

Spinoza's Genealogical Critique of Axiology

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One striking feature of Spinoza's moral philosophy is his open antipathy to what he took to be the prominent axiological theories of his day. Spinoza decries, for example, the "common supposition" that order is something "in Nature more than a relation to our imagination", that good and bad are among "the chief attributes of things", that good and bad, perfection and imperfection, are something "positive in things, considered in themselves," and that "Nature sometimes fails or sins, and produces imperfect things" (*EIAppendix*, *EIVPreface*).¹ All these notions, he argues, amount to little more than "prejudices", beliefs formed "in ignorance of things", by people who "only imagine" things, who "affirm nothing concerning things", and who "take the imagination for the intellect" (*EIAppendix*).

Spinoza's aversion to such ideas is borne in part by virtue of their inadequacy, that they are imaginations masquerading as intellections. However, he also has another, more practical concern: that such ideas will thwart his efforts to educate and "emend" the minds of his readership (cf. *TIE*). It is not simply, then, that his readers commonly hold confused and mutilated ideas about the nature of good and bad, perfect and imperfect and so on, but that there is the potential for such ideas to act as an "obstacle" to his own teachings on "the connection of things" (*EIAppendix*).

In response to this threat, Spinoza endeavours to "remove" such metaethical prejudices from the minds of his readers, to "expose" them, as he has similar misconceptions about other matters, by submitting them to the "scrutiny of reason" (*EIAppendix*). In this, Spinoza's critique of his contemporaries' theory of value, both in *EIAppendix* and later in *EIVPreface*, forms part of what Deleuze refers to as Spinoza's "anti-Bible". As Deleuze explains, there are, in a sense, three *Ethics*, each speaking to a different part of Spinoza's "logic". Definitions, axioms, postulates, propositions, demonstrations and corollaries make up Spinoza's "conceptual" *Ethics*. These, Deleuze argues, "form a grandiose course", dealing with inadequate ideas or passions only in order "to denounce their insufficiency, to repress them as far as possible like so many sediments on the river banks". A second *Ethics*, represented by Book V and contained in Book V, concerns itself with "Essences", "Singularities" and "Precepts": these are light "in itself and for itself". However, there is also a third element. This is Spinoza's anti-Bible, his book of "signs and affects", of "Anger and Laughter". This book, found predominantly in the *scholia*, "operates in the shadows, trying to distinguish between what prevents us from reaching common notions and what, on the contrary, allows us to do so, what diminishes and what augments our power, the sad signs of our servitude and the joyous signs of our liberations".²

Following Sasso,³ Deleuze notes that Spinoza's book of "signs and affects" can seem separate from Spinoza's "conceptual" *Ethics*, having "a completely different tone [...] almost another language".⁴ However, it would be wrong to assume that just because such passages are written in a different literary style to the rest of the *Ethics* they are therefore extraneous to Spinoza's main philosophical project. Indeed, Spinoza's critique of his contemporaries' theory of value in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* ultimately plays a foundational role in his own metaethical thought. For in *EIVPreface* Spinoza explicitly grounds his own theory of value on the inadequacy of his contemporaries', concluding that perfection and imperfection, good and bad are "only modes of thinking" principally on the basis that they are *not* something "positive in things, considered in themselves" (effectively deploying of the law of the excluded middle).

Both the broad aims of *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* and the significance of these arguments in his wider philosophical project, then, look clear. Yet quite how Spinoza hopes to achieve these ends is less certain. How, precisely, does Spinoza think he can "remove" his contemporaries' prejudices about value? Despite the wealth of literature on the philosophy and history of the more 'positive' aspects of Spinoza's metaethics,⁵ this, more critical and 'negative' side to his thought has generally received very little attention. In this article, I consider Spinoza's argumentative strategy in these passages in depth. In Section One, I argue that Spinoza's argument here is best understood as a

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genealogical analysis, that is, one which aims to undermine a given set of beliefs by establishing a link between it and a further, prior set. As I explain in Section Two, this strategy has a long and illustrious history in philosophical thought, Spinoza most likely coming to it through Gersonides. However, if understanding Spinoza's argument in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* as a genealogical one allows us a better appreciation of both its key moves and intellectual history, it comes with a sting in its tail. For once the plain facts of Spinoza's argumentative strategy are laid bare we can also see that contains a fatal flaw: the critique Spinoza presents of his contemporaries' axiology in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* will not get him to where he wants to go. In Section Three I consider this flaw, whether Spinoza is able to avoid it and its implications for his wider ethical project.

The Argumentative Strategy

What arguments does Spinoza offer against his readers' "prejudices" about value? There are two main passages to consider here: *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface*. Both of these follow broadly the same pattern; however, in order to highlight the differences between them, it is worth considering them separately.

Early on in *EIAppendix*, Spinoza summarises his argumentative strategy in dealing with his readers' beliefs about value thus:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God. So I shall begin by considering this one prejudice, asking *first* why most people are satisfied that it is true, and why all are so inclined by nature to embrace it. *Then* I shall show its falsity, and *finally* how, from this, prejudices have arisen concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind.

