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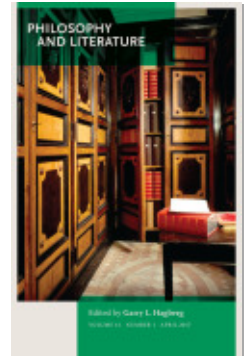
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WHAT GEORGE ELIOT OF *MIDDLEMARCH* COULD HAVE TAUGHT SPINOZA

Abstract. Though George Eliot is often taken to be sympathetic to Spinoza's ethics, in fact between them lies a fundamental difference in moral outlook. Indeed, Eliot provides the basis for a deep criticism of Spinoza's entire approach to ethics. In *Middlemarch* she shows how his abstractionism (and by extension, the abstractionism of philosophy itself) undercuts the role that sympathy ought to play in the good life. This essay reveals how she does this by examining her and Spinoza's differing conceptions of intuition, individuality, and plurality, and the implications of these differences for ethics.

THAT GEORGE ELIOT WAS deeply interested in Spinoza is well known. She translated part of Benedict de Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as early as 1842, and completed a full translation of the *Ethics* by 1856. This might lead one to think that in her novels, Eliot applied the insights of Spinoza by showing them at work in the lives of her characters. Indeed, a number of commentators have made this assumption in depicting the relationship between Eliot and Spinoza.¹ Other commentators have taken Eliot to be extending Spinoza's thought, adapting and transforming it in sympathetic ways.² Unfortunately, however, these views are deeply mistaken.

I say "deeply mistaken" because the differences between Spinoza and Eliot bespeak a fundamental divergence in moral outlook between the two. Far from being an epigone or appropriator of Spinoza, or even a fellow traveler with him, Eliot offers what is in effect a penetrating critique of his entire project, one that offers an alternative view of the

moral life. The purpose of this essay is to show that view and why she holds it.

I

A way to show the differences between Spinoza and Eliot is to start with their ideas about what they both took to be the deepest form of knowledge: intuition. For Spinoza, intuition is “the greatest striving of the mind, and its greatest virtue” (5P25).³ Through intuition one can achieve the highest state a human can be in, which is blessedness. Similarly, what could be called intuition plays a central role in Eliot’s understanding of moral maturity as presented in *Middlemarch*. However, Spinoza and Eliot construe intuition in quite different ways that underwrite a deep difference in moral outlook.

Start with Eliot. In a remarkable passage in *Middlemarch* Eliot writes:

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves. Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier for her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than *to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects*—that he had an equivalent centre of self, when the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.⁴

Eliot here pictures the process of moral maturation in terms of a distinctive kind of thinking, what she refers to as conceiving “with a distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling,” a way of thinking in which ideas are “wrought back to the directness of sense.” What does it mean to conceive in this way?

Eliot gives an example of the difference between knowing something as a matter of reflection and knowing it as a matter of feeling, namely, the moment when Casaubon understands his own mortality:

Here was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace, which is as different from what we call knowing it as the vision of waters upon the earth is different from the delirious vision of the water which cannot be had to cool the burning tongue. When the commonplace “We must all die” transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness “I must die—and soon,” then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel. (*M*, pp. 397–98)

Suddenly, Casaubon “feels the truth” rather than merely “knowing it.” For Eliot, in general we don’t really know a truth until we see the particulars of the world in terms of it; then knowing becomes a kind of “seeing-as,” an orientation or way of being in the world.⁵

Note that Eliot is *not* saying that morality in its highest sense is only a matter of mere feeling or raw emotion. In the passage from *Middlemarch* quoted above, she speaks of *ideas* “wrought back to the directness of sense”; the feelings she describes are infused with thought. Moreover, these feeling/thoughts underwrite not only a way of perceiving but also a way of acting. Seeing-as prompts a certain kind of engagement with the thing perceived in this way: I *see* a person *as* one who is mortal—I don’t *infer* that he is—and I relate spontaneously and directly to him or her in specific ways prompted by my perception—I don’t do so reflectively. My responses *enact* my feeling/thoughts and thereby reveal that I truly understand them.

