Spinoza on Human Freedom

Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life

MATTHEW J. KISNER

CAMBRIDGE

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Abbreviations and translations

Translations of Spinoza's writings most often follow *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), though I often use my own translations, which have benefited from consulting *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, volume I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton University Press, 1985). Translations from the *Theological-Political Treatise* are generally my own, though I have taken account of Shirley, as well as Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel's *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge University Press, 2007). All translations of Kant's practical philosophy are from the Cambridge edition of the *Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Abbreviations used are as follows:

A/B	Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), cited by page number from the first and second (A and B) editions of the text.
CM	Spinoza's *Cogitata Metaphysica*, the appendix to his *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae*, cited by part and chapter.
CPR	Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, cited by volume and page number from the Academy Edition (*Akademie Ausgabe* or Ak) of Kant's collected writings.
CSM/K	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1985), volume III, trans. Anthony Kenny (1991), with marginal pagination to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–74). Cited by volume and page number.

G	Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, cited by volume and page number from Ak.
KV	Spinoza's *Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en des zelfs Welstand*, cited by book and chapter.
L	Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cited by chapter, section and page number in Edwin Curley's critical edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994).
MM	Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, cited by volume and page number from Ak.
TdIE	Spinoza's *Tractatus de Intellectus Emandatione*, cited by paragraph number from *Benedicti de Spinoza Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Carolus Hermannus Bruder (Leipzig, 1843–6), volume II.
TP	Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*, cited by chapter and paragraph number from Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*, ed. R. W. Meijer, 1677.
TTP	Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, cited by chapter and paragraph number from Fokke Akkerman's critical edition of the text (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

Spinoza's *Ethics* is cited by part and proposition using the following abbreviations:

a	axiom
app	appendix
c	corollary
d	demonstration
def	definition
DOE	Definition of the Emotions (end of Part 3)
ex	explanation
p	proposition
s	scholium

Thus, 2p49d = *Ethics*, Part 2, proposition 49, demonstration.

Spinoza's *Correspondence* is cited by letter number from J. Van Vloten and J. P. N. Land's 1882 edition of Spinoza's collected works.

Acknowledgments

The jacket cover features the *Philosopher and Pupils* by seventeenth-century Dutch painter Willem van der Vliet. I chose this image because it represents the philosopher as social and active, rather than solitary and contemplative, as in more familiar representations of the period, such as Rembrandt's *The Philosopher in Meditation*. The present work is guided by the conviction that Van der Vliet's painting comes far closer to capturing Spinoza's understanding of the life of reason and freedom. Special thanks to the National Trust for Scotland for permission to use the image.

This book was made possible by the University of South Carolina, which has nurtured my career in innumerable ways, from providing me with opportunities to teach the relevant material to time away from teaching altogether. I am grateful to my colleagues in the philosophy department for their support during the years it has taken me to complete this book. I would like to thank the community of Spinoza scholars, who have been so welcoming and have taught me so much. In particular, Andrew Youpa has been a tireless interlocutor and a good friend. Michael LeBuffe has shown extraordinary patience in slogging through my early, often muddled, drafts, and Eugene Marshall has always been generous in taking the time to engage with my hasty e-mails. The entire manuscript was read by two anonymous referees from this press and one from another. Without their conscientious service in providing such thoughtful criticism, this work would be greatly impoverished. Kevin Elliot provided helpful comments on an earlier draft, going above and beyond the usual requirements of a colleague specializing in an unrelated area. I also received helpful comments on earlier portions of this book, often in article form, from Michael Della Rocca, Donald Rutherford, Justin Weinberg, Holly Groover, participants in a graduate seminar at the University of South Carolina, particularly Travis Reider, and a great number of anonymous referees from various journals. My work has also benefited from participants at talks and conferences where I presented portions of this work, including several sessions of the American

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Introduction: Beyond therapy

Among Spinoza's many philosophical aims and ambitions, none was closer to his heart than helping people to achieve freedom. Each of Spinoza's works on metaphysics, from his early commentary on Descartes' *Principles* to his eventual masterpiece, the *Ethics*, culminates in a discussion of freedom, insisting on its possibility and importance.[1] In fact, the central aim of the *Ethics* is to show us "the way leading to freedom" (5pref). Spinoza's other main body of work, his political philosophy, is also motivated by his concern for freedom. Arguing that "the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom" (*TTP* 20, 6), Spinoza recommends how states should be structured and governed for the protection and promotion of freedom. The central thesis of the *Theological-Political Treatise* quotes Tacitus that the best state allows "every man to think as he pleases and say what he thinks" (*TTP* 20).[2] Even Spinoza's notion of salvation is arguably directed at our freedom, for it arises from union with the eternal, divine nature and, thus, offers a kind of liberation from the power of external forces.[3]

It is surprising, then, that Spinoza's view of freedom has received so little scholarly attention. Most work on Spinoza's philosophy only touches on the subject of freedom, reading him instead as concerned primarily with other goals, such as resolving problems in Cartesian metaphysics or addressing the harmful influence of religious authorities.[4] The reason for this is largely that Spinoza specialists, until very recently, have tended not

[1] The *KV* concludes with a section entitled "On True Freedom," while *CM* concludes with a chapter on the human mind, arguing that we have a will and that it is free. Although Spinoza's view on the will changed over time, the same cannot be said for his insistence on the importance of human freedom.

[2] This is the title to chapter 20, quoting from *Histories* 1, 1, 4.

[3] The *KV* claims that divine union makes us "free from change and corruption" (11, 26), though it is less clear that salvation in the mature work involves such a divine union.

[4] For prominent examples of each see Curley (1988) and Nadler (2001). The most notable exception is Bennett, who devotes considerable attention to freedom, only to conclude that Spinoza's view is ultimately incoherent (1984, 324–6).

to focus on his ethics, which provides the context and motivation for his interest in freedom. Rather, work on Spinoza's philosophy has tended to revolve around issues in metaphysics and epistemology – in the anglophone literature – or political philosophy – in the continental literature.[5] Consequently, the little research that has been devoted to Spinoza's view of freedom has been narrow in focus, concentrating on the question of how he can consistently maintain the possibility of freedom, given his causal determinism, without considering the issue that most concerned him: the ethical significance of freedom.[6]

This book aims to provide an interpretation of Spinoza's theory of freedom that focuses on this neglected issue by explaining why, for Spinoza, freedom is valuable and how we should go about attaining it. Taking up this task sheds light on not only his theory of freedom, but also his ethics. In order to explain how, it is helpful to consider a natural way of thinking about Spinoza's ethics, what I will call the "therapy reading," found to some extent in most scholarship on the subject.[7] The reading takes its cue from Spinoza's characterization of our highest good as a psychological state of contentment or tranquillity, one that does not depend on external things and, consequently, is immune to the vicissitudes of fortune. Since achieving the highest good is Spinoza's central ethical goal, this reading suggests that Spinoza primarily aims to help us achieve a psychological state of happiness that involves overcoming obstacles to this state, particularly the passions, painful and disruptive passive affects. According to this way of thinking, Spinoza's ethics secures these aims by arming us with knowledge of the true nature of things, which corrects the errors and confusions at the root of the passions and strengthens our rationality, steeling us against

[5] Here I echo Garrett (1996, 269). One should note that there has been significantly more work on Spinoza's ethics since Garrett's assessment, particularly by LeBuffe, Miller and Youpa, though little of it has focused on freedom.

[6] See Parkinson (1975), Kolakowski (1973) and Kashap (1987), the only book-length treatment of Spinoza's view of freedom. One might object that there has been more work on freedom, since Spinoza essentially equates our freedom with our virtue and there has been a great deal of work on the latter. However, one cannot have a complete picture without also considering how his view of virtue also serves as a theory of freedom. This means examining how his view relates to other theories of freedom and to concepts connected with freedom, such as responsibility.

[7] This reading is invoked in the frequent claim that Spinoza's ethics offers psychological therapy; for instance, see Smith (1997, 135; 2003, 8). Elements of the reading are most pronounced in Hampshire (see particularly 1975, 308; 1977, 64), Neu (1977), Gilead (2000), De Dijn (2004), and more recently LeBuffe, who presents the main goal of Spinoza's ethics as correcting our passions by acquiring knowledge and avoiding error (2010, 11). The reader should take my description of the therapy reading with a grain of salt. Like the frequently invoked "standard view," the therapy reading is an idealized description of general trends in scholarship that fails to do justice to the complexity of most interpretations.

their harmful effects. Consequently, this reading canvasses Spinoza's ethics by explaining, first, his views on the true natures of things, that is, his metaphysics, and, second, his "remedies for the emotions" (5p20s), recommendations for avoiding passive affects and transforming them into active ones. Since Spinoza explains our passive affects as what he calls inadequate ideas, which are the source of error, explaining these remedies also means concentrating on Spinoza's view of how to avoid and correct error. In this way, the therapy reading regards his ethics as primarily providing cognitive psychological therapy: strategies and techniques for changing one's beliefs, thought processes and affective states in order to avoid cognitive error and, thereby achieve greater happiness – though this amounts to a peculiar kind of therapy since it operates through metaphysical investigation rather than reflection on one's personal experiences.

