THE PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE
Beatitude in Spinoza
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Can philosophy be a source of hope? Today it is common to believe that the answer is no – that providing hope, if it is possible at all, belongs either to the predictive sciences or to religion.

In this exciting and stimulating book, however, Alexander Douglas argues that the philosophy of Spinoza can offer something akin to religious hope. Douglas shows how Spinoza is able, without appealing to belief in any traditional afterlife or supernatural grace, to develop a profound and original theory of how humans can escape from the conditions of death and sin.

Douglas argues that this theory of escape, which Spinoza calls beatitude, is the centrepiece of his entire philosophy, though scholars have often downplayed or ignored it.

One reason for this scholarly neglect might be the difficulty of understanding Spinoza’s theory, which departs from the standard doctrines and methods of Western philosophy. Douglas’s interpretation therefore seeks inspiration beyond the Western tradition, drawing especially on the classical Daoist text Zhuangzi and its commentaries. Here, Douglas argues, surprising resonances with Spinoza’s core ideas can be found, leading to a new way of understanding his strange yet compelling theory of beatitude.

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Beatitude in Spinoza

Alexander Douglas
For my dad, James John Douglas (1946–2022) – always thinking, always hopeful
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PREFACE: THE PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE

Immanuel Kant suggested that the three big questions for philosophy are *what can I know?*, *what ought I to do?*, and *what may I hope?*.\(^1\) Contemporary philosophers continue to pursue the first two – knowledge and guidance. But they seem to have lost their taste for hope. A few years ago, I participated in a workshop, run by the Scots Philosophical Association, to discuss the theme ‘philosophers and the philosophical life’. One after another, academics got up to discuss what role philosophy played in their lives beyond their academic work. Many discussed how philosophical reflection had disciplined and advanced their pursuit of knowledge. Others discussed how moral philosophy had guided them through ethical dilemmas. But all agreed that philosophy did *not* provide them with consolation or hope.\(^2\) Kant was, in their view, wrong to include this in the philosopher’s job description.

They meant, of course, that philosophy *as such* is not in the business of consoling or giving hope. Philosophy often crosses over with the social and natural sciences, and certainly a scientist can give us hope by, for example, giving evidence that the end of poverty, the cure for cancer, or cold fusion is only a few decades away. But the philosopher *qua* philosopher is not qualified to help here. If anything, her role is to pour sceptical cold water on these hopes, reminding us that people have always been certain about predicted triumphs that never came.

Mara van der Lugt’s major study of philosophical pessimism reveals that the optimistic philosophers of eighteenth-century Europe were, almost exclusively, committed to religious notions that would be sneered out of the venue at most academic conferences today.\(^3\) She ends the book by arguing that we should keep a space for pessimism. To insist too bullishly that all is right with the world is, she argues, to risk dismissing or trivialising the suffering of those in dire or genuinely hopeless situations. This makes sense from an atheistic perspective, but it begs the question against the religious optimists who feature in her narrative. In Robert Browning’s
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poem, *Pippa Passes*, the line: ‘all’s right with the world’ follows the line: ‘God’s in his heaven’. The reference to *heaven* is indispensable here. There are no hopeless situations if even somebody whose mortal life is pure misery can look forward to an immortal life of bliss. If that is true, things might in fact be unimaginably wonderful: a finitude of suffering diminishes to nothing against a blessed immortality.

If we rule out the heavenly afterlife, however, then Van der Lugt’s point might appear to stand. A hard-headed, atheistic, naturalistic answer to the question ‘what may I hope?’ must be largely an exercise in what corporate consultants call managing expectations. Technological advancements have yielded a world of material comfort beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors, though they brought their share of injustice as well.\(^4\) We can reasonably hope to build a brighter future, but surely not a perfect one. And how will that help those who have already suffered? The main character of Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* says: ‘No kindly future will ever repair a past as vile as ours’.\(^5\) If this life is all we get, then some people really are dealt lemons, and there is no hope for them – especially if they’re already dead. As for how good the lives of future people might be, the philosopher is not specially qualified to pronounce on that. Philosophers who turn to this question today sometimes follow the current intellectual fashion for erring on the side of doom.

Why, then, should hope be a topic for philosophy? One reason is that our wilder hopes go beyond the scientific evidence on which philosophers have no expertise, and philosophers do have useful things to say about these.\(^6\) Kant, for his part, proposes that our ultimate hope is for happiness, which he defines with characteristic uncompromisingness as ‘the satisfaction of all our desires’.\(^7\) Of all our desires! That’s quite a hope. Kant could imagine this only in ‘a world invisible to us now but hoped for’.\(^8\) In the Christian tradition the name for this sort of total satisfaction is *beatitude*, though that notion has an ancestry reaching far beyond Christianity. It is, however, a notion that our mortal minds struggle to grasp. For that reason alone it is a topic for philosophers. There are deep questions around whether such a thing as beatitude is even conceivable, never mind possible. Most people’s desires are too inconsistent and incomplete for full satisfaction to be even a logical possibility. I desire peace on Earth and to be near all the people I love. But for how long? Not so long as to get bored. But then the end always seems to come too soon. And I want others to get what they want also. But what happens when their desires conflict? Do I want their desires to be different, to avoid this? But different how? And now that I’m considering that, should I want *my own* desires to be different? Human desires need a lot of cleaning up before they can even conceivably be fully satisfied.

