

# The 'Wordsworth-Spinoza Link' and Ethics: Motivating the Wordsworthian Moral

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## Abstract

Marjorie Levinson has established a link between Spinoza's philosophy and Wordsworth's poetry, focussing specifically on the two authors' shared metaphysics. In this paper I will follow the chain of Levinson's link and show that Spinoza and Wordsworth share an ethics, too. Spinoza's is an ethics of perspective; his primary prescription is to hold a perspective which acknowledges the metaphysical truth of the interconnectedness of all things for the sake of one's mental health. After grounding Wordsworth's well-known prescriptions of communion with nature in a metaphysics of monistic Nature (as Spinoza suggests), we will be in possession of vocabulary with which to describe a much deeper version of the Wordsworthian moral than has hitherto been familiar. Importantly, though we arrive at our description of the Wordsworthian moral by following Spinoza, it remains markedly Wordsworthian and is a novel particularization of Spinoza's general ethical suggestion.

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## Introduction

Marjorie Levinson has explored the connection between Spinoza's philosophy and Wordsworth's poetry, and her exploration has been fruitful; at least with regard to metaphysics, she has "establish[ed] the Wordsworth-Spinoza link at the level of *allusion* and not just conceptual resonance" ("A Motion and a Spirit" 378, emphasis added). Levinson believes that Wordsworth knowingly employs Spinozist ideas in his writing, and this may be the case.<sup>1</sup> However, it does not *need* to be the case – at least, not for the ultimate purpose of this essay. The goal in what follows is to put some meat on the bones of the familiar (but often shallowly stated) Wordsworthian moral of the importance of nature for one's life.

I will first consider the Wordsworth-Spinoza link as Levinson presents it, at the metaphysical level. Taking the sorts of allusions Levinson identifies in Wordsworth's poetry as a pushing-off point, I will then establish the link in the realm of *ethics*, too. Up to this point, the connection between the two will be as strong as Levinson described it. However, what Wordsworth encourages in the end remains distinctly *Wordsworthian* despite the conceptual resonance with Spinoza's ethics. The explication of a new aspect of the strong Wordsworth-Spinoza link will be significant, but what it inspires will be more so; following a consideration of the two together, we will possess a conceptual vocabulary with which to return to Wordsworth himself and describe a more compelling reading of his moral than has been commonly discussed up to this point.

## Foreshadowing the Wordsworthian Moral

Wordsworth's paired poems "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" are undeniably opposed; it is also clear that Wordsworth uses them to moralize. The first paints the world as indifferent, and seems to take this as depressing, encouraging inaction and a sort of hopelessness: "The eye it cannot chuse but see, / We cannot bid the ear be still, / Our bodies feel, where'er they be, / Against, or with our will"; "Of things forever speaking, / . . . nothing of itself will come" (Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply" 17-20, 26-27). The

second takes an inspired optimism, seeing purpose in all the goings-on of Nature, and encourages the reader to action: "hark! how blithe the throstle sings! / And he is no mean preacher; / Come forth into the light of things, / Let Nature be your teacher" (Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned" 13-16). The dissonance of these two poems is familiar, and it begs for resolution.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Wordsworth favours the positive perspective of the second of these poems. However, his prescription of perspective admittedly comes across rather innocent; his optimism strikes the skeptic as existentially irresponsible. Indeed, a certain depth of motivation is a fair thing to require of anyone who would purport to relieve our tension here, especially if this question is one of such fundamental importance as it seems to be.

We will revisit these two poems later; they will be significant in our presentation of a more fully fleshed out Wordsworthian moral. To see precisely how, though, we will first need to understand some Spinozist themes and how they figure in Wordsworth's poetry.

## Spinoza's Philosophy and Levinson's Wordsworth-Spinoza Link

Famously, Spinoza's metaphysics features only a single, infinite, necessarily existing substance: God, or Nature (7). It is important that the reader note the second of these disjuncts; to Spinoza, 'God' is merely a name for the single infinite substance, and so is 'Nature'. Both denote the unity of everything there is, has been, and will be.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Nature's infinitude entails a certain determinism: because Nature necessarily contains every expression of itself in itself, "all things" – being expressions of Nature – "have been determined . . . not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way, and to produce effects in a certain way" (Spinoza 20). In a word: there is only one *thing*, and *everything is it*. This will be important in Spinoza's ethics.

A more complicated metaphysical idea – one which Levinson puts to much work in her commentary on Wordsworth – is Spinoza's conceptualization of individual identity through the notion of *conatus*. Levinson suggests that *conatus* is best understood as "a physical principle" ("A

<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, it remains unclear whether Wordsworth read Spinoza for himself. He certainly would have been exposed to at least second-hand Spinozism by way of Coleridge, though; Coleridge's reputation for philosophizing and particularly the familiar story of the "Spy Nosy" affair suggests this.

