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A Note on Spinoza's Contribution to Systemic Therapy

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Writing 300 years ago the philosopher Spinoza anticipated some of the fundamental principles of systemic therapy, notably a respect for the remorseless logic of natural systems and the value of positive connotation. In the debate about the ethics of paradoxical methods, he offers a logical, and humble, defense.

Spinoza wanted to show that the universe is necessarily and logically the way it is and that all parts of it, including ourselves, are linked together in support of this necessity. He put his profoundly original ideas down in a rather impersonal and indigestible form, with propositions and proofs, like a mathematical treatise. That is why he is not more widely read and known, since the ideas themselves, particularly on freedom, are more relevant to life and work than those found in most formal philosophical systems. For Spinoza, being "free" is not so much the liberty to do what one likes regardless of nature, but is rather the consequence of accepting one's necessary place in it. "Those who believe that they ... act in any way from the free decision of their minds do but dream with their eyes open" (2, p. 135). That was a shocking thing to say because it opposed the prevailing view of man as a superior being with a rational mind that gives him power over himself and other beings.

Spinoza's dismissal of the Cartesian view that the mind has absolute power over its actions is uncharacteristically scornful. Descartes had proposed that the pineal gland in the centre of the brain connects the mind and the body, effectively translating will into action.

> Such is the doctrine of this illustrious philosopher (in so far as I gather it from his own words): it is one which had it been less ingenious I could hardly believe to have proceeded from so great a man. Indeed I am lost in wonder that a philosopher who had stoutly asserted that he would draw no conclusions which do not follow from self-evident premises, and would affirm nothing which he did not clearly and distinctly perceive, and who had so often taken to task the scholastics for wishing to explain obscurities through occult qualities, could maintain a hypothesis beside which occult qualities are commonplace. [3, p. 246]

Though the pineal gland has become something of a curiosity, Descartes' philosophy of mind became the dominant tradition in European thought, and the earlier notion, which Spinoza had refined, of the natural universe as an organic whole was rejected as too insulting to modern rationality and not in keeping with scientific and industrial progress. As Wilden (7) observes, however, the old ideas were never quite suppressed and have been kept alive and developed by such diverse minds as Leibniz, Malthus, Wallace, Claude Bernard, Marx, and Bateson. I am proposing that Spinoza has an important and early place in that submerged ideology, which is now surfacing again in contemporary thought under the general heading of cybernetics. His omission from the list is probably owing to the rather rigid, even obsessional, way in which the argument is developed. "I shall consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner as though I were concerned with lines, planes, and solids" (3, p. 129). That decision must have lost him many potential readers, though there are some fine passages buried in the text. For example:

> But human power is extremely limited and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes: we have not therefore an absolute power of shaping to our use those things that are without us ... for in so far as we are intelligent beings we cannot desire anything save that which is necessary nor yield absolute aquiescence to anything save to that which is true; wherefore in so far as we have a right understanding of these things, the endeavour of the better part of ourselves is in harmony with the order of nature as a whole." [3, p. 242]

The better part of ourselves to which he refers is "that part of our nature which is defined by intelligence," and he sees in it our only chance of real freedom, which, in his definition, becomes more an exercise of understanding and reflection of things as they must be than the capacity to make them different.

This may sound familiar to readers of Zen writings and stories and also to those family therapists who have found themselves wondering about their own state of mind when at work, particularly in pursuit of "neutrality" (6). Spinoza's only contact with therapy of any kind was probably with the doctors who treated the tuberculosis that killed him at the age of 44 in 1677, but his attitude of uncynical pessimism is far ahead of its time. When the other philosophers were inviting us to admire even more than before our wonderful intellect and its power over nature, Spinoza was saying that we would be wiser to admire nature instead. His principal contribution, then, is the assault on the common notion of free will, in which

the mind is supreme and "drives" the body, which obeys its commands. "Mind and body are one and the same thing" (3, p. 131), he pronounces, and goes on to acknowledge that this is hard to believe because people are so convinced of the reality of free will, even though nobody knows how it works and the evidence is, if anything, to the contrary. "Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason that men believe themselves to be free simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby these actions are determined" (3, p. 134). Determinism as rigid as this is hard to take because it seems to give us no choice at all. But Spinoza leaves room for choice in the sense that you can choose to pay attention to the necessities of Nature, and so attain freedom, or choose not to, so remaining bound in ignorance.

