



## THE HUMAN DESIRE FOR PLEASURE AS A BASIS FOR THE UNITY OF MANKIND: EMPIRIC RESEARCH VALIDATING SPINOZA'S 350 YEAR-OLD PHILOSOPHY

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### Abstract:

The aim of the research is to test Spinoza's universal law of self-preservation for all mankind. This embodies the different levels of desire to exist, and on higher levels, the desire for knowledge, on the highest levels, the entire scope of practical knowledge according to which human beings function in daily life and how all this is expressed in a unified way. 512 examinees from different ethnic groups, ages and genders at the Zefat Academic College in Israel were tested during course of four academic years, where they learned how to apply theories using actual cases.

### Method

Research population included 383 students in Zefat Academic College (183 Jewish, 93 Moslem, 63 Druze and 27 Christian; the rest were "other" or absent). Each student was given a questionnaire with ten questions.

Results showed a strong tendency towards unity among the groups. The unity of human nature stipulated by Spinoza is based on the notion that after removing the environmental influences that shape humans from early childhood, and observing them through the basic existential lens, a higher correlation is achieved because they act according to their nature – the human one. The research results support Spinoza's claims from 350 years ago.

**Keywords:** human nature, unity, application, mankind, pleasure

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Spinoza states in his book "*Ethics*":

*"In Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness, for Nature is always the same, and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same; that is, the laws and rules of Nature according to which all things happen and change from one to another are everywhere and always the same"*

(Ethics, Preface to Part 3)

When a person acts according to the principle law of nature - "*the law of self-preservation*", this is the basis for activity of every single thing in the world. According to Spinoza:

*"Each thing, insofar as it is itself, endeavors to persist in its own being"*

(Ethics, Part 3, Proposition 6)

**The aim of the research** is to test Spinoza's universal law of self-preservation for all mankind. This embodies the different levels of desire to exist, and on higher levels, the desire for knowledge, and on the highest levels - the entire scope of practical knowledge according to which human beings function in daily life and how all this is expressed in a unified way in aspects of ethnic background, age and gender. 383 students/examinees from different ethnic groups, ages and genders at the Zefat Academic College in Israel were tested during the course of three academic years in courses where they learned how to apply theories using actual cases.

**The aim of the first stage of the research** was to validate or refute the claims made by Spinoza in "*Ethics*". Each student was given a questionnaire with ten questions to determine whether a correlation exists between the ability to apply the knowledge acquired in the courses and a feeling of self-fulfillment, pleasure and happiness. The subjects were required to state their religion, age and gender. The first stage of the research revealed a high correlation between applied achievements and a level of satisfaction = 0.618 according to Spearman's rho.

**The aim of the second stage of the research** presented here was to examine the differences between the groups where ethnicity-religion, age and gender were concerned.

## The Unity of Mankind

Spinoza's approach to the basic nature common to human beings is linked not only to the mental aspect but also to the material one (Schmidt, 2009). These aspects relate to the rule of self-preservation as a basic law of nature common to all natural phenomena (known nowadays as the common genetic code). Spinoza was the first to relate specifically to what is now known today as "*The Law of Mass Conservation*" - a law of nature that refers to the entire material world of entities and phenomena.

In Ethics Scholium to Proposition 15 Part 1 he says:

*"If we consider it intellectually and conceive it is substance [...] than it will be quite clear to those who can distinguish between the imagination and intellect,[...] that matter is everywhere the same, and there are no distinct parts in it except insofar as we conceive matter in various ways."*

Spinoza validates this material principle by means of the spiritual aspect, for man is actually composed of a body and a soul that can be seen at times as material and at times as spiritual. (Della Rocca, 1996., Gilead, 1986). Spinoza's parallelism is one of the most well-known and from the substance point of view, in nature things take on a shape and take off a shape but do not change in essence.

