**Two Ethical Ideals in Spinoza’s *Ethics*:**

**The Free Man and The Wise Man**

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**Abstract:** According to Steven Nadler’s novel interpretation of Spinoza’s much discussed ‘free man’, the free man is not an unattainable ideal. On this reading, the free man represents an ideal condition not because he is passionless as has often been claimed, but because even though he experiences passions, he “never lets those passions determine his actions.” In this paper, I argue that Nadler’s interpretation is incorrect in taking the model of the free man to be an attainable ideal within our reach. Furthermore, I show that Spinoza’s moral philosophy has room for another ideal yet attainable condition, which is represented by the wise man. On my reading, becoming a wise man consists *not* in surmounting human bondage, but in understanding ourselves as finite expressions of God’s power and, thereby, coming to terms with the ineliminability of bondage for us due to our very human or modal condition in the Spinozistic universe.

**Key words:** Spinoza, Ethical Ideals, Free Man, Wise Man, *Acquiescentia*

In his article, “On Spinoza’s ‘Free Man’,” Steven Nadler introduces a novel interpretation of Spinoza’s much discussed ‘free man’. Central to Nadler’s view is that, contrary to usual interpretations, the free man is not devoid of passions and inadequate ideas. According to Nadler, the free man represents an ideal condition not because he is passionless as has often been claimed, but because even though he experiences passions, he “never lets those passions determine his actions” (Nadler 2015: 114) such that his actions are *always* determined by his adequate ideas. While Nadler acknowledges the difficulty of attaining “this exceptionless rational consistency” (116) he does not consider this condition an “unattainable ideal that lies outside the realm of human possibility” (104). Instead, on Nadler’s reading the free man represents an “ideal but perfectly human condition” (120)—one, which is “a very realizable goal for the achievement of human well-being” (103). In this paper, I will examine just how human and realizable this ideal condition is given Spinoza’s account of human bondage in the *Ethics*. On the basis of this examination, I will present a negative and a positive thesis. My negative thesis is that Nadler’s interpretation is incorrect in taking the model of the free man to be an attainable ideal within our reach. My positive thesis is that even though the model of the free man is beyond our reach, Spinoza’s moral philosophy has, nonetheless, room for another ideal yet attainable condition, which is represented by the wise man.

In Section 2, I show that Nadler’s interpretation does not succeed in establishing the attainability of the free man for finite modes such as ourselves, even if we grant that the free man has passions as Nadler suggests. This is because, the exceptionless rational consistency of the free man as described by Nadler implies that, while the free man is not “outside of Nature” (114) and is—to the contrary—a part of Nature that is subject to passions, he is never in *bondage* to the passions. In order to highlight the unattainability of such an ideal condition for finite existents in the Spinozistic universe, I will have recourse to the ineliminability of human bondage for Spinoza and his account of the power of ideas within this context.

In Section 3, I argue that in addition to the model of the free man, Spinoza presents us with another ethical ideal: the wise man, which he describes as someone who is “…conscious of himself, and of God, and of things…[and] always possesses true peace of mind (*vera animi acquiescentia*)” (EVP42S).[[1]](#footnote-1) After suggesting that the wise man is someone who has attained the highest form of understanding—that is, intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) and its attendant blessedness (*beautitudo*), I show that the true peace of mind of the wise man arises from his self-understanding. In understanding that he is in God, the wise man thereby considers his power (as well as the power of other things) as a necessarily finite expression of God’s power and acknowledges that as a finite mode he does not have absolute power in the face of the passions. I conclude my paper by arguing that, unlike the free man, the wise man is not an “unattainable ideal that lies outside the realm of human possibility” (Nadler 2015: 104). This is because, becoming a wise man consists *not* in achieving exceptionless rational consistency and surmounting human bondage, but in understanding ourselves as finite expressions of God’s power and, thereby, coming to terms with the ineliminability of bondage for us due to our very human or modal condition. In showing how the ideal of the wise man differs from the ideal of the free man in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of how his view of human bondage bears on how he thinks that we ought to live. I begin by examining Nadler’s version of the free man in relation to human bondage.

