Spinoza on Human Freedom, by Matthew Kisner. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 261. H/b $85.00.

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Matthew Kisner's Spinoza on Human Freedom humanizes a philosophy often represented as forbiddingly rationalist and inhuman. After all, Spinoza exhorts us to strive to view reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, a view that, we might worry, marginalizes the things we care about. Kisner provides a systematic reframing of Spinoza's thought, one benefit of which is to dispel this worry. For Kisner, Spinoza both exhorts us to reason and recognizes that human beings are necessarily dependent, emotional beings. Seeing the human condition in this way is as old as philosophy itself, of course, and seeing it in Spinoza is old as Spinoza. The great value in Kisner's reading, however, is his placement of human freedom at the intersection of these distinctly human qualities; we are beings capable of reason, as well as ever in bondage to our passions to some degree, and human freedom occurs when we navigate these two properly. Kisner provides a compelling reading of Spinoza that synthesizes his rationalism with his view of human beings as affective, dependent, social creatures, a synthesis that significantly advances Spinoza scholarship as well as that of the history of ethics generally.

Kisner's case for this reading begins in the first few chapters, where he attempts to find room for human freedom in Spinoza's psychology. The first challenge Kisner considers comes from Jonathan Bennett, who charges Spinoza with an incoherent account of human freedom. To be sure, Spinoza does assert that only God is free, because only he is self-caused, and everything else depends on him for being. We mere humans, being modifications of the divine substance, must lack this sort of freedom, yet Spinoza's entire ethical system appears to require that humans be able to attain freedom. Thus the charge of incoherence.

To remove the appearance of incoherence, Kisner argues that freedom has two senses. There is divine freedom, which requires self-causation, and there is human freedom, which requires not self-causation but self-determination in one's actions. If one is self-determined in one's actions then one is to that extent humanly free, even if one entirely lacks the divine sort of freedom. This allows Spinoza's ethical project to go forward, because it requires only human freedom.

Kisner then follows this interpretive move through Spinoza's psychology. For Spinoza, humans are rational, and thus free, to the extent that they have adequate ideas, which are ideas that represent the nature and causal history of their objects; this mode of representation is what Spinoza identifies with the view *sub specie aeternitatis*. Being human, we can never be without inadequate ideas. Indeed, it is on this point that Bennett is most sharply critical of Spinoza. According to Bennett, Spinoza requires that we eschew all sensory perception, because it involves externally determined mental states, which is contrary to freedom. Bennett takes this alleged implication of Spinoza's psychology as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Kisner then applies his distinction and notes that human freedom does not require that our mind and its content be self-caused, only that it be self-determined in its actions. Thus, as long as the external causes are not the determinants of action, rather than some rational activity, we may retain our freedom. Though Kisner does not put it this way, we might say that one is humanly

free even in sensory perception just when one acts not from passively received sensory perception, but from the product of an active analysis of that perception, in concert with rational principles for action.

Thus is the sensation-denying reading of Spinoza rejected. Kisner continues to apply this distinction to adequacy, so that all we mere humans can hope to acquire are humanly adequate ideas, just as we can only be humanly free. Given that the distinction with regard to freedom has so successfully resolved the problem, however, I am not sure why this further distinction was necessary. Indeed, later on when Kisner wishes to talk in greater detail about Spinoza's ethical system, which makes heavy use of the notion of adequacy, the presence of this distinction muddies the waters. What's more, it seems perfectly plausible to say that human minds contain some (entirely, divinely) adequate ideas and some inadequate ideas, so that we are (humanly) free just when, or to the extent which, the adequate ideas determine our actions rather than the inadequate ones. Thus we need not impose two senses of adequacy onto Spinoza's system, which strains at its inclusion. These issues aside, however, the first part of this book, which deals primarily with Spinoza's psychology, is a success.

Once Kisner begins to apply these Spinozist categories to ethics, his interpretation shines. He next investigates this notion of human freedom, arguing that Spinoza's conception of self-determination in action is in fact a concept of autonomy akin to Kant's, though the question of whether there is enough similarity here to warrant the comparison I shall leave aside. Besides, Spinoza's concept of autonomy is distinctive from Kant's, as Kisner notes, in part because of its placement in his naturalistic, deterministic system of thought.

Kisner elaborates on this conception of Spinozist human autonomy and explains how it combines with his ethical egoism. For example, for Spinoza, benevolence is a form of love that involves recognizing another as a cause of our joy. Thus, Kisner argues, benevolence necessarily involves some externally determined cause and cannot be a case of absolute freedom, adequacy, or activity. What's more, Kisner claims, benevolence toward others need not be construed in Spinoza's thought as merely instrumental; that is, Spinoza's egoism need not entail that we show good will toward others solely because of the benefit that doing so can return to us. Instead, Kisner argues, our benevolence toward another can have 'constitutive value', in that the behavior can partially constitute something else that has intrinsic value. For Kisner's Spinoza, what has intrinsic value is living a rational life. If benevolence toward others is a constituent of the rational life, then that action has constitutive value.

This move allows Kisner to expand the Spinozist ethical life profoundly. Furthermore, when Kisner begins to expand his picture of this life, we see more clearly the value of his distinction earlier in the text. What does it mean to take human freedom as a qualified form of freedom, as 'the most humanly possible' freedom, as Kisner does? It means that certain facts about human beings may fundamentally condition human freedom. Given that we are social creatures and for the most part dependent upon the good will of others for our flourishing, it follows that a humanly free life must acknowledge that fact. Thus, when we enter into community with others, or when we rely upon our sensory perception (though not uncritically), we are exhibiting human freedom. For Kisner, then, the pinnacle of Spinozist human freedom is not the free man apart from and without a need for others, nor is he one who only cognizes adequate ideas, for such

beings simply are not human at all. Kisner deals with Spinoza's free man aptly, setting aside the idea that it could ever serve as a model of human nature. Instead, Kisner looks to the *conatus* as that model; insofar as we strive from our own nature, he claims, we are as free as we can hope to be. This move both harmonizes with his earlier distinction and makes good interpretive sense.

In the final chapters of this book, Kisner provides some details of how the humanly virtuous, free being would live. This discussion includes a perhaps too brief look at Spinozist virtues of fortitude, courage, generosity, and so on, each of which must be definition involve some passivity and dependence upon others. Thus human virtue too is qualified and partially passive, in a way akin to human freedom and adequacy. Given these limitations, Kisner finds Spinoza's endorsement of democracy quite welcome, though expected.

Overall this is an admirable reframing of Spinoza's ethical project. Kisner is correct to assign a central role to human passivity in Spinoza and doing so leads him to some very interesting ethical conclusions. On the other hand, he may occasionally be overly exuberant in his placement of passivity at the center of human nature. To speak this way is to overlook the undeniable intellectualism and perfectionism present in the text. Given that the majority of the literature before now has presented Spinoza's philosophy as overly austere and almost inhuman, however, Kisner's interpretation is a much-needed corrective, one that has much to offer in its own right.

EUGENE MARSHALL

Department of Philosophy
Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481
USA