

**Michael LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Pp. 253.**

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**M**ichael LeBuffe's book – *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* – is a most important study of Spinoza's moral philosophy. This is, I believe, the first book-length study of the topic in English. In the existing literature there are a few important articles on the topic of Spinoza's moral philosophy, notably those by Don Garrett, Donald Rutherford, Michael Della Rocca and the late Alan Donagan, though none of these really attempted to provide a comprehensive picture of Spinoza's views on morality. That the issue of morality and ethics is central to Spinoza's philosophy one can learn from the very title of his *magnum opus* – the *Ethics*. From various early drafts of the *Ethics*, quoted in Spinoza's letters, we learn that the original title of the book was 'Philosophy' (TIE 31 note k [II/14], TIE 45, 51). Spinoza could not title his book 'Metaphysics [*metaphysica*]' since at his time the term was closely associated with scholastic and Aristotelian philosophy, which on many occasions Spinoza subjected to rather sharp and pointed criticism. That Spinoza eventually settled on the title '*Ethica*' seems to show both the centrality of the topic to Spinoza's thought, and the fact that for Spinoza the ethical "part" of the book begins with the first sentence of the first part.

It is one of the great virtues of LeBuffe's book that he begins his account of Spinoza's views on morality from its metaphysical foundations. The first chapter provides an outline of Spinoza's metaphysics as developed in Part I of the *Ethics*. Chapters 2-4 provide a careful reconstruction of Spinoza's philosophy of mind and theory of error. Chapters 5-7 discuss the *conatus* doctrine and Spinoza's moral psychology. The next four chapters address the various strands of Spinoza's moral theory, while the twelfth and final chapter is dedicated to the notoriously difficult conclusion of the *Ethics*.

LeBuffe's study is thorough, systematic and clear. The author uses his own translations of Spinoza and engages in a serious philosophical dialogue with Spinoza's text. The author's "no-nonsense" and "no-mystification" attitude deserves all compliments. The study is well structured. The twelve chapters develop smoothly and are ordered in a manner that helps the reader enter into Spinoza's world. While this not an introductory work, it is lucid, honest, stimulating, and insightful. I have

several disagreements with the author, and on the whole I am less confident than the author about the success of Spinoza's "moral theory." But this is all beside the point. It is an excellent work that should and will trigger serious and extensive discussion.

The book has numerous virtues, not the least of which is the tight connection it draws between adequate knowledge and the good in Spinoza. In the following I will present a few points on which I seem to disagree with LeBuffe. On some of these points I admit that I do not have a satisfactory alternative, but this shows the urgency of the issues at stake. I will concentrate on the following four issues, moving from the least to the most complicated: (1) the Relationship between Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of God, (2) Death and Fear of Death in Spinoza, (3) Why should we care about other human beings (or, at least, not eat them)? (4) Teleology and Free Will.

**(1) *The Relationship between Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of God***

I agree with LeBuffe's claim that the Third Kind of Knowledge is primarily knowledge of the self (through its causal derivation from the essence of God). This is so because my knowledge of any finite thing is mediated through my body and mind. This being said, I do not agree with the claim that "for Spinoza, if any human agent has any knowledge that might be called the 'knowledge of God,' then that person will have self-knowledge" (204). To my mind, Spinoza does not consider self-knowledge easy to achieve, which is precisely why he places self-knowledge in the category of the Third Kind of Knowledge, which very few people achieve, and to a very limited degree. That Spinoza thinks we normally do not have adequate self-knowledge we can learn from three important propositions in Part II of the *Ethics*.

P27: The idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human body itself.

P28: The ideas of the affections of the human Body, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused.

P29: The idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human Mind.

Along the same lines Spinoza states in E2p13s (97/15) that "we have only a completely confused knowledge of our Body," and in the preface to the TTP he notes: "Men generally know not their own selves" (III/5). Unlike the knowledge

of the self (and the knowledge of any finite thing), knowledge of God's essence (i.e., the attributes) is widespread. Consider E2p47:

P47: The human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.