In Part 1, Proposition 20, corollary 2 Spinoza says:

*"For if they were to change in respect of existence, they would also have to change in respect of essence".*

In Part 2, proposition 7, Spinoza expresses parallelism in the following way:

*"The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things".*

In this Scholium:

*"And so, whether we conceive Nature under attribute of Extension or under the attribute of Thought ..., we find one and the same order.... or one and the same connection of causes – that is, the same things following one another".*

According to the Preface to Part 3 man is not a separate entity within nature in general but rather an integral part thereof (Hampshire, 1962). The laws of nature are

also incumbent on man and the differences between human beings are not in essence but rather in aspects of their preference, regarding the need for the self to exist and be preserved (Gabbey, 1997). Spinoza claims that as far as the role of insight and its function in self-preservation is concerned, the rationale is common for all human beings, as he writes in Part 2, Corollary of Proposition 38:

*"Hence it follows that there are certain ideas or notions common to all men. For all bodies agree in certain respects, which must be conceived by all adequately, or clearly and distinctly".*

According to this common rule sadness decreases or delays man's power to act; in other words it delays his desire to retain his personal existence. And the opposite is true: pleasure increases or cultivates man's power to act, and the more his pleasure increases, so his entireness will increase and with it his expression of existential self-fulfillment. Spinoza's pragmatism in distinguishing between good and bad forms the basis to understand his behavioral approach, because the purpose of the theory in understanding its values is not in its value per se but in putting it into practice. The value of a theory is in adopting it in practice and in promoting man who without practice acts with less perfection (LaBuffe, 2010).

According to Spinoza, pleasure and pain are two extremes of a continuum of existence which enfolds within it the terms good and bad as conceived by every human being. Two ends of the impulse to exist. According to Part 3, Proof to Proposition 57:

*"Therefore, pleasure and pain is desire of appetite, insofar as it is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, by external causes; that is, it is each individual's very nature.*

Spinoza continues thus in Part 3, Definitions of the Emotions 25 that:

*"Self-contentment is pleasure arising from a man's contemplation of himself and his power of activity".*

Gilbert (2007), in the fifth section of his book *"Stumbling on Happiness"* maintains that in order to achieve ultimate pleasure and minimize pain we need to be able to identify experiences with the circumstances that caused them. However, we must also be able to explain how and why those particular circumstances caused those particular experiences. Gilbert (2007) claims that all the physiological indications such as EEG, PET or MRI scans are inferior to a person's own personal expressions about his feelings.

The person who actually had the experience is the only one able to see inside himself and therefore his statements act as a baseline from which feelings of happiness can be compared, and this research has been undertaken bearing these factors in mind.

At this point practical insight blends in as a very beneficial tool for human existence and for promoting the quality of existence. In Proof to Proposition 35 Part 4 Spinoza says:

*"It follows that insofar as men live under the guidance of reason, to that extent only do they necessarily do the things which are necessarily good for human nature and consequently for every single man".*

He continues with Proposition 36:

*"The highest good of those who pursue virtue [guidance of reason] is common to all, and all can equally enjoy it".*

Here Spinoza connects in a practical way the insightful behavior calmly, by himself, and in the same sentence, he connects it to the law self-preservation. In his words, in Proposition 52 Part 4 (See also Mounitz, 2011):

*"Self-contentment can arise from reason, and only that self-contentment which arises from reason is the highest there can be"*

There is nothing in man that resists the law of self-preservation. Also, what is known as *"self-hatred"* is interpreted as a sort of sickness, sadness that reflects pain and suffering that is a lower level of the existence of the law of self-preservation and this phenomenon has nothing to do with insightfulness (Green, 2016).

The construct of Spinoza's *"Ethics"* is organized according to the geometric Euclid system. This system is set up not only according to shape but blends integrally into the contents of the system (Steenbakkers, 2009).

Spinoza had good reason to blend his theory with the mathematical construct. Spinoza's *"Ethics"* is a practical behavioral philosophy; it has no value without internalizing the metaphysical theory and conducting oneself according to its rules in daily life. Spinoza's aim was to find the commonality in every human being capable of understanding his philosophy. The common rationale for humanity as a whole lies in the laws of mathematics and geometry. Every person who thinks rationally cannot

reject the geometrical order and that in itself is something common to all, with no differences in ethnicity.