Focusing on the theme of freedom suggests a different way of thinking about Spinoza's ethical aims. For freedom is important to Spinoza, in part, because it is fundamentally connected to our good: freedom amounts to acting from one's own power, what he calls *conatus* or striving, while he understands the good as whatever promotes one's power. It follows that achieving our good necessarily promotes our freedom, so that the aim of attaining our highest good is tantamount to attaining our greatest freedom. In this way, focusing on freedom emphasizes that Spinoza's highest good consists in increasing our power and activity as much as attaining any psychological state. Given this emphasis, it is most natural to read Spinoza's ethics as providing guidance for increasing our power. This reading, unlike the therapy reading, understands the ethics as primarily working toward the practical aim of directing action, rather than the psychological aim of achieving contentment or tranquillity. On this view, Spinoza's ethics investigates the true nature of things not simply because metaphysical knowledge has a transformative effect on our psychology, but also because it identifies what promotes our power so that we may act appropriately. In making this claim, I do not mean to deny that happiness consists partly in attaining a psychological state of contentment or that acting in accordance with Spinoza's ethics requires us to change our thought processes and affective states. I argue, rather, that these therapeutic aims should be understood with respect to the practical aim of directing action. Consequently, my reading differs from the therapy reading primarily in its emphasis.

Nevertheless, this difference in emphasis is important because it directs our attention to aspects of Spinoza's ethics that have been neglected. In particular, the book focuses on Spinoza's practical philosophy, specifically

his account of reason's practical demands, contained in his theory of the natural law, his view of the virtuous character and what we might call civic virtue, the virtuous activities of citizens.[8] Conversely, I devote less attention to issues that have preoccupied the literature on Spinoza's ethics, such as his remedies of the passions, the psychological techniques for avoiding error and for changing one's affects and mental processes.[9] I justify this on the grounds that these techniques have already received thorough investigation, arguably more than they deserve, since the interest in the subject is motivated to some extent by the mistaken notion that Spinoza's ethics offers such remedies in lieu of a practical philosophy.[10] I will also have relatively little to say about Spinoza's theory of salvation from Part v of the *Ethics*. Here again, there has been ample attention devoted to this subject, partly because salvation amounts to achieving the psychological state that accompanies intuitive knowledge of God and such states have been emphasized by the therapy reading.[11] While I do not mean to deny that salvation is an important part of Spinoza's ethics, it is less important to my investigation since it plays little role in his practical philosophy.

In focusing on Spinoza's practical philosophy, this book provides something that has been sorely lacking in the literature, a concrete and detailed picture of the good life, that is, a life of freedom and virtue. Such a picture is critical if we are to take Spinoza's ethics seriously: to understand what it is asking of us and to try it on, so to speak. In the absence of such a picture, the therapy reading suggests that a good life is primarily devoted to intellectual activities, such as scholarly study and contemplation.[12] However,

[8] Spinoza's practical philosophy has received shockingly little attention, aside from some general discussion of his normative ethical principles, such as ethical egoism. Some have suggested that Spinoza does not even have a practical philosophy: "the *Ethics* offers no laws or rules of behavior – their very form would be misleading – and it does not tell us what actions the wise will perform" (Schneewind 1998, 222). Smith claims that Spinoza's ethics "offers no answer to the question 'what ought I to do'" (2003, 27). Similar reasoning leads Broad to conclude that Spinoza's *Ethics* "is not a treatise on ethics in our sense of the word" (1930, 15). LeBuffe is more attentive to Spinoza's practical prescriptions (2007; 2010, Chapter 10), providing an exhaustive inventory of Spinoza's explicit prescriptions in the *Ethics*. However, LeBuffe focuses primarily on prescriptions for correcting errors of the imagination, rather than on what I regard as the main sources of Spinoza's practical philosophy, his accounts of the natural law, civic virtue and the virtuous character.

[9] Chapter 9 does consider Spinoza's psychological techniques for changing our mental processes, though it focuses on how these changes influence our choices and actions.

[10] For a recent discussion of these techniques, see Lin (2009).

[11] There is a section or chapter on salvation in almost all general and introductory works on Spinoza. See also Rutherford (1999).

[12] For instance, Smith argues that Spinoza identifies the highest good "exclusively with the contemplative ideal" (1997, 142). Rutherford argues that Spinoza understands the highest good of a rational being as "a life of pure thought" (2008, 506). Along these lines, Bidney claims that "the body is the source of all passivity and is the cause of human servitude. Properly speaking, virtue pertains only

if we understand a good life as devoted not just to achieving a psychological state by acquiring knowledge, but more broadly to maximizing one's activity, then this assumption seems less plausible. Rather, my approach suggests that freedom involves stamping one's causal footprint on to the world. While Spinoza admittedly holds that our power is best served by leading a rational life (4app5), this does not imply a preference for intellectual activities. For he holds that rational ideas increase our activity not only in the abstract metaphysical sense of increasing our mental power, but also in a practical sense, by directing us to engage actively in the world through forming friendships, treating others with kindness and participating in the life of the state. Moreover, a free life cannot be insulated from practical, worldly considerations, since Spinoza recognizes that developing and exercising our rationality depends upon material conditions, including political conditions, such as a state that promotes the free exchange of ideas. In this way, a free life looks much like recent work has come to understand Spinoza's life, as profoundly engaged in the world – indeed, as aiming for nothing less than the transformation of the very political and social fabric of early modern life.[13]

While focusing on Spinoza's practical philosophy leads me to a number of distinctive conclusions, three deserve special mention here at the outset. First, I argue that Spinoza's ethics is better equipped to account for traditional morality than has been appreciated. It is not uncommon to think of Spinoza as a kind of iconoclastic, almost Nietzschean figure, challenging the most basic assumptions of morality.[14] A variety of reasons are offered to support this conclusion. First, it is argued that Spinoza, in denying the possibility of mind–body causation, also denies the possibility that humans can bring about their own actions, and thus, of moral agency.[15] Second, it is argued that Spinoza's causal determinism rules out the justification for attributing praise and blame and, thus, the grounds for moral evaluation.[16] Third, some argue that morality imposes laws in the sense of normative

to human reason which constitutes the active essence of man; there is no corporeal virtue at all" (1940, 278).

[13] This is according to my reading of Israel (2001).

[14] Of course, this view is praised for bravely reconceiving moral philosophy more than criticized as immoral; see Frankena (1975, 85–7).

[15] See Irwin (2008, 180–4). Irwin also argues that understanding ourselves as the cause of our actions is a confusion that Spinoza's ethics aims to overcome.

[16] Bidney argues that a wise man, because he understands that everything is necessary, does not praise and blame or hold people responsible (1940, 323). Bidney also argues that we value the praise and blame of others because of purely social conventions, not reason (328). Broad argues that for Spinoza "praise and blame must be removed from ethical judgments" because there is no possibility of humans acting otherwise (1930, 44).

commands, whereas Spinoza is only interested in laws as descriptions.[17] Fourth, some argue that morality imposes obligations that may by contrary to our own interests, whereas Spinoza upholds ethical egoism, the view that we are only ethically required to pursue our self-interest.[18] Fifth, Spinoza argues that a truly free man would not form the ideas of good and bad (4p68), which suggests that a basic form of moral evaluation is some sort of illusion.

However, if we focus our attention squarely on Spinoza's practical philosophy, we find that none of these charges is warranted. Chapter 3 shows that the first charge is based on a misreading of Spinoza's parallelism and, against the second, that Spinoza regarded his causal determinism as consistent with notions of praise, blame and responsibility. With respect to the third charge, Chapter 6 shows that reason, according to Spinoza, prescribes natural laws, which are roughly analogous to moral laws, since they are universal, normatively binding commands; he even holds that natural laws are impartial to some degree, since they are formulated from the perspective of reason, which does not take account of our individual perspectives. With respect to the fourth charge, I show in Chapter 7 that Spinoza regards acting for the good of others as valuable in and of itself, regardless of the consequences. It follows that benevolence is valuable even when the consequences of doing so oppose one's own interests, perhaps sufficiently valuable that we should sometimes act with benevolence regardless of harmful consequences to ourselves. Finally, Chapter 5 shows, contrary to the fifth charge, that we can have knowledge of good and bad. Thus, correcting these confusions shows that Spinoza's ethics holds us to normatively binding, impartial, practical laws, directing us to the good of others, much like conventional morality.

