

Spinoza: Thirty Practical Principles

These are my summary reconstructions of the principles to follow in seeking a happy life that are to be found in books 4 and 5 of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza does not himself present them in a coherent group of 30, but I think that this reconstruction does justice to his intentions nevertheless. I present the principles here without the extended arguments that Spinoza uses to establish their truth. You need to go back to the text and analyze the arguments in order to understand the principles fully. I have divided the principles into two groups: Wisdom and Pragmatics. Wisdom refers to principles that provide guidance for living based on a deep understanding of the nature of the universe and the place of the mind within it. Pragmatics refers to principles that provide guidance before we are able to achieve such deep understanding.

Wisdom

1. Seek to cultivate the mind of a wise person. The mind of the wise person is populated mostly, though not entirely, by joyful emotions and active, adequate ideas. Adequate ideas are clear and distinct and understand things as expressions of the essence of God or Nature, and its infinite attributes, only two of which we can understand - thought and material extension.
2. The goal is not to abolish negative emotions and passive, inadequate ideas, since this is impossible, but rather to come to a state in which they occupy only a very small part of the mind.
3. Remember that a mind that consists in mostly adequate ideas survives the death of the body because it was never really in time at all, but rather part of the eternal mind of God. For this reason, the wise person has no need to fear death. What perishes are confused ideas, which come through haphazard sense-encounters, and so are of little significance. Though these ideas are at the core of our memory, and therefore our sense of identity, personal identity has no importance when compared with the infinite intellect, the mind of God or Nature.
4. The wise person hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, despises no one, and least of all things is proud.
5. Spiritual unhealthiness and misfortunes can generally be traced to excessive love for something that changes in various ways, and of which we can never become masters. For no one is anxious or overly concerned about anything unless he or she loves it. Wrongs, suspicions, enmities, &c. arise only regarding things that we can never really master. This means that we need to replace excessive love for finite things with realistic love and kindness, and to invest our love fully only in the eternal and infinite being, God or Nature.
6. Recognize that all things follow from the necessity of the divine essence (or, what is the same thing, the necessity of the laws of nature) and that what appears hurtful, evil, horrible, unjust, or base, assumes that appearance owing to our own disordered, fragmentary, and confused view of the universe.

7. Recognize that your emotions and those of others are parts of the universe, like everything else that exists, and so are the necessary outcomes of antecedent causes. In that way, you will absolve others of responsibility for negative feelings (anger, hatred, envy, revenge, etc.) and accept the feelings as parts of the natural order of things.
8. Accept what happens to you, and continue on your way. Realize that you are a small part of the universe, and that it is impossible for you to control everything. In this way you will achieve harmony with the order of nature as a whole.
9. Work at developing a systematic and comprehensive understanding of nature and the place of the emotions within it. Apply this understanding to your emotions and those of others. In this way, you will introduce systematic rational order into what is initially irrational and disordered, and experience the joy involved in doing so.
10. Study the emotions so that you are able to form clear and distinct ideas of their nature and how they come into existence. That way, when others are hateful or angry or envious, you will experience the joy of understanding these feelings rather than the pain of being hurt by them.
11. The wise person regards guilt as painful and destructive, and therefore seeks to abolish it. There is no point in suffering over one's actions in the past, both because suffering diminishes our power to thrive, and because past actions are beyond our control.
12. Recognize that each of your emotions has many causes, not just a single one. In this way, you will spread negative feelings among many causes, diminishing their force, rather than concentrating them on the image of a single thing or person.

Pragmatics

1. Lacking full knowledge of the emotions, it is best to develop a pragmatic system of principles, and to commit the system to memory. It is also important to imagine situations in which these principles should be applied, and to apply them in imagination. In this way, you ready yourself for applying the principles when actual occasions arise.
2. Focus on life and the occasions it presents to enhance your power to thrive instead of focusing on death.
3. Always bear in mind that which is good in every individual thing so that you always act with a feeling of joy.
4. Do not seek money for its own sake. Instead seek only as much money as is necessary to satisfy your genuine needs and help others when you are able. Live simply and with contentment.
5. Do not seek pain, for example, the pain recommended by superstitious forms of religion (guilt, penance, self-abnegation, etc.). Instead seek pleasure that is in accord with your true advantage.
6. Courage is not the same as blind daring. Maintain at all times presence of mind, and be prepared to retreat as well as to face danger when appropriate.

7. Resolve to do good and to go on your way joyfully.
8. Always try to combine with others in harmony and friendship, since in this way you enhance your power to thrive as well as that of other people.
9. Desire for others the good that you seek for yourself, since shared goods are what creates the community that enhances your power.
10. Act in good faith rather than fraudulently. Good faith means acting in accordance with the laws that enable human beings to unite their forces in communities and larger societies.
11. Practice justice, equity, and honorable living.
12. Observe the customs of the community.
13. Respond to others' hatred, anger, contempt, etc. with love and kindness, for this increases their joy with the idea of you as the cause, and thereby converts their negative emotions regarding you into positive ones.
14. Bear the wrongs done to you patiently, remembering that the hurtful acts of people are the result of natural causes.
15. Do not seek to be admired, since this may cause envy in other people.
16. Do not talk about people's faults, but rather about the attainable strengths of human beings. In this way, you will encourage others to improve themselves, and to fulfill their capacity for rational existence.
17. Be liberal in giving, especially to those who lack the basic means of living. Encourage the dedication of the state to care for the poor, since none of us has the individual resources to care for all of those who require it.
18. In marriage, people should be bound to one another not only by sexual attraction, but also by love of raising children, and, above all, by encouraging in the marriage partners mutual development of freedom of the spirit. Freedom of the spirit is what follows from acting in accordance with these 30 practical principles.