes in the physical world

- Spinoza's view can be seen as challenging this way at looking at consciousness and the mind
- One way of seeing this is by looking at what Spinoza says about the what it is to be *a living organism*

Spinoza's theory of organism

- Spinoza's view of how an individual human is constituted, may be seen as offering a first modern account of biological organisms
- (See H. Jonas, 'Spinoza and the Theory of Organism', *Jnl. Hist. Philosophy*, III (1) , 1965, pp 43-58.)
- Phenomenality (or 'inwardness', as Jonas calls it (*The Phenomenon of Life*, 1966)) is inherently a property of physically embodied organisms in a physical world.
- This suggests a response to the problems concerning the split between mind and body raised by Descartes and by many contemporary philosophers

Phenomenality as essentially embodied.

- On a Spinoza-informed view, *phenomenal consciousness is integral to the organic, physically embodied* lives of individuals
- Phenomenality, viewed this way, is *at the same time both* an inner, 'me-related' process...
 - (cognitive, emotional, experiential)
- and an outer, 'world-encompassing' process...
 - (embodied, physiological, organismal)

Consciousness and Freedom

- Spinoza's theory also establishes an important link between the idea of consciousness and the idea of freedom.
- We can see an organism's consciousness, on his view, as an *expression of that organism's seeking its own autonomy or self-determination*;
- This process will occur
 - both at the embodied level
 - and at the experiential level.

Higher and lower freedom, consciousness

- For Spinoza freedom (or autonomy) is something that can occur to a greater or lesser degree;
- This is equally true of consciousness:
 - We can have both relatively **active** and relatively **passive** states of consciousness;
 - Or (putting it another way)
 - **free** and **unfree** consciousness...

Consciousness-theory as evaluative or normative

- The Spinozan view thus apparently implies a conception of consciousness that is, at root, *normative as well as descriptive*.
- To understand the proper nature of consciousness
 - *is* to be motivated to seek to enjoy the consciousness of a more autonomous individual
 - in preference to the consciousness of a less autonomous individual.

Phenomeno-ethics?

- So a fully developed theory of consciousness, along lines suggested by Spinoza's theory,
 - will not merely provide a scientific explanation of how it arises as a natural phenomenon,
 - but will also point to how states of consciousness will vary in ideality or desirability.
- This suggests a new field of study: phenomeno-ethics (?)

Towards an ethical Psychology...

- Spinoza's account of individual autonomy implies that
 - in general, my own self-determination will be most likely to be realized when my purposes and emotions harmonize with the purposes and emotions of others, ... rather than when they are in conflict with them;
- Similarly my understanding of the conditions of my own autonomy
 - will necessarily imply a recognition of the conditions of the autonomy of others.

- So Spinoza's view isn't just a theory of *individual self-interest*:
- Rather, his account of the free mind converges on a *universalistic ethics*.

Summing up so far

- We've suggested that the two contemporary debates ...
 - over **fact-value**; and over **mind-body** –
- ... have more in common than is generally assumed.
- Spinoza's vision helps to clarify their relation;
 - ... and perhaps also provides the source of a common resolution of each via a single linked theory of **freedom**.



4. Spinoza as a proto-Enactivist

What is 'enactivism'?

- Enactivism can be seen as a multi-threaded answer to the question:

What are minds, and how do they relate – epistemically and experientially – to the world?

Key ideas in enactivism

- organisms as autonomous systems (agents)
- nervous systems as autonomous systems
- mind as lived embodiment
- cognition as meaning-generation (sense-making)
- sensorimotor coupling between organism and world
- mutual co-determination between organism and world
- centrality of experience to mind

Key theoretical currents underpinning Enactivism

- autopoietic theory
- Continental phenomenology
- buddhism
- embodied neuroscience
(‘neurophenomenology’)
- dynamic sensorimotor theory

The Cartesian Anxiety*

- *How can the mind know anything about the 'world'?*
- Two presuppositions behind this question:
 1. A view of mind as radically distinct, ontologically, and epistemically, from the world.
 2. A view of the world as pre-given, out there,
 - knowledge as a process of capturing true snapshots in the head that are likenesses of the pre-given, out-there world.
 - error as owning snapshots in the head that don't accurately reproduce the likeness of the world
- Even anti-dualist versions of the Cartesian anxiety share the second presupposition.

*Bernstein, R. (1983). *Beyond objectivism and relativism: Science, hermeneutics and praxis*. U. of Pennsylvania Press. See Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991), *The Embodied Mind*, ch 7.