Much about this passage requires explanation. First, it is worth noting that, in the end, Spinoza's order of analysis in *EIAppendix* actually reverses the order he suggests in the extract above. Thus, it is only at the end of *EIAppendix* that Spinoza identifies precisely which prejudices he takes his argument to undermine (i.e., those "concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind"). Instead, he begins by considering those prejudices which, in his view, "give rise" to such ideas: "that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end" and that "God himself directs all things to some certain end". Moreover, the majority of his argument in *EIAppendix* is devoted to explaining why most people believe these – what we might call 'generative' prejudices – are true, and why, instead, they are false. He assigns far less space to the connection between such beliefs and our views concerning good and evil.

However, despite certain peculiarities in Spinoza's mode of presentation, we ought not to lose sight of the main purpose of his argument: namely, to expose a specific set of axiological prejudices that he takes to "depend" on the idea that God-or-Nature acts for the sake of an end. Reconfigured, then, we might think of Spinoza's method as comprising of three steps: (i) The identification of the prejudices targeted for removal; (ii) Identification of those generative ideas giving rise to the prejudices identified in (i); (iii) The removal of that set of generative ideas identified in (ii) through their falsification. To this we might add point (iv): an analysis of why we commonly take those generative ideas identified in (ii) to be true/are inclined by nature to embrace them. Since, however, Spinoza's treatment of (iv) does little work in the argument against those prejudices identified in step (i), we need not consider it further here.

At this point in proceedings our first instinct might be to look in greater depth at the content of Spinoza's argument, that is: those ideas Spinoza identifies in (i) and (ii); his discussion as to how those generative ideas he identifies in (ii) gave rise to those he identifies in (i); and his refutation of such generative beliefs (iii). These matters are important sites of scholarly interest, ones which I deal with elsewhere.⁶ However, again, they are largely irrelevant to our present purposes. That is, what I am interested in here is not necessarily *which* "prejudices" about value Spinoza hopes to "remove",

why he takes them to be generated by the idea that “all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end” and that “God himself directs all things to some certain end”, or *why* he thinks *those* generative ideas are false. Instead, what I want to explore is the structure of this argument: that is, how Spinoza thinks that an argument of the sort described by (i) – (iii) can bring about the removal of his contemporaries' axiologies.

How, then, might we characterise Spinoza's argumentative strategy here? What Spinoza offers us here, I believe, is essentially a genealogical analysis.⁷ That is, he seems to think he can bring about the removal of his contemporaries' misconceptions about value by providing a genealogical account of how such beliefs have arisen within the minds of their believers in the first place and why *that* source is in some way questionable.

A few things characterise this discussion. First, in contrast to genealogical analyses that take P's environment (widely conceived) as the 'cause' of P's beliefs,⁸ for Spinoza the origins of his contemporaries' axiology lie exclusively in a tightly bound, single set of ideas already present in the minds of his readership. “Prejudices have arisen concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind”, but such ideas have not arisen by a confluence of disparate stimuli, as the result of some set of cultural, political and economic forces. Rather they have been born directly from another, prior set of prejudices (we believe x because we believe y).⁹ The history of such views, then, is a history bound in the hereditary relationship between two generations of concepts, of how one set of beliefs – what I refer to here as a set of 'generative' beliefs – has come, by its own potency, to engender another. This generative process is *individual* in that it is necessarily situated within an individual mind, however it is also *multiple*, in the sense that it is prone to taking place in the mind of anyone subscribing to the initial prejudice. Indeed, on Spinoza's account, it is not just that such a process *could* take place in the minds of such subscribers (a set he takes to be fairly well populated) but rather that it *has* taken place. Spinoza's history of how such prejudices have formed is therefore also a *social* history; it is a history of how certain ideas about “*good* and *evil* [...] *order* and *confusion* [...] and other things of this kind” have grown up within the general population, a history of “what men commonly suppose” and what, as a result of those common suppositions, we have been led to believe.

One question this raises, of course, is how far we are meant to take this as a *real* history. That is, is Spinoza asserting that this is actually how we have come to believe the views we hold about good and bad, order and disorder, or is it that such stories merely allow us to imagine how such beliefs could have been engendered and, in that imagining, allow us to see some 'truth' about their conceptual origins? As Williams puts it, genealogies may not be simply a matter of “real history”;

There is also a role for a fictional narrative, an imagined developmental story, which helps to explain a concept or value or institution by showing ways in which it could have come about in a simplified environment containing certain kinds of human interests or capacities, which, relative to the story, are taken as given.¹⁰

Among the more real genealogies, then, we might count the kind of genealogy attempted by David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, or Paul Rée in his *Origin of the Moral Sensations*.¹¹ A more problematic case, seemingly both real and fictional, would be Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of his contemporaries' Christian morality in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* – Nietzsche himself having interesting things to say about the extent to which his critique aspired to 'truth' (and what we mean by that term).

Certain aspects of Spinoza's critique can look fictional. For example, when Spinoza reflects on why we have come to believe that God and natural things act for the sake of an end, it is not entirely clear that the story he tells – one centred on our ignorance of the causes of things – is intended to describe some set of historical facts. Rather, such passages appear designed only to help us see how, absent their historical setting, certain psychological tendencies can promulgate and perpetuate imaginary ideas both about ourselves and our environment. Spinoza's story about the origins of our beliefs about value, on the other hand, looks more “real”, more grounded in an actual development from one set of ideas to another. To a degree, we might see this as a natural consequence of the tight connection Spinoza draws between our beliefs about value and the 'prejudices' from which they emerged. Thus where the story Spinoza wants to tell about the origins of our beliefs about teleological

forces in nature is intended to have certain ‘fictional’ elements, since the story about the set of beliefs *they* gave rise to (i.e., our beliefs about value) is a story simply about the necessary generation of one set of ideas from another, *that* story may be considered an actual history (however you came to believe that y, once you were persuaded of y, x followed).