What of Spinoza? He speaks about intuition in terms as glowing as Eliot speaks of feeling/thoughts “wrought back to the directness of sense”:

I thought this worth the trouble of noting here, in order to show by this example how much the knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive, or knowledge of the third kind (see 2P40S2), can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than the universal knowledge I have called knowledge of the second kind. For although I have shown generally in Part I that all things (and consequently the human mind also) depend on God both for their essence and their existence, nevertheless, that demonstration, though legitimate and put beyond all chance of doubt, still does not affect our mind as much as when this is inferred from the very essence of any singular thing which we say depends on God. (5P36S)

But what does Spinoza mean by intuition? When at 2P40S2 Spinoza first introduces the notion of intuition (knowledge of the third kind)—contrasting it with imagination (the “first kind of knowing”) and with reason (“the second kind of knowing”)—he gives an example of the ways someone might determine the fourth number in a series in which it is meant to stand to the third number as the second does to the first. (The problem given is: 1:2:3:?.) Those who know the answer (namely, 6) via their *imagination* might find the answer by following a rule of thumb without understanding why the rule is as it is; those who arrive at a conclusion via *reason* might derive the answer “from the force of the demonstration of P19 in Book VII of Euclid, namely, from the common property of proportionals”; but those who know *intuitively* that the

answer is 6 are those who not only rationally understand what proportionality is but also “see in one glance” how proportionality operates in this particular case—those who grasp the ratio that the first number has to the second and who see directly that only 6 has exactly this same ratio with the number 3. Spinoza uses “see in one glance” to emphasize that intuition does *not* mean “applies a rule,” but rather that it’s a form of seeing-as in which the rational structure of a particular situation is perceived directly (in this case, in terms of the rules of proportionality, and in other cases in terms of the rational interrelatedness that is the universe). Spinoza’s “see in one glance” is thus very much like Eliot’s “directness of sense”; for both of them the highest form of knowledge involves apprehending a particular problem, idea, situation, or entity in a nondiscursive, immediate, straight-ahead manner of comprehension. For both of them intuition is thus best thought of as a *way of perceiving* individual situations, one that correctly and directly grasps the relationships at work in them.

Of course, according to Eliot and Spinoza, for an act to be one of intuition it not only matters *how* one grasps entities and events in the world but also *what* the content of this grasp is. In other words, in addition to the method by which one engages the world, intuition also includes a specific insight: in the case of Eliot, that one is not the center of a universe focused on one’s own success, and also that others have their own “centers of self” through which they view the world differently than one does; for Spinoza, that one is a mode of God, and all that follows from this fact—including that we are necessarily extended (material) beings—is causally determined to be the way we are, that we each seek to enhance our own powers in the ways that seem available to us, and that the laws that govern our identity and activity are deducible from the basic principles of extension and thought that govern the universe.

So the ideal for Eliot is to have grasped, with the same concrete immediacy that one grasps that physical objects are solid, that others have their own unique center of self, along with the attendant feelings and actions that result in “courageous effort for unselfish ends, in the internal triumph of justice and pity over personal resentment, in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary life.”⁶ And for Spinoza the ideal is to intuit “in one glance” the particular ways each of us is a mode of God, with the accompanying grasp that we are therefore causally determined instances of the rationally unfolding universe.⁷

But at this juncture a yawning gap opens up between Eliot and Spinoza. It arises out of that little word “essence” in Spinoza’s definition of “intuition”—which, the *Ethics* says, “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the formal essence of things” (2P40S2, emphasis added; see also 5P29Dem)—a word that is sometimes overlooked by commentators, but that is absolutely crucial to Spinoza’s entire enterprise.⁸ Understanding what it tells us about the nature of intuition as Spinoza conceives it reveals a fundamental difference with Eliot, a difference that ramifies out into their respective takes on the world and our moral response to it. The objects of intuition for Spinoza are particular *essences*, not particular *people*. What does this mean and why does he say this?