Systemic therapy, particularly as described and practiced by Selvini-Palazzoli *et al.* in Milan (5), is a fiercely disciplined attempt to view the family in the same manner as Spinoza urges us to view Nature, that is, as a system that, when understood clearly, must be accepted as it is. "The mind has greater power over the emotions and is less subject thereto in so far as it understands all things as necessary" (3, p. 250). Allowing for the passages of time and of translation, these words of Spinoza's could stand as the systemic therapist's motto. In the typical session there are two distinct parts, the first consisting of a series of questions designed to elicit information about the family. The second, following a break during which the conductor of the interview discusses the case with colleagues who have been observing the session through a screen, consists of a prescription or message that is given to the family, who then leave. Though the Milan group have subsequently wondered whether the final intervention is really necessary for therapy to be effective (6), it is this part that usually attracts the most interest from other family therapists, because it often has a dramatic effect on the family, as if they had been stunned by it. Observers unfamiliar with the method are sometimes also surprised, particularly by the way in which the presenting problem and the interaction around it are redefined as desirable and therefore not to be abandoned. Much is made of the paradoxical and playful elements in the prescription. Some fear that it is mischievous and unethical to instruct people to continue their disturbed behavior, because that seems to require further suffering which should, they imply, be unnecessary now that help is at hand. Others scrutinize the paradoxical aspect should the effective ingredient of this approach to be found there. The principal task is actually neither to be paradoxical nor playful but to discover and accept the family as it is, paying particular attention to the function of the symptom. To propose that it be maintained for the time being is simply the most effective way of communicating that attitude.[1] *The therapists temporarily abandon any desire to change the family.* It is this exclusive attention to what is necessary in the system that distinguishes the Milan method from other therapies and lends such authority and dignity to its practitioners. The therapists accept their own injunction to expect no change "for the time being" and believe that what they are saying is quite correct—namely, that at the time of speaking that is precisely how the family must operate, and in no other way. I am suggesting that the ethical propositions of Spinoza (who wanted to provide a basic discipline for all science, particularly Education, Medicine, and Mechanics, (3, p. 7) are a first step in an ethics of systemic therapy. Consider the following passage, in which he argues at some length that distress is diminished by seeing that it is "natural and necessary" and that loss could not be avoided.

> For we see, the pain arising from the loss of any good is mitigated as soon as the man who lost it perceives that it could not by any means have been preserved. So also we see that no-one pities an infant because it cannot speak, walk, or reason or lastly because it passes so many years, as it were, in unconsciousness. Whereas if most people were born full-grown and only one here and there an infant, everyone would pity the infants; because infancy would not then be looked on as a state *natural and necessary,* but as a fault or delinquency in Nature; and we may note several other instances of the same sort. (Italics mine.) [2, p. 250]

By reframing a loss as inevitable and a pitiable state as "natural and necessary," Spinoza has touched upon one of the central disciplines of systemic therapy, which is always to be attentive to the necessities in the system as it presents itself.[2] This is paradoxical only because the family is expecting to be told that their problem is not necessary and can therefore be removed. The family in therapy must always be seen as a natural (i.e., necessary) system, however disordered or perverse. Accept anything less and the therapist will lose sight of the function of the symptom and will begin to think that it is "unnatural" ("a fault or delinquency in Nature"). Then he or she will be paralyzed by it just as the family is.

