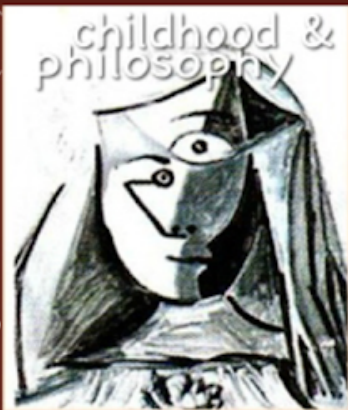




article

spinoza on procreation

authors

noa lahav ayalon

harvard university

e-mail: nlahavayalon@fas.harvard.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0764-6993>

doi: [10.12957/childphilo.2025.90626](https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2025.90626)

abstract

This paper offers a Spinozistic argument for the ethical value of procreation, situating the decision to have children within Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics. Contemporary debates on procreation often frame it in terms of individual autonomy, social duty, or ecological concerns, but Spinoza's philosophy provides a distinct perspective—one grounded in rational striving, love, and the expansion of human power. By examining Spinoza's notions of *conatus*, individuation, and affectivity, this paper argues that procreation, when approached rationally and with freedom of mind, is not merely a biological act but an ethical affirmation of life. Spinoza's causal framework suggests that ideally a child is an effect of a rational love, and their flourishing depends on the quality of that love insofar as it is a cause. Moreover, raising a child in a Spinozistic spirit is an extension of this rational love, offering a path to greater understanding, freedom, and joy. Ultimately, this paper repositions procreation as a meaningful and empowering choice within Spinoza's broader vision of human flourishing.

keywords: spinoza; affectivity; procreation; freedom; philosophy of love.

spinoza sobre la procreación

resumen



Este artículo presenta un argumento spinozista sobre el valor ético de la procreación, situando la decisión de tener hijos dentro de la metafísica y la ética de Spinoza. Los debates contemporáneos sobre la procreación suelen enmarcarse en términos de autonomía individual, deber social o preocupaciones ecológicas, pero la filosofía de Spinoza ofrece una perspectiva distinta, basada en el esfuerzo racional (*conatus*), el amor y la expansión del poder humano. A través del análisis de las nociones spinozistas de *conatus*, individuación y afectividad, este artículo sostiene que la procreación, cuando se aborda racionalmente y con *libertas mentis*, no es simplemente un acto biológico, sino una afirmación ética de la vida. El marco causal de Spinoza sugiere que un niño es un efecto de un matrimonio basado en la razón, y su desarrollo dependerá de la calidad de esa causa. Además, criar a un hijo en un espíritu spinozista es una extensión de este amor racional, ofreciendo un camino hacia una mayor comprensión, libertad y alegría. En última instancia, este artículo re-plantea la procreación como una elección significativa y enriquecedora dentro de la visión spinozista del florecimiento humano.

palabras clave: spinoza; afectividad; procreación; libertad; filosofía del amor.

spinoza sobre a procriação

resumo

Este artigo apresenta um argumento espinosista para o valor ético da procriação, situando a decisão de ter filhos dentro da metafísica e da ética de Espinosa. Os debates contemporâneos sobre a procriação frequentemente a enquadram em termos de autonomia individual, dever social ou preocupações ecológicas, mas a filosofia de Espinosa oferece uma perspectiva distinta, fundamentada no esforço racional, no amor e na expansão da potência humana.

Ao examinar as noções espinosistas de *conatus*, individuação e afetividade, este artigo defende que a procriação, quando abordada racionalmente e com liberdade da mente, não é apenas um ato biológico, mas uma afirmação ética da vida. O quadro causal de Espinosa sugere que, idealmente, uma criança é um efeito de um amor racional, e seu florescimento depende da qualidade desse amor na medida em que ele é causa. Além disso, criar uma criança em um espírito espinosista é uma extensão desse amor racional, oferecendo um caminho para maior compreensão, liberdade e alegria. Em última instância, este trabalho reposiciona a procriação como uma escolha significativa e fortalecedora dentro da visão mais ampla de Espinosa sobre o florescimento humano.

palavras-chave: Espinosa; afetividade; procriação; liberdade; filosofia do amor.

spinoza on procreation

introduction

The decision to bring a new life into the world is a profound and multifaceted choice, one that engages individuals on multiple levels: biological, psychological, social, and ethical. Contemporary discourse on the ethics of procreation, however, is often characterized by a fragmented landscape of competing values and perspectives, ranging from those who emphasize the biological imperative or societal duty to procreate to others who champion individual autonomy or express concerns about overpopulation and the ethical implications of climate change. The frameworks used to navigate this difficult choice often fall short in fully grasping the complexities of human love, relationship, and the potential for joy and freedom that might arise in the context of parenthood. However, it is considered today in large parts of society as a difficult choice that forces us to examine the very foundations of our motivations and values¹. The decision calls for a rigorous investigation of our beliefs about the good life, and about how our striving to persevere and achieve a sense of meaning may or may not be served through the creation of new life. This paper seeks to contribute to this critical discourse by offering a novel argument for the ethical value of procreation, seen through the distinct lens of Baruch Spinoza's philosophy. Essentially, this is an argument rooted in rationality, love, and the inherent drive to understand and affirm the world. I agree that choosing to have children is not a decision to be made lightly. When this choice is approached with conscious intent, and grounded in love, it can become a unique avenue for individuals to express their powers and enhance their own experience of freedom and joy.