Spinoza says that the essence of a thing “belongs to that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, or can neither be nor be conceived without the thing” (2D2). Thus, the essence of x is that which makes x the x it is, and that makes it possible for us to conceive of an x as an x . It should be obvious that x and the essence of x are not the same thing: some features of x can be removed from x and x nevertheless will remain an x . Abraham Lincoln can grow a beard and still be Lincoln. Indeed, the essence of x can exist even if x itself ceases to exist or has not yet come into being (2P8): that which made Abraham Lincoln Abraham Lincoln is the same no matter whether Lincoln is alive or dead. If one follows Spinoza’s notion that the essence of a body consists in part in the ratio of motion and rest peculiar to it, then one can say that its essence consisting of this ratio exists no matter whether the body itself physically embodies this ratio, just as what might be called the ratios that constitute the essence of a right triangle exist even if all the right triangles were suddenly to disappear from the universe.

The *Ethics* is at great pains to distinguish between singular things, on the one hand, and their essence, on the other (see 1P25). Singular things “are finite and have a determinate existence” (2D7), whereas their essence is eternal: “In God there is necessarily an idea that expresses the essence of this or that human body, under a species of eternity” (5P22). Individual things exist in time and have duration as part of what they are, and are the result of the particular causal process that produced them, whereas essences exist outside of time and are thus independent of duration (this is what Spinoza means by claiming they are “eternal”). Thus, for each thing there exists the idea of that thing in the infinite

intellect of God, an idea that captures and expresses the essence of that thing that makes it the particular thing it is. This idea is real in the sense that it is part of the blueprint of the universe, but its reality doesn't depend on whether the particular thing of which it is an idea actually exists in time. In this way, the idea is eternal in the sense that its reality is outside time altogether. Lincoln's essence existed before Lincoln was born, and continued to exist after he died—indeed, will continue to exist even if time itself were to cease (just as the Pythagorean theorem will continue to be true in all possible worlds, including one in which our universe ceased to exist). Thus: "In God there is necessarily an idea that expresses the essence of this or that human body, under the species of eternity" (5P22).

Why does Spinoza insist that the objects of intuition are *essences* and not particular, singular things? In a proper intuition, intuiters ultimately grasp directly the way a particular is a mode of God, which is to say, they immediately perceive the way a particular entity incarnates the activity of God. At work is Spinoza's explanatory rationalism, in which the connection between God and the modes through which God manifests itself is one of deductive rigor such that the nature of a particular is directly graspable simply from knowing the nature of God. But only the *essence* of a mode can satisfy this epistemic condition, and not the mode itself as a physical thing existing in time, because as an entity in time a mode is not only the result of its own essence but is also the result of the causal activity of countless prior particular things.⁹ That Abraham Lincoln was killed in Ford's Theatre by an assassin instead of being run over by a horse ten years later is not logically deducible or directly graspable from the laws of God or from the essence of Lincoln; the assassination occurred when and how it did as the result of the particular movements of all the modes involved in Lincoln's demise (those of Booth, the events of the Civil War, the development of the modern theater, Mary Todd Lincoln's insistence that Lincoln attend the performance that night, and so on). Thus, to understand the assassination requires discovering not just the general laws that govern the universe, or the way the essences of the individual entities involved instantiate and result from these general laws, but also the particular histories of each and every individual at work in this event.

Such histories, however, are not logically deducible or intuitively graspable from the laws that govern them even though they are instances of such laws, but are knowable only by uncovering the specific causal sequences that produce the particular events and whose descriptions

comprise the narrative accounts of them. Events and entities understood as particulars located in time, and thus as described in terms of their particular temporal histories, therefore elude the net of deductive scientific explanation, and are thus beyond the power of rational intuition as Spinoza conceives it.¹⁰ This is why, for Spinoza, intuition, as the highest form of knowledge, is directed toward essences and not the particular things that embody these essences.

To sum up Eliot and Spinoza's discussion of intuition: both insist that intuition is the highest form of knowing, and that it is essential for living morally, but they have two different conceptions of intuition even though there is some overlap between them. We might call their two different conceptions *intuitive intellection* in the case of Spinoza and *intuitive perception* in the case of Eliot.¹¹ Intuitive *intellection* consists of an immediate rational grasp of the *essence* of a particular. For example, an intuiter would directly see the essence of Abraham Lincoln, and would thus nondiscursively see how his peculiar power of acting is an instance of God's power of acting. In contrast, intuitive *perception* consists of an immediate grasp of a particular in all its materiality and temporality. For example, in the case of intuitive perception, an intuiter would directly apprehend Abraham Lincoln himself, not just his essence, with all of his material and temporal individuality (and, especially for Eliot, the way he perceives the world in his own peculiar way).

