

RUNNING HEAD: HEALING THE MIND....

Book Review of:

Healing the Mind: The Philosophy of Spinoza Adapted for a New Age,

By Neal Grossman

Book Review

by

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Healing The Mind: The Philosophy of Spinoza Adapted for a New Age, by Neal Grossman

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When asked if he believed in God, Einstein replied that he believed in the God of Spinoza. For Einstein, the God of Spinoza does not stand in conflict to science or reason. Indeed, for all of us interested in healing the splits between science and spirituality, reason and emotion, and mind and body, Spinoza offers a unique system of thought and a path to wholeness. Until recently, Spinoza remained obscure to all but a small group of philosophers. With Neal Grossman's book, *Healing the Mind: The Philosophy of Spinoza Adapted for a New Age*, Spinoza's contributions become accessible to a much wider audience.

Grossman invites us to walk a path from suffering to liberation by applying Spinoza's system of thought and integrate recently estranged principles of spirituality and reason. Grossman calls this spiritual psychotherapy. It is spiritual because Spinoza's ultimate aim is the mystical union with God. And it is psychotherapy because according to Spinoza, through the application of reason we can find continuous happiness, gain liberation from "afflictive emotions" (greed, jealousy, etc.), and attain "blessedness and salvation."

Following a Forward by Huston Smith, Grossman's book is written as an "intellectual self-help book" that at times resembles Buddhist ideas. The book is organized into 5

chapters that move from the metaphysical to the psychological and finally to the spiritual path of transcendence. This organization allows Grossman to build on Spinoza's philosophical foundation, and integrate the psychological and spiritual dimension of his work.

In Chapter One, Grossman (2003) lays out Spinoza's first metaphysical principles regarding the nature of God and the relationship of mind to body. Spinoza defines God as "an independent being or a being the existence of which does not depend on anything other than itself" (p. 23). Grossman proceeds to show us that from this definition a second definition logically follows, that God is "the totality of everything there is" (p. 23). Thus, God — the universe, or the whole of Nature — is all there is. And the physical universe, including the human body, constitutes the body of God. Similarly, the mental or conscious universe comprises the mind of God. Indeed, according to Spinoza, mind and body are two attributes of a single holistic reality — like two seemingly separate mirror reflections of a single object. For Spinoza, a pantheist, there is nothing that is physical that is not also conscious or a facet of mind, and there is nothing that is not God. These metaphysical principles are foundational to all further discussions.

In Chapter Two Grossman further discusses Spinoza's views of the nature of mind, including sense experience. To Spinoza, as with other mystical philosophers, the senses represent a confusing image of reality, one that creates the illusion of our separateness from each other and the world. According to this holistic philosophy, each individual is

not separate from, but instead embedded within a larger whole, which is in turn a part of an even larger whole, which is ultimately God

In contrast to naïve realism, which posits experience as ‘passively received’, Spinoza argues that experience is constructed from the interaction between our mind-body system and the external world. By understanding the limitations of sense experience, and freeing us from its illusions, happiness can come from a deeper understanding that the human mind constitutes a part within the mind of God.

In Chapter Three Grossman discusses Spinoza’s ideas regarding the nature of human desires and emotions. Countering the classical split between reason and emotion, Spinoza argues that our emotions can be rationally understood and are even programmed and determined by our thoughts and beliefs. Like many modern rational emotive therapies, Spinoza’s therapy calls for us to become conscious of these many motivating forces, including socially and culturally conditioned beliefs, thoughts and desires, which are at play within us. Through our awareness of these forces, we gain some autonomy from them. Since everything within us is a part of God, we are called to know and accept, rather than reject, all experience. This self-knowledge — beyond intellectual awareness and including feeling awareness — combined with radical self-acceptance — leads us to ultimate self-realization and inner peace.

Grossman also spends a considerable effort in Chapter Three arguing that the belief and the experience of free will are entirely illusory. Advocating strict determinism, Spinoza,

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and Grossman, argue that everything must have a cause, and every human thought or desire is hence caused within the mind of God, so “in no way can we, or that part of us called the will be ‘free from’ the Mind of God through which we are continuously created and sustained...the belief in free will is a hindrance to self-knowledge, since it prevents us from inquiring into the causes of our desires, our actions, and our so-called decisions.” (p. 105-106). Unfortunately, despite the fact that at times Grossman supports his arguments with quantum physics knowledge, he fails to explain how this philosophy of strict causal determinism can be reconciled with modern quantum theory, which holds a probabilistic non-deterministic worldview.

Having dismantled free will, Grossman describes how to regain personal power in Chapter Four. By understanding that emotions are caused by inner dialog and thoughts rather than by external forces, Grossman and Spinoza claim it is possible to reprogram the mind to produce increasingly happy emotions. Additionally, by developing second-order awareness of our inner experience, which is always available to us via an ongoing Buddhist mindfulness practice, our emotional response begins to shift. Grossman also discusses the metaphysical impossibility of good versus evil. Because as Spinoza claims, everything in the world is a manifestation of God, there can be no good versus bad. Doing away with judgments of good and bad, we also rid ourselves from feelings of guilt. Instead we are left with discernment, which is the ability to know the natural consequences of our actions. In this way, Spinoza resembles the Buddhist notion of ‘right action’ and the law of the karma.

In the final chapter Grossman presents several paths to transcendence that derive from Spinoza's metaphysics. These incorporate the use of sexuality, understanding the eternity of the mind, and a dis-identification from the personality. Because Spinoza's holistic philosophy affirms the connection of all living beings as a part of a larger organic and divine whole, sex is a means by which we can connect to the life force that unites us all. Through the sexual climax at the moment of orgasm we transcend ourselves and the illusion of separation. Furthermore, as we develop higher levels of awareness, our experiences move from subjects to objects of our awareness, gaining a sense of "I-ness" that is distinct from our passing thoughts and feelings. This sense of I-ness is a form of divine self-remembrance that reflects the eternal essence of our mind, which is outside of time.

Throughout the book, Grossman provides summaries of his arguments, which help guide us through the material. In addition to discussions of Spinoza philosophy, Grossman offers 32 practical self-reflection exercises throughout the book. For example, to illustrate how second-order awareness may shift our emotional response, Grossman invites us to monitor our experience while becoming aware that we are watching a scary movie. As we remind ourselves that we are watching a movie, we are not as lost in the scary events on the screen. With this higher-level awareness our fear will likely begin to subside. These types of practical exercises make the application of abstract ideas very tangible.

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The field of transpersonal psychology seeks to integrate psychological science with spirituality, and provide a path to mental health, personal wholeness, and sacred holiness. In fact, the words, health, wholeness and holiness, derive from the same root. This path requires that we heal the splits between science and spirituality, reason and emotion, mind and body, and rationality and mysticism. These unnatural divisions have caused enormous damage within the human psyche and the world. In *Healing the Mind* Grossman presents Spinoza's approach to healing these splits through a process called spiritual psychotherapy in a way that is understandable, illuminating, and practical. In doing so, Grossman brings out of the shadows a philosopher with much to offer on these important topics.

Author

Neal Grossman is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where he has been teaching for over thirty years. Professor Grossman has graduated from M.I.T in 1963 and received his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1970. He is the recipient of numerous teaching awards.

Reviewer

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