It is this combination of a logical platform common to every person with the option to move to, from and within it to a sense of pleasure achieved as a result of the abilities attained in practice that led us to conduct this current research.

Spinoza's psychological statements and metaphysical perceptions are based on the basic premise of existence of the self, and from this starting point he maintains that man wishes to establish and improve this basic level and empower his actions and that this empowerment is the insightful activity and its application in daily life (Della Rocca, 1996)

Spinoza brings down from the philosophical ivory tower to the field of daily life the rules of self-fulfillment, the satisfaction gained from applying insight to concrete aspects of daily life and linking them to the law of self-preservation – an analogy of a lighthouse with its flashing light, indicating the direction to everyone (Golomb, 2015)

Self-fulfillment is a significant existential matter emanating from correct practical usage of insight, i.e. changing study into practice. *"Ethics"* has no theoretical value as a book apart from being a useful guide to conducting life in a wise way (Gilead, 1986). Spinoza himself felt what he called:

*"...a transition from decreased perfection to a more extensive perfection (sense of pleasure)" when he applied geometry in an ethical system in daily life, according to Barbaras (2007).*

Spinoza himself perceived between the joy of doing mathematics and the Philosophical 'therapy' he developed in the Ethics. What the Euclidian mathematician experiences when gradually disclosing the universal ballet proportion is an unequalled joy.

Since Spinoza himself experienced the therapy of developing a philosophy by means of a mathematical method, then, practically speaking, the geometry turns the formal structure of the philosophy into practical ethical content that contributes to the positive feeling of self-fulfillment and pleasure (Steenbakkers, 2009).

It was Aristotle who had proclaimed that the pleasure felt by man as an individual is expressed when using active insight. Man's striving for pleasure and applying it is not something that happens suddenly; rather it is ongoing, and there are no exceptions here. Every person according to his ability and the role of the state is to provide every citizen with the conditions under which each individual's potential for pleasure can be realized (Aristotle, 2014).

As to the matter of a person's individual abilities, Della Rocca (1996) explains that if someone is unable to empower his actions, in spite of his existential desire to do so, this does not make him into a person who is different from those others who do succeed, because everyone acts under the same rule of nature.

The potential of every person who is born, before he is influenced by his environment, be it familial, lingual, and ethnic or other, has the same intrinsic value in that he has the ability to acquire the theoretical knowledge needed to exist using practical insight just like everyone else. These statements of Spinoza lead us to ask the research question:

*“Does the feeling of self-fulfillment come about as a result of applying a theory on a concrete case shared by mankind in general, and to what extent?” In other words, “Can differences be found in this feeling when relating to ethnicity, gender and age?”*

The aim of the research was to test the validity of Spinoza's ethical statement in aspects relating to ethnicity-religion, gender and age in heterogenic classes at the Zefat Academic College over a period of four years.

In the courses that were tested, students acquired the theoretical data and applied them to concrete cases with which they were familiar in daily life in the political-social, financial and education fields. These cases required comprehension, analysis, explanations and decision-making using the theories as tools of application. The research results support and corroborate Spinoza's statements from 350 years ago.

### **Research population**

In order to test Spinoza's assumptions we conducted an empirical research based on a survey with data collected from samples and included 383 students in Zefat Academic College (183 Jewish, 93 Moslem, 63 Druze and 27 Christian; the rest were “other” or absent).

### **Procedure and Results**

The grades in the course were coded by an ordinal measure, where 1 represents the grades between 90 and 100; 2 for grades between 80 and 89; 3 for grades between 70 and 79; and 4 for grades lower than 70. As Table 1 shows the grades were equally distributed, and the median grade was between 80 and 89.