II

Spinoza's way of conceiving of intuition has important implications for the way intuition, as he understands it, functions. In the first place, talk of essences contains an inherent tendency to move to a more general level beyond that of a particular essence. After all, the whole point of intuiting an individual essence is to understand its nature, and for this an intuiter needs to know what *sort* of thing an individual object or person is. If it's a circle, then certain relationships characterize it as an instance of the kind it is—relationships that obtain in any and all circles. If Lincoln is a human being, then certain features will distinguish him—features that he will share with any and all beings that are human. What an entity shares in common with other entities of its type is an important part of what makes it intelligible, and thus talk of essences invariably leads to talk of kinds, of types, rather than tokens.¹²

Moreover, the whole chain of logical connections that the *Ethics* claims renders an entity intuitively comprehensible consists of connecting the

essence of this entity to the wider system within which it is situated: from particular mode to modes in general, from modes to attributes such as extension, and from attributes to God or Nature as a whole. Indeed, intuition consists precisely in grasping the way the essence of an entity expresses or embodies this chain of connection, so that it necessarily invokes the system in all its generality even as it focuses on a particular entity (5P29S and 5P30). Ultimately, the whole point of intuition is to grasp in an immediate way that the entire universe is a vast system of differential relationality, an interconnected, causally ordered, and logically determined divine totality. Therefore, intuition of an individual essence ultimately leads to the intellectual love of God (see 5P32 and 5P33).

So the epistemic direction of intuition as conceived by the *Ethics* is the movement from the individual part to the whole that is God, and to see the former is to see it as an instance of, or expression of, the latter. But the upshot is a tendency inherent in intuition as characterized by Spinoza to look beyond the individual essence even as one is attending to it.

The slighting of individuality in the *Ethics* goes much deeper than this, however. By confining intuition to the *essences* of individuals, a Spinozan intuiter would necessarily fail to connect with these individuals themselves in their unique, irreplaceable existence in time (1P24). Think of the aspects of individuals that go beyond that individual's essence: that they are alive at all, when they are born and when they die, their beliefs, their tastes, their native language, the status of their health, the character of their social relations, their height and weight, the particular burdens they face and the choices they make in response to them, and so on. But these and numerous other aspects are what make actual individuals the actual individuals they are. To ignore them is to render actual individuals into abstractions ultimately characterized by their roles in the larger system of which they are a part. In this way, the Spinozan intuiter never really comes to grips directly with the concrete entities around him, but retreats to a realm devoid of the messiness, individuality, and contingency that marks the actual world of temporally embodied beings.¹³

Not surprisingly, this approach has profound implications for the way one conceives the moral life. Intuiting individuals in terms of their essences rather than their concrete particularity undermines the basis for appreciating the specific peculiarities that characterize their individuality and that underlie their differences. Why? Because, as we've seen, talk of essences leads inevitably to talk of what is shared among individuals.

For example, an individual's essence may consist in her being a human being, a female, a person seeking to enhance her powers, the causal outcome of the history of the universe, a mode of God, and so forth; but all of these are features that this individual has in common with others.

Moreover, these essential features abstract from the particularities that mark her as the specific person she is, located in a specific place and time, and who is the product of a unique set of causal factors that make her the specific individual she is. What makes me different from you is, in the first instance, that I live in a particular region of space-time, and you don't; further, I had the particular father and mother I did, with all that they bequeathed me, as did you; and so on. We are the individuals we are in significant part because of properties that do not derive from our essence. Abstracting from these properties obscures both the existence, and also the importance, of differences among individuals.