Spinoza's rigorous metaphysical system and comprehensive ethical framework, laid out in his masterpiece, the *Ethics*, provides a powerful tool for analyzing human choices, and especially the weighty choice of bringing new life into the world. Spinoza's philosophy does not revolve around a rigid moral code of rules and obligations; rather, it offers a guide to living a life characterized by

¹ For a book-length study of this question, see Berg and Wiseman (2024).

freedom and understanding (and unique early modern example of virtue ethics). For Spinoza, the key to liberation lies in understanding our shared essence as modes of the one substance, God or Nature, and in acting out of the power of reason, a power that is augmented by our ability to love, and thus to come to a recognition of the shared common properties with those we love. In this paper, I argue that Spinoza's framework provides a unique lens for understanding procreation as an avenue for humans to enhance their own striving to persevere in being approached rationally and lovingly. I contend that the act of having children, when rooted in a genuine and rational love for them, allows the parents to understand themselves more clearly, and in so doing, augment their capacity for joy, all while simultaneously helping their children to become free as well.

This paper offers a philosophical analysis of Spinoza's views on procreation interpreted through a contemporary hermeneutical lens. The intent is not strictly historical reconstruction but rather a philosophical exploration that engages Spinoza's ethical and metaphysical frameworks to address the issue of procreation. Consequently, some interpretative claims extend beyond explicit textual evidence, reflecting a deliberate systematic engagement with Spinozistic thought rather than mere exegesis.

a brief historical note

As Mary Midgley noted in a censored (for suspected lack of public interest) BBC radio script in the 1950's, the vast majority of canonical Western philosophers were bachelors². She attributes the avoidance of marriage and children to a commitment to philosophy, which demands, above all, concentration. Admittedly, spouses and children can strain the ability to concentrate. But is it possible that the personal histories of these thinkers, which led them to avoid marriage and procreation, was less a deliberate choice than insurmountable circumstances? Before addressing Spinoza's position (who is arguably notorious as one of the most abstract-thinking, fiercely rational philosophers, to whom children seem particularly ill-suited), I will present a very brief historical overview of the issue.

² For the full script, see <https://ravenmagazine.org/magazine/rings-books/>.

The question of whether and why one should have children has occupied a marginal yet persistent place in the history of philosophy. While childbearing has been an inescapable feature of human existence, philosophers—who have often led lives detached from familial obligations—have rarely addressed it as a central ethical or metaphysical issue. The vast majority of canonical philosophers, from Plato to Kant to Nietzsche, remained childless, either by circumstance or by choice, and this biographical fact has arguably shaped the philosophical discourse on procreation.

In the *Republic*, Plato presents procreation as a pragmatic function of the ideal state, integrating it into a system of eugenics designed to maintain social harmony. The myth of the metals (415a–c) justifies a controlled approach to reproduction, ensuring that children are produced in accordance with the needs of the polity rather than personal choice or fulfillment. Yet this emphasis on biological generation is not isolated from Plato's broader philosophical concerns; education, the cultivation of virtue, and the shaping of character all function as forms of intellectual and political 'procreation.' By contrast, in the *Symposium* (206c–209e), Plato presents a more artistic and expansive view, situating biological reproduction within a broader spectrum of creative and philosophical generation. Here, *tokos en kalō*—"procreation in the beautiful"—frames reproduction not as a social imperative but as an ascent toward higher forms of immortality, from physical offspring to works of art, laws, and ultimately wisdom itself. Rather than opposing biological and intellectual creation, the *Symposium* subsumes the former within a continuum that culminates in the pursuit of the divine.

Aristotle, in contrast, takes a more biologically grounded view. In *Politics* (1252a–b), he describes the household as the foundation of the state and sees procreation as part of fulfilling human nature. In *Generation of Animals* (GA 716a–b), he offers an embryological account in which the male provides the *form* and the female the *matter*, reinforcing a hierarchical vision of sexual reproduction. While he views procreation as natural and even necessary, Aristotle does not consider it a philosophical problem in its own right.

In Christian philosophy, procreation takes on a moralized dimension. Augustine (1955), in *De bono coniugali* (On the Good of Marriage), defends

procreation as a legitimate function of marriage, albeit one that must be subordinated to the higher good of celibacy. This view, which emphasizes the tension between bodily desire and spiritual purity, remained highly influential for centuries in Europe. By the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant famously critiques the instrumentalization of children. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 2017, 6:280), he argues that bringing a child into the world imposes a duty on the parents to care for it, as the child cannot consent to being born. While he does not categorically oppose procreation, he views it as an ethically fraught act requiring justification beyond mere desire or societal expectation. Schopenhauer, in contrast, adopts an explicitly anti-natalist stance. In *The World as Will and Representation* (Schopenhauer et al., 2010), he describes life as an inherently painful and futile struggle. Procreation, in his view, is an irrational perpetuation of suffering, driven by blind will rather than reason.

