Abstract: “Aristotle and Spinoza’s Views on Pleasure”

By Brandon Smith

My research for this internship was to examine the ethical role of pleasure in Aristotle and Benedict de Spinoza’s respective philosophies. The motivation behind the project is largely based on my interest in Spinoza, a seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, and his relation to the ethical views of Ancient Greek philosophy, namely Aristotelian and Hellenistic thought. This fall I will be starting an M.A. in Philosophy, with the intention of doing a comparative analysis of the ethical role of pleasure in the achievement of the good life, as outlined by Aristotle, Epicurus and Spinoza. The purpose of this summer research project was then to give me the opportunity and encouragement to begin my preparation for my larger grad project now, by building a comparative ethical foundation on Aristotle and Spinoza, subsequently allowing me to evaluate the legitimacy of my future grad research and to refine my approach to it.

The results of my research have revealed quite a number of similarities between these philosophers, despite being distanced by time and culture. Both ultimately understand pleasure as an indicator of self-actualization or self-empowerment. Overall, insofar as pleasure represents this actualization, it is deemed good in itself and a necessary component of the good life. However, Aristotle and Spinoza concede that pleasure can be excessive, leading to pain and thus the frustration of one’s self-actualization; this is why it is important to cultivate only pleasures that are in harmony with reason, i.e. those that are moderate and thus proper to one’s nature or self.

There are, however, significant differences between them. Aristotle treats bodily and mental pleasures as distinct, with mental pleasures superior to those of the body. Additionally, Aristotle argues some pleasures are inherently bad insofar as they are derived from base characteristics and desires. Spinoza, conversely, views bodily and mental pleasure as coextensive in the sense that they are two different (but ontologically identical) ways of understanding one’s state of self-empowerment. Furthermore, Spinoza asserts that all particular pleasures are good when their zone of benefit or true nature as a pleasure is adequately understood.

In conclusion, I would say pragmatically that there is sufficient ethical agreement between them, meaning Aristotelians and Spinozists would be able to cohabitate and contribute to each other’s pleasurable well-being, because the nature of their disagreement is largely based on metaphysical and epistemological foundations than ethical ones. The benefit of Aristotle is his emphasis on habituation of the characteristics necessary to the good life (i.e. being disposed to take pleasure in the things conducive to one’s flourishing), and the advantage of Spinoza is that his psychological determinism (i.e. rejection of free will) and metaphysical necessitarianism better equip one to combat inappropriate pleasures and pain in general.