

Spinoza and Buddhism

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Goals of Talk

- Articulate parallels
- Identify divergences
- Translate between concepts
- Place the two systems within an overall map of *elements of a < ... > way of life*
 - < ... > is: spiritual, happy, good ... pick your term

My Lack of Qualifications

- I'm not a member of any Buddhist sect
- I do not practice formal meditation
- I've never received training in Buddhist meditation
- I've almost no knowledge of any form of Buddhism other than Zen

Why I'm Talking about This

- I do have a little knowledge about Zen
- What little I have has been life altering
- I find the principles — techniques — to be essential tools for surviving in this world
- My understanding of Zen is that it is really about practice, not theory
 - Probably true for all Buddhism
- I find the parallels with Spinoza to be delightful and inspiring

Parallels that I See

- Oneness / indivisibility
- Acceptance / alignment
- Reality vs. illusion
- Sources of suffering
- Keys to happiness
- Role of compassion

Divergences that I See

- G-d
- Reason vs. experience
- Societal context
- Prescriptive orientation (?)

Oneness

- Spinoza speaks of G-d as substance
 - Denies the independent existence of anything else
 - Affirms the greater reality of unity over division
- Buddhism speaks of the unreality of individuals

Oneness (cont'd)

Continuum vs. Quanta

- Buddhism speaks of quantized experience
- Spinoza speaks of experiencing the unity of substance
 - Connection with his Jewish background (“G-d is one”)
- Is there a contradiction here?
 - Does Zen, with its Daoist roots, diverge from other forms of Buddhism in recognizing unity?
 - Or are unity and quantum experience consistent? (Unity = no individuals; quanta = the way we perceive.)

Acceptance / Alignment

- This is the prominent similarity
- The good life, the road to happiness (pick your term) lies in aligning oneself with what *is*
- Spinoza: determinism
 - Don't rail against fate
 - See the larger (largest) picture
 - See yourself as part of that
- Buddhism: let go of desires
 - No desire = no suffering
 - Lose yourself

Acceptance (cont'd)

Alignment with What?

- Spinoza emphasizes G-d as primary actor
- Buddhism doesn't talk of a primary actor
- There is a difference in flavor between aligning oneself with G-d and losing oneself
- Spinoza emphasizes substance while Buddhism talks of fleeting phenomena and the unreality of everything
- Spinoza talks more of *being*, Buddhism more of *nothingness*

Reality vs. Illusion

- Spinoza talks about the less-than-full reality of mere parts or aspects of G-d (things, phenomena)
 - Traces of Platonism?
- Buddhism talks about the unreality of existence
 - Emphasis is on perception
 - Suggestions of solipsism?

Sources of Suffering

- Spinoza traces suffering to the perception of threat to one's existence
 - The remedy is to perceive one's existence within its larger context of G-d
- Buddhism attributes suffering to desire
 - The remedy is to let go of desires
- Both cures involve letting go of self

Sources of Suffering (cont'd)

Kinds of Desire

- Spinoza seems to be talking about a particular desire, namely the desire to persist
 - Nietzsche's extension of this seems quite unlike Buddhist thought
- There is also the desire to dissolve (cf. Freud), but Spinoza seems to view this as the desire to become one with G-d, hence a good thing, leading to happiness
- The strict Buddhist would say that this too — as a desire — leads to suffering
 - But what about the desire for happiness, which leads one to adopt a Buddhist way of life?

Keys to Happiness

- Buddhism: let go of desire
- Spinoza: temper your desires
 - We're here, we're desirous, deal with it
 - There's an aspect of un-perfectionism in Spinoza, perhaps a legacy of his Jewish roots or of the humanist cultural context in which he lived

Compassion

- Besides the emphasis on unity, this is the other “big” similarity (at the opposite end of the active-passive spectrum!)
- Buddhism advocates compassion as a recognition of the suffering of living beings
- Spinoza advocates kindness as a form of being in G-d
 - Again a Jewish legacy?
- In both, there seems to be a sense of wonder and delight in creation
 - The strict Buddhist might deny this (delight is still a bond)

Compassion (cont'd)

(Role of Ethical Behavior)

- The different orientations suggest different paths of life, Spinoza's being more prescriptively ethical
- In both, however, the goal is to diminish suffering across-the-board (not just oneself, which doesn't really exist anyway)
- The inevitable tension between acceptance and active compassion is symbolized in (some) Buddhism through the notion of a Bodhisattva: one who forsakes Nibbana in order to help relieve the suffering of others

Summary

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