

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Philosophy

7-2011

Why Do Fools Fall in Love? Spinoza's Commentary on Genesis 29

Eugene Garver

St. John's University - Collegeville, MN, egarver@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/philosophy_pubs



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Garver, Eugene, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love? Spinoza's Commentary on Genesis 29" (2011). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 8.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/philosophy_pubs/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Why Do Fools Fall in Love? Spinoza's Commentary on Genesis 29

Eugene Garver*

Jacob's story seems to contradict several key propositions of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and it explores a specifically human emotional response which seems to have no explanation in the *Ethics*. Love is pleasure (*laetitia*; alternately and probably better translated as joy) accompanied by the idea of an external cause (*amor nihil aliud est, quam laetitia concomitante idea causae externae*) (3p13s).¹ The two features or components of love, pleasure and the idea of the external cause, seem to be completely distinct. The same pleasure can be attached to a variety of ideas of external causes, and different people, or the same person at different times, can love, others hate, the same object. The idea of an external cause can be a true or a false idea, but pleasure *is* the consciousness of the increase of power, and seems incorrigible, and unaffected by the accuracy of our attribution of a cause. Although there can be false loves, that is, wrong ideas about the external causes of those pleasures. There are no false pleasures.

Fortunately for Spinoza, I think that the two components of love cannot be independent variables. I say fortunately because otherwise pleasure would be an irrational and inexplicable surd. The mind is a complex idea made up of simpler ideas and nothing else, so that pleasure cannot be something distinct from ideas.² The possibility of false pleasures is doubly fortunate, since it will allow Spinoza to recognize, as he should, that pleasure, like ideas and everything else, admits of greater and lesser degrees of reality and perfection.³

1. I use the usual notations for Spinoza's *Ethics*. 3p13, for example, stands for Proposition 13 of Part 3. 3p13d is its demonstration 3p13c its corollary, 3p13s its scholium.

2. A little more carefully: "Modes of thinking such as love, desire, or whatever emotions are designated by name, do not occur unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, etc. But the idea can be without any other mode of thinking" (2ax3). This says that the mind contains nothing without ideas. That falls a little bit short of saying that the mind contains nothing but ideas.

3. 2p13s. "Ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and...one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality."

Pleasures can be more or less real, more or less true. Whether or not the idea of an external cause is true must infect the pleasure.

Jacob loves Rachel (*Genesis* 29:18). Her beauty, he thinks, makes his mind and body more receptive and powerful; that is what it means for love to be pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause. *Per laetitiam ... intelligam passionem, qua mens ad maiorem perfectionem transit* (3p11s). Laban tricks Jacob into marrying and sleeping with Leah, thinking that she was Rachel (29:25). In marrying a woman whom he thinks is Rachel, Jacob's power increases further as he thinks he actually possesses the object of his love and cause of his increased power. As long as the deception lasts, his power increases; the *idea* of an external cause is the same whether he marries Rachel or marries Leah thinking that she is Rachel. Regardless of its cause, the pleasure is real. If we are interested in increasing power, if the "mind, insofar as it can, endeavors to think of those things that increase or assist the body's power of activity" (3p12), then we should be indifferent to the cause of the increase in power.

In the morning, Jacob discovers Laban's deception. To adapt Bentham's maxim, Jacob went to bed with poetry, only to wake up and find it was push-pin. To the extent that he is angry at Laban, his power is diminished. If Jacob was fully rational, he wouldn't be angry, since Spinoza's rational person is never angry. Setting Laban temporarily aside, if Jacob was fully rational, how would his love for Rachel be affected by his discovery? "He who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" 4p18s, quoting *Ecclesiastes* 1:18). Jacob cares whether it is Rachel or Leah whom he loves. Should he care? It seems that Jacob wrongly experiences something equivalent to commodity fetishism, thinking that only one object can cause his increase in power. Otherwise Jacob not only wouldn't feel anger towards Laban but wouldn't experience pain at all, since his power would not decrease with the discovery that he was deceived.

There is an easy answer to question of false pleasures. False pleasures are pleasures of a part of an individual, not the whole. This is the distinction Spinoza draws between titillation and hilarity. "Titillation and anguish are related to man when one part of him is affected more than others; cheerfulness (*hilaritas*) and melancholy when all parts are equally affected (3p11s). Unfortunately that distinction doesn't help here. For that to work, Jacob's temporary pleasure at being with Leah would have to be titillation, his imagined pleasure with Rachel cheerfulness. There is one piece of evidence that might lead to an interpretation in this direction. Leah bore Jacob children while Rachel was barren (29.32-35), even though Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29.30), and Leah was unloved (29.31). The trouble with that interpretation is that Rachel certainly doesn't see

her barrenness as a sign that their love is hilarious. She envies her sister (30.1).