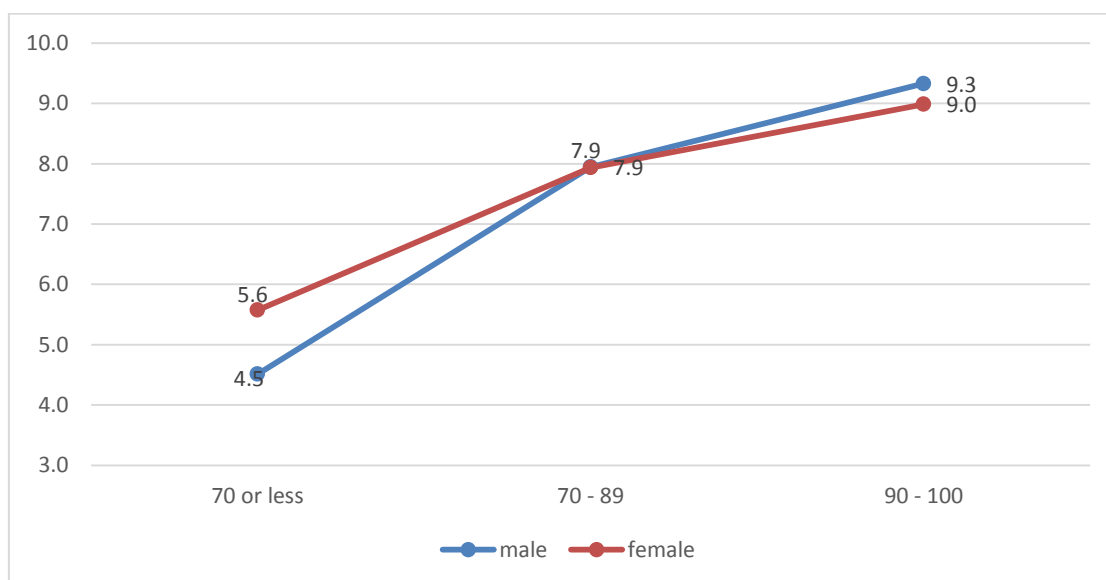
**Table 1:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Gender

Final Grade		Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
70 or less	Student Satisfaction Index	male	48	4.5125	1.93596	*
		female	45	5.5733	2.30832	
70 - 89	Student Satisfaction Index	male	90	7.9467	2.24195	
		female	93	7.9355	2.11725	
90 - 100	Student Satisfaction Index	male	42	9.3286	.86088	
		female	42	8.9857	1.14627	

\* p<0.05

**Explanation of Table and Chart:** The higher the grade, the higher the satisfaction level, but the gaps between men and women are minor and insignificant. The gap between the satisfaction index where men and women are concerned is only significant in the group of grades that were low (less than 70). In both the other grade groups, the gaps are minor and insignificant (according to t-test) thus no conclusion can be reached regarding differences between men and women.