But this, in turn, undermines the basis for morality as Eliot presents it in *Middlemarch*. Here I am thinking of what she calls sympathy: unless perceptible differences are noticed between you and me, I have no basis to feel sympathy for you in the sense of appreciating and responding with kindness and consideration to the particular needs that you have as the concrete individual you are. Because we are more than mere essences, but are embodied and live within a specific span of time—and because we know that we do—we have the existential problems and challenges that we do, together with the corresponding needs and anxieties that attend to them. Essences don't have a fear of death, a desire to protect what they think they need in order to flourish, aren't buoyed by hopes for those they love, or yearn to be understood and appreciated; individual people do. And because they do, and because they experience these characteristics in their own peculiar ways, they differ one from another, only then becoming possible subjects of sympathy. When I know that you are in pain in the particular way you suffer pain, my heart goes out to you. If you were essentially like me, then my feeling for you would in fact not be sympathy but a type of self-feeling. Without the recognition of difference there is no basis for sympathy.

It is thus no accident that sympathy plays almost no role in the good life as portrayed in the *Ethics*—it's mentioned only once, at 3P15.¹⁴ More telling, the account of sympathy found in that section is seriously misconceived. There we are told that sympathy occurs when some event or person resembles an event that we ourselves have experienced, and that once caused us pleasure or pain; sympathy is our original pleasure rekindled by similar causes. But this means that *likeness* between

sympathizers and those about whom they feel sympathy is the basis of the emotion. This way of conceiving sympathy fits perfectly with Spinoza's emphasis on essence with its tendency to obliterate differences.

But this conception misses what is in fact characteristic of sympathy. In the first place, sympathy so conceived would actually be a form of egoism: in Spinoza's view, instead of feeling what *others* feel, we feel what *we* feel and assume they feel what we do. This isn't sympathy but a kind of emotional/moral imperialism. Second, Spinoza's conception countenances no role for the imagination in which people think their ways into the lives of those who are quite different from them. Dorothea comes to appreciate that Casaubon has his *own* "center of self," a center that is quite unlike her own, but one that she eventually comes to understand and have compassion for. On Eliot's view, sympathy centrally arises when we appreciate that others are *not* us, or mere extensions of us, but live in terms of their own perspective. For her, difference, not likeness, is at the heart of sympathy.¹⁵

All of this is beautifully expressed in these lines about Casaubon:

Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labors; what fading of hopes, or what deep fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against the universal pressure, which will one day be too much for him, and bring his heart to its final pause. Doubtless his lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason that we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be for want of room for him. (*M*, p. 78)

III¹⁶

Middlemarch shows the problems with Spinoza's way of conceiving of sympathy, and with morality in general, based as they are on a construal of intuition in terms of essences, in the fate of Casaubon's *The Key to All Mythologies*. Recall that Casaubon has the idea that all myths have a single source such that they are all variations on an underlying system; discover this ur-mythology and one unlocks the meaning of the welter of apparently disparate mythologies that populate human cultures.¹⁷ On its face this doesn't sound like a bad idea. It bears at least a family resemblance to the Enlightenment notion that human nature is the same the world

over, and that human cultures and social arrangements follow certain laws that explain their nature and history. This idea gained concrete form in works such as Turgot's "On Universal History," Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, and—most relevant for Eliot—Comte's *A General View of Positivism*, a work much discussed in Eliot's circles and an important source for her own thinking.

A number of commentators have claimed that the reason Casaubon fails to discover The Key is not because his guiding idea is mistaken but rather because he lacks the intellectual capacity and will to carry out his project. He spends many hours in libraries and museums collecting information about the multitude of myths that constitute an important part in the plethora of cultures in human history, but he is unable to make sense of this welter of data, and gradually becomes defeated in his quest. The problem isn't his idea but rather that he is simply inadequate to the task. Commentators argue that a half a century later James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* accomplished what Casaubon aims at, a comparative-evolutionary account of the development of "primitive" magic and religion.

But this interpretation of Casaubon's failure—in effect, making it a matter of his character—doesn't actually accord with what *Middlemarch* says. In the novel, Ladislaw says to Dorothea that her husband's project has been rendered irrelevant as a result of recent German scholarship that Casaubon isn't aware of because he doesn't read German. This new scholarship offers "new points of view" that make the "furbishing up" of "broken-legged theories" of scholars like Bryant—an eighteenth-century forerunner to Casaubon who traced all myths back to the descendants of Ham—a mere barking up the wrong tree (*M*, pp. 207–8).

