

# **The value of benevolence: Spinoza and perfectionism**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines Spinoza's claim that rational benevolence is crucial to human well-being ('the rational benevolence claim'). According to Spinoza, rational benevolence is rational in two senses. First, it involves using reason to guide benevolent actions. Second, it involves the promotion of the rationality of other people. In order to assess the rational benevolence claim, we need to know what human well-being is. Spinoza holds that well-being consists in the perfection of human nature. Aristotle and the Stoics are the most illustrious proponents of perfectionism. However, their respective accounts have been criticised so severely that many have concluded that perfectionism about well-being is implausible.

This thesis argues that Spinoza's perfectionism avoids the traditional objections to the accounts of Aristotle and the Stoics. Nevertheless, Spinoza's own account, particularly his doctrine of agreement in nature, which underpins his rational benevolence claim, has attracted criticism. The thesis defends the rational benevolence claim in the following ways. First, the thesis shows that Spinoza avoids the traditional objections to perfectionism. Second, the thesis argues that there are available replies to the objections to Spinoza's doctrine of agreement in nature.

## **Thesis declaration**

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## Abbreviations

### Spinoza

E	<i>Ethics</i>
TEI	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>
GMW	<i>God, Man and his Well-being</i>
MT	<i>Metaphysical Thoughts in Parts I and II of Descartes' 'Principles of philosophy'</i>
PT	<i>Political Treatise</i>
TPT	<i>Theological-Political Treatise</i>
L	<i>Letters</i>

### Abbreviations for sections from the *Ethics* of Spinoza

App	appendix
Ax	axiom
C	corollary
Dem	demonstration
D	definition
Lem	lemma
P	proposition
Pref	preface
S	scholium
Post	postulate

### Aristotle

NE	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
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## **The Stoics**

De Fin Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*

DL Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Ep Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*

LS A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*

## **Other**

ELP Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*