The 20th century saw a flourishing of feminist philosophy, which shed new light on the issue of parenthood and children. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray offer competing and positive reactions to Simone De Beauvoir's claim that motherhood is a danger for the liberation of women³. Kristeva (2006), unlike many of her philosophical predecessors, takes procreation seriously as an existential and ethical experience, rather than merely a biological or social function.

Most recently, Anastasia Berg has examined the contemporary ethical dilemmas surrounding procreation. In *Should We Have Children?* (2024), she engages with existentialist and anti-natalist arguments, considering whether the decision to have children can be justified in a world marked by ecological crisis and moral uncertainty. Her work represents a shift in contemporary philosophy toward re-examining procreation not just as a private decision but as an act with broader metaphysical and ethical implications.

The striking fact that most canonical philosophers did not have children—Plato, Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, among others—raises the question of whether philosophical discourse has been shaped by a form of implicit anti-natalism. If philosophy has often privileged the

³ She "cautions women against assuming the role of mother and getting caught in the trap of reproducing the species at the expense of other projects." See Oliver, (2010), p. 762. See also Söderbäck (2019), chapters 7-9.

intellectual over the corporeal, the abstract over the concrete, and the eternal over the generational, then the neglect of procreation as a serious philosophical issue may not be incidental. Instead, it may reflect a deep-seated assumption that true creativity lies in the realm of ideas rather than in biological reproduction.

This background sets the stage for a Spinozistic argument for procreation, one that challenges the traditional philosophical neglect of reproduction and repositions it within a framework of *conatus*, affectivity, and the expansion of life itself.

spinoza's metaphysical account of conatus and individuation

Spinoza's philosophy, articulated most thoroughly in the *Ethics*, offers a comprehensive system of both metaphysics and ethics, characterized by radical immanence and determinism. Spinoza begins with the assertion that there exists only one substance, which he calls God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), that possesses infinite attributes, the two of which we can comprehend being Thought and Extension (E1d6)⁴. All things that exist, including humans, are merely modes or expressions of this one substance. Humans, therefore, are both part of God or Nature, and a unique mode of being, possessing a mind (an expression in the attribute of thought) and a body (an expression of the same mode in the attribute of extension). This understanding of the interconnectedness of all things and our place within it is crucial for understanding Spinoza's argument for procreation.

The *conatus* is conceptually inseparable from Spinoza's broader theory of affectivity, which explains how individuals experience and interpret their own striving in relation to the external world. Affects (sometimes translated simply as "emotions"), are defined as changes in the body (and the ideas of these changes, as they are expressed in the mind) that increase or diminish its power of acting (E3d3). These are the fundamental means by which individuals engage with their environment. Since the human mind is the idea of the body, every affect is simultaneously a bodily modification and an idea. This means that affectivity is

⁴ All references to Spinoza's texts are from Spinoza (1985), translated by Edwin Curley. When referring to the *Ethics*, a = axiom, d = definition, c = corollary, p = proposition, s = scholium (following a proposition reference, d = demonstration). For example, "E2p40s2" refers to Part Two of the *Ethics*, proposition 40, second scholium.

not merely a psychological phenomenon but a fundamental aspect of an individual's ontological structure⁵. As Spinoza writes in E3p11s, when defining two of the three primary affects:

By joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection. And by sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection. The affect of joy which is related to the mind and body at once I call pleasure or cheerfulness, and that of sadness, pain or melancholy.

Spinoza's account of desire, joy, and sadness as the primary affects demonstrates how *conatus* manifests in emotional life. Desire is the very expression of *conatus* itself, while joy and sadness indicate an increase or decrease in power, respectively. The *conatus* is explicitly defined as the striving to persevere in one's own being (E3p7), the very essence a life-force of the individual (interesting to compare to Platonic *eros*, which is also intimately linked to every living thing's drive—from procreation to arts to philosophy). For Spinoza, who champions a thoroughly naturalistic philosophy, this striving is not a uniquely human trait, but a fundamental attribute of all things. For humans, however, the *conatus* is intimately connected with our capacity for understanding and reason. For Spinoza, the highest expression of our essence is to act in accordance with our nature, and for humans, this means to think clearly and as adequately as possible, and thus, to act rationally. This is because our power of reason, according to Spinoza, leads us to virtue and joy, the hallmarks of a well-lived life. Therefore, the drive to persevere in our being, for humans, is deeply connected to our capacity to understand the world, and to act in accordance with this understanding, which includes, as will be argued in this paper, the path of love and relationship, and potentially, parenthood.