My second conclusion is that Spinoza offers a more nuanced and attractive view of human passivity than is often recognized. The therapy reading, emphasizing Spinoza's interest in attaining a psychological state of contentment, suggests that he regards the passions as necessarily opposed to virtue. According to this suggestion, Spinoza follows the ancient Stoics in aiming

[17] Den Uyl argues that Spinoza's laws can be reduced to two types, neither of which is genuinely normative: universally true descriptions, like the laws of physics and conventional political and socials laws, which are only binding in virtue of their political and social enforcement mechanisms (1983, 3–5). On this basis, he concludes that Spinoza offers "no normative moral standards" (88). Relatedly, Rutherford argues that Spinoza's natural laws are not normative or universally binding (2008, 500–2) and Curley argues that the natural law places no practical demands, prohibiting nothing (1991, 97).

[18] Frankena claims that Spinoza cannot offer a moral philosophy because of his normative egoism (1975, 96).

to rid us of passions, striving toward the ethical ideal of *apatheia*.[19] Indeed, it is sometimes supposed that Spinoza's freedom amounts to freedom from the passions.[20] Since Spinoza understands the passions as ideas that arise when we are passively affected by external objects, this reading suggests that his ethics aims to eliminate human passivity as much as possible, a suggestion that is embraced by those who read Spinoza's ethics as aiming to make us perfectly active beings, like God.[21] This reading is problematic, first, because claiming that the passions are necessarily harmful and opposed to virtue appears inconsistent with Spinoza's other commitments. He claims that passive desires can be good (4app3) and that our understanding and power benefit from experience (4p38; 2p13post4), which requires our being passively affected by external objects.[22] He also admits that there are passive joys, which entails that being passively affected by objects can increase our power and, thus, be good.[23] Second, the reading suggests that an ethically ideal human would have no sensations, since they arise from our passivity to external things, a conclusion which has been criticized as patently absurd.[24] Third, the notion that all passivity is harmful has been criticized on ethical grounds as constituting an inhumane intolerance of weakness and vulnerability. Thus, Nussbaum claims that, for Spinoza, "passive dependence checks and inhibits our very being, which is a project of seeking our own flourishing. For Spinoza, in effect, the very humanness of life is a problem to be solved."[25]

While Spinoza is obviously concerned with the ways that passive emotions can harm us and our freedom, he says nothing to indicate that the passions, as a category, are necessarily bad, opposed to our virtue or freedom.[26] He claims only that our virtue consists in our activity, which

[19] It is very common to draw this conclusion in passing, for instance, see Sandler (2005, 73). The view is central to James' reading of Spinoza (see, for instance, 1993, 298–9; 2009, 223–4). While LeBuffe admits that the passions can have some value, he regards it as minimal, amounting to combating competing passions (2010, 19–21). The view is also held in a less explicit way by those who argue that the model of human nature is the free man, since this entails that Spinoza's ethics asks us to become perfectly active, having no passive affects. The most notable dissenters are Goldenbaum (2004) and Moreau (1994), who argues that Spinoza leaves an important role to experience as a necessary supplement to reason.

[20] See Smith (2003, 7), Irwin (2008, 191), Broad (1930, 30) and Bidney (1940, 300).

[21] See Levene (2004, xi), Youpa (2010a, 75).

[22] Spinoza's view on the value of experience is documented in Moreau (1994) and Curley (1973a).

[23] For this reason, Hoffman (1991) and LeBuffe (2009) regard Spinoza's view on the possibility of passive joy as a problem that must be solved. Kisner (2008) responds.

[24] This is Bennett's reason for arguing that Spinoza's theory of freedom is incoherent (1984, 324–6).

[25] Nussbaum (2003, 502).

[26] The closest Spinoza comes to such a claim is in 4pref: "man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself,

is consistent with the view that certain kinds of passivity can be good in the sense that they are conditions for our activity or help to promote our activity. On the contrary, focusing on Spinoza's view of freedom makes clear that he did not regard passivity or the passions as wholly negative. Spinoza defines freedom as being self-caused, which implies that no creature except God can be completely free. Consequently, in order to make sense of Spinoza's ethical claims about freedom, we must read his ethics as concerned with a distinct category of human freedom, the greatest degree of activity and self-determination achievable by us. This category of human freedom necessarily involves a degree of passivity in virtue of our nature as finite things, which necessarily depend on and are passive to external things. On this reading, achieving the ethical aim of freedom requires us to eliminate only the kinds of passivity and passions that harm our power. In fact, this aim requires us actually to increase other kinds of passivity, those which are required for and promote human activity. These include not only sensation, but also food, shelter and the friendship of rational people, since being passively affected by them leads us to imitate their behaviors. Along these lines, Chapter 10 shows that we develop the virtuous character largely through channeling our social tendency to imitate others. Furthermore, Chapter 9 argues that passive or inadequate ideas, on Spinoza's view, play an indispensable, positive role in practical and moral reasoning, allowing us to interpret and apply reason's practical directives and indicating morally salient features of practical situations, such as our own degree of perfection. In this way, my reading shows that Spinoza not only tolerates certain kinds of human passivity, but also embraces them as contributing positively to a life of freedom. Indeed, Spinoza identifies our highest good with the love of God, which amounts to a recognition of how our existence and powers depend on other things, as Chapter 7 argues.

Third, my reading shows that there is greater cross-pollination between Spinoza's ethics and politics than is often recognized. Prima facie one would expect these projects to be closely connected, since Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* at roughly the same time. Spinoza's circle and wider audience certainly regarded his radical politics as buttressed by his deeper metaphysical commitments. However, following the

but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse." However, the passage argues that our bondage consists not in merely *having* affects or passions, but rather in being so subject to them that one is unable to control himself. On this view, the passions do not lead us into bondage unless they render us unable to control ourselves. Since reason is essential to our nature, as I will argue, this entails that the passions are only harmful when they direct us contrary to reason.

therapy reading tends to obscure the connection between the two projects, because it regards the ethics as primarily aiming to help rationally disposed people to eradicate false beliefs. Since Spinoza's politics is concerned with managing the masses, people who are generally too irrational to respond to – or, even, to be interested in – such assistance, this reading suggests that the ethics and politics have different aims and audiences, a conclusion which partly explains the unfortunate tendency to focus on only one set of writings, without considering how they illuminate one another.[27] This way of thinking has led some scholars to conclude that these projects are concerned with different and even inconsistent notions of freedom: the ethics aspires for the positive freedom that comes from liberating ourselves from the passions, whereas the politics aims for negative freedom in the sense of less restrictive political conditions. These two notions clearly cannot be equivalent since only the former requires rationality, whereas the latter is possible for even the passionate multitude.[28]

Focusing on freedom, however, illuminates the important connections between Spinoza's ethics and politics. While it is true that the politics is uniquely concerned with managing the inevitably irrational segment of the population, the works are unified by a common concern with helping people to attain freedom. Moreover, the projects are connected by a common conception of freedom, for Spinoza's politics aims to promote not freedom in the negative sense of an absence of government interference, but rather the positive, ethical freedom that comes from becoming more rational and, thus, virtuous citizens. In support of this view, Chapter 11 argues that Spinoza defends democracy on the grounds that citizens' participation in the activity of the state promotes their rationality. While Spinoza recognizes that not all people can become rational, he nevertheless advocates political measures that encourage rationality for all, from the most enlightened to the most brutish. Consequently, part of the task of Spinoza's political philosophy is to provide precisely the same sort of practical guidance as his ethics, indicating how to act in order to become free. It follows that political freedom is a subset of freedom generally; politics

[27] The claim that Spinoza's ethics and politics have fundamentally different aims in this sense is defended by Sacksteder (1975, 122) and Smith (1997, 11). The notion that the two projects are concerned with different populations, who have different capabilities and ambitions, is upheld by Smith (1997, 143; 2003, 6) and Yovel (1989b, 108). Strauss represents the most extreme version of this view, arguing that Spinoza's political writing cannot be read literally, since it is targeted at an audience that Spinoza regards as incapable of understanding his true views (1952, Chapter 5, especially 177–200).

[28] This view is defended by Sorrell (2008, 156–7). Prokhovnik similarly supposes that Spinoza distinguishes personal freedom from political liberty (2004, 203–8).

is just one particular venue in which we can become self-determined and rational.

