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SPINOZA AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF JOY

Abstract:

The focus of this presentation is twofold. First, I propose to examine the relationship between Spinoza and the phenomenological tradition, and then I shall attempt to offer a Spinoza-inspired phenomenological account of the experience of joy. On the first point, two recent works can be taken as suggesting that the relation between Spinoza's philosophy and phenomenology is an entirely antithetical one. In *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* (2014), Knox Peden shows how the history of French rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze can be read as an attempt to utilize Spinoza in a defense against phenomenology. Then, in *Out of Control: Confrontations between Spinoza and Levinas* (2016), Richard Cohen presents a debate between the phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas and the supposedly scientific Spinoza, in which the two are viewed as complete antipodes. For Cohen, Levinas presents us with a radical phenomenologically grounded ethics, whereas Spinoza expresses a dehumanizing philosophy of science. With regards to Peden's work, I shall argue that while it may be fair to explain how certain "Spinozisms" are contrary to phenomenology, this does not establish the stronger claim that Spinoza's philosophy itself is antithetical to phenomenology. With regards to Cohen's work, I shall offer a corrective to the exaggerated and inadequate account of Spinoza as a hyper-rationalist by maintaining that a more complete account of Spinoza's view involving the embodied ethical emotions brings Levinas and Spinoza much closer together with regards to the primacy of ethics. After removing these problematic contrary views, I shall offer positive reasons for holding that Spinoza's philosophy may be fruitfully considered in relation to phenomenology. Here, the question is not "Was Spinoza a phenomenologist?" but rather "What would a Spinozist phenomenology look like?" and I shall suggest that Spinoza's emphasis on the role of intuition, as well as his understanding of embodied rationality and human affectivity, provide interesting possibilities. More specifically, I shall argue that Spinoza presents readers with a practical philosophy of life that is well attuned to lived human experience, such that the ultimate goal of human existence is joy or beatitude, which is not to be found in some otherworldly state, but rather can only be achieved as a lived experience through the activity of love.

Keywords:

Spinoza, phenomenology, joy, love, emotion, ethics