To what German scholarship is Ladislaw referring? The novel doesn't say, but a reasonable guess is that Ladislaw refers to the line of German Romantic thinking that originated in the thought of Herder and that continued to exert a profound effect on German historiography and anthropology for the entire nineteenth century and beyond. A key idea of this approach is that human identities, relations, and arrangements are a function of shared meanings that differ from setting to setting such that there is no fundamental structure that underlies all of human actions and relations. Rather, in order to understand myths and other cultural products and processes, one needs to unearth their particular meanings, and to do this they need to be set within their own distinctive cultural settings (a task that requires certain distinctive methods such as *verstehen*).¹⁸

The *verstehende* approach to social analysis presupposes that human beings are essentially historical in the sense that the patterns of their thinking, relating, and acting differ from epoch to epoch because they are a function of the broad and ever-evolving sociocultural contexts within which they are situated. The broadly positivist idea that there is some ur-structure that underlies all human activity is thus mistaken, based on a misunderstanding of the peculiarity of creatures whose identity is a function of their shared meanings. On this view, people are not like planets or proteins, so that what works in understanding the latter won't work for understanding the former. Specifically with respect to Casaubon's goal, this means that there is no "fundamental structure" that underlies all the myths humans have constructed, no "key" that will unlock the meaning of all of them. With human beings it's diversity all the way down. If one accepts this insight from German scholarship, then it is clear that Casaubon's project is doomed to fail *in principle*, not because he isn't smart enough or diligent enough.¹⁹

Casaubon's failure thus isn't just his alone. It is a failure that characterizes all those attempts, *including Spinoza's*, to uncover beneath the diversity of human arrangements a single system of order such that the job of theory is to uncover this system. *Middlemarch* itself points this out right at its beginning: in the prelude, Eliot writes, "If there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the inability to count to three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile, the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favorite love-stories in prose and verse" (*M*, pp. 3–4).²⁰

But "scientific certitude" is precisely the aspiration of Spinoza and his ilk. Part 3 of the *Ethics* offers a theory of human emotional life whose workings are necessarily the way they are and that apply to all human beings. This picture, famously rooted in the *conatus*, is itself the necessary outcome of the basic principles that govern the universe as a whole—that it is (or expresses, depending on one's interpretation) Substance, that it is marked by the attributes of extension and thought, that it is manifest in particular modes, and so on.

Unfortunately, however, as Eliot put it, "indefiniteness remains" because "the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine." This indefiniteness undercuts Casaubon's and Spinoza's projects. In the character of Casaubon, *Middlemarch* presents a criticism of universalizing ways of thinking in which the individual, the concrete,

and the particular are supposedly transcended by being comprehended in terms of a system of general concepts and abstract relationships. This way of thinking, the novel says, is doomed to fail because it neglects the fact that human lives are lived in terms of what Collingwood (himself the inheritor of German scholarship) calls an “inside” that shapes human perception, thought, and action—an inside that is rooted in what he calls “absolute presuppositions” that differ from sociohistorical setting to sociohistorical setting. If we want to understand people, according to this way of thought, we have to attend to their differences, their specific contexts, their peculiar ways of thinking and feeling and relating—to their own “centers of being,” in the words of *Middlemarch*.

This is why *Middlemarch* is a novel and not, like Spinoza’s work, a treatise; why it is concerned with particular characters situated in a particular historical epoch in a specific location, and not with human beings or, more generally, modes, in and of themselves.²¹ The form of the novel itself bespeaks its message of the essential diversity of human beings and the need to understand them from their own point of view, just as the form of the *Ethics* bespeaks the idea that diversity masks uniformity and an underlying rational harmony. The conflict between these two ways of thinking goes back at least as far as Plato, who bans the poets in part because they attend to individuals and not to the ordered world of the Forms that purportedly lies behind such individuals and that Socrates claims constitutes what is truly real.

That Casaubon fails in his quest is thus not accidental: he is unable to grasp that diversity is a fundamental feature of human life. But why does he fail? Because his chief failure as a human being is his inability to understand how other people live as they do *in their own distinctive ways*. As *Middlemarch* puts it, his “soul [was] sensitive without being enthusiastic: . . . it was that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity” (*M*, p. 279). He has a limited understanding that each human being has a subjective center that colors everything we experience, a center that is unique to each one of us and that differs from person to person.