Finally, in line with Williams’ view that genealogies are usually intended to serve the aims of naturalism, Spinoza’s analysis is also a *natural* history.¹² Thus, for Spinoza, our adherence to the beliefs we hold about good and bad is a fact about us born of our position within God-or-Nature. In tandem with other “imagination”, such prejudices are those “we are inclined by nature” to “embrace”. And in this way, perhaps, for Spinoza such opinions expose, as Ravven puts it, “a naïve and uncritical passive posture towards the world as constructed by language, culture and random experience”.¹³

If Spinoza’s analysis of the axiology of his contemporaries in *EIAppendix* bears many of the properties of a typical genealogy, then, his later analysis in *EIVPreface* treads a similar path. To a certain extent, Spinoza gives this discussion its own particular bent by arguing that our thinking about value is partly informed by the etymology of the word ‘perfection’. Again, though, Spinoza’s method is primarily genealogical. What interests him is the psycho-social origins of our thinking about value, in our movement from one set of beliefs to another. This story is etymological insofar as the meaning we have attached to words such as ‘perfection’ is part of the reason that we have been moved from endorsing an (erroneous) set of metaphysical doctrines (specifically, that “Nature acts on account of an end”) to a set of metaethical ones (that, good and bad, perfection and imperfection, are something “positive in things, considered in themselves,” and that “Nature sometimes fails or sins, and produces imperfect things”). However, the point of his argument is the connection between these beliefs, not the meaning we attached to the terms within them. And it is this genealogical story that “exposes” his readership’s beliefs as prejudices. As he puts it at the argument’s close: “We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from a true knowledge of those things”.

Indeed, this pattern of argumentation follows similar arguments he presents in *EIAppendix* against the notion that “Nature does act for the sake of an end” (that is, precisely that “prejudice” he believes engenders his contemporaries’ axiological misconceptions). As he puts it in *EIAppendix*:

Not many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions. For I believe I have already sufficiently established it, both by the foundations and causes from which I have shown this prejudice to have had its origin, and also by EIp16, EIp32c1, and EIp32c2, and all those [propositions] by which I have shown that all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of Nature, and with the greatest perfection.

Latterly in this passage Spinoza argues that proof that Nature does *not* act for the sake of an end is established by his prior metaphysical deductions about God and/or Nature (i.e., “EIp16, EIp32c1, and EIp32c2, and all those [propositions] by which I have shown that all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of Nature, and with the greatest perfection”). However, he begins by first claiming that his analysis of the “foundations and causes” of his contemporaries’ misconceptions about the fundamental structure of Nature (an argument also contained in *EIAppendix*) are also, in themselves, “sufficient” to establish that “Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions”. In other words, his genealogical method alone is able to secure their refutation.

The History

Although our use of the term ‘genealogy’ to describe the kind of arguments Spinoza makes in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* derives from primarily from Nietzsche, by Spinoza’s time of writing in the mid-seventeenth century, such arguments already had a long intellectual history. One might identify a kind of proto-genealogy, for example, in Glaucon’s critique of the intrinsic value of justice in Book II of Plato’s *Republic*. In making this critique, Glaucon argues that the “origin” of justice lies, in fact, in individuals’ lack of power to do an injustice. Understanding that to do an injustice is naturally good and to suffer an injustice is bad but also that “the badness of suffering it so far exceeds the goodness of doing it”, those who have “tasted both” come to an agreement with each other

“neither to do injustice nor to suffer it”. And as a result, “they begin to make laws and covenants”, and call what the law commands “lawful and just”. “This is the nature of justice, Socrates”, says Glaucon, “and these are its natural origins”.¹⁴

Xenophanes of Kolophon offers another, early example of critique-by-genealogy in his claim that mortals only suppose that Gods are as men because they themselves are:

But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own – horses like horses, cattle like cattle.¹⁵

More interestingly, perhaps, Thomas Hobbes – a contemporary of Spinoza’s – adopts a genealogical mode of argument in his discussion of the “seed of Religion” in his *Leviathan*. Strongly foreshadowing Spinoza’s later analysis of man’s belief in a teleological metaphysics, Hobbes argues that much of man’s religious tendencies can be ascribed to his search after the causes of things. Such enquiries, Hobbes claims, “make Anxiety”:

For being assured that there be causes of all things that have arrived hitherto, or shall arrive hereafter; it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoureth to secure himselfe against the evill he feares, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetuall solicitude of the time to come [...] This perpetuall feare, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes, as it were in the Dark, must needs have for object something. And therefore when there is nothing to be seen, there is nothing to accuse, either of their good, or evill fortune, but some *Power*, or Agent *Invisible*: In which sense perhaps it was, that some of the old Poets said, that the Gods were at first created by humane Feare.¹⁶

Both ancient and contemporary sources, then, suggest that genealogical analyses of various sorts were reasonably common currency within Spinoza’s era. However, though this is so, there seems good reason to think that Spinoza’s own use of the method in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* was primarily indebted to Gersonides. This is a strong claim which requires defence. Let me begin with some contextual points.

