

In the 4th century BC, Aristotle argued that “Every [human] art and every method, and in like manner every action and deliberate choice, appear to aspire after a certain good.”¹ In the 13th century AD, Thomas Aquinas argued that “Man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions.”² Yet, in the 17th century AD, Francis Bacon complained that human learning was suppressed by “errors which have their foundation in commonly received notions.”³ This frustration appears to have been shared by Spinoza a generation later, who objected to what he considered to be a number of “prejudices” in human thought and method. A source of the errors Spinoza had in mind was that notion, taught by Aristotle and Aquinas, that God should be assumed to be like man, the “master of His actions”, “[aspiring] after a certain good” in all that He does.

In the Appendix of his *Ethics*, Spinoza sought to: (1) explain why men accept this view of God; (2) prove that it is false, and, most importantly, (3) show how it leads to prejudices that negatively affect human happiness. He addresses the first point showing that men accept this view of God because, as Aristotle argued, they act for desired ends. He then shows that this is false because, unlike man, God does not act by free will, but by a natural necessity. The third point is most interesting.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 1.

² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 1, Art. 1.

³ Bacon, *Novum Organum*. Book I, Aphorism 12.

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates proved that it will not do to define the good as "that which the gods love", because the gods are known to disagree, even war against one another. Spinoza argues that when men imagine that God acts like them, with free will, and orders all external actions for their happiness, they run into a similar problem. He provides the following proverb:

"So many men, so many minds;
everyone is wise in his own way;
brains differ as completely as palates."

Thus, when man is assumed to be the measure of all things, and when God is imagined to operate as men do, man does not move from confusion to certainty, but circles back to confusion, just as Euthyphro did. For, when assuming that God acts intentionally and freely for the benefit of man, it is assumed that man shares one common notion of "the good". Aristotle, however, taught that while men agree that the highest good is "happiness", they disagree on what happiness consists of. The vulgar, he argued, consider pleasure to be happiness; the political, honor; the contemplative, wisdom. If man's judgment of the highest end is used to interpret Nature, the experiences of men will have no clear explanation.

This, Spinoza explained, leaves men unable to explain not only the imperfections and evils in the world, but also the apparent goods, and does nothing to bring man nearer to happiness. The solution to this confusion is not to continue searching for an interpretation of God's intention in the affairs of the world, but to abandon this pursuit altogether and reject the assumption that there

is any such intention. God, Spinoza argued, is not an anthropomorphous Spirit directing material things for man's pleasure, but Nature itself, acting "solely by the necessity of his own nature."

While Bacon might not agree on all points with Spinoza, it is clear that in the 17th century, an effort was being made to abandon the philosophical and religious assumptions on which the Aristotelean and Scholastic traditions had been constructed.