**Chart 1:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Gender





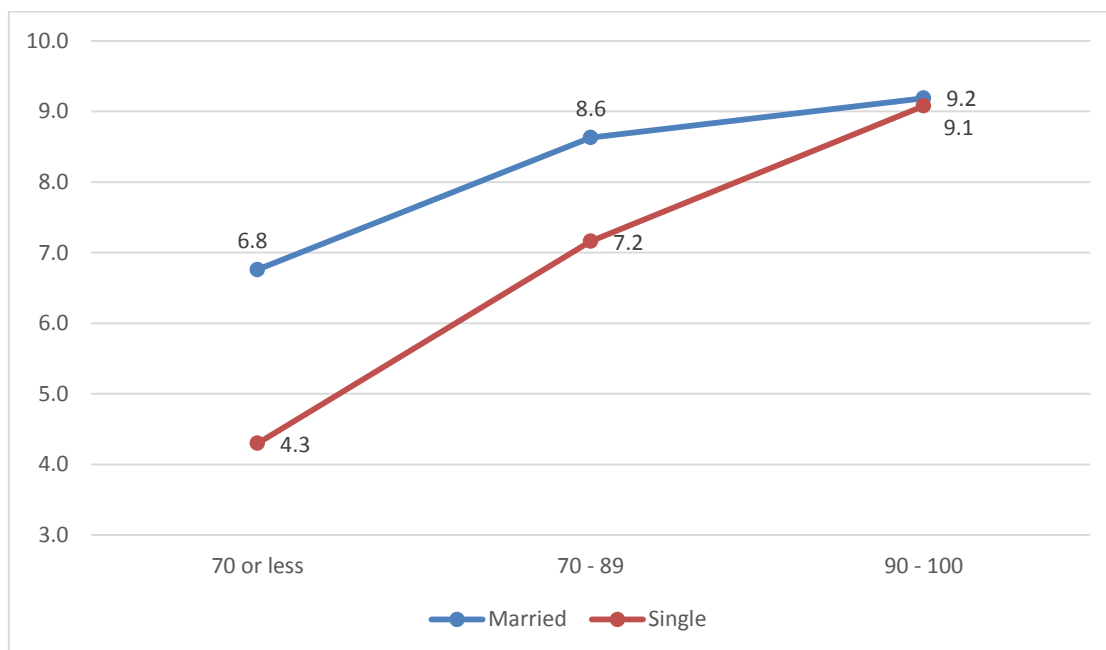
**Table 2:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Personal Status

Final Grade		Personal status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
70 or less	Student Satisfaction Index	Married	30	6.7600	1.85948	**
		Single	60	4.3000	1.79774	
70 - 89	Student Satisfaction Index	Married	102	8.6294	1.78451	**
		Single	90	7.1600	2.21926	
90 - 100	Student Satisfaction Index	Married	51	9.1882	1.13307	
		Single	30	9.0800	.87352	

\*\* p<0.01

**Explanation of Table and Chart:** The higher the grade, the greater the satisfaction, and there is a decrease in the gaps between single and married people. The gap between the satisfaction index for single and married people is significant in the lower grade groups (less than 70) and the average grade groups (70-89). In the groups of students with excellent grades (90-100) the gap disappears and is insignificant (according to t-test) thus no conclusion can be reached regarding differences between single and married people in the same group.