First, we already know that Gersonides was a writer with whom Spinoza was familiar. Spinoza’s first introduction to Gersonides’s work is likely to have occurred during his formative education at the elementary school of the united Talmud Torah congregation and, later, at the Keter Torah yeshiva, run by the congregation’s chief rabbi, Saul Levi Mortera.¹⁷ Here Spinoza is likely to have received instruction in at least some of Gersonides’s works, along with those of other major medieval Jewish scholars such as Maimonides.¹⁸ Indeed, from his library, we know Spinoza possessed a range of Hebrew texts, including Maimonides’s *Morah Nebuchim*, the main bulk of which he probably inherited.¹⁹

Second, despite Spinoza’s later antipathy to Judaism,²⁰ and occasional disagreement with some of Gersonides’s arguments, he appears to have been a writer who Spinoza held in some esteem. Thus, while Spinoza rejects Gersonides’s teachings on matters of Biblical exegesis, he still shows him a grudging respect: lambasting “the rabbi [Gersonides] [...] and those who follow in his footsteps” for attempting to “amend” Scripture rather than “explain” it, while at the same time recognising him as “otherwise a very learned man” (*TTP* §9, Annotation 16).²¹

Third, interpretative analysis has shown that Gersonides may have had a bearing on Spinoza’s philosophical development in a number of important respects. For example, Warren Zev Harvey has recently put forth a persuasive argument that Spinoza’s theory of the *conatus* (see *EIIIp6-9*) was inspired by Gersonides’s view that Nature “preserves” the existence of animals and plants and moreover “endeavours” to do so.²² Aaron V. Garrett has also highlighted a number of possible connections between Gersonides and Spinoza, mostly on matters of method.²³

Of course, much of this is equally true of Hobbes – whom Spinoza knew, appears to have respected, and seems to have been influenced by. However, what seems to identify Gersonides as a particular influence here is several strong similarities between Spinoza’s use of the genealogical argument in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* and a piece of advice Gersonides gives in his *The Wars of the Lord*. In this passage, Gersonides offers his guidance on how aspiring writers ought to present material in a philosophical treatise and the dangers posed by the preconceptions of one’s readers.²⁴ To

combat this problem, Gersonides offers the following solution (given its importance in what is to follow, it is worth quoting him here in full):

[...] when an author realises that some of his discussions explain things that are strange to the reader because of the opinions with which the latter is familiar and habituated from youth, so that the reader is upset by them even if he finds no logical inconsistencies in them, and hence for this reason would be prevented from obtaining knowledge from the rest of the book – then the author should arrange his material in a way that is appropriate to what he wants to convey to the reader. [That is,] he should present first the material that is not so strange to the reader; in this way the author will wean him away gradually from his [intellectual] heritage, so that his former opinions will not prevent him from obtaining the truth on that question. This kind of tactic is similar to that employed by the physicians of the body and of the soul, and it is necessary to use such a tactic because of the disposition of the patient. The author too [is often in the same position] when the disposition of his reader is such that on a particular topic it is in a sense diseased, although he doesn't realise it but thinks that he is sound and not in need of therapy or the advice of physicians. Such an ill person must be introduced gradually to the therapy, so that he doesn't experience too strong a stimulus. Therefore, when an author realises that the reader has corrupt opinions, whose contraries he is about to establish, he should uproot them step by step. Since he can succeed in this undertaking only if he has the consent of the reader, for he has no physical means to persuade him and the reader actually doesn't want to be disabused of these ideas, the author must use for [this process of] uprooting those principles all the means available that are not too strong. In this way the malady will be removed and the patient will be cured. Hence the author should try to dissipate that which nourishes those opinions before he actually uproots them. Even [in removing] this nourishment the author should adopt a definite order, i.e., the nourishment that the reader will miss the least should be removed first; and this should continue gradually without stop until all the sustenance that sustains this opinion will be removed. Then it will be easy for the author to uproot that opinion; indeed, the opinion might disappear by itself.²⁵

The first thing to note from this extract is Gersonides's description of the problem faced by his imagined Author. Two things characterise this discussion: first, Gersonides's description of readers' preconceptions or "former opinions" as simultaneously long-held, believed to be true by their believers and fundamentally mistaken; second, his view that such opinions present an obstacle to their believer's ability to grasp alternative claims. To begin with, Gersonides takes his imagined Author to be dealing with a set of views her readers have become "habituated" to from an early age, that *they* take as "sound", "not in need of therapy", and yet which are, at the same time, "in some sense diseased" or "corrupt". Despite such ideas constituting a "malady", it may be that the reader "actually doesn't want to be disabused of these ideas", not least because they are opinions with which they are familiar. Here one might think that such ideas constitute a problem for the Author's readers, rather than the Author themselves. Yet, Gersonides argues that one needs to be aware of these "maladies" because they have the potential to obstruct any attempt by the Author to enlighten her readership. As a result of such preconceptions, readers may find aspects of one's writings "upsetting" or "strange". More than this, though, such preconceptions, and the discordance between them and the ideas laid out by the Author, could ultimately "prevent" readers "from obtaining knowledge from the rest of the book", "the truth" that one is seeking to impart. Such effects can be felt even if one's reasoning is entirely valid; that is, even if one's readers will not be able to find any "logical inconsistencies" in one's discussion of things. Erroneous beliefs, then, can trump the true, even if the latter are justified by robust argument.

