

# Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory

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# Following a *Recta Ratio Vivendi*

## The Practical Utility of Spinoza's Dictates of Reason

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In recent years, a number of commentators have expressed dissatisfaction with Spinoza's account of practical reason, or at least the standard interpretation of it, according to which reason supplies instrumental, exceptionless rules or dictates [*dictamina*] for persevering in one's being. The challenges take several forms: (1) acting from the dictates of reason consists merely in forming adequate ideas—reason's 'dictates' are not prescriptive in any ordinary sense;<sup>1</sup> (2) the dictates of reason are too general to provide helpful guidance;<sup>2</sup> (3) where the dictates of reason are specific—in particular, in the case of the free man passages—they might not apply to those of us who are imperfectly rational and who live in situated, sub-optimal conditions.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I will maintain that these concerns either are unwarranted or they do not, when properly qualified, vitiate the action-guiding capacities of the dictates of reason. To see this we must re-examine how Spinoza conceives of deliberative reasoning. Instead of seeing it as the process of rationally deducing specific rules of action and, relatively unproblematically, subsuming particular cases under these rules, I propose that we see deliberative reasoning as a complex, inexact art, the mastery of which

<sup>1</sup> See Donald Rutherford, 'Spinoza and the Dictates of Reason' ['Dictates'], *Inquiry* 51, no. 5 (2008): 485–511; Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* [*Study*] (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> See Bennett, *Study*; Matthew Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life* [*Human Freedom*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Martin Lin, 'Spinoza's Account of Akrasia', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 3 (2006): 395–414. Unlike Bennett, though, neither Kisner nor Lin regard this as a damning problem for Spinoza's account of practical reason (see n. 16).

<sup>3</sup> See Don Garrett, "A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively": Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's Ethics' ['Free Man'], in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-Francois Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 221–38; Michael LeBuffe, 'Spinoza's Normative Ethics' ['Normative Ethics'], *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (2007): 371–92; Kisner, *Human Freedom*.

requires a kind of cognitive training. Through this training—which depends crucially on the resources of memory and imagination—one reorients one’s patterns of thought and action. In light of this, I propose that we understand the dictates of reason as general, memorable precepts that help to constitute one’s conception of a right manner of living [*recta ratio vivendi*]; such precepts are well suited to guiding the minds of imagination-driven agents in the imprecise art of living.

## 1. Three Challenges to the Standard Interpretation of the Dictates of Reason

What I will call the standard interpretation of Spinoza’s account of practical reason is the view advanced by A. G. Wernham and defended by Edwin Curley, according to which reason guides action by supplying instrumental rules for striving.<sup>4</sup> On this reading, the dictates of reason are adequate ideas of what is in one’s (real) interest. They tell us what types of actions necessarily conduce to our power, and so they are, in Curley’s words, ‘hypothetical imperatives with necessary antecedents, and so, in effect, categorical.’<sup>5</sup> As rules for persevering in our being, they are like Hobbesian laws of nature.<sup>6</sup> In this section, I will sketch three ways in which Spinoza’s account of practical reason, on this standard interpretation, has been challenged.

Before I turn to these challenges, let me say a word about the notion of practical reason. By practical reason I do not mean some special *form* of reason; rather, I simply mean the role that reason plays, proximately, in guiding deliberation and, distally, in guiding one’s actions.<sup>7</sup> Reason can guide deliberation and action in a couple of ways: (1) one can grasp through reason that her essence consists in striving to realize as fully as possible her power of acting [*potentia agendi*]. This gives one a standard by which she may evaluate objects or actions as good or evil; (2) reason can identify necessary connections between forms of action and power. Dictates are typically understood as action guiding in this second sense: they are instrumental rules for power enhancement. However, in recent years, some commentators have cast doubt on whether these dictates are genuinely action guiding. Let’s look now at these challenges.

<sup>4</sup> A. G. Wernham, ‘General Introduction’, in *Spinoza: The Political Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958); Edwin Curley, ‘Spinoza’s Moral Philosophy’, in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 354–76.

<sup>5</sup> Curley, ‘Spinoza’s Moral Philosophy’, 371.

<sup>6</sup> Wernham, ‘General Introduction’, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, Spinoza’s doctrine of attribute independence precludes the possibility of mental states (beliefs, pro-attitudes, etc.) causing physical behavior. Nevertheless, since mental states can cause other mental states that parallel, or correlate with, the behavior in question, we may loosely, and for the sake of convenience, speak of mental states causing behavior, or ideas guiding action.