In addition to helping us understand Spinoza, my reading helps us to better appreciate the relevance of his views for ongoing philosophical discussion. In pursuing this line of argument, this book runs contrary to a recent trend in the history of philosophy – particularly of epistemology, metaphysics and natural philosophy – to shy away from considering how historical figures speak to contemporary concerns.[29] Part of the reason for this trend is the concern that such work imposes anachronistic concepts and categories, thereby distorting historical work. To address this concern, we should recognize at the outset that philosophical questions are framed with respect to a background of historically particular concerns and assumptions, such that the questions addressed by philosophers of the past are rarely the same as ours today. However, this recognition does not threaten the possibility of constructing a dialogue between current and historical philosophy. On the contrary, it makes the possibility of dialogue more appealing, since we stand to learn at least as much from the different ways that philosophical questions have been framed as we do from the way they have been answered. The history of philosophy reveals ways of thinking that, while once taken for granted, often appear surprising and original today. Conversely, history challenges us to see our own historical circumstances through the eyes of another, leading us to rethink views that we have taken for granted. In this way, history provides us with a fresh perspective over our own concerns and problems. The ongoing contributions of Aristotle, Hume and Kant to contemporary ethics provide familiar examples of how productive such dialogue can be.

I should be clear, however, that in aspiring to engage in, or, at least, to pave the way for such a dialogue with Spinoza's views on freedom, I do not aim to defend them in a robust sense. Doing so would require answering the most serious objections to Spinoza's views, showing that they can defend our deepest commitments and evaluating them with respect to other approaches, all given the standards of contemporary philosophy. I am in no position to take up such a task, if for no other reason, because Spinoza's ethical theory is too poorly understood for me to be able to take up this task without becoming mired in exegesis. Rather, I aim to do something that is a necessary preliminary to taking up such a project, to draw our attention to Spinoza's most promising views. Showing that his views are promising means considering their particular strengths in

[29] For a sympathetic explanation of this trend, see Garber (2001, Chapter 1).

withstanding common objections or how they might compare favorably with other approaches, given the concerns of philosophers today. However, I only intend to conclude from such consideration that Spinoza's view is worthy of greater attention or that it cannot be as easily dismissed as one might think, not that it is true or right.

Furthermore, I do not aim to construct a dialogue with Spinoza that considers all of the many ways that his work might speak to philosophy today – and there are many, from political philosophy to environmental ethics. Rather, the book is concerned narrowly with Spinoza's contributions to contemporary discussions of autonomy – our concept that most approximates to Spinoza's freedom – taking a wide view of the work on autonomy from both political philosophy and ethics.[30] There are a number of prima facie reasons why Spinoza's thoughts on this subject would be of particular interest. Our views on autonomy are indebted to the modern period, which witnessed an increased commitment to the value of autonomy.[31] Recent historical work has shown that Spinoza played a central role in shaping and articulating this commitment, which has only become more important today.[32] This point may be overlooked because Spinoza's view is ostensibly a theory of freedom and it has recently become customary to distinguish freedom from other notions of self-determination, such as autonomy. Recognizing the connection between Spinoza's freedom and autonomy shows that he was the only philosopher of the modern period, aside from Kant, to put the notion of autonomy at the center of his philosophy, treating autonomy as the thing of greatest value to humans and the *raison d'être* for the state. Spinoza's treatment of these issues is particularly relevant today because it aims to capture a number of commitments that have become more prominent in the intervening centuries: he was a causal determinist and a thoroughgoing naturalist, holding that practical norms arise from

[30] Spinoza's contributions to this topic have not received much attention. The only sustained treatment of autonomy in the modern period, Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998), treats Spinoza as one in a long series of minor figures working towards Kant's achievement, the title of the book. While much recent work in political theory is attentive to how Spinoza's philosophy speaks to us today, it does not focus on his view of autonomy.

[31] This is evident from the rise of the now ubiquitous notion that people should have a say in the decisions that affect them. While this change can be felt in nearly every aspect of our culture, it is particularly evident in politics. In the seventeenth century, the notion that common people should participate in governance was considered absurd; even the most ardent defenders of democracy conceded that most people were too lazy or stupid to be trusted with such responsibility. By the eighteenth century, however, it was argued that people should have a say in government, regardless of their qualifications or abilities, simply because its actions affect their lives.

[32] A thorough and compelling case for Spinoza's influence is offered by Israel (2001). Spinoza's intellectual descendants are considered in Yovel (1989b). In contrast, Schneewind offers a less rosy assessment of Spinoza's influence (1998, 225), as does Prokhovnik (2004, 237–46).

human desires; he rejected the notion of a personal God and teleological explanations of the natural world and he held remarkably progressive views on politics, being one of the first modern figures to defend democracy.

What, then, according to my reading, does Spinoza have to teach us about autonomy? Most importantly, Spinoza provides us with a promising and largely unexamined strategy for thinking about autonomy. Throughout modern philosophy, freedom concepts, such as autonomy, have been important to ethics because they are regarded as conditions for moral responsibility. It follows that freedom is constitutive of our ability to act in ways that make us subject to moral evaluation, that is, of our moral agency. Freedom is valuable, on this view, for the same reason as our agency, because it is a condition for our membership in the moral community and, in this respect, the ground for moral obligations. This line of reasoning is most powerfully articulated by Kantian ethics, which regards our agency as the thing of greatest value and the ultimate basis for moral requirements. Spinoza, however, steers clear of this tradition by rejecting the notion that freedom and autonomy are conditions for moral responsibility. Since he understands human freedom as attained by acting in accordance with reason, it is rare and difficult to attain, not something possessed by all competent, responsible agents. Rather, Spinoza understands freedom within the context of his broadly eudaimonistic ethics, according to which freedom is equally important, but for entirely different reasons: because it is a necessary component of our virtue. For Spinoza, both virtue and freedom fundamentally involve one's activity, acting from one's own power. In this way, freedom and autonomy are essentially connected to Spinoza's broader ethical goal of leading a good life, that is, a life planned for attaining happiness.

This alternative strategy for conceiving of autonomy is interesting for two main reasons. First, it articulates approximations of hallmark Kantian claims about the moral significance of autonomy within an entirely different philosophical framework. Kant is influential in contemporary ethics largely because he provides a means of articulating and defending the moral value of autonomy. While he is often upheld as an alternative to utilitarianism on the grounds that he conceives of morality in terms of laws and duties, this commitment by itself is not novel, since the natural law tradition had long conceived of morality along these lines. Rather, Kant's distinctive achievement is identifying our autonomy with the self-legislation involved in directing oneself in accordance with the moral law. My reading shows that Spinoza's ethics comes far closer to capturing this Kantian claim than is usually recognized. This is because Spinoza holds

that we become free and autonomous by following reason's practical prescriptions or natural laws, which look much like conventional moral laws; Chapter 6 argues that Spinoza's natural laws amount to universal and, to some extent, impartial practical principles.[33] The similarity to Kant's view is particularly close because Spinoza's view of the natural law eliminates the religious and theological suppositions with which such theories are usually bound up.[34]

Spinoza also goes some way toward capturing the Kantian claim that autonomy is the foundation for morality (with the qualification that Spinoza is entitled to a weaker conception of morality than Kant). Since Spinoza's ethics is eudaimonistic, he justifies ethical prescriptions on the grounds that they contribute to our good. Our good, in turn, is closely connected to our autonomy, for being autonomous means acting from our own power and the good is simply what promotes our power. Consequently, we can say that Spinoza also justifies ethical prescriptions on the grounds that they promote our autonomy. Furthermore, Spinoza holds that autonomy is the foundation of morality, in a deeper and more Kantian sense, because he holds that we are only able to recognize the natural law by exercising reason, in which our autonomy consists. In other words, we can only become moral, in the sense of following the natural law, by becoming autonomous. Thus, Spinoza's ethics conceives this, an intuitively appealing Kantian claim within the framework of eudaimonism and a secular theory of natural law.

There is a second way that Spinoza's approach to autonomy is interesting to philosophy today. Because he regards autonomy as an ethical goal rather than an intrinsic property of moral agents, Spinoza attends to the social and political conditions for autonomy, and this in two ways. First, he attends to the social and political conditions for developing autonomy. Spinoza understands individual agents as collections of ideas representing their bodies and their causal histories.[35] As such, we acquire our ideas primarily from our experiences with other things, particularly people, since we have a psychological tendency to mirror the ideas of those things that we represent

[33] Relatedly, Chapter 7 argues that Spinoza justifies altruism or benevolence on the basis of intellectual love, which requires a kind of respect for others in the sense of recognizing their value, independently of deliberating about how to act.

[34] This distinguishes Spinoza's theory of natural law from more Kantian contemporary theories of natural law; see Rhonheimer's (2000).

