

M. J. Kisner and A. Youpa (eds.): *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

For those of us who were first drawn to Spinoza largely because of his work in ethics, the fact that his moral philosophy has tended to receive so little scholarly interest compared to, say, his metaphysics or epistemology, is always somewhat perplexing. Certainly it seems clear enough that Spinoza himself was driven largely by a desire to uncover ethical truths, and that he saw his conception of the good and the good life, rigorously deduced from an initial set of stipulative definitions, as one of his crowning achievements. In the Preface to Part Two of the *Ethics*, for example, he resolutely swats away the other branches of Descartes' tree of knowledge, announcing his intention is to focus only on those things 'that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness'. Less a tree than, more of a pole.

There is the sense, though, that the academic tide has been turning. Along with an increasing number of book chapters and journal articles, Spinoza's ethical theory has also recently received two book-length treatments in LeBuffe's *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010) and Kisner's *Spinoza on Human Freedom* (2011). Now, in this new collection of essays from Oxford University Press, capably edited by Matthew Kisner and Andrew Youpa, we have another rich source of material.

For the specialist, it really is essential reading. Kisner and Youpa have brought together some of the most exciting and knowledgeable scholars working in the field and they have all produced first-rate work.

John Carriero opens the collection. Carrying on in a similar vein to his 2005 essay, 'Spinoza on Final Causality', and his 2011 'Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza', Carriero again brings

out the historical significance of Spinoza's ethical claims through comparison with Aristotelian and Thomist traditions, this time providing an overview of Spinoza's ethics that, aside from its other merits, would serve as an excellent introduction to any new to his moral philosophy.

Steven Nadler offers a strong rebuttal to the thought that Spinoza was only concerned with personal well-being and had little to say about how we ought to treat others. Plotting a not-entirely-uneventful course from Spinoza's egoistic moral psychology to an ethic of benevolence, Nadler shows that, for Spinoza, it is not enough for the 'person guided by reason' to 'simply modify the actions of those with whom he must interact in society', rather they will want to 'transform those individuals themselves, to modify their character' (p. 47).

Charles Jarrett presents an admirably clear-eyed essay on Spinoza's metaethics, giving a close analysis of how far we might consider it either constructivist or naturalist. The answer, briefly: 'Spinoza is a constructivist regarding the terms 'good' and 'bad, as well as 'perfect' and 'imperfect''(p.78); virtue 'becomes a normative term...when Spinoza takes the ideal human being to be one who acts solely from virtue'(p. 78); and 'Spinoza simply jettisons specifically moral concepts of right and wrong...[they] express legal concepts' (p.78).

Michael A. Rosenthal addresses similar questions of normativity from different angle, reflecting on some of the structural similarities between Spinoza's politics and ethics. According to Rosenthal, such parallels ultimately allow us to understand how normativity enters Spinoza's ethical picture: in the same way a sovereign will establishes what is 'just' for a multifarious society so too the agent's will dictates the well-being of its various component parts. Thus, Rosenthal claims, 'political principles do much of the normative work in ethics', and 'politics in a broad sense, understood through the idea of self-constitution, is the ground of value in general' (p. 96).

Jon Miller makes a convincing case as to what might be Spinoza's 'most basic ethical precept', namely 'that we ought (in some sense of that word) to live in agreement with nature' (p. 106). Karolina Hübner meanwhile casts new light on a problem that has managed to somehow slip under the radar of most Spinoza scholars: if Spinoza takes the content of good and bad to be determined by a model of human nature we set before ourselves, then what constitutes a rational understanding of human nature?

Susan James considers two related puzzles thrown up by Spinoza's parallelism: if Spinoza's ethics calls for an intellectual progression, and if his metaphysics suggests that every change in our mind must be mirrored by a change in our body, how then do our bodies change as our understanding grows? And what, for Spinoza, constitutes a bodily good? One interesting implication of Spinoza's answer, James explains, is that it reveals the value and importance of interactions with our community: 'Vulnerable as we are, we can only empower ourselves in community with other human beings, and the character of the societies we live in has an immediate bearing on our capacity to increase our understanding' (p. 158).