I want to know if Jacob's power decreases simply because he now knows that his pleasure was in fact caused by Leah rather than Rachel. If finding the true cause decreases his pleasure, then the two dimensions of love, pleasure and the idea of an external cause, are not as independent as the *Ethics* suggests. Jacob was wrong about the external cause of his pleasure. The issue is whether he could be wrong too about the fact that it was pleasurable.

The pleasure of the night before of course can't change, since it is in the past. The next day Jacob is still as powerful as he was before discovering the ruse. But he can no longer remember loving Rachel the night before, since he now knows that he didn't. Since he can't remember, that increase in power cannot continue, as it would if he continued to hold the idea of Rachel as external cause. The proposition: "From the image of things past or future man is affected by the same emotion of pleasure or pain as from the image of a thing present" (3p18) can mean either that Jacob's present pain at remembering sleeping with Leah implies that he was also pained at the time, or that his pleasure at the time implies that his power increases the morning after as well, even though he would surely deny that he is experiencing pleasure. There is either a false pain, since he doesn't think he loves Leah, or a false pleasure, since at the time he thought that she increased his power.

Once he knows that Leah is the cause, his remembered pleasure no longer has any force in continuing to increase his power. This is where Jacob's story becomes hard to square with Spinoza's account of the emotions. Even worse, given Spinoza's attitude towards the moral teachings of the Bible expressed in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, this contradiction must be troubling to Spinoza.⁴ Jacob now knows that Leah was the cause of his pleasure; nevertheless, he doesn't love her, because he loves Rachel. Because he doesn't love her, she doesn't give him pleasure. The pleasure which he now remembers seems hollow. He loses power on being enlightened.⁵ There are now two conflicting aspects

4. In the *TTP* Spinoza says that the Bible contains many speculative falsehoods and nonsense, but that its moral teachings are fully consistent with reason. I can see no reason for Spinoza to dismiss *Genesis 29* as speculative.

5. There are analogies here to Bernard Williams' question of whether reflection can result in a loss of knowledge. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1985.

of his experience which come from the two interpretations of 3p18 in the last paragraph: he loves Leah because she caused him pleasure; he doesn't love Leah because if he did, it would diminish his love for Rachel, and he resists such decrease (3p13). Spinoza thinks the first, but Jacob would insist that the second is true. Jacob feels a sort of remorse when looking back at the love he felt towards Leah thinking that she was Rachel.

Jacob doesn't reason, as Spinoza thinks he should: because Leah caused me pleasure, I love her, as the definition of love in 3p11s suggests. Instead he thinks: because I don't love Leah, she didn't give me the pleasure I thought I had. (In neither case does he really reason; that is just a simple way of representing the causal connections in Jacob's mind.) Therefore there can be false pleasures.

Jacob could have responded in the other direction I just mentioned, the line of reasoning I see as spinozistic: because Leah caused me pleasure, I love her. Jacob feels pleasure, and his power of action increases. This pleasure, like any pleasure other than those that are purely corporeal, is accompanied by the idea of an external cause. Therefore Jacob loves Leah. When he learns that she was the cause of his pleasure, he loves her. To act otherwise is to be irrational and to direct one's conatus towards sunk costs rather than indefinite persistence in being. Either there is something wrong with Jacob for acting in a self-destructive way rather than as the conatus directs, or there is something wrong with Spinoza's analysis.

If Jacob had never met Rachel, then marrying and sleeping with Leah could have been the pleasurable and power-increasing experience it seemed to be in the first place. After a blind date, Jacob would trace the pleasure back to Leah and therefore love her. I see no reason Spinoza and Jacob wouldn't agree this far. Therefore there must be something about his prior love for Rachel that makes his discovery that he slept with Leah into a painful loss of power. He is not pained because he slept with Leah; he is pained because he slept with someone other than Rachel, thinking that she was Rachel. Spinoza talks about the irrationality of jealousy and notes in the scholium to 5p20 that "emotional distress and unhappiness have their origin especially in excessive love toward a thing subject to considerable instability, a thing which we can never completely possess." Jealousy is easier to understand than seeing how Jacob's "excessive love" for Rachel makes him unable to love Leah, unable to increasing his power while imagining her as its cause. Spinoza doesn't note the exclusivity and fidelity of certain varieties of love. Spinoza knows that there are objects which only one person can possess, but here the issue is whether there is an emotion such that it can only have one object. "The highest good sought by