[35] My claim here may be controversial because it entails that all of our ideas are ultimately traceable to ideas of experience, in other words, inadequate ideas. Chapter 1 defends this claim by arguing that we cannot have any strictly adequate ideas. According to this view, when Spinoza claims that we can have adequate ideas he means that we can have ideas that are as adequate as humanly possible.

as being like ourselves. It follows that we acquire many of our ideas – and consequently our beliefs and behaviors – from those around us. On this picture, whether we develop reason and, thereby, become autonomous depends, to a large extent, on having certain sorts of interactions and relationships with others and, consequently, on the broader social and political conditions that structure and determine these interactions.

Second, Spinoza attends to the social and political conditions for not only developing autonomy but also being autonomous. He holds that our autonomy consists in following reason, which places ethical demands on our interactions with others, for instance, that we act for their benefit. One might be tempted to construe this requirement in a purely psychological way as requiring only that we choose our actions by considering others. However, Spinoza's famous parallelism doctrine identifies psychological processes with bodily movements, such that our reasoning about others cannot be distinguished from our bodily interactions with them. Since our rationality requires interacting with others in particular ways, it follows that our autonomy does as well. Consequently, our autonomy depends upon whether the prevailing social and political conditions permit or encourage such interaction. Both of these points are evident in Spinoza's politics, according to which the state is created for the purpose of promoting and protecting people's freedom and, thus, their autonomy, as Chapter 11 argues. To help the state achieve this aim, Spinoza's politics explains precisely how the state should be constituted and conducted to promote the rationality of its citizen's.

By conceiving of autonomy in this way, Spinoza provides a refreshing alternative to contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy, which have been primarily concerned to determine the psychological processes by which one acts in a way that is genuinely self-determined. While Spinoza's theory of autonomy attends to such psychological processes, it is more attentive to their social and political context. Moreover, Spinoza's theory is also concerned with nonpsychological aspects of our antonomy, such as social and political requirements and threats to our autonomy. In this way, Spinoza's view is more friendly to a view of autonomy, developed by recent feminists, as relational, in other words, partly constituted by our relationships with others.[36] This view is justified partly by the notion that our identities are determined socially, through our relationships with others and the roles that we play in communities. For if our identities are formed socially, then acting in accordance with our identities, in other

[36] For an overview of this approach, see Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000).

words, being genuinely self-directed or autonomous, requires that we play certain social roles, a conclusion upheld not only by feminists but also by communitarians and others. Consequently, understanding autonomy – that is, understanding what it means to be autonomous, as well as identifying and diagnosing threats to our autonomy – requires us to consider the broader social and political context. Spinoza's view of autonomy is interesting, then, because it provides a framework for this more relational approach to autonomy.

Of course, so far I have offered nothing more than a sketch of my main claims. The case for them emerges over the coming chapters. The organization of this book will strike some readers as unusual. Nearly all philosophical studies of Spinoza follow the progress of the *Ethics*, first analyzing the central metaphysical apparatus before considering his psychology, then ethics and, finally, politics. This approach is unhelpful for my purposes, since I aim to focus on Spinoza's practical philosophy, which comes later in the *Ethics* and in other texts. So, while I understand that Spinoza's ethics is fundamentally based in his metaphysics, I want to avoid spending several chapters setting up the metaphysical issues and tracing Spinoza's long progress to the relevant issues. Consequently and instead, the book begins by explaining Spinoza's theory of freedom, what it is and why it matters, drawing on his entire corpus. To this end, Chapter 1 considers Spinoza's basic conception of freedom and defends two main claims, that human freedom, unlike perfect freedom, necessarily involves a degree of passivity and that being free is identical to being rational or, in Spinoza's terms, having adequate ideas. Chapter 2 goes on to consider Spinoza's arguments for conceiving of freedom in this way, while Chapter 3 considers how, for Spinoza, this conception of freedom is related to other concepts, autonomy and responsibility. Chapter 4 explains why freedom is valuable by considering its place in Spinoza's ethics. The chapter argues that Spinoza upholds an eudaimonistic conception of ethics as indicating the value of various goods so that we may plan our lives for attaining our highest good. Freedom is ethically important, on this picture, because it is identical to virtue and, consequently, provides the measure by which we determine the value of goods.

With this account of freedom in place, the rest of the book examines its practical implications, the nature of free action and a free life. Since we become free by acting rationally, the next three chapters take up this examination by considering Spinoza's claims about reason's practical guidance. Since reason, for Spinoza, directs us to action by indicating the value of various goods, understanding reason's practical guidance requires us to

consider his theory of the good, including what he regards as good and how we can use reason to identify the good; this is the subject of the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter considers reason's practical guidance for attaining the good, which is contained in Spinoza's account of the natural law. The seventh chapter focuses on the most important natural law, that we should act with benevolence. The chapter considers the justification for the law and how to square it with Spinoza's ethical egoism.

Once we understand reason's practical guidance, the final chapters consider how this guidance is put into practice in a life of freedom. It is critically important to distinguish this as a separate question, because a free human life cannot be purely rational and, thus, not lived entirely on the basis of reason's guidance. Indeed, Chapter 6 argues that human reason is limited, such that its practical directives are too general to admit univocal interpretation. Consequently, understanding a life in accordance with such directives requires us to consider the necessarily nonrational and passive ways that we navigate practical situations. This important point is obscured by the common assumption that Spinoza offers a picture of the free life in his account of the free man. Since the free man is a perfectly rational being, this assumption suggests that Spinoza understands the free life as one of perfect reason, without attending to the ways that we are nonrational and passive. Consequently, I begin the final part of the book by arguing, against this assumption, that the free man should not be read as Spinoza's model of human nature. Chapter 9 then considers the precise role for passivity in a free life, arguing that passive or inadequate ideas, including the passions, play a positive role in practical reasoning, thereby contributing to our power and freedom. The final two chapters provide a more concrete picture of a free life. The textual basis for this picture is primarily Spinoza's account of the virtuous character, the subject of Chapter 10, which explains what it means for humans, given their necessary passivity, to act rationally. The final chapter considers what Spinoza's politics tells us about a life of freedom. It argues that human freedom involves democratic participation in political life. The chapter concludes that Spinoza's view of autonomy as depending on social and political conditions is friendly to recent relational views of autonomy.

CHAPTER 1

Freedom as rationality

While the notion of freedom plays a central role in Spinoza's philosophy, it is far from obvious how he understands it. A first interpretive difficulty is understanding the unity of Spinoza's claims about freedom. Whereas Part 1 of the *Ethics* defines freedom in metaphysical terms as being the cause of one's own existence and actions, the later text treats freedom as equivalent to the ethical goal of mastering one's emotions. But it is not clear how mastering the emotions involves being free in the sense of self-caused. A second difficulty is understanding the consistency of Spinoza's claims about freedom. Defining freedom as self-caused implies that only God can be free, a conclusion Spinoza openly accepts. On the other hand, since his ethics promises to help us attain freedom, without giving any indication that this is an unrealistic goal, he also seems to hold that we can attain freedom, in some sense. How, then, do we reconcile these apparently incompatible claims about the possibility of human freedom? This chapter explains Spinoza's basic conception of freedom, which means coming to terms with these difficulties.

This investigation leads me to two main conclusions, which are important to the coming chapters. The first is Spinoza's identification of freedom with rationality. While philosophers have long connected freedom and rationality, Spinoza does so on distinctive metaphysical grounds by conceiving of reason as having what he calls adequate ideas, which are caused by our own essential power or *conatus*, in other words, ideas of which we are the sole or adequate cause. It follows that using reason entails being free in the sense of causing one's own ideas. In fact, it follows that rationality and freedom are actually equivalent: since human beings, understood at the mental level, are ultimately made up of ideas, being the cause of one's own ideas just means being the cause of oneself, understood at the mental level. The second conclusion is that the ethical goal of human freedom should not be understood as freedom in the strict sense of Spinoza's definition. Since freedom is defined as self-causation, only God can be free in

this sense. Consequently, we should understand the goal of Spinoza's ethics as approximating the standard set by the definition, that is, becoming as self-determining as possible.

After explaining Spinoza's definition of freedom and its motivation in the first section, the second section addresses the first interpretive difficulty. The section shows how Spinoza's definition is connected to his later claims about freedom by explaining his identification of freedom with rationality. Turning to the second interpretive difficulty, the third section argues that Spinoza's claims are consistent if we carefully distinguish between a few senses of 'freedom.' The section concludes that humans can only attain freedom in a limited sense. The final section addresses a potential problem with my reading. If freedom is equivalent to having adequate ideas, then Spinoza's claims about the possibility of freedom ought to be consistent with his claims about the possibility of having adequate ideas. Yet Spinoza denies the possibility of human freedom while arguing that humans can have adequate ideas. The section concludes that Spinoza only admits the possibility of humans having adequate ideas in a limited sense, corresponding to the limited degree of freedom available to humans.