Building on a meticulous analysis of Spinoza's metaphysics, Eugene Marshall shows that, despite appearances to the contrary, human beings 'can have adequate ideas, be adequate causes and even be free to some extent, or in certain activities' (p. 176).

In two essays that are among the highlights of the book, Justin Steinberg and Michael LeBuffe consider the role of 'the dictates of reason' in Spinoza's ethical system. Steinberg focuses his efforts on rescuing Spinoza's dictates from accusations that they variously non-prescriptive, vacuous, and/or useless for those of us deliberating in suboptimal conditions. LeBuffe attempts to preserve the motivational force of the dictates in light of Spinoza's thorough-going necessitarianism, in part by distinguishing between two kinds of necessity in Spinoza's

metaphysics: necessity as ‘what must be the case’ and necessity as ‘what is necessary to be what is the case at all times and all places’ (p. 199).

Looking behind the curtain of the *Ethics*, Olli Koistinen tries to uncover Spinoza’s reasons for holding that value judgements express desires. His striking conclusion is that Spinoza is driven to this position by virtue of the fact that, within his system, the alternative has the potential to threaten our existence. Given Spinoza’s account of what it means to be human, motivation by consideration of a ‘human-independent good’ would be (to put it mildly) ‘extremely bad for us’ (p. 229).

Finally, in the last two essays of the book, Sanem Soyarslan and Valtteri Viljanen look respectively to our progress toward the good life and the pot of honey Spinoza puts at the end of it. Soyarslan gives a persuasive account of the importance Spinoza places on intuitive knowledge in our ascent from an ordinary life to blessedness. On her view, ‘intuitive knowledge does not consist in a disinterested pursuit of truth’, rather it is ‘centrally connected to the practical quest of pursuing the good life’ (p 256-7). Viljanen, meanwhile, makes sense of one of the more esoteric of Spinoza’s claims: that our minds become more eternal as we become more virtuous.

Of course, given the range of writers contributing to the volume and the diversity of opinions present, the reader will inevitably find arguments that fail to convince. Indeed, for the seasoned reader, there are likely to be points in each of the essays where an interpretation jars with one’s own views on the source material. However, to focus on these would be to do a disservice to the regular and frequent ‘nail on head’ moments throughout the book – one of mine, for example, being Steinberg’s succinct summary of Spinoza’s ‘metacognitive strategy’: ‘by joining rational principles to the imagination, reason can colonize the imagination, exploiting the resource of the latter and expanding its own dominion’ (p. 191).

Moreover, what really stands out from the essays is both the depth of the analysis and the quality of the writing. James, for example, manages to immerse the reader in Spinoza's thinking to such an extent that one is almost left feeling as though one is on the inside, looking out ('The more we know how to empower our embodied selves by social and political means, the more adequate and active our understanding becomes, and the more fully we are able to realize our greatest good by creating communities adapted to the cultivation of further understanding. To put it another way, the more we manage to live joyfully together, the more we manifest our understanding.' - p. 155). Koistinen, by contrast, dissects Spinoza's philosophy like an enthusiastic botanist, urging you to peer deeper into his microscope and unable to contain his excitement for what he has found ('It seems to me that Spinoza's attempt to reduce the mind-body relation to that of the idea-object relation is fascinating' - p.223).

There are some limitations to the book. For example, as is evident from the description given above, the collection is firmly focused on internal problems within Spinoza's philosophy: how we can reconcile his metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, what light can we shed on some of his more ambiguous claims. As such, we are only offered a few, all-too-fleeting glimpses of what, if anything, a 'Spinozistic' ethics might add to our own understanding of morality. Only a fool criticises a group of authors for failing to answer the questions he or she finds interesting, yet one would have liked to have seen a couple of authors exploring whether Spinoza's conclusions about ethics have anything to say about modern problems in moral philosophy, irrespective of their justifiability or consistency within his wider philosophical system. These, though, are quibbles. Overall, this is an excellent collection and ought to be one of the first ports of call for any of those interested in Spinoza's ethical philosophy, or indeed, Spinoza himself.

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