men under the sway of emotion is often such that only one man can possess it" (4p37s1); Jacob's story raises the question of whether Spinoza can similarly argue that the highest good sought by men under the sway of emotion is often such that it can only have one source. His truly rational person would have no such loyalties, just as the rational person would see him or herself as part of a human community without boundaries—that one person was a Jew and another a gentile, one Dutch and the other Portuguese, would be of no interest to Spinoza's sage.⁶ Nothing is as useful to man as man (4p35c1); there are no limitations on that utility. But it is one thing, as he would say, to moralize against such love; it is another to explain how people are capable of such an odd emotion. To insist that one's pleasures be caused by only one external cause makes false pleasures possible.

There is another side to the story. Jacob feels pain when he realizes that he slept with Leah, thinking she was Rachel. I have been wondering why Jacob should care about the source of his pleasure. Equally, we should ask why the realization that he was mistaken should cause pain. Here there is an obvious answer: because Jacob realizes that he didn't get what he wanted. A frustrated desire causes pain. But this answer won't work for Spinoza. We don't desire things because we think them good; we think them good because we desire them. Jacob thinks that he loves Rachel rather than Leah because he finds Rachel more beautiful and lovable, but really it's the other way around: he finds Rachel more beautiful and lovable because he desires her and thinks of her as a source of pleasure. A puzzling temporal asymmetry is at work here. Before his wedding night, Jacob loved Rachel, since she was a source of pleasure for him. That night, Leah was a source of pleasure. He never desired Leah, yet she caused pleasure, without the prior desire. The asymmetry seems to deny the proposition I quoted above that "from the image of things past or future man is affected by the same emotion of pleasure or pain as from the image of a thing present" (3p18). Spinoza's rational person shouldn't care about the source of pleasure.

I offered two possible readings of Jacob's response. His reasoning could be either: (1) because Leah caused me pleasure, I love her, or (2) because I don't

6. See the ending of the last chapter of the *TTP*.

love Leah, she didn't give me the pleasure I thought I had. I argued that the first is not a likely human response, even though Spinoza's reasoning pushes that way. People care about the sources of their pleasure. People believe that they desire things because they are good. And if that's the case, that response is unique to human beings. Judging from my dog as a representative of the non-human world, he would certainly respond in the first way, and would not be capable of responding in the second. He is totally promiscuous in his loves, and is open to being pleased by anyone, increasing his power by being fed, petted, or played with. My dog on this account is closer to Spinoza's model of rationality than Jacob is.⁷

My dog isn't wiser than Jacob; he just isn't imaginative enough to respond in the second way. "If we think that someone enjoys something that only one person can possess, we shall endeavor to bring it about that he should not possess that thing." Spinoza limits 3p32 to people, and the scholium comments on human nature: "Human nature is in general so constituted that men pity the unfortunate and envy the fortunate" (3p32s). Just as Spinoza shows that only people feel pity, envy, compassion, and ambition, only people experience the pleasures and pains of exclusivity. While the focus on unique possession and unique objects of affection might be specifically human, it isn't limited to the rational person. Indeed, the more rational, the less someone might be fixed on a unique cause of pleasure. "It is not by accident but from the very nature of reason that men's highest good is common to all" (4p36s).

One exciting feature of Part 3 of the *Ethics* is that we see uniquely human emotions that are not due to people being more rational than other animals, but which instead cause uniquely human ways of going wrong, and which come from the uniquely powerful imagination that people possess. Being selective about the sources of one's pleasures is both uniquely human and irrational, and therefore the possibility of false pleasures is uniquely human too. Lower animals are promiscuous. Rational people are promiscuous. Only not fully rational human beings are selective in their loves.

There is a simple explanation of how there can be uniquely human emotions which are not active emotions or the emotions of a person guided

7. Whether this is a fair implication of Spinoza's reasoning or not, the argument this far does show that my dog more closely resembles *homo economicus* than Jacob does.

by reason. The more a body can do and be affected in many ways, the richer the imagination. The richer the imagination, the more the mind can have adequate ideas. At the same time, the richer the imagination, the more the mind can develop new forms of irrationality. Imagining that only one object will satisfy the conatus is maximally irrational. It is the parody of the true proposition that only knowledge will certainly sustain and improve the self. It deserves to be called mad along with greed and ambition (4p44s), which are also specifically human albeit irrational.