With the problem posed by reader bias understood in these terms, Gersonides goes on to give his advice on how one can remedy such maladies. Such therapy comes with an important constraint: one can only succeed in treating reader bias if one has "the consent of the reader", for authors have "no physical means to persuade him". Recognising this, Gersonides argues that if one is to seek to "disabuse" one's readers of their former opinions, one therefore needs to "wean" them away from their intellectual heritage "gradually". This therapy has two characteristics: in combating such ideas, authors should first tackle those ideas that propagate the opinions they want to remove; and in tackling that set of generative ideas, authors should look first to those ideas that readers hold least dear. In Gersonides's view, then, there is little to be gained from confronting readers' preconceptions

directly. Rather one must look to “that which nourishes” and “sustains” such opinions and focus one’s attention on trying to “dissipate” those, sustaining views first. “Uprooting” readers’ primary misconceptions, Gersonides explains, will then be “easy”; in fact, “the opinion might disappear by itself” (more on this final point in Section Three).

The other, major point Gersonides stresses is that in seeking to remove those ideas that generate one’s primary concern, one ought to do so in “a definite order” wherein those ideas that “readers will miss the least” are removed first. In this, Gersonides appears particularly drawn by his extended use of a medical metaphor. His worry, he explains, is that the reader ought not to “experience too strong a stimulus” – the thought being, presumably, that if the author looks to attack those beliefs their readers are most attached to first, such readers may experience such a shock as to dissuade them from taking the rest of the therapy. Gersonides therefore advises a more indirect strategy, where those opinions easiest to uproot are dealt with first and those that are more deeply embedded are tackled last.

From this analysis, we might immediately recognise the similarities between Gersonides’s ‘medical’ method and Spinoza’s genealogical analysis of his contemporaries’ axiology in the *Ethics*. First, one might see a similarity between Gersonides’s description of the problem posed by one’s readers’ “former opinions” and Spinoza’s concern about his own readers’ “prejudices”. For Gersonides’s imagined Author, then, the worry was that, even if her reasoning is entirely valid, because her readers already hold a prior set of opinions to which they have become “habituated”, there are likely to be many aspects of her writings that readers are likely to find “upsetting” or “strange”, this discordance eventually “preventing” those readers “from obtaining knowledge from the rest of the book”. Correspondingly, in the *Appendix* to Part One of the *Ethics*, Spinoza voices similar concerns about his readers’ pre-existing conceptions, noting that, despite his various demonstrations explaining God’s nature and properties, his readers are still likely to hold a number of “prejudices” that “could, and can, be a great obstacle” to their understanding of the “connection of things”, and “prevent” his demonstrations from “being perceived”.

Spinoza’s method with dealing with such misbeliefs also follows Gersonides. As described, in Gersonides’s view there is little to be gained from confronting readers’ preconceptions directly; rather, one must look to “that which nourishes those opinions” and “sustains” them, and try to “dissipate” these views first. Similarly, in his critique of his contemporaries’ axiology, Spinoza adopts a genealogical method: “removing” his readers views about value by first revealing their origins in a metaphysical view of God’s action and then “showing the falsity” of that generative belief (EI*Appendix*).

One further possible point of contact we might be curious about here is Gersonides’s entreaty that, in looking to uproot one’s reader’s prior opinions one ought to approach them in a definitive order, wherein those opinions to which readers are least committed are removed first. Does Spinoza follow Gersonides in this? Here much depends on our view of the nature of Spinoza’s audience and the content of his argument. For example, if we imagine that Spinoza saw his audience primarily as unreformed Aristotelian scholastics – more towards the kind of reading established by Wolfson²⁶ – then we are likely to think that he paid little attention to Gersonides advice in this particular respect. For an Aristotelian, Spinoza’s primary focus on the idea “Nature acts for the sake of an end” would hardly have attacked the idea his readers were committed to the least; rather it struck at the very bedrock of their metaphysical system. On the other hand, if we imagine Spinoza saw his audience as primarily made up of the so-called ‘New Scientists’ and their followers, (Cartesians, followers of Francis Bacon and Hobbes and so on) – closer, perhaps, to the kind of reading endorsed by Curley²⁷ – then we might think that Spinoza was attempting to follow Gersonides’s advice on how he ought to order his arguments. For *this* audience, Spinoza’s general scepticism of teleological processes in natural processes (if not the metaphysical deductions on which it was based) would have been welcome. Less attractive, though, would have been his attempt to draw out the implications of that position for our knowledge of morality. ‘New Scientists’ such as Descartes and Bacon, for example, routinely distinguished between those questions that pertain to the mechanics of natural processes (i.e., final and efficient causality) and those that pertain to questions of ethics (wherein reasoning with regard to the ‘purpose’ and ‘end’ of human beings was considered legitimate) (See CSM 2, 258). In presenting his conclusions about value last and his conclusions about teleology first, then, Spinoza’s ordering of arguments in the *Ethics* would have been broadly in line with what Gersonides would have advised. To reach a definitive conclusion about Spinoza’s adherence to Gersonides’s advice on

how an author ought to order his or her arguments, then, one requires a definitive analysis of Spinoza's intended audience. However, unfortunately, this project is ultimately beyond the bounds of this article.

