

Spinoza's Three Kinds Of Knowledge¹

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In Spinoza's *Ethics*, he describes three kinds of knowledge.² This is an area that has caused a great deal of confusion and debate. It is an area that is critical to understanding his *Ethics*. I, therefore, decided to create these examples in order to help make clear what those three kinds of knowledge are.

I will give two examples. The first example illustrates the three kinds of knowledge. The second example illustrates the value of the third kind of knowledge.

Imagine you were brought up in a far-off land and had never seen or heard of a bicycle. Therefore, you would have zero knowledge of a bicycle.

Now imagine you saw, for the first time, someone ride past you on a bicycle. You would now know that such a thing exists. You wouldn't know how it works, but again, you know it exists. This is knowledge of the first kind.

You then go to a class where you are taught all about how bicycles work. You are taught about peddling, balance, steering, etc. You now have knowledge of the second kind. You understand how bicycles work.

You finally have the opportunity to actually ride a bicycle. You get on and immediately start peddling; you watch your balance, and you steer to where you want to go. Your mind is concentrating on all of the elements needed to keep the bicycle going.

After a while, your mind puts all of the elements of riding the bicycle into a single idea that you learn intuitively - riding a bicycle. You no longer think about peddling, balancing, or steering. It's all intuitive. You now think about where you want to go or what you're going to do when you get there. The actual mechanics of riding the bicycle are intuitive or automatic. You now know how to ride a bicycle from the third kind of knowledge!

This example makes it clear what the three kinds of knowledge are. I would now like to give another example that exemplifies the value of the third kind of knowledge.

Imagine someone comes up to you and slaps you on the face. Understanding the event from the first kind of knowledge, you would feel the pain, get angry, and react in some way, such as yelling at the person, hitting them back, or running away.

From the second kind of knowledge, in the immediate moment, you would still react in the same way you did as in the first kind of knowledge. You would feel the pain, get angry, and react accordingly. However, once you've had a moment to process the event and reflect on your understanding of determinism, you will realize that the event was utterly unavoidable and that the person who slapped you had no other choice. As you bring these facts to mind, your anger quickly dissipates. You are no longer angry at something that couldn't have been different. It was just an event that you didn't expect but was determined nevertheless.

Having knowledge of determinism from the third kind, while you can still react in any way you like to the slap, you would understand immediately that the event was unavoidable. Your anger would never arise! Your understanding of the event was immediate and intuitive. It no longer requires reflection or any mental process or effort.

So, in this case, the main difference between understanding the event at the three kinds of knowledge is as follows:

Kind 1: anger

Kind 2: short-term anger (until you can process it)

Kind 3: no anger

Spinoza's *Ethics* is about peace of mind and happiness. Knowledge of Spinoza's ideas from the third kind best leads to peace of mind.

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