One striking feature of the demonstration of this proposition is that it does not require us to have adequate knowledge of *anything* in order to know adequately God's essence (In fact, I would argue that nothing in this demonstration is limited to the human mind, and that any fish or porcupine has adequate knowledge of God's essence). Spinoza is strictly committed to this radical and revolutionary view, which makes the adequate knowledge of God's essence trivial and easiest to have by virtue of E1a4, one of the most important axioms of the *Ethics*.

E1a4: The cognition of an effect depends on and involves the cognition of its cause.

Since God's essence is the ultimate cause of all things, the knowledge of God's essence is the *sine qua non* condition for any knowledge. Thus, E1a4 forces Spinoza to choose between two radical options: skepticism ("nothing is known"), or making the knowledge of God's essence more trivial than any other knowledge. Thus, I would argue, human beings must always have adequate knowledge of God's essence (i.e., the attributes of Extension and Thought), though only through very hard training can they achieve some adequate knowledge of themselves.

## (2) *Death and Fear of Death in Spinoza*

In E4p67 Spinoza famously states:

A freeman thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.

According to LeBuffe, this proposition, like the other propositions about the "Free Man" (E4pp67-73) do not so much recommend any particular action but rather serve as diagnostic tools to see how far we are from the desired state of the "Free Man" (187-8). I very much like the idea of the "Free Man" propositions as diagnostic tools, though I do think that the desired model of the "Free Man" should motivate us toward achieving this state. But this is not my main concern. Let me stress that what I develop in the following is not originally mine (I wish it were!). I take it from the outstanding dissertation of Oded Schechter.<sup>1</sup> Consider Spinoza's view of death in comparison with the view of Hobbes, the philosopher whom many consider closest to Spinoza in terms of their political philosophies. The fear of death is one

of the deepest and strongest motivations of Hobbes' *rational* man. For Hobbes, rationality helps man find the best measures to avoid quick death, but Hobbes *never* examines the rationality of the fear of death. In this sense, for Hobbes, reason is the slave of man's fear of death. For Spinoza, on the other hand, reason undermines the fear of death. A Spinozistic rational man does not fear, *or even think*, of death. This is a crucial change not only in the perception of the role of death and fear of death, but also in our understanding of the capacities of reason. For Spinoza, reason is *not* merely instrumental. It has critical capacities, which, once fully developed, would eradicate one of our deepest motives: the fear of death. The boldness of this move is quite astonishing. Consider just two points. In comparison to this view of Spinoza, Heidegger's rambling announcements of his intention to radically reorient western philosophy and place man in straight confrontation with his own death appear as mere symptoms of nervousness of an old grandpa. Heidegger's deepest insight is just another common myth for Spinoza. Secondly, think about the *political* implications of a philosophy that does *not* accept the fear of death as rational.

As far as I can see, Spinoza did not develop this line of thought in the TTP (which is much closer to Hobbes's political thought), but in the *Ethics* it is stated quite clearly.

**(3) *Why should we care about other human beings (or at least, not eat them)?***

In E4p37s1 Spinoza presents a very surprising line of argumentation against vegetarianism:

The law against killing animals is based more on empty superstitions and unmanly compassion [*muliebri misericordia*] than on sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us the necessity of joining with men, but not with the lower animals [*brutis*], or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them as they have against us. Indeed, because the right of each other is defined by one's virtue, or [*seu*] power, men have a greater right against the lower animals than they have against men. Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensations. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects.

Notice that on the metaphysical level Spinoza seems to have a very egalitarian view of animals. Spinoza does not doubt that animals have sensations (in another place he criticizes the view of animals as irrational). Unlike the mainstream of modern philosophy, Spinoza does not assume any abyss between human beings and other animals: human beings are quantitatively more powerful than other animals. Spinoza's justification for the slaughter of animals is quite simple. Power is identical with right. Hence, the more powerful have more right against the less powerful. We have the power and we have the right to use animals for our purposes. We cannot use animals as *friends*, since they do not share our nature, and agreement in nature is apparently a condition for communication. Therefore, we can do with them whatever we wish.

Now, let's pose a simple question. Suppose I have a neighbor whom I strictly cannot turn into a friend (perhaps that person is autistic, or has other severe communication incapacities). Why, according to Spinoza, should I help this person – or at least not eat him?