And then what would complete satisfaction be like? Would it feel the same as not having any desires at all? Then why not pursue the elimination of desire directly? Or would that be a sort of *emptiness*, whereas beatitude is sometimes characterised as a sort of *fullness* of being? Intuitively, drinking water when you’re thirsty doesn’t seem the same as not being thirsty to begin with. Some people tell us that a cycle of constantly satisfied and renewed desire is a miserable condition, but I’m not so sure. The ghosts in some old stories I read as a child are always hungry and always eating.\(^9\)
In some ways that’s enviable. Have you ever come to the end of an excellent meal and wished you could be hungry again? Could beatitude be, somehow, like that?

No wonder so many, including Kant, consign beatitude to a world or a life beyond this one. The notion is so abstract and alien that hoping for it must involve expecting to learn what it really is only when it arrives, in the new life and the world beyond. I once heard the novelist Marilynne Robinson being asked how she envisaged the blissful afterlife. She replied only: ‘I expect to be impressed’.¹⁰

This book studies the theory of beatitude presented by Spinoza. Unlike Kant and most Christian thinkers, Spinoza believed that beatitude can be achieved in this life.¹¹ Naturally this must involve a very significant transformation of desire, but not its total elimination. This dimension of Spinoza’s philosophy has, to my knowledge, been strangely overlooked. There are countless books on Spinoza’s epistemology and metaphysics – his answers to the question what can I know? There are many, also, on his moral philosophy – his answers to what ought I to do? But to me the most striking and original contribution made by Spinoza is his answer to what may I hope? His answer is beatitude – not in some other life, in a world beyond, but here and now.

This idea would be a striking heresy among my secular, naturalist colleagues. It is not, they would say, the business of philosophy to show us the way to beatitude. The notion of perfect satisfaction is a religious idol, of dubious logical coherence, with no place in the disenchanted universe revealed to us by the natural sciences. My colleagues more committed to Abrahamic faiths would agree with most of this, only holding on to the glimmer of hope for perfect satisfaction in a world unlike this one – a world in which a notion like beatitude could stand a chance of making sense. But that other world is the object of revelation and faith, not philosophy. Spinoza, however, is well known as a heretic, though there has always been a puzzle around what precisely his heresy was.¹² I propose that his greatest heresy was the claim that beatitude can exist in this life and this world, and the path to it can be shown by philosophy.

I am not aware of any other book-length works dedicated specially to the topic of beatitude in Spinoza.¹³ This is strange to me, since showing the way to beatitude is, as far as I can tell, his main philosophical purpose. His theory of beatitude also strikes me as unique in his historical context. It is not, I will argue, Stoic, Platonic, or Aristotelian, since Spinoza is entirely detached from any notion of a teleological natural order, which can’t be said of those schools of philosophy.¹⁴ The term ‘beatitude’ has a Christian flavour to it, and I will argue that Spinoza’s thinking follows the general pattern of the Judeo-Christian story of the Fall and salvation. But his theory of beatitude isn’t ultimately Judeo-Christian either – again, this is not least because it is detached from any ultimate teleological picture. It has some resonances with Sufism and even more, surprisingly, with Daoism – at least with the ideas in the Zhuangzi and some commentaries on it. Could this be a case of convergent evolution? Here it seems important that there also seems to be no strong notion of a teleological natural order in the Zhuangzi. Perhaps Zhuangzi and Spinoza – both intellectual outsiders in their own worlds – meet in the realms beyond conventional wisdom.
I have drawn out the parallel here for the purposes of exposition, although my relation to the Zhuangzi text is that of an interested amateur. I have only a beginner knowledge of Classical Chinese, or 文言文, and my understanding of the Zhuangzi depends heavily on comparing translations and secondary sources. But I am not trying to contribute to Zhuangzi scholarship or engage in ‘comparative philosophy’; I am only using the ideas in the Zhuangzi – or what I think they are – for the purposes of Spinoza exegesis. It is typical of scholars to draw upon other thinkers when trying to explain Spinoza’s thought. Edwin Curley writes, for instance: ‘Just as Joachim saw Spinoza through lenses ground by Hegel and Bradley, so I have seen him through those ground by Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein’. I suppose I see Spinoza through lenses ground by Zhuangzi, or at least by Zhuangzi’s commentators and scholars.

