

Is Spinoza's View on Value Judgments Convincing?

In the Appendix to Part I of *The Ethics*, Spinoza argues that people, assuming everything in nature was created for their sake, form value judgments by calling things good, bad, beautiful, or ugly based not on truth but on personal benefit or emotion. He believes these judgments are not rooted in the nature of things themselves but in how humans are affected by them. For Spinoza, this shows how imagination often replaces understanding, leading to confusion and false beliefs about the world and about God.

I find parts of this argument convincing, especially his critique of how easily people treat their feelings or preferences as objective truth. It is true that people tend to see what is useful or comfortable as good and what is difficult or painful as bad without questioning those categories. Spinoza's call to question these instincts is valuable. He challenges us not to confuse emotional reactions with genuine understanding and that reminder is important in both philosophy and faith.

However, I do not fully accept his conclusion. From my Orthodox Christian perspective, while it is true that people often misjudge or misunderstand things, that does not mean value itself is imaginary. In Orthodoxy, beauty, goodness, and truth are not just opinions or mental projections. They are real because they reflect the nature of God. The problem is not that these values do not exist, but that we often fail to see them clearly due to pride, passions, or self-centered thinking. So while Spinoza is right to warn against confusing our preferences for truth, I think he goes too far by rejecting value judgments altogether as human inventions.

While I agree with Spinoza's warning against treating our emotional reactions as objective truths, I think he oversimplifies the nature of value judgments. He argues that all human meaning-making is rooted in imagination, but I would counter that not all value judgments are purely subjective. In my Orthodox Christian tradition, values such as beauty, goodness, and truth are not simply mental projections; they reflect the nature of God. The challenge is not that these values do not exist, but that we often fail to recognize them clearly due to our passions and ego-driven perspectives. Spinoza rightly critiques the dangers of allowing emotions to cloud our understanding of God, but I believe he misses the possibility that some values, those that align with divine principles, are real and reflect a deeper, transcendent reality.

Thus, while Spinoza's logic encourages us to be cautious of our instincts, I believe it is important to recognize that value judgments can indeed be valid, particularly when they are grounded in spiritual wisdom and discernment rather than emotional reaction. The task is not to reject value judgments altogether but to refine our understanding of them in alignment with God's truth.

I am also not fully convinced by his claim that all human meaning-making is rooted in imagination. There is a difference between subjective feeling and spiritual discernment. While some may treat their emotions as sacred, religious traditions often train people to question their instincts, to seek wisdom, and to align with something higher than themselves. Spinoza rightly critiques superstition but by doing so he dismisses the possibility that certain values might actually reflect the deeper structure of reality.

In the end, Spinoza's argument pushes us to be more careful thinkers, which I respect. But I do not believe that value is just in our heads. I believe it begins in God, and our task is to see and live into that reality, not to create it from scratch.