### 1.1 *The Non-Prescriptive Problem*

The first problem is that Spinoza often equates ‘acting from the dictate of reason’ [*ex dictamine rationis*] with having adequate ideas,<sup>8</sup> as if simply having an adequate idea, or at least possessing the second kind of knowledge (2p40s2), just is to act from the dictates of reason. This is how Donald Rutherford proposes that we understand the dictates of reason: ‘reason *dictates* action for Spinoza only to the extent that adequate ideas determine the existence of other adequate ideas and related affects, as part of the necessary order of nature.’<sup>9</sup> If this is the case, the dictates of reason are nothing but garden-variety truths, which, like all truths, have practical effects when adequately grasped.

Because Spinoza thinks that adequate ideas are *intrinsically* active, on this reading, reason does not so much *guide* deliberation and action as it does produce effects directly. But if this were the only sense in which reason contributed to action, Spinoza’s account would be rather misleading, since he frequently writes about acting from the guidance [*ex ductu*] of reason. Reason must not just *be* active, it must *guide* action. This worry underlies Jonathan Bennett’s criticism that, at most, Spinoza demonstrates that we can act while *using* reason, but that ‘it is a wild leap from “done while using reason” to “done by the guidance of reason.” It allows [Spinoza] to introduce “the guidance of reason” without explaining how reason can be prescriptive or what its prescriptions are.’<sup>10</sup> This leads Bennett to the ‘dismal conclusion’ that ‘Spinoza has no suggestions at all to offer us regarding how reason can be prescriptive.’<sup>11</sup> Rutherford agrees with the conclusion, but suggests that ‘Spinoza does not take himself to be capable of demonstrating a set of normative principles.’<sup>12</sup> On Rutherford’s interpretation, the dictates ‘do not function as practical principles; rather, they are merely acts of understanding, or conclusions entailed by acts of understanding.’<sup>13</sup> But even on Rutherford’s more charitable reading, the conclusion is rather disappointing for one hoping that the dictates of reason might supply deliberative guidance.

### 1.2 *Vacuity Problem*

Spinoza does provide examples of dictates of reason that he apparently intended to be action guiding. Unfortunately, many of them are exceedingly general. In the scholium to 4p18 Spinoza breaks from the geometrical order to give the reader a glimpse of some of these dictates. One looking for a concrete set of directives here would be

<sup>8</sup> Support for this can be found throughout Part 4. For instance, in 4p24, Spinoza equates acting from the guidance of reason [*ex ductu rationis*] with acting absolutely from virtue, which he in turn explicates (in 4p23d) in terms of having adequate ideas (from 3p1). Since he elsewhere indicates that acting from the guidance of reason [*ex ductu rationis*] is equivalent to acting from the dictate of reason [*ex dictamine rationis*] (see, e.g., 4p35d), it would seem that acting from the dictate of reason consists simply in having adequate ideas.

<sup>9</sup> Rutherford, ‘Dictates’, 495.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 309.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 310.

<sup>12</sup> Rutherford, ‘Dictates’, 501.

<sup>13</sup> Rutherford, ‘Dictates’, 503.

disappointed, as the dictates include only the most general precepts, such as: ‘everyone love himself, seek his advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead a man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can’ (4p18s). Hardly revelatory stuff. Not only are these ‘dictates’ rather uninformative, to the extent that they prescribe anything at all they seem to exhort one to do what one *already* does, and, indeed, what one, insofar as one is in oneself, cannot but do, namely strive to persevere in one’s being (3p6). And later statements—e.g., ‘from the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils’ (4p65)—are so general as to be practically bankrupt. Because of this, Spinoza’s account of practical reason seems susceptible to the same kind of parody that Leibniz made of Descartes’s rules of method, which is that they boil down to the following instructions: ‘Take what is necessary, do as you ought, and you will get what you wanted.’<sup>14</sup>