After years of struggling to understand what Spinoza meant by beatitude, I read in Hao Wang about the comparison with the Zhuangzi made by several Chinese scholars. Following this up, I began to feel that through the Zhuangzi I could understand Spinoza in a new way. I aim to convey how I now understand Spinoza by sharing some of the experience of coming to understanding through the Zhuangzi, even if this takes me out of my scholarly comfort zone. Still, I must make it clear that my intended topic here is Spinoza’s theory of beatitude, not Spinoza’s proximity to the Zhuangzi or Daoism.

This book is an essay in the history of philosophy, but this doesn’t rule out its also being an essay in philosophy. Writing of the great Zhuangzi commentator Guo Xiang, Fung Yu-Lan writes: ‘commentators of this kind were really philosophers; commentaries of this kind were really philosophical works having intrinsic value in themselves’. I hope that the same might be said of my commentary on Spinoza’s thoughts concerning beatitude.

Spinoza uses his extraordinary philosophical vision to ground a hope for perfect satisfaction, complete acquiescence of the soul – beginning in this life and continuing into eternity. He offers a hope and a comfort far beyond what the scientist can offer. The scientist can offer at most a reasonable probability that life might be pretty good for most people someday. The philosopher can offer the hope that life can be perfect for the beatific person, and that it is possible – though perhaps exceedingly difficult – to become a beatific person. I will examine how Spinoza proposed to do this.

Notes
2 All except me: I outlined some thoughts that I later published as Alexander Douglas, ‘Philosophy and Hope’, *The Philosopher* 107 (December 2018). Subsequent to writing the draft of this introduction, I was pointed towards Tom Whyman, *Infinitely Full of Hope: Fatherhood and the Future in an Age of Crisis and Disaster* (London: Repeater, 2021). Whyman makes a very similar point to mine about Kant’s three questions, though he goes off in a very different direction after that.


7 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A806 / A834.

8 A reference, perhaps, to Heb 11:1: ‘the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of unseen realities’.

9 They were based on the preta of Buddhist tradition, or 飢鬼 in their Chinese version – though there is wide variation on the questions of whether, and what, such beings can eat.

10 Hope for something beyond our comprehension is not applied only to the afterlife: Lear, *Radical Hope*.

11 An anonymous reviewer pointed out to me that in Eastern Christianity the notion of *theosis* is regularly interpreted as a form of beatitude achievable within this life.


14 Whether it is Epicurean, in some sense, is a question I am less confident in answering. In what follows I will note various points of agreement with Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Nevertheless, the parallels with the Zhuangzi – on the points I want to emphasise – seem stronger to me.

15 Gregory Lee warns against the uncritical use of terms like ‘Chinese’ to refer to a language that predates the idea of China by two millennia Gregory Lee, *China Imagined: From European Fantasy to Spectacular Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Similarly, I have mostly tried to avoid phrases like ‘Chinese philosophy’ for material written before 1911. The attentive reader might notice some exceptions. Sometimes the misleading term is hard to avoid.


This book was partly written during a semester of research leave granted by the School of Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies at the University of St Andrews, made possible by hard work from my wonderful colleagues in the academic and support staff of the school.

Francesco Toto read a chapter of the work and gave me invaluable feedback and guidance.

The whole draft was read by Mara van der Lugt, Susan James, Dimitris Vardoulakis, and Lauren Slater, as well as the anonymous reviewers appointed by Routledge. All of these gave me brilliant and generous suggestions. Without a scholarly community like this, work would be impossible.

I developed the ideas in continuous discussion with my colleagues and friends. I was handed so many ideas from others that it is hard for me to remember where they came from, though I have tried to give at least some clues in the citations. Still, I want to express my gratitude to more people than I can name here. I also felt a constant sense of encouragement and support from this community, through a project that was at times both intellectually and emotionally challenging. A representative but far-from-exhaustive list is (in addition to those named above): Antonio Salgado Borge, Christoph Schuringa, Nicholas Morrow Williams, Emanuele Costa, Kathrine Cuccuru, Steph Marston, John Heyderman, Maria Rosa Antognazza, Theo Verbeek, Yitzhak Melamed, Steven Nadler, Keith Green, Katherine Hawley, Jade Fletcher, Margaret Hampson, Hannah Laurens, David Harmon, Xiao Qi, Hedvig Moncrieff, James Harris, Mogens Laerke, Clare Carlisle, and Anthony Morgan.

I must also thank Michael Della Rocca, Alan Nelson, Susan James, Dimitris Vardoulakis, and James Harris for supporting me in funding and other applications and for their interest in my work. The generosity that these great scholars have shown towards me suggests that the best researchers might be the most selfless, despite the ugly incentives of the current funding structures.
The team at Routledge have been fantastic. I want to thank Tony Bruce and Adam Johnson for persevering with me through many twists and turns. I would also like to thank the production and editorial team for all that they do.

Without my friends, past and present, nothing is possible. Of course my greatest debt will always be to my parents, in all the obvious ways and some less obvious. My mother’s courage and love inspire every word I write. Jasmin and Xavier have for so long been the vital centre of my beautiful life. And Lauren, my fiancée at the time of writing, shows me what beatitude might look like, and draws me nearer to it.