<sup>2</sup> I take it for granted that this dilemma seems intuitively important to us as humans generally; the question of how we ought to act in the world is, of course, the fundamental question of ethics. Interestingly, there are hints that Wordsworth found it particularly foundational, too. Wordsworth had "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" come first in the expanded second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and, considering this edition featured an explicit defense of the poet's philosophy, it is perhaps fair to take this rearrangement as a signal of the primacy of the ideas developed in the paired poems.

<sup>3</sup> To minimize terminological tension between Spinoza and Wordsworth, and because it perhaps more intuitively communicates the concept Spinoza is after, I will use 'Nature' wherever possible.

Motion and a Spirit" 377) of individuation; conatus equates things with their actions, with the motion of their persistent being. Conatus "is specifically not an endeavor" undertaken or a drive possessed by a thing, says Levinson ("A Motion and a Spirit" 377); rather, a thing *is* its conatus, in the sense that it is individuated by its past, present, and continuing motion (Spinoza 41). Levinson sums it up nicely: "[w]hat we are ('we' meaning persons, rocks, trees, [etc.]) is where and how we move within the ceaselessly interactive network of God or Nature" ("A Motion and a Spirit" 383).

Admittedly, Wordsworth did not write the most explicitly metaphysical poems. Nevertheless, Levinson links Spinoza and Wordsworth by pointing out features of his poems which certainly imply a Spinozist metaphysics. The narrator of "Lines written in Early Spring" observes that "there was pleasure there" where "The budding twigs spread out their fan" (20, 17) and that the birds' "least motion . . . seemed a thrill of pleasure" (15-16). The twigs experience pleasure in growth, which is the process of their individuation. In motion outward, the subtle blending of material bodies that is the plant's coming to inhabit new space, the plant participates in a joyous harmony. For the birds, mere play, perhaps the least purposive seeming of all necessary motion, is enough to prove their participation in nature's expression of Nature (note the selective capitalization), and this is pleasant to them. It is Spinoza's belief that bodies sharing motion experience a pleasure which works to glorify Nature, and Levinson cites the examples from "Lines written in Early Spring" to suggest that it is Wordsworth's belief, too.

## Prescribing Perspectives – A New Link

Such invocations of Spinoza's metaphysical unity abound in Wordsworth's poetry, but the cases in which *people* take the pleasurable place of the twigs and the birds will be more interesting to us, as they point out tensions which become the focal point of Spinoza's (and Wordsworth's) ethics.

If all the joy described above is accessible to plants and animals, then we thoroughly thoughtful humans ought to have it with even greater ease, and to much loftier degrees over much subtler shared motions! Not (necessarily) so. On account of our capacities for high-level, self-conscious thought, humans are *perspective-taking* things. We are more obviously able to hold different attitudes toward Nature and our place in it than are nature's humbler inhabitants. Indeed, this is what Spinoza's ethics aims to address; Spinoza's primary prescription is that we understand all things as "contained in God and . . . follow[ing] from the necessity of

the divine nature" (174). Don Garrett clarifies this by remarking that "Spinoza's is fundamentally an ethics of *mental health*" (308) – it is for the sake of our peace of mind that we should adopt a perspective which sees all things as necessary parts of Nature. But recall the clashing perspectives of "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned"; taken together, these poems remind us of the difficulty we face in trying to maintain a given outlook on the world. In them, Wordsworth follows Spinoza in affirming the existential import of the question of perspective (indeed, Wordsworth says *more* about possible pessimistic perspectives than Spinoza does). In what follows, I will explore some instances of these perspectives playing out in Wordsworth's poetry. The goal will be to develop a fuller conception of how these attitudes owe their merit to a metaphysical veracity (or their *demerit* to a lack thereof), and thus solidify this new, ethical aspect of the Wordsworth-Spinoza link.

The spots of time in Wordsworth's *Prelude* are rich examples to consider; they deal with questions of perspective and perception and affirm the agreement between proper perspective and the metaphysical truth of Nature. Regarding the first spot of time, the narrator of *The Prelude* acknowledges that the "girl who bore a pitcher on her head / And seemed with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind . . . was in truth / An ordinary sight," (Wordsworth, "1799" l. 317-320) and yet he cannot deny its significance. Importantly, the second description of the scene does not feature the girl forcing herself against the wind, but something more like their union; "The woman and her garments vexed and tossed / By the strong wind" now constitute a single item described (Wordsworth, "1799" l, 326-27).<sup>4</sup> The two are no longer seen as *opposed*, but rather as *composing* something. They are interacting in a shared motion which, though ordinary, takes on a significance by being viewed as an instance of harmony in Nature.