Spinoza's distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas is also crucial for understanding his argument. Adequate ideas stem from reason and understanding, while inadequate ideas stem from the imagination and the passions (E2p40s). Inadequate ideas are often the source of suffering, confusion, and bondage, while adequate ideas, derived from clear and distinct thinking, lead to joy, power, and freedom (freedom of mind being the highest achievement of

⁵ For an excellent overview, see Garrett (1996).

virtue a human can hope for⁶). In the scholium to this proposition, Spinoza delivers his three-tiered epistemology. The first kind of knowledge, imagination (or opinion), is based on inadequate ideas formed through sensory experience and hearsay, leading to confusion and passive emotions. The second, reason (*ratio*), arises from adequate understanding of common notions, providing adequate ideas that enhance our power of acting. The third, intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), is the highest form of cognition, offering direct insight into the essence of things through an immediate grasp of their relation to God or Nature. This highest knowledge leads to intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) and true human flourishing. The goal of Spinoza's ethical project is to cultivate our capacity for understanding, which ultimately allows us to act with greater agency and joy. This capacity is not static, but can be cultivated through an ongoing process of learning, reflection, and love. By acting out of the power of reason, we come to understand our true nature, and our true capabilities, in a manner that promotes both our freedom and our joy. As such, this process of understanding, and in turn acting in accordance with this understanding, is what it truly means to persevere in our being, and therefore, to express our essence as best as possible.

The principle of individuation in Spinoza's system is deeply intertwined with *conatus*. A being is individuated not by an immutable essence but by the dynamic and relational structure of its striving in a network of external influences. Human beings are thus never self-contained entities; their identity and power are co-determined by the affections they undergo and the relationships they form. This relational ontology underpins Spinoza's approach to ethics, where the goal is to transition from passive affects (which bind us to external determinations) to active affects (which express our essence more adequately).

Every individual thing is constituted by a specific proportion of motion and rest between its parts. In Part 2, the idea is presented thus: "Bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance" (E2p13lemma1). In E2d7, he defines singular things as follows:

By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together

⁶ See Nadler (2015), Kisner (2010) and LeBuffe (2010).

they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.

This definition allows for a highly flexible understanding of individuality. An individual is not defined by its material composition but by the dynamic relationships between its constituent parts. This applies not only to organisms but also to larger collective entities. A group of people who maintain a specific ratio of motion and rest and work together toward a common goal or effect can also be considered an individual (compared to the notion of a family). This is to be expected: Having agreed that no finite singular thing is a substance, but only a mode, and that there is only one substance, the burden of individuation lies on the proportion of motion and rest between its parts.

In Parts 3, 4 and 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza emphasizes the crucial role of love in the pursuit of understanding and freedom⁷. Love, in Spinoza's philosophy, is defined as "joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause" (E3p13s). A loving individual is a strong individual; but the quality, and therefore the efficacy, in terms of *conatus*, of the love, is determined by the rationality of the individual and the way it understands its object. The less the understanding is done via passive imagination and more through the second kind of knowledge, the more strengthening it will be. And understanding via *ratio*, or the second kind of knowledge, means understanding the necessary common properties between the mind and the object of knowledge or love. This recognition of our common properties with others is key to increasing our power and freedom, as Spinoza

⁷ For Spinoza's theory of love, particularly regarding the crucial distinction between rational love and intellectual love (*amor Dei intellectualis*), see *Ethics* 5p32c and 5p36s, which highlight how intellectual love arises from intuitive knowledge of our essence as necessarily belonging to God or Nature. On the contrast between rational love as experienced through the second kind of knowledge and intellectual love belonging to the third kind, see especially *Ethics* 5p36s and 5p42, where Spinoza emphasizes that intellectual love involves direct insight into the eternal and necessary existence of oneself in God, a knowledge that transcends the rational understanding of shared common properties characteristic of the second kind of knowledge.

In contemporary literature, this distinction has been extensively analyzed. Primus (2022), clarifies the epistemological foundations of intellectual love, emphasizing its role as the culmination of Spinoza's ethical vision. LeBuffe, (2010, pp. 218–230), highlights how intellectual love facilitates the ultimate liberation from passive affects. Nadler (2015), further explores how rational love is essential but preliminary, with intellectual love marking the final stage in human flourishing. Additionally, see Ayalon (2022) where the conceptual transition from rational love to intellectual love is described as a shift in affective life and epistemic self-awareness, emphasizing the evolution involved in moving from second- to third-kind cognition and the ethical implications of this transition for Spinoza's theory of human freedom. Collectively, these interpretations elucidate how, for Spinoza, the movement from rational to intellectual love represents the path toward freedom and blessedness.

claims that we increase our power when we are united with others that share with us the same essence.

Thus, Spinoza's philosophy does not encourage an isolationist path towards freedom and understanding, but one that is rooted in relationship and interdependence. In E4p18s, Spinoza writes:

There are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought. Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those which agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man.