**Chart 2:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Personal Status

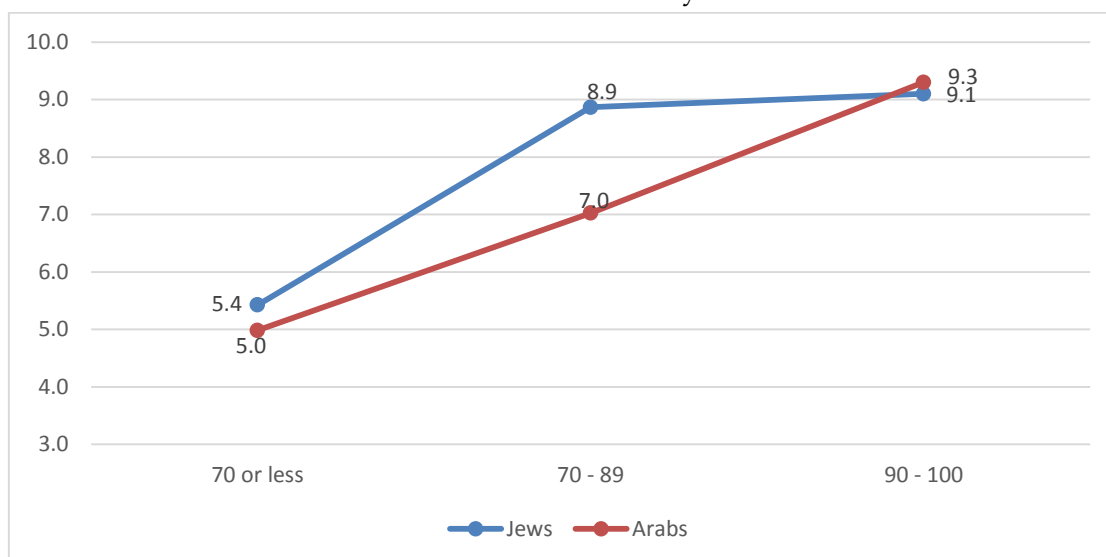


**Table 3:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Ethnicity

Final Grade		Ethnicity	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
70 or less	Student Satisfaction Index	Jews	24	5.4250	2.00808	
		Arabs	72	4.9833	2.23361	
70 - 89	Student Satisfaction Index	Jews	99	8.8667	1.52744	**
		Arabs	96	7.0250	2.23357	
90 - 100	Student Satisfaction Index	Jews	60	9.1000	1.16822	
		Arabs	24	9.3000	.48990	

\*\* p<0.01

**Chart 3:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Ethnicity



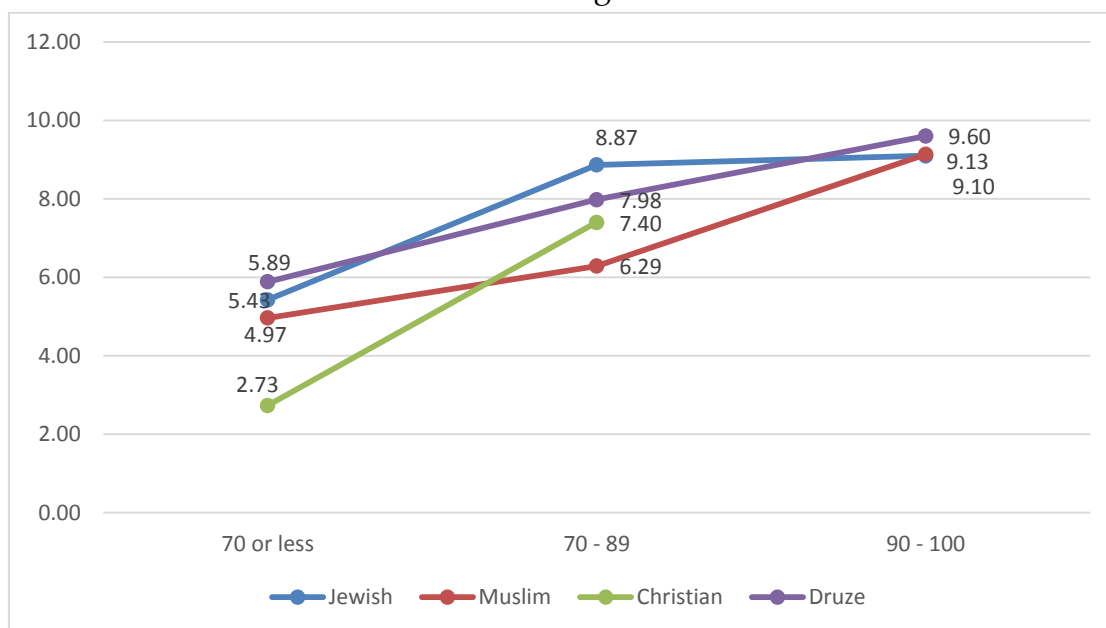
**Explanation of Table and Chart:** It was found that the higher the grade, the greater the satisfaction amongst Jews and Arabs. The smallest gaps on the satisfaction scale amongst Jews and Arabs are evident in the excellent students (90-100) – a gap of 0.2 points on the scale, and in the weaker students (less than 70) with a gap of 0.44 points on the scale. The conclusion therefore is that no differences exist between Jews and Arabs in these two groups. The gap between the satisfaction index amongst Jews and Arabs in the group of average grades (70-89) is significant (according to t-test) thus no conclusion can be reached regarding differences between Jews and Arabs in that group.