Together with the contextual evidence, then, these points of contact seem to suggest that Spinoza's own use of the genealogical method was directly indebted to Gersonides. Establishing this link would, of course, put this article at an important juncture in the secondary literature on Spinoza's influences, supporting those who have stressed Spinoza's debt to Jewish thinkers,²⁸ and contradicting those who are more sceptical of such connections.²⁹ However, I think it is worth being cautious here. First, it must be noted that Spinoza makes no explicit reference to Gersonides in either *EIAppendix* or *EIVPreface*. As such, any claim to the effect that he was consciously echoing Gersonides in these passages would have to do so in absence of any explicit evidence to that effect. For some, this would not necessarily count against the claim that Spinoza's argumentative strategy in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* is directly indebted to Gersonides. After all, Spinoza rarely makes reference to any past or contemporary writer in the *Ethics* and it would be absurd to suggest that, as such, we can never claim he was influenced by anyone. Nevertheless, drawing such a strong connection between the two writers inevitably leaves one open to the accusation of confirmation bias. That is, one might argue that in noticing this fit between Spinoza's critique of his contemporaries' axiology in the *Ethics* and Gersonides's advice in *The Wars of the Lord*, we have not found a point of historical contact, rather it is simply that we identified a certain passage in Gersonides which seems to reflect a pattern of reasoning in Spinoza and then read back into Spinoza the idea that he must have been influenced by him in the relevant passages.

In light of this counter, then, rather than pressing for the strong claim that Spinoza *was* influenced by Gersonides in the passages, it is perhaps more prudent to simply say that, in light of Gersonides's writings (and supporting evidence), there seems good reason to think that Spinoza *may* have been influenced by him in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface*. More broadly, we might also say that regardless of whether Spinoza *was* directly influenced by Gersonides, Gersonides writings – both on their own and in conjunction with the use of the same sort of argument by writers such as Hobbes – suggest that many of Spinoza's contemporaries would have taken the genealogical method to have a certain pedigree, in turn, potentially explaining Spinoza's own use of that method.

The Flaw

Thus far we have seen that by identifying Spinoza's argumentative strategy in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface* as a genealogical analysis of his contemporaries' theory of value we are able to better appreciate both the structure of his argument and its intellectual history. However, elucidating Spinoza's argument in this way also comes at a cost, for it also becomes clear that it contains a fatal flaw. To see this, it helps to return first to Gersonides and, in particular, what he says about the kinds of things his 'medical' method can do.

As discussed above, Gersonides takes his method to enable authors to "uproot" their readers' beliefs, even ensuring such beliefs "disappear by themselves". Now, precisely what Gersonides means by this is not entirely clear. However, we might read Gersonides as being open to the two possibilities here. First, Gersonides's method might be seen to bring about the 'disappearance' of one's readers' beliefs simply by undermining their reasons for believing such beliefs. Imagine, say, that Sarah has a belief that God caused her to regain her sight (call this Belief 1). Let us also say that the *only* reason Sarah believes God caused her to regain her sight (Belief 1) is because she also believes she experienced a miracle (call this Belief 2). In this case, one might use Gersonides's technique to disabuse Sarah of her belief that God caused her to regain her sight (Belief 1) by proving that the reason why she believes that belief (i.e., Belief 2) is itself false. Significantly, this would *not* show that Belief 1 *was* false. It could be, for example, that even though Sarah is wrong to think she experienced a miracle, God still caused her to regain her sight. However, such an argument might undermine Sarah's confidence in Belief 1, essentially by falsifying the only reason Sarah had for believing Belief 1 in the first place. To put it another way, an argument to the effect that Belief 2 was false would not show that Belief 1 was *unjustifiable* but it might show that, from Sarah's perspective at least, any continued adherence to Belief 1 would be *unjustified*. And once Sarah had been shown that she no longer has any reason to believe Belief 1, there seems good reason to think that, as Gersonides puts it, that that belief will "disappear by itself".³⁰

As well as being able to bring about the “disappearance” of one’s reader’s beliefs in this way, however, there is one strategy by which Gersonides’s technique could be used to bring about the ‘disappearance’ of one’s readers’ beliefs through outright falsification. Specifically, if it could be shown that the reason why a reader believes a given belief is not only the cause of that belief but a necessary condition of it being true, then any argument that showed that that generative belief was false would also show that the belief it engendered was false. For example, consider Sarah again. Say that one was able to show not only that the only reason Sarah believes God caused her to regain her sight (Belief 1) was because she also believes she experienced a miracle (Belief 2) but in addition, that the only process by which God *could* cause her to regain her sight was through miraculous means. In such a case, an argument showing that the generative idea behind Sarah’s belief that God caused her to regain her sight was false (i.e., \neg Belief 2), would also show that God did not cause her to regain her sight (i.e., \neg Belief 1). Such an argument would take the form:

- P1. Sarah believes that God caused her to regain her sight (Belief 1).
 - P2. Sarah’s only believes God caused her to regain her sight because she also believes she experienced a miracle (Belief 2).
 - P3. Sarah’s experiencing of a miracle is a necessary condition of God causing her to regain her sight.
 - P4. Sarah’s belief that she experienced a miracle is false (\neg Belief 2)
- Therefore*
- C1. God did not cause Sarah to regain her sight (by P4 and P3)
- Therefore*
- C2. Sarah’s belief that God caused her to regain her sight is false (\neg Belief 1).