***1. Nadler’s Version of The Free Man: Subject to Passions but Never in Bondage to Them***

Spinoza devotes one of the five parts of the *Ethics*—Part IV—to exploring human bondage, which he describes as “man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the [passive] affects” (Preface to Part IV). As we see in Part IV, at the center of human bondage lies the phenomenon of *akrasia*: the situation wherein “though [we] see the better for ourselves, [we] are…forced to follow the worse” (ibid). Spinoza allocates a significant portion of Part IV to demonstrating the cause of *akrasia* and, thereby, to “determin[ing] what reason can do in moderating the affects, and what it *cannot* do” (EIVP17S, my italics).[[2]](#footnote-2) It is thus helpful to begin by considering Nadler’s account of the free man in relation to *akrasia*, so we can better delineate the self-mastery required to become a free man on this novel account. While I do not need to delve into a detailed analysis of the Spinozistic explanation of *akrasia* here, it is important to note that according to this explanation *akrasia* consists in a situation wherein (a) both a rational idea and a passionate idea exert some power;[[3]](#footnote-3) and (b) the passionate idea ends up determining our action, since, in that particular situation, the passionate idea is more powerful than the rational one. Importantly, for Spinoza, in such a situation we are *forced* or *determined* to follow the worse due to the power of passions and comparative weakness of rational ideas—*not* due to the weakness of an undetermined will, which would have guaranteed self-mastery if it were strong enough.[[4]](#footnote-4) I will say more on what the power of ideas consists in for Spinoza. But first let us consider whether on Nadler’s account, the free man would ever suffer *akrasia*.

The answer to this question clearly seems to be in the negative. After all, if Nadler held that the free man could be subject to *akrasia*, then this would conflict with his construal of Spinoza’s free man as someone who, despite being subject to passions, never lets them determine his actions. According to Nadler’s description of the free man,

What distinguishes the free man is not that he experiences no passions or inadequate ideas whatsoever, but that he is in control of himself…What makes the free man free is that his actions are consistently determined by his adequate ideas. He has passions/inadequate ideas, but he *never* acts on their basis. Desire always takes its lead from adequate ideas, because the free man’s adequate ideas are always affectively stronger than his inadequate ideas. This exceptionless rational consistency is what distinguishes him from the more ordinary person who generally follows the dictates of reason. (2015:116)

This passage does not directly address whether the free man will ever experience a conflict between an adequate idea and a passionate idea. In other words, it is not clear here whether, on Nadler’s account, the free man’s passions can ever exert sufficient power to *oppose* the affective power of rational ideas so that he is tempted to act against his better judgment.[[5]](#footnote-5) What this passage clearly implies, however, is that in the event of such a conflict adequate ideas would always win out. So it follows from Nadler’s account that the free man never acts against his better judgment; he not only sees the better for himself, but also follows the better in an exceptionless manner.

If what distinguishes the free man is his exceptionless rational consistency as described by Nadler, then this implies that even though the free man has needs and vulnerabilities, he is never subject to *akrasia*. Needless to say, this also implies that the free man is never subject to non-akratic forms of bondage either. For instance, the free man never experiences a case of reason succumbing to passion wherein passion is so powerful that it prevents him from coming to see the better for him in the first place. As Nadler puts it “it may even be that the free man experiences, on occasion, hate, anger, fear, and other ‘evil affects’” (2015: 116). However, even in such circumstances, the free man will definitely—and, most likely, easily—overcome these passions, given the power of his adequate ideas and the “lack of efficacy” (116) of his passionate ideas. In sum, thanks to his unshakable self-mastery, even when the free man experiences harmful passions such as hate and anger, he will always manage to conquer “these feelings *within himself*” (116, my italics) and thereby surmount bondage to them.

Given all this, the critical question for our purposes is this: Can Nadler’s version of the free man be possibly instantiated in a human life? Importantly, Nadler himself acknowledges that “we are generally only very imperfectly free since most of our lives are led under the sway of the passions” (107).[[6]](#footnote-6) Accordingly, he recognizes just how difficult the task of becoming a free man can be given the self-mastery required (119). Notwithstanding this, however, Nadler does not consider the free man an “unattainable ideal that lies outside the realm of human possibility” (104). Instead, he holds that becoming a free man, albeit difficult, is *in principle* possible for us. According to Nadler, it is important to show that “the free man is not an inadequately conceived, unrealizable, even impossible model, something that human beings can at best only asymptotically approximate but never *actually* become” (104, my italics). This is because, for Nadler, “If the true and ultimate condition of human well-being is *in principle* unattainable or even incoherent, that would seem both to represent a serious philosophical flaw in Spinoza’s theory and to detract from its interest as an account of the good life” (105, my italics). But can Nadler’s interpretation of the free man really be said to establish the attainability of the free man for us in line with his motivation?