**Table 4:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Religion

Final Grade		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
70 or less	Jewish	24	5.4250	2.00808	**
	Muslim	36	4.9667	1.75825	
	Christian	9	2.7333	.95394	
	Druze	21	5.8857	2.34655	
70 - 89	Jewish	99	8.8667	1.52744	**
	Muslim	48	6.2875	2.26421	
	Christian	18	7.4000	1.99529	
	Druze	30	7.9800	1.94145	
90 - 100	Jewish	60	9.1000	1.16822	
	Muslim	9	9.1333	.26458	
	Druze	12	9.6000	.44313	

\*\* p<0.01

**Chart 4:** Differences between Averages on a Scale of Satisfaction According to Grade and Religion



**Explanation of Table and Chart:** It was found that the higher the grade, the greater the satisfaction amongst all the religions. The smallest gaps on the satisfaction scale are evident in the group of excellent students (90-100) in all religions. Small gaps on the satisfaction scale were recorded in the first group of grades (less than 7) among Jews, Moslems and Druze (but not Christians). In the average grade group, the gaps are

larger and significant (according to t-test) thus no conclusion can be reached regarding differences between the religions in the average grade group.

## Discussion

**Results** indicate a strong tendency towards unity among the above groups. The unity of human nature stipulated by Spinoza is based on the notion that after removing the environmental influences that shape humans from early childhood, and observing them through the basic existential lens, a higher correlation is achieved because they act according to their nature – the human one. This nature encompasses the desire to exist and improve the level of existence, when on each improvement level the person carries out self-observation and by means of this act he reveals an improvement in his abilities *and beyond a lower level of perfection to supreme perfection* leading to satisfaction, a feeling of self-fulfillment and pleasure.

In other words, the research results support Spinoza's claims from 350 years ago. Following is an abstract of the empirical findings of the research:

### A. Gender

Here the test showed that the higher the grade in the course, the higher the satisfaction, among both men and women. Where the highest grades were concerned, it was apparent that men achieve a higher average grade than women (9.33 compared to 8.99 respectively), but here, the confidence intervals overlap which indicates that the differences between the two groups are not statistically significant. Among the medium grades, the average on the satisfaction scale is almost completely equal among men and women. Also in the lower grades, an overlap can be found in the confidence intervals, indicating a lack of differences between the groups. In conclusion, the findings show that no significant statistical differences exist between men and women in all the categories.

### B. Ethnicity

The results clearly indicate that the higher the grade, the greater the sense of satisfaction in all sectors. Satisfaction is greatest when grades are highest and lowest when grades are lowest. In addition, it appears that in every group of grades there are minor differences in averages. For example, in the highest grade group (90-100) satisfaction is greatest among the Druze (9.60) and among the Jews and Moslems it is slightly lower, yet almost identical (about 9.10). Yet when the confidence intervals are considered, there appears to be an overlap which indicates that the differences between the groups

are not statistically significant. The same can be said for medium and low grades, as indicated in Table 3.

### **C. Personal Status**

Table 2 and Chart 2 also reflect that the higher the grade, the greater the satisfaction among single and married people. A certain, but insignificant, decrease is evident as achievements decrease. As noted, the gap between single and married people disappears almost completely when achievement level is 90-100.

### **D. Religion**

This trend is also relevant when dividing up the participants according to the parameter of different religions. The higher the grades, the smaller the gaps in a positive feeling of pleasure and self-determination, as reflected in Table 4 and Chart 4. A slight difference in the level of satisfaction should be noted in this table (4) among the Jewish participants, something that was not evident in the ethnicity table (3). This was to be expected because religion is an acquired aspect and not innate, like age or ethnicity. In any event, the gap is not extreme and is not contradictory, and may even corroborate Spinoza's approach that determined that the common basis is the law of self-preservation. This is the quality of nature itself, and as such it is innate, whereas religion is acquired, and thus this finding, too, supports Spinoza's claims as confirmed in this research.

### **E. Age**

The results show that the higher the grade, the greater the satisfaction. In addition, they show that young people achieve lower averages on the satisfaction scale in all grade groups. On examining the results it is clear, for example, that the students with the highest grades (90-100) expressed the highest level of satisfaction among the 30-39 age group (9.65) compared to younger people aged 18-29 (8.92), the lowest being among the 40+ age group (8.64). Here, too, it is clear that there is an overlap in confidence intervals, which indicates that no statistical differences exist.