In this way then, provided an author could establish something like P3, Gersonides’s method might bring about the “disappearance” of Belief 1 through its falsification.

In sum, therefore, we might interpret Gersonides as non-committal between these two possible outcomes of his technique. By his lights, his technique might be used to show that a reader has no good reason for thinking their beliefs are true or, in cases where it might be shown that those beliefs that generate the reader’s target beliefs also amount to a necessary condition of that belief, to show that a reader’s beliefs were false.

Both these possibilities seem to represent legitimate uses of the kind of genealogical method Gersonides’s espouses. Where, then, does Spinoza go wrong? The key point here is in Spinoza’s failure to recognise that if he is to establish his reader’s beliefs as false, he needs to establish something like P3. That is, he needs to show not only that those ideas that have generated his reader’s views about value are false (i.e., that there are no teleological processes in Nature) but also that such ideas are themselves necessary conditions of the metaethical ideas they give rise to. However, at no point does Spinoza try to prove any such thing (indeed, we might doubt whether it could be proved). Instead, Spinoza goes directly from arguing that his contemporaries’ beliefs about teleological processes in Nature are false to arguing that, as such, so are those metaethical prejudices they give rise to – a move which, following the schema above, is invalid.

At this point, we might pause for a moment. Up until this point we have generally assumed that in seeking to “remove” and “expose” his contemporaries’ metaethical beliefs, Spinoza is attempting to refute them. This follows an accepted tradition in the secondary literature.³¹ However, in light of the analysis above, we might now start to question this assumption. After all, Spinoza never explicitly says that he wants to prove that those axiological beliefs he targets are false. Rather he only claims to want to “remove” them from the minds of his adherents – in marked contrast to his stated desire to “falsify” those generative ideas upon which such prejudices depend (i.e., the idea that there are teleological processes in Nature) (*EIAppendix*). Following this line of thought, then, one could argue that rather than seeking to *refute* his contemporaries’ axiology through his genealogical argument, Spinoza’s intention was only to undermine his readers’ confidence in such views, to “remove” his contemporaries’ misconceptions by revealing to them that they have no good reason for believing them to be true? In turn, we might then think that Spinoza’s failure to establish something like P3 is not a failure on *Spinoza’s* part (e.g. to understand the limitations of the genealogical method) but as a signal that *we* have not understood the aim of his argument as well as we might.

This is a hugely appealing reading of *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface*, one which seemingly saves Spinoza from error and thereby allows for a more ‘charitable’ reading of the text. Regrettably, however, such an interpretation runs counter to the available evidence. As remarked earlier, Spinoza clearly thinks that, in general, genealogical modes of argument can reveal a belief to be false. As he writes about the “prejudice” that Nature does act for the sake of an end: “I believe I have already sufficiently established [its falsity] [...] [in part] by the foundations and causes from which I have shown this prejudice to have had its origin”. Moreover, while Spinoza’s talk of “removal” and “exposure” is ambiguous, there seems good reason to think that, like his attack on the prejudice that Nature acts for the sake of an end, he took his argument against “the foundations and causes” from which he believes he has shown the prejudice to originate (i.e., precise the view that “Nature acts for the sake of an end”), to sufficiently establish that such views are false. Here we need only look to how Spinoza comes to use this proof of as a way of motivating his own account of value (a move I discuss further in a moment). We are forced to conclude, then, that Spinoza’s critique of his contemporaries’ axiology is fundamentally flawed. If we are right in thinking – which seems reasonable – that the aim of Spinoza’s critique is to refute his contemporaries’ axiological positions, we must also conclude that his choice of argumentative strategy in service of that aim is mistaken and that his (apparent) view that such beliefs are false remains unjustified.

What are the implications of this error? On the one hand, one might argue that while Spinoza’s failure to prove the falsity of his readership’s theory of value represents a flaw in his *practical* project in the *Ethics* (say, to “emend” the intellects of his contemporaries), it does not really impact on his wider, *philosophical* project (say, to reveal to us our “highest blessedness”). After all, Spinoza could simply assert his own ‘positive’ account of good and bad, perfection and imperfection, independently of his corresponding critique – as Hobbes does with regards to his conception of value.³² Moreover, even if the analysis presented here shows that Spinoza does not do enough to refute his contemporaries’ position, it could still be read as seriously undermining at least one of the primary reasons why his contemporaries believed such an axiology to be true (that is, assuming Spinoza’s analysis of the roots of his contemporaries metaethics is right).