In order to answer this question, we need to determine whether becoming a free man as Nadler describes it is indeed *in* *principle* possible for us in the Spinozistic system. While Nadler does not explain what he means by “in principle” possibility, it seems safe to suggest that for him *in principle* possibility indicates logical possibility or the possibility of conception without contradiction. Accordingly, by suggesting that becoming a free man is in principle possible for human beings, Nadler means that the concept of a human being completely free from bondage is not self-contradictory in Spinoza’s system. As I read Spinoza, if we are (not) able to conceive something without contradiction, it is because it is something that could (not) exist or occur in Nature, and vice versa.[[7]](#footnote-7) If this reading is correct, then it follows that in order to determine whether becoming a free man is possible in Spinoza’s system, there is only one question that we need to ask: Is it an available outcome for us in Nature? In other words, we need to consider whether it is a realizable ideal for finite existents such as ourselves to be parts of Nature that are subject to passions, yet *never* lack power to moderate and restrain these passions.

***2. Is Nadler’s Version of the Free Man Attainable for Finite Existents?***

In this section, I will argue contra Nadler that even on this novel reading of the free man, the free man still remains an “unrealizable…model, something that human beings can…never actually become” (Nadler 2015: 104). But first I wish to clarify one point. Admittedly, at first blush it appears that the gap between an actual human being and Nadler’s version of the free man is narrower than the one between an actual human being and the free man of the usual interpretations. Whereas on the latter view, the free man is effectively outside of Nature in not being subject to any passions, on Nadler’s view the free man is a part of Nature and subject to passions, even though he is completely self-determined in that he is never in bondage to the passions. Here I will not dispute that in the Spinozistic framework we can be said to achieve instances of freedom or self-determination to the extent that our actions are determined by our adequate ideas. As I see it, however, that we can achieve instances of freedom does not mean that becoming a free man is “a very realizable goal for the achievement of human well-being” (103).

In order to show that it is not attainable for us to become a free man—that is, someone who is subject to passions yet *never* acts on their basis, let us first turn to EIVP4, which Nadler describes as one of the most important propositions in the *Ethics*: “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.” Taken in isolation, EIVP4 is in line with Nadler’s reading; for it necessitates that there are certain changes of which we are the inadequate cause and that cannot be understood through our nature alone. Since what is thus impossible according to this proposition is to be completely devoid of passions and since, on Nadler’s account, the free man is not devoid of passions, the free man does not appear to present an impossibility.

However, the very fact that Spinoza presents EIVP4 in the part of the *Ethics* that is centered on the power of passions and human bondage—a part where Spinoza says he “would treat *only* of man’s lack of power”(EIVP17S, my italics)—suggests that for him there is a very thin line between being subject to passions and being in bondage to them insofar as human beings are concerned. In fact sometimes it appears that the line is not even there. In the context of Part IV, Spinoza contrasts our lack of power to virtue, by stating that the latter is “nothing but living according to the guidance of reason,” whereas the former “consists only in this, that a man allows himself to be guided by things outside him, and to be determined by them to do what the common constitution of external things demands, not what his own nature, considered in itself, demands” (EIVP37S1). Given that lack of power indicates absence of self-determination, it is not surprising that throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza not only uses “lack of power” interchangeably with “passion” (See, for instance, VP20S),[[8]](#footnote-8) but also invokes the former to define bondage. In the Preface of Part IV after defining bondage as “man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects” Spinoza continues as follows: “For the man who is subject to [passive][[9]](#footnote-9) affects is under the control, *not of himself*, 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” (my italics). Spinoza thus describes being subject to passions as a state wherein we lack self-control and are, instead, under the control of fortune, as a result of which we are subject to bondage, including *akrasia*.