1.1 FREEDOM AS SELF-DETERMINATION

To understand Spinoza's view of freedom, we should begin with his definition:

> That thing is said to be free [*liber*] which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone. (1def7)[1]

The definition may strike some readers as strange, because it claims that free actions arise from necessity, which rules out the common notion that freedom consists in or requires a lack of causal determination. According to Spinoza's view, *whether* our actions are causally determined has no bearing on whether we are free; in other words, our freedom is compatible with causal determinism.[2] Rather, our freedom is a matter of *how* our actions are determined, by internal or external causes, since the definition states that things are free when they are self-determined, more specifically, the sole cause of their own actions. In fact, the definition stipulates that a free thing is the sole cause of not only its own actions, but also its own existence,

[1] Spinoza offered the same definition in letter 58 to Schuller.

[2] While Spinoza is a compatibilist, he does not think that causal determinism is entirely irrelevant to our freedom, since he argues that accepting the necessity of all things contributes to our freedom by promoting our understanding (2p44c2; 3p49d).

existing "solely from the necessity of its own nature." In other words, a free thing is entirely self-caused.

While the next chapter will consider Spinoza's arguments for conceiving of freedom in this way, at this point I should at least say something about his motivation, much of which comes from his metaphysical commitments. Unlike Descartes, who distinguished two kinds of substance, mental substances (which are essentially thinking) and bodily substances (which are essentially extended), Spinoza admits only one substance, God, whose essence is infinite power (1def6; 1p34). Finite things, bodies and minds, do not qualify as substances, for Spinoza, because they are not causally independent, as a substance should be (1def3). Spinoza's substance monism leads him to two commitments that shape his thinking about freedom, the first of which is causal determinism. Spinoza upholds a rationalist conception of causality, according to which causal relationships imply relationships of logical entailment: if *A* causes *B*, then fully understanding *A* provides grounds for deriving or deducing *B*. It follows that *A* also renders *B* necessary in the same way that the premises of a valid argument render their conclusion necessary. Consequently, claiming that all finite things are causally dependent implies that they are also necessarily determined: "all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature not only to exist but also to act in a definite way" (1p29d). Indeed, even Spinoza's God is necessarily determined by his own essence (1p17s).[3] Given this way of thinking, it is unsurprising that Spinoza regards freedom as compatible with causal determinism; otherwise, no thing, not even God, would be free.

The second commitment is Spinoza's distinctive understanding of finite things. Since all things are causally dependent on God, Spinoza distinguishes finite things not by their causal independence, but rather by the particular way that they express God's essence or power. More specifically, the essence of any finite thing is its particular power, what Spinoza calls its *conatus*, its striving or endeavor to persist in existence and increase its power (3p7). Although Spinoza uses '*potentia*' to refer to our power, he does not understand power as a potential or capacity, something contained but untapped, like the power in a battery. Thinking of power as a capacity suggests that I have the power to do any number of things that I do not do, such as jump off a ten-story building or stay up all night grading papers. Spinoza could not accept such a view because of his commitment to what is

[3] In other words, Spinoza does not regard God as free in a libertarian sense. Thus, Spinoza rejects the Cartesian view that God possesses an "absolute will" or undetermined will (1p17s; 1p32c2).

power, refusing to appoint a new stadtholder, thereby allowing Johan DeWitt, the representative from the most powerful Dutch state, to assume de facto executive power.

DeWitt and his allies claimed to represent "true freedom," a phrase that became identified with the Dutch republican movement. In taking up the banner of freedom, DeWitt followed in the footsteps of English republicans, who tended to justify their views by appealing to the notion of freedom derived from Roman law: being one's own master, having the ability to govern oneself.[11] This definition was taken to imply that monarchies inherently harm freedom, because the monarch, simply in governing the state, interferes in the people's ability to govern themselves.[12] The opposing, conservative view conceived of freedom as liberties dispensed to subjects by the grace of the sovereign.[13] On this definition, it is conceptually incoherent to say that the monarch interferes in the liberty of subjects, since their liberties are just defined as whatever powers he grants them. DeWitt's notion of "true freedom" implicitly invoked the same reasoning used by English republicans: only popular sovereignties are free because they are governed according to the will and interests of the people.

Seen against this historical backdrop, Spinoza's definition of freedom as self-determination appears to stake out something of a pro-republican position in debates over popular sovereignty. It would be naive to suppose that Spinoza was unaware of the political implications of his definition. We must remember that he wrote the *Ethics* at roughly the same time as the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, a work that explicitly defends popular sovereignty and implicitly defends DeWitt's regime, to some extent. In particular, a central aim of the *TTP* is to defend toleration, that is, to show that "in a free commonwealth every man may think as he pleases and say what he thinks" (*TTP* 20). DeWitt, an accomplished *philosophe*, was naturally more sympathetic to the Remonstrants, reformers of Dutch Calvinism, who tended to be more intellectually and culturally liberal. Consequently, his true freedom included "freedom or toleration in and about the service and worship of God," which afforded greater intellectual freedom, particularly to Dutch Cartesians, who had endured some persecution from

[11] Sir Edward Coke and others drew on older Roman-influenced texts to make their points in parliament (Johnson and Cole 1977). The texts include Henry de Bracton's *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* (1260) and Sir Thomas Littleton's fifteenth-century *Un Lyver de exposicion de parcel de les tenures*.

[12] As explained in Skinner (2003).

[13] For example, see Cowell (1607). While it is problematic to place Hobbes squarely in the conservative camp, his understanding of political freedom is consistent with that of the conservatives, for Hobbes defines the liberty of the subjects as whatever the sovereign permits (*L* 21: 6, 138).

Gomarist anti-Remonstrants.[14] Consequently, Spinoza's definition of freedom as self-determination should also be read as partly motivated by these political convictions, which are more explicitly defended in the *TTP*; the political dimension of freedom will be considered in Chapter II below.

1.2 THE FIRST DIFFICULTY: FREEDOM AND MASTERING THE EMOTIONS

With Spinoza's definition in view, we can consider the first interpretive difficulty, reconciling it with his eventual claims about freedom in Parts IV and V of the *Ethics*, which regard freedom as equivalent to mastering one's emotions.[15] For instance, 4pref suggests that freedom is equivalent to escaping the "bondage" of the emotions. He explains that such bondage amounts to being "unable to control and check" the emotions, being so "compelled" by them that he "is not his own master." Along these lines, Spinoza criticizes those who believe that freedom means obeying their lusts (5p41). He tells us that the mind's freedom consists in gaining power over the emotions (5p42s) and that we come to govern our emotions and appetites out of a love of freedom (5p10). In this respect, Spinoza's thinking about freedom in the later *Ethics* more clearly resembles his thinking about freedom in the early *Korte Verhandeling van God* (*KV*), where he claims that true freedom comes from possessing the knowledge that there are no devils, which frees us from passions of fear (II, 26).[16]

How, then, is mastering one's emotions connected to self-causation? It is important to recognize that mastering the emotions, for Spinoza, means gaining specifically *rational* control over them, in other words, governing the emotions in accordance with reason. Summarizing his claims in Part V, Spinoza claims that controlling the emotions provides us with "the freedom of the mind," which is the freedom possessed by "the wise" or rational people (5p42s). He tells us that the true freedom of man is "related to strength of mind [*fortitudo*]" (4p73s), which is "attributable to the mind

[14] This is according to Pieter de la Court's *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland* (1972), which aims to defend the true freedom platform; the quote is from the title of Book I, chapter 14.

[15] It is common to emphasize this notion of freedom in Spinoza. For instance, Smith claims that freedom consists in understanding the passions (1997, Chapter 5).

[16] I should acknowledge here an important difference between the *KV* and the *Ethics*: the latter no longer argues that we have complete power to follow reason (5pref). Nevertheless, the *Ethics* draws on the same notion of freedom as controlling harmful emotions by improving the intellect. For a helpful overview of the development of Spinoza's metaphysical views between the works, see Nyden-Bullock (2007).

in virtue of its understanding" (4p59s). Most decisively, he claims that "to live by the guidance of reason . . . is to become free men" (4p54s).[17] These claims indicate that the "bondage" described in 4pref is not bondage to the emotions per se, but rather the bondage of being led by irrational emotions.[18] According to this view, mastering the emotions requires rational self-governance; in fact, Spinoza indicates that mastering the emotions contributes to our freedom precisely because it involves rationality. Consequently, we can understand how mastering the emotions contributes to our self-determination by explaining how rationality does so.