The practical method in Spinoza's behavioral theories discussed above is reinforced by the results of this study. Man's desire to exist occurs on various levels where basic survival and bodily needs represent the lowest level of happiness. The higher levels refer to luxuries and quality of life that also lead to fulfillment, but according to Aristotle (2014), these are insufficient: man strives for continual happiness, which is expressed in spiritual pleasure. Indeed, Aristotle defined happiness as an

ongoing activity. The research confirmed that this entire principle holds true for the whole of mankind.

Regarding the law of self-preservation at its various levels, including the desire for happiness, Spinoza's naturalism that expresses the unity of human nature, adopts a view of equality between all human beings. This statement of Spinoza's is also reinforced in the present study as we found that ethnicity and religious differences between the subjects were minor (see Tables 3 and 4 above). Spinoza's philosophy, as presented in this research, states that human nature, that is not a separate entity from nature as a whole, is constant in all places and at all times (Gilead, 1986, Hampshire, 1962). This study showed that ethnic, religious, linguistic or other differences had no effect on the basic human characteristics, which drive us all to one extent or another and this fits with the hierarchical principle of the law of self-preservation. According to the laws of nature, plants and animals are also governed by the laws of self-preservation as Gabbey (1997) interprets, but at lower physiological levels. Intellectual abilities and the positive feelings emanating from them in all people regardless of cultural, religious, linguistic or ethnic differences were encouraged in the research.

Ethics, Preface to Part 3, corresponding to Spinoza's statement:

*"In Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness, for Nature is always the same, and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same; that is, the laws and rules of Nature according to which all things happen and change from one to another are everywhere and always the same."*

The differences in achievement levels in the subject groups as reflected from the above tables do not contradict Spinoza's law of self-preservation. As Della Rocca (1996) maintains, if a person does not have the ability to empower himself to act, in spite of his existential desire to do so, it does not mean that he becomes someone different from other people who do succeed in this, because every person acts according to the same law of nature; the differences derive from the abilities of each and every person and not because of a fault or something out of the ordinary in the above law of nature.

The differences between the natural world and man are not in the principle of the law of nature but in man's ability to achieve them and thus reaching self-fulfillment, to contemplate this achievement and rejoice in his abilities, thereby achieving a higher level of activity within the bounds of the laws of self-preservation. Being a part of nature each person has a common denominator deep in his structural make-up that is irrelevant to ethnic, religious or linguistic differences (Spinoza, 2002a, See also Della Rocca, 2008).

**The research conclusions** corroborate our hypotheses based on Spinoza's philosophical roots. These roots came about as the result of observing the behavior and feelings of human beings.

Spinoza's claims, as shown in this research, are based upon the self-reflection of a person who experiences the transition from a low level of perfection to a higher level using the geometric Euclid structure as an ethical system of human feelings and human behavior. According to up-to-date research, Spinoza himself experienced those feelings of calm as a result of reflective self-observation and an increase of empowerment after he had applied the principles of geometry on concrete cases taken from daily life (Steenbakkers, 2009, Barbaras, 2007).

The research results corroborate the statements of LaBuffe (2010) because the theoretical ability to make a distinction between good and bad in and of itself, for example in decision-making, has no value when it comes to making a person happy. The aim of understanding a theory is not of itself in a person's existential sophisticated qualities. Every theory is intended to be applied, and the application, according to Spinoza, is the transition from a low level of perfection to a high level of perfection, in a way that is basic to all mankind.

Regarding the practical role of philosophy reflected in Golomb's (2015) contribution, we will conclude in the spirit of the present research:

**The research contribution** is its unique nature. Here we are offering a philosophical perspective on a contemporary empirical research which incorporates an additional benefit. As far as we are aware, no research has yet been carried out in a pioneering way that brings the discussion of Spinoza's theories down from the philosophical ivory tower to the field of daily life in a contemporary empirical research.

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