As a result, Casaubon lacks what was for Eliot a—or maybe *the*—fundamental virtue, namely, sympathy. He can’t grasp what it is like to be Dorothea, how *she* sees the world, what *she* wants, how *she* views him. He interprets what she does and says as if it were what *he* would mean if he did and said these same things. Unfortunately, this same failure also marks many of the other characters in the book, including Dorothea

herself as the novel begins. But as its plot unfolds she grows out of this state of narcissistic ignorance into a person who can appreciate that others have their own distinctive centers and can feel compassion for those around her on the basis of this appreciation.²²

For Eliot, we are all struggling creatures subject to our peculiar experiences of disappointment and joy, success and failure, aliveness and fear of death, and our job is to help one another in coping with these vicissitudes. To do this, Eliot says, requires seeing the world from others' points of view, and employing *verstehen* to address one another's failures and successes that we inevitably encounter; it means developing our capacity to sympathize even with those who hurt or disappoint us, or who appear strange or unappealing by our lights. It means also appreciating that they, too, see us in different ways from the ways we see ourselves. In short, it means developing our capacities for sympathy.

Middlemarch—with its full range of complex, flawed, struggling, sometimes unappealing characters—is the product of an artist who developed her own capacity to sympathize to an extraordinary degree. One of the deepest strengths of *Middlemarch* is not only that it *expresses* the view that sympathy is essential through the fortunes of its figures and what the novel says about them; it also *embodies* this sympathy in its very form, thereby displaying for readers how it wishes them to understand themselves and others (all with an eye toward enhancing this power in its readers).²³ It does so by displaying the different centers of being of its individual characters and the power of compassion when these differences are grasped and responded to constructively. If Spinoza had read the novel—and done so sympathetically!—he might well have come to appreciate that his goal of “scientific certitude,” with its talk of eternal essences, bespeaks, like Casaubon's, a failure to grasp the fundamental role of diversity in human life. But more important, as a consequence he might have come to appreciate the true nature and crucial importance of sympathy in understanding and relating to our fellow human beings in all their rich individuality and need.

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1. See Miriam Henson, “George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as a Translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*,” *George Eliot Review* 40 (2009): 18–26; and Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1978).

2. See Virgil Martin Nemoianu, "The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*," *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (2010): 65–81.
3. All quotes from the *Ethics* are from Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The "Ethics" and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). References to the *Ethics* are by part, category (P=proposition; D=definition; Dem=demonstration; S=scholium), and number. Thus, for instance, "3P10" refers to the third part, proposition ten.
4. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 198 (emphasis added); hereafter abbreviated *M*.
5. Eliot develops her view that "emotion links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions," and that "generalities are the refuge at once of deficient intellectual activity and deficient feeling," in her "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young" in *The Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883); see p. 243, in particular.
6. Eliot, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness," p. 243.
7. For a wonderful discussion of the nature and role of intuition in the *Ethics*, see Sanem Soyarslan, "From Ordinary Life to Blessedness: The Power of Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, ed. Matthew Kisner and Andrew Youpa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 236–57.
8. The *Ethics* discusses two kinds of essence, formal essence and actual essence. But it is clear that in characterizing intuition the essence involved is formal essence, and so that I discuss only formal essence in this paper. Including actual essence into my account would complicate it somewhat but would not materially change it. For an excellent discussion of these two types of essence, see Don Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's "Ethics"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 284–302. See also Margaret Wilson, "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in *Cambridge Companion*.
9. 1P28 says this explicitly. Indeed, the demonstration of this proposition goes on to affirm, "What is finite and has a determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God, for whatever follows from the absolute nature of an attribute of God is eternal and infinite (by P21). . . . It [what is finite] had to be determined to exist and produce an effect by God or an attribute of God *insofar as it is modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence*" (emphasis added).
10. For an insightful discussion of this point, see Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), secs. 18 and 19.
11. The term "intellection" is meant to highlight that intuition for Spinoza builds on reason's abstractions brought to bear on a particular case. In fact, the *Ethics* insists that "the striving, or desire, to know things by the third kind of knowledge (intuition) cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge (perception) but can indeed from the second kind of knowledge (reason)" (5P28). The term "perception" is meant to highlight in Eliot's account of intuition that its objects are particular entities identified in a certain way.
12. Some commentators have even claimed that the (formal) essence of a mode is in fact shared with other modes of its kind. See Christopher Martin, "The Framework of

Essences in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (2008): 489–509. This is a decidedly minority view, but insofar as this interpretation is correct, it reinforces my claim that accounts of individuals in terms of essences inevitably lead to characterizing them in terms of what they share with others of their kind.