If for Spinoza “…[we are] necessarily always subject to passions” (EIVP4C) and if to the extent that we are subject to passions we are not under the control of ourselves, then can we ever achieve the exceptionless self-mastery or self-determination that is required to become a free man? The answer to this question hinges in large part on just how powerful our rational ideas can be and what they can promise in the face of passionate ideas, which brings us to Spinoza’s account of the power of ideas in the *Ethics*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to the second Axiom in Part V of the *Ethics*, “The power of an effect is defined by the power of its cause, insofar as its essence is explained or defined by the essence of its cause” (EVA2). Based on this axiom, it seems that for Spinoza the power of an idea is a function of the power of its causes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Now what does this mean insofar as rational ideas and passionate ideas are concerned? Since we are the adequate cause of a rational idea, a rational idea can be clearly and distinctly perceived through our essence alone, which, in turn, means that the essence of an adequate idea can be defined by our essence alone. Therefore, the power of a rational idea is just the power of our *conatus*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Unlike the power of rational ideas, the power of passionate ideas is not defined by the power of our *conatus* alone, as we are the inadequate cause of passions. Rather, in Spinoza’s words, “the force and growth of any passion, and its perseverance in existing, are *not* defined by the power by which we strive to persevere in existing, but by the power of an external cause compared with our own” (EVP5, my italics). Since it is possible for the power of external causes to be greater than the power of any one individual by an indefinite degree (EIVP3), passions often end up being more powerful than rational ideas and determining our action. This explains the pessimism in Spinoza’s language when he states that human beings “*must* sin” (EIVP54S, my italics) and “rarely live from the dictate of reason” (ibid, see also EIVP35S). They are instead frequently subject to bondage.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Is it then possible for us to become a free man—that is, someone whose adequate ideas are always affectively stronger than their inadequate ideas? In other words, is it possible for us to attain a state of exceptionless self-determination or a condition wherein “desire always takes its lead from adequate ideas” as Nadler (2015:116) suggests? I submit that it is not. Notably, on Nadler’s account, ‘self-determining’ means that an individual “is not ‘determined to do what the common constitution of external things demands’ but rather ‘what his own nature, considered in itself, demands’ (IVp37s1)” (116). As I see it, achieving exceptionless self-determination in this sense is not an available outcome for us—not even for the most rational ones amongst us. This is because, such an achievement would effectively require us—the finite members of the common order of Nature—to be “determined only by [ourselves]” (Preface to Part III) and have “absolute power over [our] actions” (ibid). As I read Spinoza, it is clear that our adequate ideas do not offer such absolute power. After all, if the power of our adequate ideas is just the power of our *conatus* according to him and if “[our] power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (EIVApp.XXXII), then our adequate ideas can never offer an invincible power in the face of passions. Since for Spinoza our power, even at its best, is nothing but God’s very power manifested in a *finite* form (EIVP4D), even our most powerful adequate ideas cannot promise absolute freedom from bondage to the passions. Given this and the fact that we do not have an undetermined will over and above ideas that can offer absolute control over passions, I maintain that in the Spinozistic universe we are all ineliminably in bondage, albeit to varying degrees.

As seen earlier, Nadler’s very motivation in his article is to show that the free man is an attainable ideal that is within our reach, which he describes as “a *very realizable* goal for the achievement of human well-being” (2015: 103, my italics)—something that human beings can “*actually* become” (104, my italics)—*not* “something that they at best only asymptotically approximate” (ibid). In my view, even though Nadler’s account does not succeed in establishing the attainability of the free man for us in line with his motivation, it does helpfully underscore the importance for a moral philosophy to present a human ideal that is within our reach. Whereas Nadler’s free man is beyond our reach and thus is not “a very realizable goal for the achievement of human well-being” as he intends it to be, I maintain that Spinoza’s moral philosophy has room for an ideal yet perfectly human condition, which brings us to the third section.

***3. An Ideal, Yet Perfectly Human Condition***

On my reading, the ideal but perfectly human condition is represented by the wise man, which Spinoza describes in Part V as someone who “is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” (EVP42S). For Spinoza, in contrast to the ignorant man who “is driven only by lust…troubled in many ways by external causes, and unable ever to possess true peace of mind,” the wise man “always possesses true peace of mind (*vera animi acquiescentia*)” (ibid). Importantly, Nadler also mentions the wise man by referring to a passage from Part IV, where Spinoza says “it is the part of a wise man…to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents…and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another” (EIV45S). Instead of treating the wise man as a separate ideal, however, Nadler (2015: 115, note 14) identifies the wise man with the free man by maintaining that the context of EIVP45S does not bear out a distinction between them.[[14]](#footnote-14) Unlike Nadler, I hold that the wise man represents a different, more human, ideal than the free man. In order to show why this is the case I will first consider what Spinoza says about the wise man in Part V.

 In the context of Part V, Spinoza presents the above-cited passage regarding the wise man after completing his account of intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) and its accompanying affective state, that is, blessedness (*beautitudo*), and thereby “finish[ing] all the things [he] wished to show concerning the mind’s power over the affects and its freedom” (EVP42S). According to Spinoza, “the greatest virtue of the mind” (EVP25) and “the greatest human perfection” (EVP27D) consist in understanding things by intuitive knowledge or the third kind of knowledge, which, he considers to be superior to and more powerful than reason. Intuitive knowledge, by definition, “proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things” (EVP25D). It consists in an immediate grasp of the relation of God’s essence to the essences of things and gives rise to a state of affective and intellectual excellence, which Spinoza describes as “perfect joy” or blessedness. In Spinoza’s words, “the more each of us is able to achieve [intuitive knowledge], the more he is conscious of himself and of God, that is, the more perfect and blessed he is”[[15]](#footnote-15) (EVP31S).