Spinoza’s conception of reason, which consists in grasping common notions (2p40s2), properties that are shared either by all things or at least by some subset of things (2p38; 2p39), seems to constrain the kind of guidance that it could offer. Reason ascertains common notions and necessary connections between things, it grasps things *sub specie aeternitatis* (2p44c2; 5p29s); it does not grasp concrete particulars. Thus, it can inform us of types of action that *necessarily* conduce to power enhancement. But, if the dictates of reason are general, exceptionless rules for (or truths about) power enhancement, they are bound to be relatively indeterminate and uninformative. Susan James nicely captures this quandary in her characterization of seventeenth-century deductivist approaches to moral prescriptions: ‘On the one hand, [the prescriptions] might be suitably obvious and uncontentious but prescribe too few courses of action. On the other hand, they might discriminate between more courses of action at the expense of their own indubitability.’<sup>15</sup> Spinoza’s problem is the former: reason seems only to supply prescriptive pabulum. The second objection, then, is that reason’s dictates are rather vacuous.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Peter Dear, ‘Method and the Study of Nature’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147–77, p. 157. One might compare this with Da Mayor’s advice to Mookie in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*: Da Mayor: ‘Doctor’; Mookie: ‘C’mon, what? What?’; Da Mayor: ‘Always do the right thing’; Mookie: ‘That’s it?’; Da Mayor: ‘That’s it’; Mookie: ‘I got it. I’m gone’.

<sup>15</sup> Susan James, ‘Reason, the Passions, and the Good Life’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1358–97, p. 1364.

<sup>16</sup> The vacuity concern has been noted by otherwise rather sympathetic commentators. For instance, Martin Lin writes that because of the generality and atemporality of adequate ideas ‘one might reasonably wonder if adequate ideas can ever be involved in deliberation. Since reason can only represent to us very general and abstract features of the world and not particular things and their positions in the order and connection of causes (and hence their temporal properties), then how can reason ever tell us what to do?’ (Lin, ‘Spinoza’s Account of Akrasia’, 405). Lin goes on to suggest that this might not be a problem if we acknowledge that the concepts of rationality and adequacy ‘admit of degrees’ (‘Spinoza’s Account of Akrasia’, 405). Matthew Kisner too points out that ‘many of Spinoza’s natural laws boil down to the dictate to “do what is good for you,” which is so vague that it scarcely looks like a principle at all’ (*Human Freedom*, 120) and

### 1.3 *Applicability Problem*

At this point one might wonder if the problems with Spinoza's account of the dictates of reason run as deep as I have suggested. Consider the first objection: Spinoza sometimes takes the dictates of reason to be simple entailments of reason. These sometimes take the form of descriptions of what one who has adequate ideas does or desires. But, one might wonder, why isn't a description of what one who is rational does or desires tantamount to an assertion about what it would be rational for *anyone* to do or desire? And, if the descriptions of the actions and affects of a rational person can be neatly translated into prescriptions for us, then vacuity is not such a problem either, since the *Ethics* contains some specific descriptions of how a rational person acts or feels, particularly in the descriptions of the free man.<sup>17</sup>

But, tempting though it might be to take the descriptions of one who acts from the guidance of reason as prescriptive for us, it would be a mistake to do so. These descriptions tell us only what we *would* do if we were (fully) rational. But, as several commentators have rightly pointed out, it is not always the case that what we, imperfect beings who deliberate in suboptimal conditions, should do is identical with what fully rational beings would do in optimal conditions. This is seen most clearly in the case of the free man, whose actions—however admirable—do not necessarily serve as a good model for imperfectly rational beings to emulate.<sup>18</sup> This is a version of the problem of the second best: the best course of action in suboptimal conditions might not be to approximate as far as possible the best course of actions in optimal conditions. And the best thing for a suboptimal agent to do might not be to emulate the behavior of an optimal agent. For instance, even if an ideally rational person would have no need to study for a logic exam, it would be patently foolish for most young logic students to emulate the ideal or to take the description of an ideal agent as prescriptive for them.

This problem extends to all of the dictates of reason. While in many circumstances it might be best to act as reason dictates, in some instances it might be best to yield to non-rational affects or to engage in non-rational behavior. For instance Spinoza makes

that 'any universal rule directing us to our good is necessarily very general—"every man should seek his advantage." Consequently, Spinoza's rules are not sufficiently fine-grained to provide specific practical direction' (*Human Freedom*, 130). Kisner proceeds to show that this is not an insuperable problem for Spinoza's account of practical reason, provided that we distinguish between the perspective of reason, which discerns only highly general precepts, and the practical perspective, which makes use of the full range of cognition (e.g., experience, the affects, etc.) to make fine-grained determinations. I am quite sympathetic to Kisner's account. What I aim to show in this essay is how the perspective of reason—and the precepts that are issued therefrom—can be usefully incorporated into the practical perspective.

<sup>17</sup> The free man, who acts solely from reason (4p66s), flees from threats not out of fear but from presence of mind (4p69), strives to avoid the favors of the ignorant (4p70), avoids deception (4p72), and so forth.