13. This is reminiscent of Plato's discussion of Eros in the *Symposium*, in which Diotima claims that the object of love is not a particular person but the Form of Beauty of which the person is a pale embodiment. For the implications of this, see the classic essays by Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato's Dialogues," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 1–34, and by Martha Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979): 131–72.

14. Twice the *Ethics* refers to compassion as "unmanly" and contrasts it with reason, implying that compassion is to be dismissed as mere emotion and therefore girlish, puerile, uninformed, and unstable; see 4P37S1 and 2P49S1 (part 4c).

15. Recall the remarks about Fred Vincy: "Fred fancied that he saw to the bottom of his uncle Featherstone's soul, though in reality half of what he saw was no more than the reflex of his own inclinations. The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes" (*M*, p. 111); or the early failure of Dorothea to understand Casaubon: "Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions" (*M*, p. 77).

For an insightful discussion of Eliot and Spinoza on sympathy, see Ted Zinzinger, "Spinoza, *Adam Bede*, Knowledge, and Sympathy: A Reply to Atkins," *Philosophy and Literature* 36 (2012): 424–40.

16. My thinking in this section, and about *Middlemarch* in general, is indebted to Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). See also Rohan Amanda Maitzen, "Martha Nussbaum and the Moral Life of *Middlemarch*," *Philosophy and Literature* 30, (2006): 190–207.

17. Casaubon's *Key to All Mythologies* aims "to show that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed" (*M*, p. 24). Casaubon's goal is like that of Lydgate, "to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure" that is the "common basis from which they have all started" (*M*, p. 139). As does Casaubon, Lydgate, too, fails to achieve this goal.

18. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's criticism leveled against *The Golden Bough*; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough,'" *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

19. This becomes Dorothea's view of Casaubon's project. As she contemplates the possibility of agreeing to continue Casaubon's work were he to die, she construes this to mean devoting herself "to sifting those mixed heaps of material, which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful." She thinks the *Key* to be untrustworthy, a "theory which was already withered like the birth of an elfin child," one that "floated among flexible conjectures no more solid than those etymologies which seemed strong because of likeness in sound, until it was shown that likeness in sound made them impossible" (*M*, pp. 449–50).

20. The novel contains many reminders of the diversity of individual humans; for example, the case with Lydgate: “The particular faults from which these delicate generalities are distilled have distinguishable physiognomies, diction, accent, and grimaces; filling up parts in various dramas. Our vanities differ as our noses do: all conceit is not the same conceit, but varies in correspondence with the minutiae of mental make in which one of us differs from another” (*M*, p. 140).

21. Catherine Villanueva Gardner, in her interesting book *Woman Philosophers: Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview, 2004), argues in her chapter on George Eliot that in her novels Eliot is philosophizing in a nonstandard but completely appropriate way. But however one classifies *Middlemarch*, the manner of thinking in it is clearly different from that present in the *Ethics*: the former presents a narrative that tells the stories of concrete individuals, whereas the latter is a geometric exercises that offers abstract elaborations of general definitions and their logical implications.

22. Dorothea’s initial grasp of Casaubon is mostly imaginary: she “had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon’s mind [and saw] reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought” (*M*, p. 24); for her, “Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions” (*M*, p. 84). But later she comes “to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference” (*M*, p. 211). Her growth in sympathy is enacted toward not only toward Casaubon but also the tenant farmers, Lydgate, and Rosamund Vincy, among others.

23. As Eliot put this in one of her letters to Charles Bray, “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures” (*The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 3, ed. Gordon S. Haight [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954], pp. 110–11). See Moira Gatens, “The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot,” *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (2009): 73–90.