I should point out here that there is an intuitive connection between rationality and self-determination, an intuition that has been present throughout the history of philosophy and which stands independently of Spinoza's particular commitments. To draw out the intuition, consider the fact that reason often forces us to conclusions and actions that we do not desire. Indeed, because of this tendency, the Stoics described the action of reason as grabbing us by the hair.[19] If reason can determine our will contrary to our desires, then it might seem to be as much of a threat to our self-determination as external forces that determine our will contrary to our preferences; imagine a nefarious hypnotist, who implants a suggestion, without my knowledge, forcing me to avoid my favorite flavor of ice cream. The intuition, however, counters that reason's power to determine the will does not threaten our self-determination. In support of this intuition, Wolf offers the example of two swimmers, who, on the basis of a reasoned examination, jump into a lake to save a drowning child.[20] Wolf asks us to suppose that one of the swimmers is compelled to act from reason, such that he could not have acted otherwise. Would he be any less free because his reason insisted, demanded, even forced him into the water, despite his fear and reservations? Her intuition is that the swimmer is no less free on this account; rather, we would say that he is particularly rational, conscientious or brave. Since an analogous external compulsion would clearly interfere in the swimmer's freedom – imagine that he was hypnotized to save the child – Wolf concludes that reason's inclinations are essential to us, such that following them is a case of self-determination. This seems right: determination by reason is different from determination

[17] The connection between freedom and the understanding helps us to understand other claims about freedom in Part v, such as the equation of freedom with blessedness (5pref, 5p33s, 5p36cs).

[18] Consequently, the freedom described in the later *Ethics* does not amount to an absence of emotions. I depart here from Irwin, who regards Spinoza's freedom as equivalent to "freedom from emotion" (2008, 190).

[19] As reported by Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, 7.253–60.

[20] See Wolf (1990), 59–61.

by an external force precisely because reason is essential to who we are, more essential even than our desires.

Although one could accept Spinoza's identification of reason with self-determination on such intuitive grounds, he offers a metaphysical justification for this claim by explaining rationality as consisting in literal self-causation, acting from our essential power or *conatus*.[21] To understand this point, we must say something more about Spinoza's theory of reason as having certain knowledge or adequate ideas (2p40c2). He defines an adequate idea as having "all the intrinsic characteristics of a true idea" (2def4). I take it that "intrinsic characteristics" refers to an idea's representational content, independent of its relationship to the object it represents, for instance, whether it corresponds with or is caused by its object.[22] Thus, an adequate idea has the same representational content as a true idea. Spinoza defines a true idea, in turn, as one that "agrees" or "corresponds with" its object (1ax6; 2p32), which amounts to representing its object. Since God's ideas contain all ideas, he represents all things, which entails that all of God's ideas are true (2p32) and adequate (2p36d). It follows that our idea of a thing is adequate when it has the same representational content as God's idea of the thing. In Spinoza's words: "When we say that there is in us an adequate and perfect idea, we are saying only this, that there is an adequate and perfect idea in God insofar as he constitutes the essence of our mind" (2p34d). In other words, our ideas are adequate when God's adequate ideas are contained in our mind (the part of God that "constitutes the essence of our mind").[23]

Now that we understand what adequate ideas are, how do they contribute to our self-determination? To answer this question, we must consider a few requirements for adequate ideas. Since our ideas are part of God's ideas, which are true and adequate, then it follows that our ideas are only false, confused or inadequate because they are incomplete, missing some representational content contained by God's ideas. This conclusion is supported by Spinoza's claim that falsity is a privation possessed by inadequate ideas because they are "fragmentary [*mutilatae*]" (2p35); "when

[21] For another explanation of the connection between reason and freedom, which is consistent with my own, see Giancotti (1990).

[22] Garrett (2003, 53) argues that intrinsic characteristics should be read in tandem with the *TdIE*, where he discusses intrinsic denominations.

[23] While our ideas are part of God's ideas, it does not follow that I conceive my ideas in the same way as God. On the contrary, God's ideas are always conceived adequately, whereas particular minds often conceive them inadequately or confusedly; "no ideas are confused or inadequate except in particular minds" (2p36d). In this respect, the adequacy of an idea is relative to the particular mind that conceives it. On this point, see Bennett (1984, 178) and Della Rocca (1996a, Chapter 3).

something in nature appears to us as ridiculous, absurd or evil, this is due to the fact that our knowledge is only partial, that we are largely ignorant of the order and coherence of the whole of nature" (*TTP* 16, 4). Our ideas are usually inadequate because they are missing a complete representation of their objects' causes. This point is evident in Spinoza's explanation for why we cannot have adequate ideas of any part of the body:

> The idea, or knowledge of each part [of the body] will be in God, insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing, a singular thing which is prior, in the order of Nature to the part itself . . . And so, the knowledge of each part composing the human body is in God insofar as he is affected with a great many ideas of things, and not insofar as he has only the idea of the human body, that is, the idea which constitutes the nature of the human mind. And so the human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body. (2p24d)

Spinoza claims here, basically, that our ideas are inadequate because they represent only the relevant part of the body, whereas God's true ideas also represent the "great many things" "prior in the order of nature" that act on and determine the part of the body, in other words, the causes of their objects. This claim indicates a first requirement for adequate ideas, that they provide complete representations of their objects' causes; call this the causal representation requirement.[24] The basis for the requirement is straightforward: Spinoza understands adequate ideas as providing us with knowledge (2p40s2; 2p41); since knowledge comprehends causes (1ax4), it follows that adequate ideas must represent the causes of their objects.[25] This is a steep requirement because it stipulates that adequate ideas represent not just their objects' causes, but also their causes, their causes' causes, and so on. This is because an idea could not provide knowledge of the causes of the object without also providing knowledge of their causes, which requires providing knowledge of their causes' causes, and so on. In other words, the requirement stipulates that adequate ideas represent all their objects' causal antecedents.

There is a second requirement for adequate ideas, one that has received less attention but is critical to understanding Spinoza's theory of freedom: in order for an idea to be adequate in our minds, we must be its adequate cause; call this the causal adequacy requirement. In order to understand the requirement and its basis, we must consider two other commitments. The first is Spinoza's conception of an adequate cause.

[24] For a more detailed discussion of the requirement, see Della Rocca (1996a, Chapter 4).
[25] See also letter 19.

term perception seems to indicate that the mind is passive to its object, whereas conception seems to express an activity of the mind" (2def3ex).

With the causal adequacy requirement in view, we can now explain how rationality contributes to our freedom, as it is defined in 1def7. The reasoning goes as follows: the causal adequacy requirement shows that using reason, having adequate ideas, amounts to being an adequate cause of one's ideas. According to Spinoza's parallelism, all things are expressed, at the mental level, as ideas. It follows that humans, understood at the mental level, are made up of ideas. Consequently, being the adequate cause of one's own ideas is equivalent to being the adequate cause of oneself, understood at the mental level. Being an adequate cause of oneself, in turn, is equivalent to being free. In fact, Spinoza's definitions of an adequate cause and freedom stipulate an analytic connection between them: freedom is defined as being the sole cause of oneself and an adequate cause is defined as a sole cause; in other words, being free is equivalent to being an adequate cause of oneself. It follows that freedom, understood at the mental level, is equivalent to having adequate ideas, since this is just the mental expression of being an adequate cause of oneself and, thus, free. In light of this discussion, we can see the connection between freedom in the sense of self-caused and mastering the emotions: we master the emotions by using reason, which is equivalent to being the cause of oneself.

1.3 THE SECOND DIFFICULTY: THREE SENSES OF FREEDOM

We may now turn to the second difficulty, Spinoza's apparently inconsistent claims about the possibility of freedom. On one hand, he promises, in the title of Part V, to reveal "the way leading to freedom" (5pref), which (assuming that he does not intend to lead us on a wild goose chase) suggests that humans can attain freedom.[27] On the other hand, he pointedly denies that humans can attain freedom, claiming that "God is the only free cause" (1p17c2).[28] This is not the only text where Spinoza denies the possibility of human freedom. Since, as I have shown, he defines freedom as equivalent to being an adequate cause of oneself, he also denies the possibility of human freedom when he denies that humans can be adequate causes: "It is impossible for a man not to be part of nature and not to undergo changes other than those which can be understood solely through his own

[27] Chapter 8 explains why we should not read Spinoza's ethics as holding us to unattainable ends.

[28] Parkinson (1975, 24) suggests that this problem cannot be solved. He argues that humans are free in the moral sense that they have reasons for action, not in the causal sense stipulated by 1def7, which entails that Spinoza has two distinct concepts of freedom.

nature and of which he is the adequate cause" (4p4). The passage basically asserts, using rather frustrating grammar, that it is impossible not to be an inadequate cause, which is equivalent to claiming that we are necessarily an inadequate cause.