A second spot of time says something similar and something more. Again, the narrator's last attempt at describing the hilltop scene brings its separate elements into a single object, "a fountain" (Wordsworth, "1799" l, 370). This spot of time, though, came to be associated with an explicitly negative experience for the narrator (the death of his father). Here Wordsworth affirms that the perspective which understands all things as necessary expressions of Nature is a perspective which "is not touched by affects which are contrary to our nature, that is, which . . . are evil"<sup>5</sup> (Spinoza 177-78). Negative experiences are necessary, too; viewing them otherwise is to get reality wrong, according to both Spinoza and Wordsworth. To get reality right is to

<sup>4</sup> Compare 'the woman and the strong wind vexing and tossing her garments', in which two things more clearly figure in the description. To be fair, Wordsworth inserts a comma between 'woman' and 'and her garments' in the description of "1805" XI, 314-15, but removes it again in "1850" XII, 260-61.

<sup>5</sup> Bearing in mind Garrett's point that Spinoza's is an ethics of mental health, the term 'evil' here simply means contrary to psychological wellbeing.

understand that even dissonance is harmony, to see the beauty in even the negative aspects of Nature.

Importantly, improper perspectives can be seen in Wordsworth's poetry, too, and are problematic specifically because of their metaphysical inaccuracy. To make a return to "Lines written in Early Spring": the narrator there is "In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind" (3-4). This is quite clearly not the mood of the Spinozist perspective; let us consider where it goes wrong. The "pleasant thoughts" are presumably those in which the narrator notices the pleasure of the twigs and the birds. Somehow, though, the narrator's perspective makes it impossible for *himself* to participate in that pleasure and experience a positive spot of time. Though the link between nature and the human soul (Nature) is acknowledged (Wordsworth, "Early Spring" 5-6), the narrator subtly excludes himself from the unity of the scene. This is confirmed by the fact that the "sad thoughts" are those regarding "What man has made of man" (Wordsworth, "Early Spring" 8, 24). This expression shows a marked *individuality*, a very human tendency to think of oneself as outside the system of Nature even while acknowledging the interconnectedness in *nature*. This notion is, of course, incompatible with Spinozist metaphysics. It is a subtle, self-focussed note of egoism which corrupts the narrator's perspective, and this example again affirms the link between Spinoza's and Wordsworth's ethics of perspective by condemning their opposite.

Even Wordsworth's general theorization of spots of time confirms their Spinozist ethical orientation. In introducing the spots of time as a concept, the narrator of *The Prelude* notes their "fructifying virtue" (Wordsworth, "1799" I, 290).<sup>6</sup> The use of the moral term 'virtue' is significant and suggests a normative note. But more important is the fact that their virtue lies particularly in their power to nourish and repair the mind "depressed / By trivial occupations and the round / Of ordinary intercourse" (Wordsworth, "1799" I, 290-94). In later versions Wordsworth specified the cause of this depression as "*false* opinion and contentious thought" in everyday actions ("1805" XI, 260-62; "1850" XII, 211-13, emphasis added). This description of the spots of time paints them as significant for the health of the mind and rooted in a truth which affirms the significance of the ordinary; in a word, the spots of time are Wordsworth's take on Spinoza's ethical project.

With this, we have solidified a new link in the chain connecting Wordsworth and Spinoza. The two share a

metaphysics, as Levinson pointed out, but they share more than this: Wordsworth follows Spinoza into Spinoza's brand of ethics, acknowledging the significance of the proper perspective for mental health. In what follows, we will ground the familiar Wordsworthian moral in this perspective; though it is a departure from the letter of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Wordsworth's moralizing represents significant work in the Spinozist spirit.

## The Wordsworthian Moral

The reader will have noticed that we have not yet made our way to ethics proper. We have discussed the fact that Spinoza and Wordsworth advocate for a particular perspective inspired by their shared metaphysics, but there has not been much prescribed in terms of *action*. I suggested in a footnote above that the question of perspective would have to come before the question of action; having dealt with the former, we will move to the latter presently. This will also be our return to "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned." To my view, these two poems deal with more than perspective; they discuss the ways of life which could *follow* from perspective, the totally original, totally *Wordsworthian* description of how best to live one's life in light of the proper perspective.