<sup>18</sup> See Don Garrett, 'Free Man'; Dan Garber, 'Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability', in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man*, eds. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), 183–207; LeBuffe, 'Normative Ethics'; and Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008). This is not to say that the free man should not be understood as a model of human nature. A model of human nature can function as the standard against which actual humans may judge their levels of perfection without also serving as an infallible guide for humans to emulate.

it quite clear that despite the fact that neither humility nor repentance are rational, one should not conclude from this that these passions should be extirpated.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, he writes: ‘Because men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects, humility and repentance, and in addition hope and fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage. So since men must sin, they ought rather to sin in that direction.’<sup>20</sup> While this is framed in terms of how *other* (presumably less rational) people should act, the point applies equally to the partially rational reader: in some instances the most rational course of action—i.e., the course of action that promotes the greater good or lesser evil (4p65)—might involve yielding to affects or performing actions that are contrary to the dictates of reason.

This seems to give rise to a paradox, as Spinoza embraces both (1) from the dictates of reason one pursues the greater good or lesser evil (4p65) and (2) the greater good or lesser evil is sometimes brought about by acting contrary to the dictates of reason. Together these two theses imply that from the dictates of reason one sometimes acts contrary to the dictates of reason. Indeed, Spinoza directly embraces this conclusion in a somewhat different context, when he writes in the *Tractatus Politicus* that ‘if a man who is guided by reason has sometimes to do, by order of the commonwealth, what he knows to be contrary to reason, this penalty is far outweighed by the good he derives from the civil order itself; for it is also a law of reason that of two evils the lesser one should be chosen.’<sup>21</sup>

The paradox dissolves once we acknowledge that there is an equivocation at the heart of the notion of acting from the guidance of reason. Acting from reason can mean pursuing that which satisfies the description of the greater good or lesser evil (4p65) in a particular case, which—since it will be concrete and spatio-temporally situated—I will call the good *in situ*. Determining what constitutes the good *in situ* requires input from the imagination, since one cannot have rational knowledge of concrete particulars. The adequate, rational knowledge that we can form of good and evil is ‘only abstract, or universal’;<sup>22</sup> whereas ‘the judgment we make concerning the order of things and the connections of causes, so that we may be able to determine what in the present is good or evil for us, is imaginary.’<sup>23</sup> Rather than determining what is good *in situ*, reason can identify, for instance, affect-types and action-types that follow from the laws of our nature alone. In Spinoza’s terms, reason can tell us what is good or evil *per se*.<sup>24</sup> With

<sup>19</sup> 4p53 and 4p54.

<sup>20</sup> 4p54s.

<sup>21</sup> *TP* 3.6; compare *TTP* XVI.200. All references to the *Tractatus Politicus* [*TP*] are to *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000). All references to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [*TTP*] are to *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Citations refer to the chapter/page number (e.g., XX.232 refers to chapter XX, page 232).

<sup>22</sup> 4p62s.

<sup>23</sup> 4p62s.

<sup>24</sup> Without getting too bogged down in the niceties of Spinoza’s metaethics, let me say a few words about the concept of the good *per se*. One might think that the very concept of the good *per se* is an oxymoron, given Spinoza’s insistence that, ‘as far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves [*in se*]’ (4pref). Nevertheless, Spinoza *does* refer to affects as *bonum per se* and *malum per se* (4p45s2; 4p47; 4p50)—the former referring to affect-types that are constitutively linked to increases in one’s power of acting, the latter referring to affect-types that are constitutively linked to decreases in one’s power of acting. Moreover, as I read him, Spinoza does not deny that things can be

the distinction between the good *in situ* and the good per se in mind, we can see that there is no paradox in claiming that it can sometimes be rational or good (*in situ*) to act contrary what is rational or good (per se).

In resolving this paradox, though, I have cast further doubt on reason's action-guiding credentials, since it looks like the dictates of reason merely tell us what is rational or good per se, which may not be an especially good guide for me as I deliberate about how to act *in situ*.<sup>25</sup> So, even if the dictates of reason do supply non-vacuous content, they do not obviously prescribe how *we*—spatio-temporally situated, deliberative beings—should act.