Unlike the person hypothesized in 3p32, Jacob doesn't want something that only one person can possess—he wants pleasure from only one source. He not only wants to increase his power. He wants Rachel to be the cause of his increased pleasure. Showing how that desire is possible is more difficult than proving 3p32. 3p32 depends on the supposition that “we” think that there are objects of pleasure which can only be enjoyed by one person. The assertion we need here depends on the more unlikely supposition that there are causes of pleasure which exclude other similar causes. It is hard to see why that should be true in the mechanical and geometrical presentation of the emotions in Part 3, and hard to see why it should be true for the model of rational behavior developed in Parts 4 and 5. Only humans imagine that there are unique objects of love. Just as people in the Preface to Part 4 conceive examples of human nature, Jacob conceives that he can have only one exemplary object of love.

The difference between 3p32 and what is needed is parallel to the difference between what Spinoza demonstrates in 3p16 and 3p27. In the first, he shows that if we perceive two objects as similar, we will transfer our emotions from one to the other. “From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have something similar to an object that is wont to affect the mind with pleasure or pain, we shall love it, or hate it, although the point of similarity is not the efficient cause of these emotions” (3p16) If Jacob loves Rachel and sees Leah as similar, then he will love Leah too. In 3p27, it is the similarity of subjects, not objects, that is in question. “From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, toward which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion.” If Rachel loves Jacob, and if Leah sees her loving him, then Leah will love him too. 3p32 shows that if only one of them can possess an object, then the two are rivals, as Leah and Rachel are for Jacob's love. Missing is an account of how an object of love (other than God) can become exclusive, a philosophical problem perhaps first articulated in the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Many commentators have

tried to understand Spinoza on individual immortality in Part 5 of the *Ethics*. Here is the question of the individual as an object of love, the individual as external cause of increasing power.

The closest Spinoza comes to identifying the phenomenon of exclusive love comes in his idea of devotion, which is love combined with wonder (3p52s, 3da10). Jacob is devoted to Rachel because he imagines her as unique. His experience with Leah makes it harder to maintain that idea. Therefore he tries to resist loving Leah because that love would not destroy his love for Rachel, but his devotion towards her. Neither of the sisters sees anything wrong with Jacob's exclusive devotion; instead chapter 30 shows how they compete against each other for his love.

It is time to bring Laban back into the picture. Given the presence of Rachel in his imagination, he could not imagine Leah as a source of pleasure. His love for Rachel was strong enough to drive out any competing love. He could not imagine a comparable source of satisfaction: his love for Rachel wouldn't stop him from eating and doing other things to increase his power, but he saw the two sisters as comparable and so incompatible sources of pleasure. An earlier part of Jacob's story also reaffirms Spinoza's idea that blessedness does not require wisdom. Jacob became Isaac's heir through trickery, but from then on he is an admirable and righteous patriarch.

With his disillusionment comes pain rather than a simple transfer of affections from Rachel to Leah. Jacob's pain comes from the fact that his actual experience does not correspond to his imagination. He had waited seven years to marry Rachel. There is a conflict between his experience with Leah and his anticipated union with Rachel, and from the conflict comes a loss of power. "The mind, insofar as it can, endeavors to think of those things that increase or assist the body's power of activity" (3p12). Jacob tries to think of Rachel, whom he loves, and is hindered from thinking about her because of last night's experience with Leah. False pleasures come with the pleasures of anticipation.⁸

Jacob is like someone who expects the pleasures of drinking a first growth Bordeaux and is given a great white Burgundy instead. What would otherwise

8. The mythical Careful Reader will have noted that I am channeling the *Philebus* as well as Spinoza's *Ethics*. But to make those comparisons explicit would simply confuse things.

be pleasant tastes terrible because it conflicts with his or her expectations. Something that would otherwise be pleasurable is not because it is not the object of one's desires. But Jacob's story is more difficult in two respects.

First, following Spinoza, this is a matter not only of pleasure but of increasing power. Just because something does not correspond to my expectations and so satisfy my desires, it doesn't follow that it doesn't increase my power anyway. Passive pleasures don't require my consent to increase my power. Translating from the language of expectations to that of the conatus, Spinoza does seem to have an answer to this question. There are internal causes which always, regardless of the particular desires which constitute someone's conatus, cause increases in power. Having adequate ideas is always empowering. There are no external causes which cause increases in power regardless of a person's conatus. Hobbes thought there were such universal currencies of power, as do others who think that money or political power are means to whatever ends one has. If I'm expecting even a mediocre red Bordeaux, even a fine Montrachet will not be a pleasurable experience. Leah may be perfectly capable of increasing anyone's power, anyone, that is, except someone who already loves Rachel.