That is, the agreement in nature that we find among fellow humans, with whom we share a significant amount of common properties, is fundamental for our survival and flourishing. And the more we tie ourselves in love and friendship to others, rational like us, the more joy and powerfulness we attain.

a theory of procreation according to Spinoza's "Ethics"

Although Spinoza does not address child-rearing directly in the *Ethics*⁸, his comments on good marriages in the Appendix to Part 3 make an interesting point:

As for marriage, it certainly agrees with reason, if the desire for physical union is not generated only by external appearance but also by a love of begetting children and educating them wisely, and moreover, if the love of each, of both the man and the woman, is caused not by external appearance only, but mainly by freedom of mind. (Definitions of the Affects, article 20)⁹

Spinoza's account of marriage reflects his broader commitment to causal explanation, a cornerstone of his rationalist philosophy. As a strict determinist, Spinoza holds that to fully understand an effect—such as the begetting and

⁸ For a general picture of his view on children, see Ayalon (2021).

⁹ For recent discussions on marriage, sexual equality, and the dynamics of power in Spinoza's philosophy, see Lord (2011), who argues that women's exclusion from political participation in Spinoza's *Political Treatise* is not grounded in their essential nature but arises instead from socio-economic circumstances, particularly their economic dependence within marriage, which prevents genuine equality and power-sharing in relationships. Lord further emphasizes that, under different socio-economic conditions, Spinoza's system would allow for women to participate fully as rational citizens. Complementing this perspective, Sharp (2012), examines Spinoza's retelling of the Genesis narrative, arguing that he implicitly presents marriage as a rational and mutually empowering partnership. Sharp highlights that, contrary to his explicit exclusion of women from political power, Spinoza's reading of Eve positions her as Adam's equal partner, whose relationship would ideally enhance their combined power, freedom, and virtue, thus challenging dominant historical interpretations of Spinoza as fundamentally anti-egalitarian with respect to gender relations. Both interpretations contribute significantly to a nuanced understanding of Spinoza's complex views on marriage, gender equality, and the ethical potential of rational partnership.

education of children—we must trace it back to its causes. Here, he presents a model of marriage in which the union of man and woman is not based on inadequately perceived, passive causes, such as external appearance or fleeting desire, but primarily on adequately perceived, active causes (which stem from the human being's essence), that is, through freedom of mind. When a marriage is rooted in such rational freedom, it produces effects that are themselves rational and stable—namely, the wise education of children and a relationship grounded in mutual understanding rather than transient passions. The causal structure Spinoza describes thus reinforces his ethical ideal: a marriage governed by reason and genuine intellectual connection is not only more stable but also more generative of lasting, beneficial effects. This aligns with his broader ethical framework, where acting from reason leads to greater joy, virtue, and power. By making freedom of mind the primary cause of a good marriage, Spinoza presents a vision of partnership in which rational individuals do not merely coexist but actively enhance each other's flourishing through shared understanding.

In an especially interesting correspondence with his friend Pieter Balling (ep. 17), Spinoza explores the profound emotional connection between father and child through the lens of imaginative identification and the possibility of affective transformation. Responding compassionately to Balling's distress over experiencing an apparent omen of his child's death, Spinoza allows that a father's intense love allows him imaginatively to participate in the child's states, anticipating their emotional and physical experiences. In this respect, Spinoza's letter demonstrates a crucial dynamic in the parent-child relationship: the child, sharing essential properties with the parent, becomes a uniquely powerful source of affective identification, enabling both deep emotional connection and the potential for rational understanding. The rational reframing of Balling's idea that he had experienced an omen, exemplified in Spinoza's compassionate therapeutic advice, aligns parental love with active affects—such as nobility or rational love—thereby making the father-child bond an important site for empowerment even through tragedy and loss.

In Spinoza's causal framework, a child is not merely the biological product of physical union but an effect of a rational relationship. This emphasis on

causality is crucial: just as understanding any effect requires tracing it back to its cause, a child's existence and proper education should be understood as the outcome of a well-ordered union. In this sense, the rational love between parents does not merely produce a child but also conditions the "kind" of child that is produced, shaping their intellectual and emotional development.

Spinoza thus integrates procreation into his broader ethical vision: just as individuals strive to persevere in their being (*conatus*), the rational parent strives to extend that perseverance through the production of a new, rational being. The child, as an effect, represents not just biological continuation but an extension of reason, freedom, and joy—ideally growing into an individual who also acts from adequate understanding. This highlights Spinoza's rejection of a merely physical or passion-driven view of procreation and instead situates it within his ethical ideal of rational flourishing.

Another important point follows from Spinoza's broader view of individuation and the increase of power through union. Since a marriage grounded in freedom of mind strengthens both individuals by enhancing their rationality and capacity for joy, procreation in this context is not just a biological consequence but an extension of this shared power. A child is not merely an effect in the narrow causal sense but also a continuation of the rational order that the parents embody.

Crucially, when a child is born, they share a maximum of common properties with their parents—not only in a biological sense but also metaphysically, in terms of the relational structure that defines individuation in Spinoza's system. Because individuation is dynamic and relational, the child is not an isolated entity but a being whose essence is deeply intertwined with that of the parents. The child's development is thus shaped by the nature of the union that brought them into existence: a relationship governed by transient passions may give rise to instability, while one rooted in reason fosters a child who can continue the process of understanding and flourishing.