Given that Spinoza describes the wise man in EVP42S as someone who is “conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” after completing his account of intuitive knowledge and blessedness, it appears to me plausible to suggest that the wise man is someone who has attained intuitive knowledge and its attendant blessedness. Furthermore, I consider this achievement an available outcome for us in the Spinozistic framework based on the following textual evidence.

Beginning with the Preface to Part II, Spinoza makes clear his practical orientation by stating that in the rest of the *Ethics* he will be “explaining those things…that can lead us…to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest *blessedness*” (my italics). Later on in EIIPP45-47 he shows that the human mind *has* an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence or “the knowledge of God,” which he considers elsewhere (EVP20S)[[16]](#footnote-16) as the foundation of intuitive knowledge. And then in EIIP47S he establishes the possibility of achieving intuitive knowledge: “From this we see that God’s infinite essence and his eternity is known to all. And since all things are in God and conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately, and so can form the third kind of knowledge…” What all these passages show is that, even though intuitive knowledge is difficult to achieve, it is an available outcome for us in the Spinozistic universe. Accordingly, right before famously concluding the *Ethics* by saying that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (EVP42S), Spinoza notes that “if the way [he has] shown to lead to [blessedness] now seems very hard, still, it can be found.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

So far I have suggested that becoming a wise man—that is, becoming someone who has achieved intuitive knowledge and blessedness—is attainable for us in the Spinozistic universe. I need to clarify at this point that, on my reading, the wise man—unlike the free man—does not represent an ideal of exceptionless self-mastery. In other words, the wise man is not someone who has completely overcome human bondage, even though he is someone who “is hardly troubled in spirit” and “always possesses true peace of mind (*vera* *animi acquiescentia*)” (EVP42S). Although it might not be immediately clear how possessing true peace of mind can be compatible with being ineliminably in bondage to a certain degree, the following passage sheds some light on how this could be possible.

But human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of Nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, that is, the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied (*acquiescet*) with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction (*acquiescentia*). For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied (*acquiescere*) with anything except what is true... (AppXXXII).

On my reading of this passage, here *acquiescentia*, which Curley renders as “satisfaction,” does not arise from having achieved exceptionless self-mastery. Instead, it arises from an *understanding* of the reason as to why such an achievement is not attainable for us, given just how limited our power is as finite modes and that we do not have “an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use” (ibid). Since “we are a part of the whole of Nature, whose order we follow” (ibid), we cannot always be determined to do “what our own nature, considered in itself, demands” (EIVP37S1). However, that our “power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (AppXXXII) does not mean that we are thereby always necessarily troubled by external causes. It is possible for us to be “hardly troubled in spirit” and experience, instead, a certain kind of peace of mind or *acquiescentia* if we manage to understand and come to terms with the fact that as parts of Nature we do not have absolute power in the face of the passions and, consequently, that we will necessarily undergo instances of bondage that we cannot avoid.

Importantly, *vera* *animi acquiescentia*—namely, the affect that Curley renders as “true peace of mind” and ascribes to the wise man in EVP42S, is a species of *acquiescentia*, which arises exclusively from intuitive knowledge. According to Spinoza’s general definition, *acquiescentia in se ipso*[[18]](#footnote-18) is “joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his own power of acting” (EIIIDefAffXXV, see also EIIIP55S). The particular instance of *acquiescentia* that arises from intuitive knowledge is an active affect, [[19]](#footnote-19) which Spinoza treats coextensively with blessedness elsewhere.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the case of *vera* *animi acquiescentia*, we consider ourselves or our power in relation to God’s power. In understanding that we are in God, we thereby consider our power (as well as the power of other things) as a necessarily finite expression of God’s power. That is why Spinoza describes the wise man as someone who is “conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” (EIVP42S).