The problem here, though, is that while it is true that Spinoza *could* have asserted his own positive account of value, irrespective of his critique of his contemporaries’ axiology, in the text itself, it is equally clear that Spinoza makes that refutation the cornerstone and starting premise of his entire ethical project. As mentioned above, in *EIVPreface*, Spinoza concludes that good and bad, perfection and imperfection, are only “modes of thinking”, precisely on the grounds that they are not, as he takes his contemporaries to claim, something “positive in things, considered in themselves”, explicitly deploying the law of the excluded middle. *By Spinoza’s own lights*, then, the error he makes in his critique of his contemporaries’ axiology ultimately undermines his entire ethical project. Without a functioning critique, all the further claims that he goes on to make about the nature of good and bad as “notions that we are accustomed to feign”, as well as all the normative ethics he builds on top of *those* claims, begin to look unjustified. Although it stretches the point a bit, we might even say that such this error has the potential to rob Spinoza of his own motivation to pursue moral philosophy in the first place. In his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza claims (albeit perhaps somewhat rhetorically) that it was only *after* he saw “that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves” – the axiological belief he takes to be common currency among his contemporaries – that he “resolved at last to try and find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected” (TIE, §1). In undermining his critique, then, the flaw also undermines his resolution, “to try and find out whether there was anything which would be the true good”. Both in regard to this point and the one immediately preceding it, then, we might say that this is not the argument Spinoza *needs* to make, nor perhaps, the argument he *ought* to make. However, it is undoubtedly the argument that he *does* make.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to elucidate Spinoza’s critique of his contemporaries’ axiology, as set out in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface*. I have argued that Spinoza’s argumentative strategy in these passages is best characterised as a genealogical analysis. The benefit of this characterisation is that it allows us to appreciate both the structure of Spinoza’s argument and its intellectual history. However, it also

lays bare a significant flaw in his reasoning: namely, his failure to see that an argument showing a redundancy in the reasons for which a person believes in *p* is not sufficient to show that *p* is false. As I have shown, this flaw is deep, difficult to avoid and has significant implications for his later meta- and normative ethics. However, by emphasising the intellectual history of Spinoza's strategy in *EIAppendix* and *EIVPreface*, I hope I have also shown that there may be as much of *historical* interest in the origins of erroneous views and ancestries of bad arguments as in the development of robust theory and the march of philosophical progress (if, indeed, we think there is such a march).

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Abbreviations:

- E - *The Ethics* in Curley, E., (trans. and ed.) *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Vol.1.* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- TIE - *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in Curley, E., (trans. and ed.) *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Vol. 1.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985
- TTP - *Theologico-Political Treatise* in Silverthorne, M., and Israel, J. (trans.) *Spinoza: Theological-Political Treatise.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- CSM - John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Trans.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes.* 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

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Endnotes:

¹ For all references to the *Ethics*, I adopt the traditional shorthand whereby (e.g.) EIIp7s indicates the *scholium* to proposition 7 of Book II of the *Ethics*. The letter abbreviations are: a = axiom, c = corollary, d = demonstration, def = definition, p = proposition, s = *scholium*.

² Deleuze, 'Spinoza and the three "ethics"', 27-30.

³ Sasso, 'Discours et non-discours de l'Ethique'

⁴ Deleuze, 'Spinoza and the three "ethics"', 27-30.

⁵ See, e.g. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*; Curley, 'Spinoza's Moral Philosophy'; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*; Frankena, 'Spinoza's 'New Morality''; Frankena, 'Spinoza on the knowledge of good and evil'; Mattern, 'Spinoza and Ethical Subjectivism'; Garrett D., 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory'; Jarrett, 'Spinoza on the Relativity of Good and Evil'; Miller, 'Spinoza's Axiology'; Nadler, *Spinoza's 'Ethics': An Introduction*;

LeBuffe, 'Spinoza's Normative Ethics'; Youpa, 'Rationalist Moral Philosophy'; Youpa, 'Spinoza's Theories of Value'; Kisner, 'Perfection and Desire: Spinoza on the Good'.

⁶ ANONYMOUS.

⁷ For an excellent recent review of a wide range of modern genealogical arguments, see Srinivasan, 'The Archimedean Urge'.

⁸ Cf. Srinivasan, 'The Archimedean Urge'.

⁹ In this way, Spinoza's argument looks akin what Srinivasan would refer to as an argument from explanatory inertness. See Srinivasan, 'The Archimedean Urge'.

¹⁰ Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 20-1.

¹¹ For further discussion on the similarities and difference between these writers' treatment of the genealogical method, see Hoy, 'Nietzsche, Hume and the Genealogical Method'.

¹² Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 22.

¹³ Ravven, 'Spinoza's Rupture with Tradition', 197.

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book II, 358-60.

¹⁵ Xenophanes, 'Fragments', fragments 5-6. My thanks to Amia Srinivasan for bringing my attention to this example.

¹⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 12.

¹⁷ Nadler, 'The Jewish Spinoza'.

¹⁸ Roth, *Spinoza*, 224.

¹⁹ Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 285.

²⁰ Nadler, 'The Jewish Spinoza'.

²¹ Cf. James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, 169.

²² Harvey, 'Gersonides and Spinoza on Conatus'.

²³ Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 134-143.

²⁴ Feldman, *Gersonides: Judaism within the Limits of Reason*, 25-27.

²⁵ Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord*, 102-3.

²⁶ Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*.

²⁷ Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*.

²⁸ e.g. Garrett A., *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*; Ravven and Goodman, *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*; Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy*; Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*; Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides*; Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*; Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*.

²⁹ e.g. van Bunge, *Spinoza Past and Present*; van Bunge, 'Spinoza's Jewish identity and the use of context'.

³⁰ Some modern philosophers might demure at the point, arguing perhaps that it is rationally permissible for Sarah to both (a) believe that God caused her to regain her sight and (b) believe that her belief that God caused her to regain her sight is unjustified. See, for example, Weatherson, 'Do Judgments Screen Evidence?'. See discussion in Srinivasan, 'The Archimedean Urge'.

³¹ Garrett, 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory', 287-8; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 290.

³² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 6; Hobbes, *De Homine*, ch. XI, 4, 47