For Spinoza, enhancing the power of the *conatus* is not just about individual preservation but about increasing one's power through relationships that align

with reason¹⁰. In this way, a child born from a marriage of rational love is not simply an offspring but a new being formed within an ethical and intellectual framework. This perspective reframes procreation not as a duty imposed by society or an act driven by mere desire, but as an opportunity to expand reason and joy within nature itself. It aligns with Spinoza's ethical vision in which rational individuals, by acting from adequate understanding, do not just preserve themselves but actively contribute to the perfection of the whole.

Thus, the choice to have children, when undertaken with conscious intent and grounded in love¹¹, can be a profoundly ethical and fulfilling choice according to Spinoza's philosophy, aligning with his idea of human flourishing and empowerment. It must be stressed, though, that Spinoza nowhere claims that procreation is a duty, but rather a powerful option for those inclined towards it, when done correctly, with love and understanding.

raising a child in the spirit of Spinoza's philosophy

As we have seen, the very act of procreation, understood through a Spinozistic lens, can be viewed as an expression of the *conatus*, the striving to persevere in one's own being. The highest expression of the human *conatus* is to act rationally, and this includes the behaviors which stem from our passions, which are an integral part of the human experience. When rooted in love, and not merely in blind instinct, or social or cultural expectations, this act of bringing new

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this insightful point. Indeed, Spinoza explicitly argues in *Ethics* 4p18s that when multiple individuals share the same nature, they form a more powerful collective individual, thus enhancing their capacity for self-defense and preservation. While my argument primarily emphasizes increased self-understanding and joy as the ethical benefit of having children, the reviewer rightly notes that, according to my interpretation of Spinoza, children—due to sharing significant common properties with their parents—should likewise enhance the parents' collective ability for physical or political self-preservation. Hence, a Spinozistic argument for procreation should indeed include not only epistemic and affective but also practical considerations of collective power and security.

¹¹ Spinoza's explicit warnings about human susceptibility to self-deception regarding free will (*Ethics* 1app) underscore that it is often difficult to distinguish rational choice from blind instinct or mere passive desire. For Spinoza, blind instinct is characterized by inadequate ideas and external determination, involving desires whose causes we neither clearly understand nor adequately control. Rational choice, by contrast, arises explicitly from adequate ideas and involves clear understanding of one's desires as expressions of one's essence and active striving (*conatus*). Thus, what distinguishes rational choice from blind instinct is not merely conscious endorsement, but a deeper self-awareness grounded in the rational comprehension of one's nature and motivations, a distinction Spinoza himself emphasizes as difficult but essential to ethical self-understanding (see the exceptionally dense scholium to 2p49, which encompasses the connection between these issues and more).

life into the world can be seen as an affirmative expression of the human's innate drive to continue, to expand, and to participate in the ongoing unfolding of life itself¹². Procreation, therefore, when engaged with consciously, can be a powerful manifestation of the human capacity to participate in the infinite modal expressions of God or Nature.

The Spinozistic argument for procreation is grounded in the importance of love as a path to self-understanding and joy, and thus, freedom. As mentioned above, love in Spinoza's philosophy is not an unthinking emotion but is rather rooted in a recognition of another being's essence and the common properties we share with them. In *Ethics*, he presents three kinds of love that correspond to his three kinds of knowledge. The first, imaginative love, arises from inadequate ideas based on opinion and imagination. It is partial, confused, and externally determined, often taking the form of attraction based on appearances, social conventions, or fleeting emotions. Because it depends on external causes beyond our control, it remains unstable and passive. The second, rational love, is grounded in reason and common notions, emerging from an understanding of shared human nature. This form of love is more stable and empowering, as it is based on recognizing what is genuinely beneficial for oneself and the other. Unlike imaginative love, rational love is an active effect, increasing one's power and aligning with virtue (it is mostly identified with friendship, but could easily fit with familial love, similarly to Aristotelean *philia*). The highest form, intellectual love, arises from the third kind of knowledge—intuition—and consists in the direct grasp of things as necessary expressions of God or Nature.

In the context of procreation, Spinoza's philosophy of love can help navigate parenthood. It implies a deep commitment to the child's well-being, affirming their striving to persevere in their own being, just as much as one affirms one's own striving (in a sense, through maintaining a specific ratio of motion and rest with the child, they are indeed an extension of oneself—which is often the way love for children is experienced, especially in infancy). Ultimately, parents who choose to have children that align with Spinozistic love are engaging in an

¹² It is beyond the scope of this paper, but interesting to compare to Plato's naturalistic account of love in the *Symposium*, which places philosophical love of Beauty itself on a spectrum with lust and drive for procreation.

active and conscious process of creating a loving relationship that is founded on a deep awareness of shared human essence and a shared connection to God or Nature.