One might try to rescue Spinoza from the apparent contradiction by pointing out that the definition of freedom stipulates two conditions, that one be the sole cause of her own actions and her own existence. Although we clearly cannot satisfy the second condition, one might think that we can be the sole cause of our own actions, meeting at least the first condition of the definition. This suggests that we can resolve the apparent contradiction while remaining somewhat true to Spinoza's definition of freedom: when he denies the possibility of human freedom, he is asserting that we cannot meet the second condition, and when he affirms the possibility of human freedom, he is asserting that we can meet the first. A first problem with this suggestion is reconciling it with the texts. Spinoza's claim that God is the only free cause basically asserts that God is the only being that can cause anything – that is, bring about some change – entirely from its own power. Similarly 4p4 claims that we cannot be an adequate cause, which would seem to entail that we cannot be an adequate cause of anything.[29] This entails that humans cannot even be the sole cause of their own actions and, thus, that we cannot meet even the first condition of the definition.

But, regardless of how we read these texts, the second and more serious problem is that Spinoza is not entitled to claim that humans can be an adequate cause of their own actions or, indeed, of anything. Understanding this point requires having a clear picture of what precisely an adequate cause is. Remember, an adequate cause is one "whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through the said cause." According to this definition, in order for an individual to be an adequate cause of her action, we must be able to clearly and distinctly perceive the action through her alone. Clearly and distinctly perceiving something is equivalent to having knowledge of it, that is, adequate ideas.[30] According to the causal representation requirement, having an adequate idea of a thing requires conceiving its causes, not just proximate causes but all of its causal antecedents. Consequently, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive an action through the

[29] One might claim that 4p4 only rules out the possibility of humans *always* being an adequate cause, thereby allowing the possibility that we can be an adequate cause of some action or change. While I find the reading counterintuitive, my main reason for rejecting it is that Spinoza's philosophy renders it impossible for humans to be an adequate cause of anything, as I will now show.

[30] 3p9 shows that Spinoza regards clear and distinct ideas as equivalent to adequate ideas, since what he calls a clear and distinct idea in the proposition he calls an adequate idea in the demonstration.

individual alone unless she is its sole causal antecedent. In other words, being an adequate cause of an action requires not only being the sole cause of the change, but also the cause's cause, and its cause and so forth, all the way back to the original cause. It follows that being an adequate cause requires being the cause of oneself; otherwise, the causal antecedents of one's actions will necessarily trace back to some prior external cause. This explains why the definition of freedom requires both being an adequate cause of oneself and one's actions: the two conditions go hand in hand. It follows that humans, since they are not self-caused, cannot be an adequate cause of their actions or of any change.[31]

According to this discussion, Spinoza has deep reasons to deny the possibility of human freedom. The fact that we cannot be adequate causes is guaranteed by our very nature as finite things, which entails that we are necessarily determined by external things, as I argued in the first section. Consequently, claiming that we can attain freedom is tantamount to denying that we are like other finite things. In this respect, admitting the possibility of human freedom denies Spinoza's naturalism, the view that human beings are part of the natural world, to be understood in the same way as the rest of the natural world. This point is evident above in 4p4, which equates supposing that humans can be an adequate cause with supposing that man is "not part of nature." Spinoza famously criticizes this view as treating man as a "kingdom within a kingdom [*imperium in imperio*]" (3pref). While the criticism originates in the *Ethics*, it reappears in the *TP*, where he claims that treating humans as a kingdom within a kingdom consists specifically in supposing that they are not determined by other finite things:[32]

> Most people believe that the ignorant violate the order of nature, rather than conform to it; they think of men in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom [*imperium in imperio*]. They hold that the human mind is not produced by natural causes but is directly created by God and is so independent of other things that it has an absolute power to determine itself and to use reason in a correct way. (2, 6)

According to this passage, asserting the possibility of human freedom – "an absolute power to determine oneself" – commits one of the cardinal sins of Spinoza's philosophy!

[31] This discussion is indebted to helpful conversations with Eugene Marshall.

[32] The *Ethics* more briefly claims that the mistake consists in thinking that man "has absolute power over his actions, and is determined by no other source than himself" (3pref).

This conclusion suggests that it is hopeless to resolve the apparent contradiction by showing that humans can attain the standard set by 1def7. Consequently, I prefer another strategy, one that instead attends to Spinoza's use of 'freedom' and its cognates. For Spinoza only appears contradictory if we suppose that he always uses the term strictly in accordance with his definition, but he may be asserting the possibility of human freedom according to a different sense of the term. In fact, it is clear that he, at least sometimes, uses 'free' in a different sense that applies to humans:

> The more free we consider a man to be, the less we can say that he is able not to use his reason and to choose evil before good; and so God, who exists, understands, and acts with absolute freedom, also exists, understands and acts necessarily, that is, from the necessity of his own nature. For there is no doubt that God acts with the same freedom with which he exists. Therefore, as he exists from the necessity of his own nature, so he also acts from the necessity of his own nature; that is, he acts from absolute freedom. (*TP* 2, 7)[33]

Spinoza here claims that only God has freedom in the 1def7 sense of existing and acting from "his own nature"; following Spinoza's lead, let's call this "absolute freedom." Yet Spinoza still claims that we can consider a man to be free in what must be a second sense of the term. Since Spinoza claims that humans can be considered "more" or "less" free, this second sense of the term is scalar, admitting degrees; let's call this "degree freedom." This second sense of the term is evident elsewhere, when Spinoza claims that a person could live "more freely" (4p73d) and that "it is not in the power of any man always to use his reason and be at *the highest pitch of human freedom*" (*TP* 2, 8; emphasis added). These two kinds of freedom must be different not only because degree freedom is attainable by humans, but also because absolute freedom is not scalar. For having absolute freedom means being an adequate or sole cause of oneself, which, according to Spinoza's definition, does not come in degrees – something is either the sole cause of itself or not. Rather, absolute freedom is categorical, setting an all or nothing standard for freedom.

What, then, is degree freedom? Since Spinoza does not provide an explanation of this second sense of the term, we would expect it to be related to his general definition of freedom. This suggests that the second sense refers to the degree to which a thing approximates the definition, in other words, absolute freedom. While Spinoza defines an adequate cause as all or nothing, one's proximity to this standard does admit degrees. For instance, if I build a sandcastle with a little help from a friend, then I am

[33] Thanks to Michael Della Rocca for directing me to this passage.

degree of adequacy according to how close they come to being absolutely adequate. What, then, does it mean for an idea to be near or far from absolutely adequate? To begin with, since an absolutely adequate idea is one of which we are the sole cause, an idea approximates this standard according to our degree of self-determination in conceiving the idea. In other words, the closer we come to being an adequate cause of our ideas, the greater our ideas' degree of adequacy. Read in this way, it is clear that our ideas' degree of adequacy is equivalent to our degree of freedom, understood at the mental level, since both are determined by our degree of self-determination.[47]

Given my previous claims about adequate ideas, there is another explanation for how the degree adequacy of ideas approximates the standard of an absolutely adequate idea: since an absolutely adequate idea represents all of its object's causal antecedents, an idea's degree of adequacy can also be understood as its degree of completeness in representing these antecedents. In other words, the more an idea represents its object's causes, the greater its degree of adequacy. It is important to recognize that these two explanations for how an idea approximates the standard of an absolutely adequate idea are really just two different ways of making the same point: as one's ideas represent their objects' causes, one's mind also contains the ideas that cause its own ideas. Consequently, the more our ideas represent their causes, the more self-determining we become in conceiving the ideas.

Unfortunately, this second sense of the term does not explain Spinoza's claims in 2p38 and 2p47 that we can have adequate ideas. According to the second sense of the term, all of our ideas have some degree of adequacy, since they are all at least partly caused by us: "the mind, both insofar as it has clear and distinct ideas and insofar as it has confused ideas, strives to persist in its being" (3p9).[48] But 2p38 and 2p47 describe our ideas as adequate in order to single them out as attaining some special, epistemic standard. In other words, the second sense of the term is scalar, whereas Spinoza's claims in 2p38 and 2p47 are categorical. Nevertheless, the second sense of the term indicates that there is a precedent for Spinoza using 'adequate' in a different sense than the strict sense implied by his theory and, furthermore,

[47] According to this discussion, the scalar notion of causal adequacy, described in the previous note, concerns the degree to which one is a complete cause of a thing, in other words, proportionally how much one brings about an effect with respect to other causes.

[48] Since we are passive in conceiving inadequate ideas, one might question how they express our power at all. The answer is that passive ideas express our power simply in virtue of the fact that they represent our body (3p11s). Furthermore, he claims that all ideas involve, at least, the power that moves us to affirm them as true (2p49).