Spinoza himself suggests that understanding things from the proper perspective will lead an agent to action (179), but "action" for him is rather open-ended. Action is simply participation in Nature, even if only mentally and inwardly; thus, proper perspective *necessarily* leads to increased action, because it adds a new dimension to perception, a new motion of thought in Nature. Of course, the proper perspective could almost certainly lead to ethical action in a more familiar sense for Spinoza,<sup>7</sup> but it is evidently not in the purview of the *Ethics* to go into detail about this; the morals there are mostly mental and meditative. Wordsworth, though, says more; indeed, it is perhaps what he says most.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is not obviously a difference in metaphysics which opposes the narrator of "Expostulation and Reply" to the narrator of "The Tables Turned." The former seems to believe in a certain deterministic world system and remarks on the comparative insignificance of human will and action therein (Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply" 25-26), and these are aspects of the Spinozist perspective. Furthermore, the notion of feeding the mind "In

<sup>6</sup> In "1805" and "1850," 'fructifying' was replaced with 'renovating' (XI, 259; XII, 210). I do not believe that the difference in adjective will matter much here; the use of 'virtue' is more important, as it suggests that the fruitful-making or renovating property of spots of time is *ethically* significant, and 'virtue' is in all three versions.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it probably *did*. Though Spinoza himself had a reputation for being something of a shut-in, private scholarly type (Klever 44), his ethical character was well-known (45). There is no evidence that he felt personally unsatisfied with his behaviour, morally speaking, and thus no reason to say that his conduct did not meet the ethical demands of his philosophy. None of what follows is meant to decry Spinoza; the point here is simply to emphasize that what Wordsworth does with the idea of the proper perspective is very much *his own*.

a wise passiveness" (Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply" 23-24) could easily be read as something like Spinoza's mental ethical action. It would be surprising if the narrator of "Expostulation and Reply" should be condemned for these reasons alone. I propose that it is specifically the *ethical* aspect of his perspective, his decision about how to act in light of metaphysical truth that is being condemned. Wordsworth suggests that the solely reflective, meditative lifestyle is not the best one, ethically speaking, because "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things" ("The Tables Turned" 26-27). Solitary, stationary daydreaming becomes self-centred and self-pitying rather than outward-focussed and Nature-glorifying in "Expostulation and Reply;"<sup>8</sup> the narrator's friend confirms this by discerning a childishly egoistic note in the narrator's philosophizing (9-12). It is, according to Wordsworth, too easy for metaphysical meditation to swerve off course.

Contrast this with the advice in "The Tables Turned:" there the reader is explicitly commissioned to *physical action* in light of the proper perspective. "Up! up!" demands the narrator in "The Tables Turned" (1, 3); "Come forth, and bring with you a heart / That watches and receives" (31-32) the wisdom, truth, and moral instruction of Nature (19-20, 21-23). Consider a typical Wordsworthian activity, going for a walk. Going for a walk simultaneously asserts the individual as a motion in the world and signals a humble receptivity to the largeness of the system of which the individual is a part; to Wordsworth, such a physical action is very clearly metaphysically symbolic. While metaphysical meditation may be enough for some (it seemed to be for Spinoza), Wordsworth points out that perhaps the common person needs more concrete reminders of the truth of Nature, and suggests his typical moral in light of this; Wordsworth's is an ethics of mental health, too, and it specifies physical engagement with nature as the most practical way to achieve engagement with Nature and maintain a healthy perspective.

## Conclusion

Wordsworth's ethics depart from Spinoza's in that it aims to be more accessible to the less philosophically inclined, but it does not for this reason sacrifice its depth. While Wordsworth's prescription for symbolic communion with Nature by way of physical communion with nature is markedly his own, it remains rooted in compelling Spinozist metaphysical convictions and concerns for mental health; this has perhaps been overlooked by the skeptical pessimist

who would complain about the shallowness of Wordsworth's moralizing. On a different note, the Wordsworthian proviso to Spinoza's ethics is a welcome one. Though there is something deeply impressive about the figure of mental discipline Spinoza cuts in his meditative ethics, it is admittedly not very easy for most of us to relate to, nor is it terribly helpful when in a lonely, depressive mood. Far more relatable is the narrator of "Expostulation and Reply" who feels overwhelmingly small in his meditations, and far easier to accept is the encouragement of "The Tables Turned" to take simple, practical steps toward mental health. In this light, the familiar Wordsworthian lifestyle takes on a new life; go for a walk, maybe take your sister and your friend with you<sup>9</sup> – these actions have deep meaning for the agent aware of their metaphysical implications.

Wordsworth wrote of the common person and for the common person, and his treatment of Spinoza's ethical doctrine is no different. However, it would be a sorry oversight for the pessimist to ignore the depth in Wordsworth's prescriptions; considering the Wordsworth-Spinoza link, Wordsworth's moral is more than a feel-good message of naïve optimism. To end on a somewhat playful summarizing note: Wordsworth has good reason to tell persistent pessimists and critics to take a hike.

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<sup>8</sup> And in "Lines written in Early Spring," too.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it strikes me that the metaphysical symbolism of going for a walk could be extrapolated to include socialization as a practical reminder of the truth of Nature; interacting with friends involves both self-assertion ('putting yourself out there') and focus on others (*pace* the somewhat abrasive narrator of "Expostulation and Reply").

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