Moreover, the nature of the parent-child relationship offers unique opportunities for reciprocal love and affirmation. Raising children is not a one-way street, where parents only give and the children only receive. The process of raising children creates a dynamic that facilitates both the giver and the receiver, as each comes to a clearer understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Spinoza claims that acting from our passions is a form of bondage, while acting from understanding is true freedom. The process of parenting can offer us opportunities to engage with our passions, and to learn how to act from understanding and not from passion. We learn how to act when we are confronted by anger, fear, frustration, and joy, all common experiences in the life of a parent.

Procreation uniquely compels individuals to confront their limitations, biases, and unconscious habits in ways that mere social interactions rarely achieve. Unlike casual interactions, the ongoing, intimate, and demanding relationship of parenting continually tests and reshapes one's understanding of oneself and others. It demands sustained reflection on one's values, desires, and rational capacities, thus offering a profound avenue for achieving greater self-awareness and rationality. The relationship with the child is contrasted with the parents' relationship with their own parents, allowing for an experience of a sense of time and relativity that is rarely achieved otherwise. This process substantially differs from other forms of self-enhancement, such as leisure activities (e.g., playing PS5), because it engages fundamentally relational aspects of human existence and requires persistent emotional and intellectual effort, thereby deeply resonating with Spinoza's ethical ideal of active engagement and self-transformation through relationality.

The unique challenges of raising children create numerous opportunities for self-examination, reflection, and learning. The process of bringing up children challenges us to grapple with our own limitations, biases, and unconscious habits, forcing us to confront our incomplete understanding of the world. Parents must learn how to balance their own needs with the needs of their children. This

requires a conscious effort to act with rational love, understanding that both they and their children are also modes of God or Nature, striving to persevere in being. It also pushes to find harmony in home life, through a cultivation of a healthy proportion of motion and rest between members of the family. When done correctly, the ongoing challenges that inevitably arise in the process of raising children can lead to a greater capacity for understanding and, as Spinoza claims, an increase in joy¹³.

Contemporary attachment theory lends further support to the Spinozistic argument for procreation. Secure attachment between caregiver and child is not only essential for healthy development in children but also acts as a crucial model for building loving relationships and fostering a sense of self that is rooted in secure love, affirmation, and understanding. It is through secure attachment that children develop a sense of their own worth and an understanding of the shared human essence that they share with those who love them. This cycle of secure attachment mirrors the Spinozistic ideal of acting rationally from a place of love, a process in which all are strengthened, insofar as their actions are made via understanding.

A possible argument against the interpretation presented above may focus on the perceived "burden" of raising children, which is often framed in a manner that seems to go against the Spinozistic ideal of achieving freedom and joy. It is true that raising children involves a great deal of responsibility and sacrifice, as one must set aside one's own interests and desires in the service of another. However, in the Spinozistic view, these "sacrifices" can become powerful vehicles for growth and self-understanding, if understood as actions of love, and as a

¹³ As an anonymous reviewer notes, activity/passivity and increase/decrease in power do not straightforwardly map onto one another, since Spinoza explicitly recognizes the existence of passive joys (as evidenced by the vast majority of propositions discussed in Part 3). This raises the critical question of what specifically distinguishes rationally chosen procreation from procreation pursued merely through passive joy. The key difference is that rationally conceived children, due to their maximal sharing of common properties with their parents, are more readily perceived as "another self," thus offering an especially accessible and stable venue for rational love. Unlike children conceived through passive joy, who are more likely to become objects of fluctuating and externally determined passions, rationally chosen children facilitate a consistent enhancement of parents' understanding and joy. By contrast, passive procreation increases the likelihood of estrangement, disappointment, and other forms of familial dysfunction, precisely because the child is not clearly or stably perceived through common notions, but rather through imagination and externally caused affections.

process of affirming our common essence with the new mode we are nurturing. As Spinoza says, true freedom is achieved when we act out of an understanding of the world, and when our actions are guided by rational love. Raising children is a complex and difficult undertaking, filled with challenges, and therefore offers us an endless opportunity to exercise our true essence as humans, and thus, to pursue our own joy and freedom. As Spinoza write in the closing words of the *Ethics*, "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (5p42s).

Another important consideration is the possibility of "passionate" parenting that is not rooted in reason and understanding, as Spinoza outlines in the *Ethics*. The Spinozistic argument for procreation depends on the idea that we make the choice to have children from a place of love, born out of a conscious and rational understanding of our shared essence with them. However, if procreation stems from irrational fears, desires for power, or a misguided sense of duty, then this argument does not apply, and the act of raising children can become a pathway to pain, bondage, and suffering, rather than freedom and joy. The Spinozistic argument for procreation should not be seen as an encouragement to have children regardless of motivation, but rather, as an ideal framework for understanding when this path may align with one's strive to persevere in being.