How to quell the anxiety

- Enactivism offers a radically different view of knowledge: Knowledge is the autonomous activity of a living organism.
- Living IS autonomous – self-generated – activity which IS making sense of a world. The relation between an organism and its world is one of mutual co-determination.

Reframing subjectivity and objectivity

- This view actually transforms both the problem of ethics and the problem of consciousness.
- Both of these are, at least in part, problems of trying to relate a particular, epistemically problematized, 'subjective' domain to a more epistemically privileged – non-problematic – 'objective' domain
 - (e.g. the domain of objective scientific inquiry, or the domain of common-sense publically observable fact).
- But once the idea underlying the 'Cartesian anxiety' is given up, the notions of subjectivity and objectivity are radically transformed.

Between Spinoza and Enactivism

- Spinoza was one of the first ...
 - and enactivism one of the most recent – attempts to break out of the Cartesian mindset
- *Autonomy as self-determination* plays a central role in both views
- Mind as radically embodied – ontological split between mental and physical rejected
- Reframing of subjective-objective relation.

Double-aspect theory, old and new

- for Spinoza, the mental and the physical are two attributes of a single being (i.e. of an organism)
- for enactivism, one can view an organism in two ways:
 - (a) as a body that is a mechanism with its own biological, autonomous mode of operation (*Korper*);
 - (b) as a living, experiencing body (*Leib*)
- the latter could be viewed as a new reading of Spinoza's double-aspect monism

Naturalism

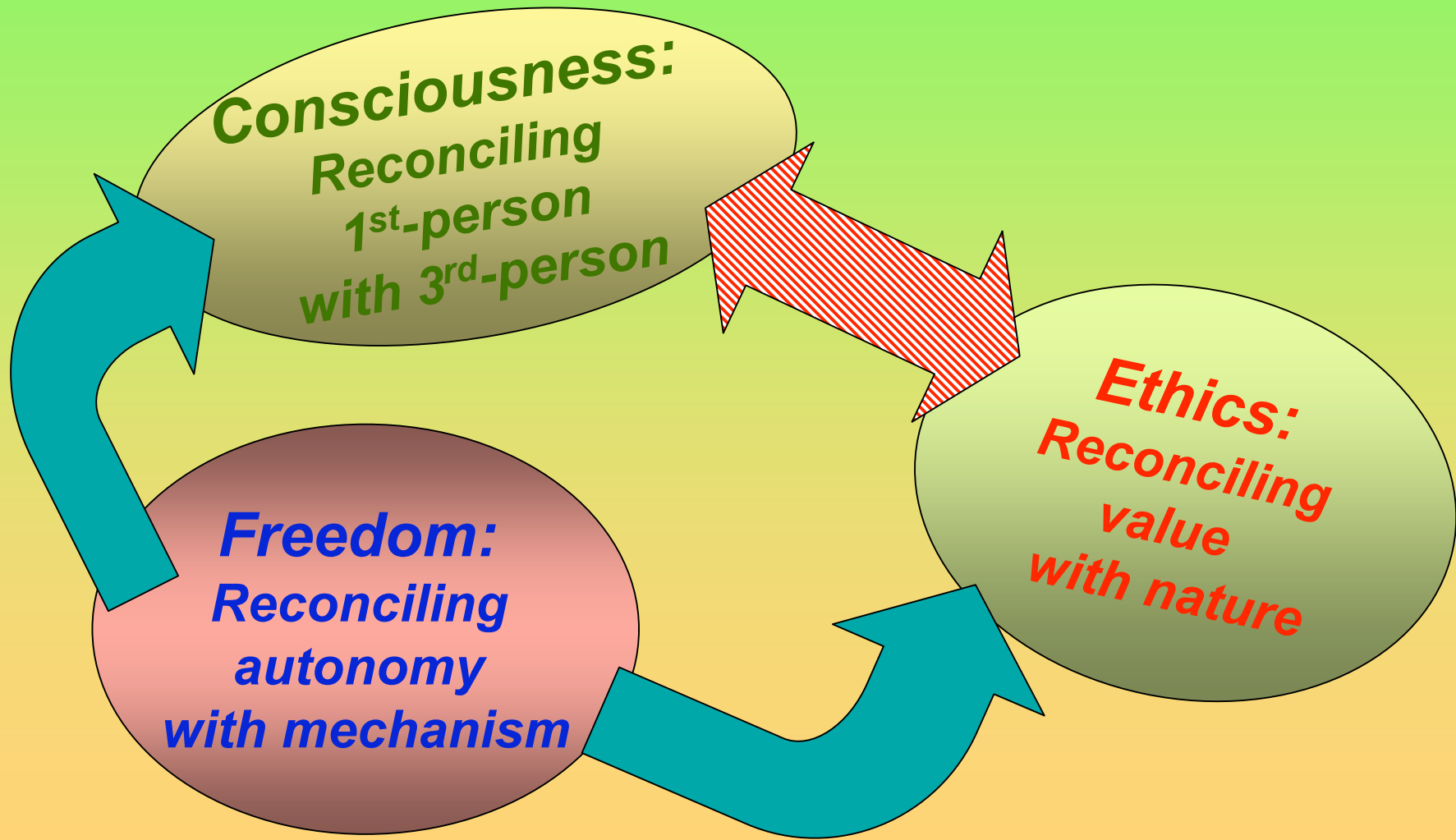
- In Spinoza there is a rejection of extravagant metaphysical claims: (a transcendent God, souls, free will)
 - in each case immanence replaces transcendence.
- Enactivism has its own clearly naturalistic character:
 - we investigate ourselves as natural, biological, organisms
- But materialism as a metaphysical doctrine (dualism without the souls) is also rejected by enactivism (and the Phenomenological tradition generally)