Second, Jacob's story is more complicated because it involves a temporal dimension, which adequate ideas and pleasures and desires associated with them do not. I reject the flavor of the Montrachet as soon as I taste it, since it tastes like and is in fact a lousy red Bordeaux. Is this not a false pain? But Jacob does not experience the pain of frustrated desire on his wedding night, but only the morning after. The successful politician rewrites history, but here Jacob seems to rewrite his own memories.

The human imagination is so powerful that it can cause many people, and not only moralists, to think that things are pleasant because they are good. The imagination makes us think in terms of final causes; Jacob therefore thinks that whether or not his power increases depends on whether he thinks it does; whether we feels pleasure depends on his getting what he wants. He thinks there can be false pleasures and pains because pleasure and pain depend on our ideas about them. The human imagination is rich enough that someone can think that only certain people can be useful to them and increase their power. Jacob's problem is not confined to romantic love. Human beings naturally impute all kinds of good qualities to those whom they love, and bad qualities to those we hate. If I love Rachel, then I find her deep voice sexy and attractive. If I love Leah, I find her high-pitched voice girlish and lovable; Rachel's dark skin makes her beautiful to those who love her; Leah's white skin does the same. When we turn from love to hate, what was voluptuous becomes fat. More strongly, we

see as desirable whatever qualities we happen to find. This second feature of the uniquely human emotional life causes much of rivalry and competition.

Jacob does not reject a lesser present joy for the sake of a greater joy in the future. He is not rejecting a lower pleasure for a higher one. He does not reject Leah because he finds something undesirable about her. She just isn't Rachel. Before that night, Jacob could imagine Rachel as a source of joy and increase in power (3p12). The morning after, he couldn't continue imagining it. He has been deprived not only of the reality of loving Rachel but of the pleasant imaginary idea.

Jacob was tricked. Because of the deception, Leah in fact did give him pleasure and strength, although he didn't know it. Once he realized that he was tricked, he can no longer remember Leah as giving him pleasure, just as he can no longer remember Rachel as giving him pleasure. His pain at mistaking Leah for Rachel makes it impossible for him to remember her as an object of love. "The mind is averse to thinking of things that diminish or check its power and the body's power" (3p13c). Not only is the amount of power in his conatus as though the increase in power had never occurred, but Jacob is now weaker than before he slept with Leah. The pain of realizing his mistake, the pain of coming to know the truth, decreases his power. It seems as though Jacob has reversed the past. Last night he was empowered by Leah. Now he hates her; she is a source of pain. But more than that, he now takes their being together the night before as a source of pain rather than pleasure.

Jacob, by Spinoza's account, has this complicated psychological experience because he is led by imagination rather than reason. Nothing in this story would make sense if there were adequate ideas involved. No one can be deceived into having an adequate idea, while one can be pleased and have his or her powers increased through deception. Furthermore, or what comes to the same thing, Jacob's desires are wholly temporal: "Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel" (29.17-18). He imagines Rachel as an object of love and devotion not because she will help him to have more adequate ideas. He loves her because he saw her first. Spinoza does not follow Plato's *Symposium* in seeing the experience of beauty as a route to wisdom and immortality. Still—and here the Bible and Spinoza come back together—without adequate ideas, Jacob is still a virtuous man, and his love for Rachel leads him to fourteen years of obedience and charity.

Laban's ruse is no different from many of the devices political rulers use to increase obedience, and Spinoza shows that people voluntarily submit to the ruler's commands whenever doing so increases their power (see esp.

TTP chapter 17). Clever rulers, like Laban, get their subjects to lead just and charitable lives without having to understand what they're doing. Loyalty to one nation is as irrational as love for only one individual, yet both can increase one's power. Jacob serves Laban, increasing the power of Laban as a sovereign. "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older" (*Genesis* 29.28). Jacob gets what he wants too; it just turns out to be more expensive than he expected. We'd rather have security without having to obey someone else, but that's not an option. Jacob is eventually rewarded, with both Leah and Rachel as wives, with twelve sons, and "grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses" (30.43). The virtue founded on adequate ideas is its own reward (5p42); the virtue of the good non-philosopher represented by Jacob receives its appropriate reward as well.

Saint John's University, MN,
enero 15, 2011.

Aceptado: marzo 2011.

Works Cited

Spinoza, Baruch. *Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, Edwin Curley, ed. and trans. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1985.

• Eugene Garver is Regents Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Saint John's University. He is the author of the following books: *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence*, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character*, *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics*, *For the Sake of Argument*, and the forthcoming *Living Well and Living Together: Aristotle's Politics*. In 2008 he rode his bicycle, with the Tour d'Afrique, from Cairo to Cape Town.