I do not need to delve into a detailed discussion of Spinoza’s account of *acquiescentia* here. However, it is important to clarify two interrelated points. First, even achieving intuitive knowledge and thereby experiencing this highest form of *acquiescentia* does not provide boundless power in the face of passions or turn our mind into a special, “undetermined” locus of power. After all, even though the power of our *conatus* reaches its pinnacle when we attain intuitive knowledge, the power of our mind’s intuitive ideas is just the power of our *conatus*, which, in turn, is nothing but God’s very power manifested in a finite form (EIVP4D). Furthermore, as Spinoza puts it in EVP40S, our mind, even when it understands and gains some eternity,[[21]](#footnote-21) still remains a part of the infinite and interdetermining network of finite minds, which brings us to the second point.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As I see it, insofar as our mind remains a finite member of the aforementioned network, it cannot retain *acquiescentia* permanently—that is, it cannot be always *determined* by this affect. In order for our mind to retain *acquiescentia* permanently in this sense, there would need to be no contrary passive affect in our mind that might challenge and overpower this active affect.[[23]](#footnote-23) Such a condition could be the case, only if (a) intuitive knowledge and the resultant *acquiescentia* offered boundless power in the face of passions, *or* (b) our mind were constituted solely by adequate ideas or the intellect, which Spinoza describes as the eternal part of the mind (EVP40C). I have just asserted in the previous paragraph that (a) is not possible. Regarding (b), I hold that since our mind is just the idea of an actually existing body (EIIP11and EIIP13) for Spinoza, it cannot be identified solely with its eternal part—that is, “the intellect through which we are said to act” (EVP40C). In addition, every human mind, to the extent that it is considered to be part of the common order of Nature, also has an imaginative part, “through which alone we are said to be acted on” (ibid). And the mind of the wise man is no exception, or so I hold.

According to my interpretation, the wise man has a mind whose *greatest* part is eternal—that is, his “adequate ideas constitute the greatest part of [his] mind” (EVP20S). His mind thus “acts most” (ibid) and can “bring about that [the passions] constitute the *smallest* part of the mind…” (ibid, my italics). Furthermore, having attained intuitive knowledge and, thereby, achieved an affective transformation by assuming an eternal perspective of himself, the wise man lives his life in a special way. More specifically, rather than live an ordinary life, which Spinoza describes as a life dominated by the pursuit of transitory goods like honor, sensual pleasure and wealth (TdIE, [3]); the wise man lives a life according to the order of the intellect.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, despite the fact that he thus lives a life focused on the pursuit of the eternal good of understanding, he does so while living in time. Insofar as the wise man represents the ideal condition of a human being living in time, even a mind as powerful as his cannot assume complete freedom from the passions in this life. Therefore, even when the human mind is at its best and sees that it is in God by conceiving of its own essence “as an eternal truth, through God’s nature” (EVP37D), the attendant state of *acquiescentia* can only be retained temporarily until the mind is acted on by passions that end up overpowering intuitive ideas.

Given all this, I maintain that true peace of mind (*vera* *animi acquiescentia*) involves not solely a consideration of our power, but also, at the same time, the acknowledgment that our power of understanding, even at its best, is the limited power of a *finite* mind, which, in turn, is just “a *part* of the infinite intellect of God” (EIIP11C, my italics). Accordingly, I hold that while the wise man experiences true peace of mind or “joyful awareness of being in God” (Carlisle 2017: 228), he does not thereby presume an absolute power over the passions and lose sight of his vulnerability to bondage*.* Whereas he is someone who knows that our mind’s power consists only in its power of understanding, he is also aware of the fact that sometimes this power can be a surprisingly fragile remedy in the face of the extremely powerful passions.

***Concluding Remarks***

I showed in this paper that it is impossible to achieve the exceptionless self-mastery that is required to become a free man on Nadler’s account. On my reading, it is the wise man—and not Nadler’s free man—who represents “the ideal condition of our very *concrete* human nature” (Nadler 2015: 104, my italics). This is because, whereas becoming a free man effectively requires absolute power in the face of passions, becoming a wise man involves achieving self-understanding, including the understanding that such an absolute power is not compatible with our ontological status as finite modes of God. In essentially being a model of self-understanding, the wise man *both* appreciates his power as an expression of God’s power and accepts the limited nature of this power as an ineliminable aspect of our very concrete human nature, which is ultimately just our modal nature that we share with the other members of the common order of Nature.