## 2. The Principle of Accommodation

In light of the applicability concern just articulated, it looks like in order for a precept to be action guiding it must, in some way, be suited to the situated deliberative agent. I want to suggest now that this point was in no way lost on Spinoza. Spinoza makes the circumstance relativity of intellectual or moral guidance a cornerstone of his ethical teachings. For, even if the broad features of a good life—in which one knows and loves God, adopts a temperate (though not ascetic) lifestyle, participates in harmonious relationships with others, and so forth—hold for all humans, the means by which the good life may be best achieved will depend on one's circumstances and one's particular cast of mind, one's *ingenium*. Consequently, the moral teachings and deliberative strategies for enhancing the power of individuals must be suited to one's situated position.

Spinoza's appreciation of the circumstance relativity of guidance is most readily apparent in his political writings, where he adopts an unabashedly realist approach to governance. Unlike those who 'conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be',<sup>26</sup> Spinoza insists that in order to govern effectively, so that one's commands are followed and the collective power or right of the people is maximized, one must be attentive to the actual capacities of the relevant agents.<sup>27</sup> This entails tailoring the content of laws and governing procedures to suit the actual social psychological conditions.<sup>28</sup>

*objectively* good or evil. Rather, he denies that anything can be intrinsically and absolutely 'good' and 'evil'. 'Good' and 'evil' are meaningful, objective designations, but only relative to some particular thing's striving or nature. In this light, 'good' and 'evil' should be seen as relational or extrinsic properties. This fits with Spinoza's subsequent definition of the 'good' as that which 'we certainly know to be useful to us' (4D1), or that which increases our power of acting (4p8d). On this model, some thing T is good for some agent A if and only if T increases A's power of acting.

<sup>25</sup> LeBuffe expresses the complexity of situated deliberation thus: 'What I ought to do is a very complex question requiring me to understand what passion is influencing me and how, given my particular circumstances, I can best resist it and increase my power to persevere' (LeBuffe, 'Normative Ethics', 390).

<sup>26</sup> *TP* 1.1.1. As has been often noted, the opening of the *TP* echoes Machiavelli's *The Prince*, ch. XV.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, *TP* 4.4.

<sup>28</sup> By 'social psychological conditions', I mean both the general features of human psychology as expressed within a particular social arrangement and the specific *ingenium* or cast of mind of a people, shaped by socio-historical circumstances.



This realist approach to governance applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to ordinary interpersonal affairs, since, as Spinoza writes in the *Ethics*, if one is to strengthen bonds with others, one must ‘bear with each according to his understanding [*ex ipsius ingenio*]’.<sup>29</sup>

Bearing with the *ingenia* of others requires presenting oneself and one’s teaching in a manner that will be agreeable to one’s audience. We find an early endorsement of linguistic accommodation in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*TIE*], an unfinished work of method that is, in certain respects, Spinoza’s counterpart to Descartes’s methodological writings.<sup>30</sup> Like Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, the *TIE* opens with an autobiographical sketch of how its author learned to cast off sensory-based or external authority-based beliefs to rationally redirect his mind. And both authors offer a set of policies to live by while one undertakes this cognitive revolution. Spinoza’s version of Descartes’s ‘provisional moral code’<sup>31</sup> consists of a set of ‘rules of living’ [*regulae vivendi*], the first of which is:

To speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people, and do whatever does not interfere with our attaining our purpose. For we can gain a considerable advantage from this, if we yield as much to their understanding as we can. Moreover, in this way, they will give a favorable hearing to the truth.<sup>32</sup>

This notion of accommodating one’s audience is reinforced in rule three, which, among other things, exhorts one to conform to the ‘customs of the community’,<sup>33</sup> a point that Spinoza also emphasizes in another early work, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, on the grounds that by ‘becoming like his fellow men’ one can more effectively ‘win them over and help them.’<sup>34</sup>

One finds similar views expressed in virtually all of Spinoza’s works. Indeed, some have read his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as one grand exercise in rhetorical accommodation, in which he tamps down his naturalistic metaphysics so as to win the approval of liberal Christian theologians.<sup>35</sup> The accommodationist principles that he explicitly endorses contribute to this impression. For instance, in discussing the

<sup>29</sup> 4app12–13.

<sup>30</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* [*Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*] and *Discourse on Method* [*Discours de la méthode*].

<sup>31</sup> AT 6.22ff./CSM 1.122ff.

<sup>32</sup> *TIE* §17.

<sup>33</sup> The idea of conforming to the customs of one’s community (Spinoza’s rule 3) is quite close to the ‘first maxim’ of Descartes’s provisional code, namely, that one ‘obey the laws and customs of [one’s] country’ (*Discourse* III in AT 6.23/CSM 1.122). And Spinoza’s views on esteem and accommodation in the *Short Treatise* resemble Descartes’s discussion of pride and shame in the *Passions of the Soul* (*Passions*, Part Three, §206 in AT 11.483/CSM 1.401).