'Ethicalized naturalism'

- one's theory is not merely supposed to reflectively enable one to articulate what are features of the natural world, and of ourselves as members of the natural order:
- we also discover what are good and not-so-good ways of thinking, feeling and acting.
- Spinoza:
 - the cultivation of positive emotions and avoidance of negative emotions lay at the heart of his theory of autonomy and ethics
- Enactivism:
 - the Buddhist theme (mainly implicit?) looks towards similar goals, via meditation rather than via rational reflection
 - but the theory of autonomy in enactivism is *open to development as a much more explicit theory of emotional self-development and self-enhancement*

Concluding

- Key problems of ethics and of consciousness have important elements in common
- In Spinoza's philosophy, 'freedom' and 'autonomy' are important mediating notions in resolving problems in ethics and in consciousness
- There are some interesting links between the thought of Spinoza and enactivism: both can be seen as developing an 'ethicalized naturalism'
- Examining the ways in which Spinoza's thought can resolve problems in ethics and consciousness may thus help in the longer-term task of constructing an enactive response to these problems.



Appendix

A brief summary of the
main elements of Spinoza's Philosophy.

Main Elements of Spinoza's Philosophy

(1: God, world, mind and body)

- *Deus sive Natura*
 - God is equated with totality of the (natural) world;
 - An immanent, not a transcendent being.
- *Cogitatio; Extensio*
 - The mental and physical are two attributes (*thought; extension*) of God/Nature;
 - not separate substances in their own right.
- Rejection of Cartesian splits
 - Between divine creator and finite created world
 - Between matter as mechanistic substance and mind as spiritual substance

Main Elements of Spinoza's Philosophy (2: Individual things)

- 'Finite modes'
 - All individual things are finite modifications (modes) of infinite substance
 - their individuality is partial, since any particular thing will be dependent on many others for its existence and continued survival.
- *Conatus*
 - Individual things have a tendency to persevere in their own existence;
 - to maintain their power of action.

Main Elements of Spinoza's Philosophy

(3: Ideas)

- Ideas
 - The mind is the idea of the body
 - (an idea is a reflection of the physical reality of a thing under the attribute of thought).
- Adequate and inadequate ideas
 - If an idea occurs in the mind as a result of some external influence, it may be true (reflect the bodily affections that result from the external cause) but inadequate
 - But insofar as ideas arise in us through an internal necessitation or derivation from other ideas, they are both true and adequate

Main Elements of Spinoza's Philosophy

(4: Necessity and Freedom)

- Necessitation:
 - Everything that occurs does so out of necessity;
 - Our illusion that we have free will is based on ignorance of the causes acting on us.
- Freedom as self-determination
 - Although our actions are determined, we can nevertheless have a greater or lesser degree of freedom,
 - ...to the extent to which our actions can be *self*-determined
 - As we gain more adequate ideas of the causes acting on us, our power or freedom increases.

Main Elements of Spinoza's Philosophy (5: Organisms)

- Living organisms
 - are finite modes with special kinds of organisation that makes them particularly fit for survival in their environment.
 - (Unlike ordinary mechanisms, they are composites of ever changing individuals.)
- Emotions:
 - An individual organism will be subject to emotions,
 - which may be either passive (tending to reduce the power of that individual to survive)
 - ... or active (increasing its power).