It is certainly not an easy task to become someone who is “…conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” (EVP42S) and, thereby, to attain the blessedness and *acquiescentia* of the wise man. It is, nonetheless, an available outcome for us in Spinoza’s universe, one which we actually strive for in this life as finite modes “consist[ing] of a mind and a body” (EIIP13C). In Spinoza’s words, “In this life…we strive especially that the infant’s body may change…into another, capable of a great many things and related to a mind very much *conscious of itself, of God, and of things*” (EVP39S, my emphasis). In thus striving to become like the wise man, we strive “to touch eternity while living in time” (Carlisle 2015: 26-27). And, if my reading is correct, we do so without thereby losing sight of the unavoidable constraints that come with our durational existence as finite modes.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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1. All translations of Spinoza’s writings including the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE) and *Ethics* (E) are those of Edwin Curley in Spinoza (1985). References to the *Ethics* will be by part (I-V), axiom (A), proposition (P), scholium (S), corollary (C), and explanation (Exp). ‘D’ indicates a definition (when immediately following a part number) or a demonstration (when immediately following a proposition number). I will use ‘DefAff’ to indicate Definition of Affects (end of Part III). Quotations from the Latin text of the *Ethics* are from the Gebhart edition *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhart (1925), reprinted in *Éthique* (1999), a bilingual Latin-French edition presented and translated by Bernard Pautrat. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Preface to Part IV, after asserting that human beings are often subject to *akrasia*, Spinoza notes that in “this part, [he has] undertaken to demonstrate *the cause of this*, and what there is of good and evil in the affects” (my italics). After introducing his account of *akrasia*, he explains his reason for taking up this topic as follows: “My reason…is that it is *necessary* to come to know (*noscere*) *both* our nature's *power* and its *lack of power* (*impotentiam*) so that we can determine what reason *can do* in moderating the affects, and what it *cannot do*” (EIVP17S, my italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Martin Lin’s words, in an *akratic* situation “reason and passion are both fully on display” (2006: 395). As Lin (ibid) says, there are cases of reason succumbing to passion that are not *akratic*. For example, passion might prevent one from ever coming to a rational judgment about the best course of action in the first place, and so one could not be said, in such a case, to act against one’s better judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Spinoza famously holds that it is an error to think that we have free will, for then we are unaware of the fact that we are determined by causes (EIIP35S). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nadler does not explicitly address the issue of *akrasia* in his article. However, he notes that in the free man, passions “remain subordinate as motivational elements to adequate ideas” (115), which might suggest that on his reading passionate ideas cannot even oppose rational ideas. But in his treatment of EVP10S, Nadler seems to suggest that the free man can experience some fluctuations, even though he eventually overcomes them. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nadler adds that “[e]ven those who are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, and who have thereby gained a significant store of adequate ideas, are not always determined to act based on those adequate ideas alone” (107-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As Richard Mason nicely puts it, in the Spinozistic framework “to be possible cannot be to exist or to subsist in some shadow-realm of possibilities, but is simply to be an available outcome within the framework of nature and natural laws” (1986: 325). Jon Miller also holds a similar position by saying that “The possible is that which could occur in Nature” (2001: 810). See Miller (811, note 84) for his explanation of how his position is in partial agreement with Mason. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Furthermore, we learn that lack of power goes hand in hand with inadequate knowledge (EIVPreface, EIVAppII; see also EVP20S) and indicates negation (EIVP32D; see also EIVPreface). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here the context makes it clear that what is at stake is passive affects, not active affects. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I give a detailed treatment of this issue and of the limits of intuitive ideas in Soyarslan (2014a). Whereas Nadler describes “the human mind [as] an agonistic arena, with adequate and inadequate ideas struggling for dominance” (2015: 107) and notes that “those ideas with the greater affective power will win out and effectively determine desire” (ibid), he does not explain what the power of ideas consist in for Spinoza. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In holding this I follow Della Rocca (2003: 212) and Lin (2006: 402). As Lin (403) and Marshall (2008: 49) point out, for Spinoza the power of an idea does not refer to the purely epistemic qualities of an idea, such as its adequacy or inadequacy. If it did, rational ideas would *always* be more powerful than passionate ideas and *akratic* action would not be possible, which obviously is not the case. Instead, the power of an idea refers to its *causal power* in that it is a function of the power of its causes. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Here I follow Lin (2006: 403). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For Spinoza “so long as we are not torn by affects contrary to our nature, we have the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect” (EVP10). However, I hold that given the extremely powerful nature of passions and our limited power, we can never completely avoid being torn by affects contrary to our nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nadler makes this point contra Hübner (2014: 138, note 49). I agree with Hübner that the wise man is not to be identified with the free man. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As I see it, here, it is clear from the context that consciousness implies adequate knowledge. Note, however, that there are passages such as EVP34S where consciousness does not imply adequate knowledge. Whether or not Spinoza has a consistent and developed account of consciousness is a disputed issue. See Curley (1988: 71-73), Wilson (1999), Nadler (2008) and LeBuffe (2010) for various accounts of consciousness in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note that Spinoza invokes EIIP47S in EVP20S in order to support his view that knowledge of God is the foundation of intuitive knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Kristin Primus (2017: 185) for the idea that attaining intuitive knowledge and its attendant *beautitudo* are more achievable for finite minds than is sometimes supposed. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Curley renders *acquiescentia in se ipso* as “self-esteem,” whereas Samuel Shirley (2006) prefers to translate it as “self-contentment.” Donald Rutherford (1999: 451-452), on the other hand, states that even though he retains Curley’s translation, it is important to recognize that the expression also carries the more literal meaning of “contentment with oneself.” In this paper I follow Clare Carlisle (2017: 210-11), who prefers to leave *acquiescentia* untranslated “in order to retain the rich and multiple resonance the term has for Spinoza.” In her words, “translating *acquiescentia in se ipso* as ‘self-esteem’ fails to capture the meaning that *acquiescentia* has for Spinoza. This meaning is twofold: on the one hand, the Latin root *quies* signifies stillness, quiet, rest; on the other hand, the verb *acquiescere* also carries the sense of acceptance, submission or obedience conveyed by the English ‘acquiesce’” (210). As I explain in my paper, I maintain that *vera* *animi acquiescentia* involves that sense of acceptance. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In the *Ethics* *acquiescentia in se ipso* comes in active and passive forms depending on whether *acquiescentia* at stake arises from an *adequate* knowledge of “[ourselves] and [our] power of acting” (EIIIDefAffXXV) or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind ***(animi acquiescentia)***, which stems from the intuitive knowledge of God” (EIVApp4). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The question as to how (if at all) our mind can be deemed eternal in the Spinozistic framework is a controversial issue, which we do not need to pursue in detail. But I would like to note that, on the interpretation I follow, the human mind partakes of eternity in two distinct but related ways: (1) to the extent that there is an aspect of the mind that corresponds to the eternal aspect of the body, that is, to the extent that “[the] idea, which expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity, is a certain mode of thinking, which pertains to the essence of the mind, and which is necessarily eternal” (EVP23S), and (2) insofar as we attain adequate ideas—that is, to the extent that “we know things by the second and third kind of knowledge” (EVP38D). Whereas every mind (and body) partakes in the first kind of eternity, and automatically so, the second kind of eternity applies more narrowly to the human mind. In engaging in acts of understanding and recognizing that it has the first kind of eternity, the human mind has the ability to increase the share of its eternal part—that is, the intellect. For similar interpretations, see Nadler (2001), (2006) and Garber (2005). I agree with Nadler (2006: 262), who argues that neither of these ways amounts to anything more than the fact that when a person dies, the knowledge in his mind—as a set of eternally true and adequate ideas—will persist. For some of the other excellent treatments of the eternity of the mind in Spinoza, see Garrett (2009), Parchment (2000), and Steinberg (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In EVP40S Spinoza states that “…it is clear that our mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is *determined* (*determinatur*) by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God’s eternal and infinite intellect” (my italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Notably, in EVP37, Spinoza appears to suggest that there is no passion in the mind “which is *contrary to* [the intellectual love of God], or [*sive*] which can *take it away*” (my italics). Given that in the *Ethics* Spinoza treats the intellectual love coextensively with blessedness and ***animi acquiescentia***, one might wonder if EVP37 poses a problem for my reading. I do not think it does. For, as I argue in Soyarslan (2014a), EVP37 does not concern the mind *per se*. As I read Spinoza, the demonstration of EVP37 suggests that EVP37 concerns the mind only insofar as its eternal aspect is considered. However, since no human mind can be identified with its eternal aspect alone, it would be impossible to rule out situations wherein passionate ideas can be co-present with adequate ideas in the same mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I give an account of the transformative transition from ordinary life to life according to the order of the intellect in Soyarslan (2014b). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. An earlier version of this paper was read at the North American Spinoza Society Session at the APA Eastern Division Meeting in New York City. I would like to thank the audience, particularly Michael LeBuffe, Martin Lin, and Andrew Youpa, for their helpful commentary. I am also indebted to Tad Schmaltz, Steven Nadler, and two anonymous referees at this journal for commenting on earlier versions of this paper. I would like to thank the editor and the associate editor of this journal for their guidance and consideration. Finally, as always, I am beyond grateful to my beautiful son, Alex Teo, for making everything better and to my family for their constant support and love. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)