Finally, the inherent vulnerability of children is a significant ethical consideration that must be addressed. The very choice to bring a new life into the world comes with a heavy responsibility to protect and nurture the child, not just in their physical well-being, but also in their intellectual and emotional development. Parents must understand that their actions will directly influence their child's capacity for freedom and joy, and therefore, must understand the Spinozistic model that highlights the importance of acting rationally and with understanding. Spinoza's philosophy encourages parents to understand the importance of nurturing their children's *conatus* to become free by developing their ability to act out of their power of reason and love.

conclusion

This paper has presented a new perspective on the ethics of procreation, rooted in the comprehensive and illuminating framework of Spinoza's philosophy.

By embracing the key concepts of the *conatus*, the importance of acting rationally, the powerful role of love, and the crucial value of shared human essence, I have argued that choosing to have children, when approached consciously and with loving intention, can indeed be a profoundly ethical and meaningful act. Raising children, though often challenging, provides opportunities for parents to understand themselves better and to thus increase their capacity for joy and freedom.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this interpretation. While Spinoza's system offers a framework for understanding procreation as a potential path to self-realization, this model should not be considered prescriptive. As was emphasized repeatedly, choosing to have children is not a duty or an obligation, but a deeply personal choice that should be made with care, and must stem from a genuine desire, guided by reason, love, and an understanding of our shared human essence. It is also interesting to note that Spinoza himself (like many Western philosophers) did not have children of his own.

Ultimately, this paper offers a theory of procreation that is based on the robust metaphysical, epistemological and psychological philosophy of Spinoza. As such, it moves beyond the ethical or sociological considerations in which this issue is often debated. One of the central tenets of Spinoza's philosophy is that true freedom is not found in isolation or individualistic pursuits but is instead rooted in relationship, understanding, and the active affirmation of ourselves and others, in the context of our shared humanity. We have the capacity to act with love and reason, and this capacity is strengthened through action. In the context of parenting, that means choosing to act lovingly, rationally, and with understanding—and parenting provides countless ways to do just that, every day. Recognizing the way we increase in power through love, we can better understand the potential joy that is inherent in a well-lived life shared with our fellow human modes, and especially with our children.

references

- Augustine. (1955). *Treatises on marriage and other subjects*. Fathers of the Church.
Ayalon, N. L. (2021). Spinoza on children and childhood. *childhood & philosophy*, 17, 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2021.59537>

- Ayalon, N. L. (2022). The Metamorphosis of Love in Spinoza's Ethics. *Synthesis philosophica*, 37(1), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.21464/sp37102>.
- Berg, A., & Wiseman, R. (2024). *What are children for? On ambivalence and choice*. St. Martin's Press.
- Garrett, D. (1996). *Spinoza's Ethical Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2017). The Metaphysics of Morals. In L. Denis (Ed.), *The Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kisner, M. (2010). Reconsidering Spinoza's Free Man: The Model of Human Nature. *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, 5.
- Kristeva, J. (2006). Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva. *Hypatia*, 21(4), 164–177.
- LeBuffe, M. (2010). *From Bondage to Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Lord, B. (2011). "Disempowered by Nature": Spinoza on The Political Capabilities of Women. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 19(6), 1085–1106.
- Nadler, S. (2015). On Spinoza's "Free Man". *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1(1).
- Oliver, K. (2010). Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 760–777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01134.x>
- Primus, K. (2022). Part V of Spinoza's Ethics: Intuitive knowledge, contentment of mind, and intellectual love of God. *Philosophy Compass*, 17(6), n/a-n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12838>
- Schopenhauer, A., Norman, J., Welchman, A., & Janaway, C. (2010). *The world as will and representation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sharp, H. (2012). Eve's Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 50(4), 559–580.
- Söderbäck, F. (2019). *Revolutionary time : on time and difference in Kristeva and Irigaray*. State University of New York Press.
- Spinoza, B. (1985). *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Vol. 1). (E. Curley, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

noa lahav ayalon:

Currently a postdoctoral fellow in philosophy at Harvard University. Her research focuses on Spinoza, with special attention to love, religion, and the concept of life.

how to quote this article:

APA: Ayalon, N. L. (2025). Spinoza on procreation. *childhood & philosophy*, 21, 1–21. doi: 10.12957/childphilo.2025.90626

ABNT: AYALON, N. L. (2025). Spinoza on procreation. *childhood & philosophy*, v. 21, p. 1-21. doi: 10.12957/childphilo.2025.90626. Disponível em: _____. Acesso em: _____.

credits

-
- **Acknowledgements:** Not applicable.
 - **Financing:** Yad Hanadiv, Rothschild Foundation.
 - **Conflicts of interest:** The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
 - **Ethical approval:** Not applicable.
 - **Availability of data and material:** Not applicable.
 - **Authors' contribution:** Conceptualisation; Writing, revising and editing the text; Formal analysis; Research; Methodology; Resources; Validation: LAHAV AYALON, N.
 - **Image:** Not applicable.
 - **Preprint:** Not published in preprint repository.
-

article submitted to the similarity system **Plagius**

submitted: 19.03.2025 approved: 14.07.2025 published: 31.08.2025

editor: roberto franzini tibaldeo

reviewer 1: *michelle duarte*; **reviewer 2:** *oliver toth*.