Spinoza seems to have two main strategies to address this question. One is to claim that it is not prudent to harm others. You'll get in trouble with the police, the victim's family, or even with your own socially conditioned affects (which we call 'conscience'). Yet, this strategy is doomed to fail since it is just a matter of some creativity for us to come up with a scenario in which all of these elements are neutralized. The alternative strategy is to assume that since all human beings share the same nature, essentially we are one and the same entity. We should care about each other since by promoting your well being I *eo ipso* promote mine.

LeBuffe raises very justified doubts about this strategy, claiming that it is not at all clear that Spinoza is entitled to the view that there is a common human nature (172). I completely agree with this point. As far as I can see, Spinoza's definition of essence (E2d2) does not allow essences to be shared by more than one particular. LeBuffe thinks that having a concept of shared human nature is common among moral perfectionists, and that it would be odd for Spinoza (whom LeBuffe considers part of that tradition) not to have such a concept. Yet, to my mind, the problem is even more acute: absent a theory of a common human essence, I am not sure Spinoza has the resources to justify the rationality of helping others.

(4) *Teleology and Free Will*

The appendix to Part I of the *Ethics* is one of the boldest of Spinoza's texts. LeBuffe dedicates extensive space for a detailed and careful analysis of this important piece. One of the main topics of the appendix to Part I is Spinoza's critique of teleology. Over the past decade there has been an intensive scholarly debate on this issue, following an excellent 1999 article by Don Garrett in which he argued that Spinoza bans divine but not human teleology.<sup>2</sup> In his book, LeBuffe joins the camp, which attempts to vindicate human teleology in Spinoza, yet unlike many in his camp he stresses (rightly!) the tight connection between human teleology and free choice:

Teleology seems to involve, inherently, some kind of choice. *Spinoza does take human beings, as we have seen, to act on account of an end.* Roughly, on Spinoza's account, in deciding between two courses of action that I take to be things I might do, I will decide which is to my advantage and then choose to pursue that project. God, however, is not limited as I am either in the knowledge of what is necessary and what is impossible or in the power to act. God does everything [...] from the necessity of his own nature; and anything that he does not do is impossible. So God does not make choices or have projects of the sort necessary for teleological theory of action. We do only because we are limited in ways that God is not (37. Italics added.).

This passage presents a fine and precise analysis of how teleological action assumes freedom of will for Spinoza. All I wish to add is that our actions are *just as necessary* as God's actions. Now, it is true that according to Spinoza we have a natural inclination to *believe* in free will (132) (I even suspect that for Spinoza we can *never* eradicate this belief, though we can know that it is false). But the belief in freedom of choice or freedom of will is clearly an illusion for Spinoza, and as far as I can see, the same should be the case with our belief in human teleology – namely, that our actions are explained and set by our ends. The model of thoughtful teleology seems to violate two crucial doctrines of Spinoza's: (i.) the barrier among the attributes, and, more crucially, (ii.) the existence and essence of every being should be *fully explained* by its efficient cause.<sup>3</sup> At this point, one may raise the important issue of the *conatus* – Spinoza's claim that all things strive to persevere in their *esse* (E3pp6-8) – as proof of Spinoza's support of teleology. While I agree that there is a close relation between teleology and the *conatus*, I would argue that the *conatus* is Spinoza's main tool in his attempt to reduce and *explain away* teleology through the efficient cause. In other words, Spinoza would suggest that

## REVIEW OF LEBUFFE

we can explain *prima facies* teleological elements – which the advocate of teleology thinks only final causes can explain – through the activity of the conatus as an *efficient* cause.

Let me conclude by thanking LeBuffe for his outstanding and impressive book. My disagreements notwithstanding, I found LeBuffe’s book extremely helpful, philosophically stimulating, and engaging. This is a highly important work on some of the most central elements of Spinoza’s philosophy, and it will entice scholarly debates for many years to come.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Existence, Temporalities, and Death in Spinoza* (Dissertation, University of Chicago 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Don Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism" in Rocco Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (eds.), *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 310-35.

<sup>3</sup> The first issue could perhaps be mitigated by suggesting that it is not our intentions that explain our actions, but rather the physical items that are identical with our intentions.