Talking of the "true and final good," Spinoza says that it is characterized by "the knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature" (3, p. 6). In his final work, *Mind and Nature, A Necessary Unity,* Gregory Bateson expresses the same view: "A sort of freedom comes from recognizing what is necessarily so. After that is recognized, comes a knowledge of how to act" (1, p. 219). The Milan group acknowledge their debt to Bateson (6, Chapter 1), whose moral and intellectual assault on the cause-and-effect logic of Cartesian dualism is as urgent now as it was in Spinoza's time. There are many striking parallels between the two thinkers. Compare Bateson's note, "...under a big enough macroscope no idea can be wrong, no purpose destructive, no dissection misleading" (1, p. 207), with Spinoza's assertion that

> nothing comes to pass in nature which can be set down to a flaw therein: for nature is always the same, and everywhere one and the same in her efficacy and power of action ...so that there should be one and the same method

> of understanding the nature of all things whatsoever, namely, through nature's universal laws and rules. Thus the passions of hatred, anger, envy and so on, considered in themselves, follow from this same necessity and efficacy of nature; they answer to certain definite causes through which they are understood and possess certain properties as worthy of being known as the properties of anything else whereof the contemplation in itself affords us delight. [3, p. 129]

Although Bateson's epistemology reflects a much more informed and evolutionary view of nature, he shares with Spinoza an impatient contempt for muddled thinking and mystification and a deep respect for the coherence of natural systems (see Dell, 2). Without such rigor, the systemic view, particularly the use of positive connotation, would amount to little more than a weak and indiscriminate approval of anything that the therapist happens to notice. On the contrary, the idea is to notice the specific and essentially secret contribution that the presenting problems make to the family's survival. A therapist will only persist in the search for these inscrutable connections if he or she is convinced that Cartesian logic is inadequate for the purpose, because such logic can only lead to the conclusion that the cause of the problem is unknown. "Most writers on the emotions and on human conduct...attribute human infirmities and fickleness, not to the power of nature in general, but to some mysterious flaw in the nature of man which accordingly they bemoan, deride, despise, or as usually happens, abuse" (3, p. 128). Such an attitude, Spinoza might well have added, could only hinder the family therapist's task. He did offer the following advice:

> For he who desires to aid his fellows either in word or deed, so that they may together enjoy the highest good, he, I say will before all things strive to win them over with love; not to draw them into admiration, so that a system may be called after his name, nor to give any cause for envy. Further in his conversation he will shrink from talking of men's faults, and will be careful to speak but sparingly of human infirmity; but he will dwell at length on human virtue or power and the way whereby it may be perfected. [3, p. 240]

This gives a fair account of the mental and moral effort required by the therapist when making a serious positive comment to the members of the family about what they are doing for each other. Even the most appalling and destructive actions are seen by the systemic therapist as vital to the family's organization. The personal qualities needed to put this across to the family sincerely and effectively are rarely discussed in the literature, though Selvini-Palazzoli *et al.* (5) have stressed that "if the method is correct, no charisma whatsoever is needed," (p. 11), which is the point also made by the philosopher ("not to draw them into admiration ...." etc.).**[3]**

Spinoza lived in Holland, in quiet solitude, shunning publicity and fame. Much of his work, which was written in Latin, was published anonymously, the rest posthumously, yet he was well enough known to be regarded as a heretic and was excommunicated by the Jewish community. His attitude to the world, both in his life and in his writings, was like that of a therapist who wishes to be as self-effacing as possible. Hampshire (4) says "Spinoza's writing ...can always be recognized by a certain grave remorselessness of logic, a complete absence of decoration, and a sustained concentration which admits of no concession to the desire to please:...His philosphy is an experiment in impassive rationalism carried to its extreme limits" (pp. 25-26).

Conclusion

Spinoza's ethics, a radical development of medieval scholasticism and Jewish theology, encourage the modern clinician not to compete with the heroism of the family and its members but to admire it as a manifestation of natural necessity, and to say so. All the activity of systemic therapy is directed to this end, not toward change. *In that* sense, therapists do best when they do least.

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[1]A family is, after all, an organization for doing things, and not for contemplation, and is more appropriately addressed by an instruction than by an observation.

[2]A similar kind of activity on the part of the therapist is called "hypothesizing" by Selvini-Palazzoli *et al*. (6).

[3]Nor are systemic therapists required to be saints. Attractive qualities are in general a disadvantage in this work, which exploits, on the contrary, the therapist's capacity to stay out of personal encounters such as feeling desperately sorry for, or getting into an argument with, an individual client. The successful systemic therapist as a person is oddly uninteresting to the family and appears more as an agent of information exchange, a polite functionary.