<sup>34</sup> KVII, 12, C 116–17.

<sup>35</sup> Leo Strauss, ‘How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*’, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 142–201; Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), ch. 2; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), ch. 5.

value of believing in the historical parables contained in Scripture, Spinoza stresses the importance of meeting people at their cognitive level:

[W]here someone seeks to teach a whole nation, not to speak of the entire human race, and wants to be understood by everybody, he must substantiate his points by experience alone and thoroughly adapt his arguments and the definitions of his teaching to the capacity of the common people (the majority of mankind), and not make a chain of inferences or advance definitions linking his arguments together. Otherwise he will be writing only for the learned, that is, he will be intelligible only to what is, in comparison with the rest of mankind, a very small handful of people.<sup>36</sup>

Spinoza relies on this insight in the *Ethics*, as well, appealing to experiential evidence in the scholia to corroborate, or lend convictive force to, theses that he has already demonstrated to be true beyond any doubt, claiming that ‘although these things are such that no reason for doubt remains, still, I hardly believe that men can be induced to consider them fairly unless I confirm them by experience’ (3p2s).

Behind these sundry remarks lies a general principle of practical ethics—which I will call the Principle of Accommodation—that may be formulated as follows:

One should adopt teachings/commands and modes of presenting these teachings/commands that are suited to elicit optimal cognitive and affective responses relative to the circumstances and the casts of mind [*ingenia*] of the affected parties.

Compliance with this principle might require accommodating one’s language, one’s appearance, one’s methods of argumentation and persuasion, or even the content of one’s message, to suit the psychology of one’s audience. And, as we will see, this rule applies both interpersonally and intra-personally; it governs not only how we instruct others, but also what rules we adopt for ourselves.

The principle of accommodation reflects Spinoza’s appreciation of the distinction between the good *per se* and the good *in situ*. If one is to determine the good *in situ*, which is the aim of deliberative reasoning, it is not enough to know what is good *per se*. One must consider the psychological temperaments, proclivities, biases, and sources of irrationality of the relevant parties—including the deliberative agent herself—and adopt policies and courses of action that are most likely to be effective in light of these psychological facts. The principle of accommodation serves, effectively, as a kind of meta-rule of living that entails that if one is to adequately specify first-order rules one will need to have knowledge of circumstantial particulars. Spinoza’s commitment to the principle of accommodation thus not only evinces his appreciation of the distinction between the good *per se* and the good *in situ*, it also serves as a constraint on first-order action-guiding principles. The question that we must ask, then, in light of this principle, is whether Spinoza actually has any conception of first-order action-guiding rules that conform to this general constraint.

<sup>36</sup> *TTP* V:76.

### 3. Law as *Ratio Vivendi*

To find a class of genuinely action-guiding rules in Spinoza, I propose that we look to his notion of a *ratio vivendi*, a rule or manner of living.<sup>37</sup> This locution appears at crucial points in his works, including his discussion of law in chapter IV of the *TTP*, which opens: ‘the word law [*lex*] in an absolute sense signifies that, in accordance with which, each individual thing, or all things, or all things of the same kind, behave in one and the same fixed and determined way’.<sup>38</sup> He then proceeds to distinguish between laws that depend on natural necessity—that is, on the nature of a thing alone—and laws that depend on a human decision, which men ‘prescribe to themselves and to others in order to achieve a better and safer life, or for other reasons’.<sup>39</sup> The latter, like all laws, are descriptive, designating patterns of ‘fixed and determinate’ [*certa ac determinata*] behavior. But this descriptive regularity is itself based on the decisions of subjects to obey these commands, decisions which are themselves dependent on the judgment that the commands supply reasons for compliance.<sup>40</sup> In other words, laws are commands that *prescribe* modes of action and compel sufficient compliance to exhibit *descriptive* regularity.

This dual descriptive-prescriptive conception of law is captured by Spinoza’s subsequent characterization of decision-based law as a *ratio vivendi*, a rule or pattern for living.<sup>41</sup> Civil law, as a *ratio vivendi*, indicates the common manner of life that characterizes the behavior of compliant subjects (i.e., beings for whom a common command is prescriptive). This explains why Spinoza claims that those who comply with a common civil code—i.e., who have transferred their right [*ius*] or *potestas*<sup>42</sup>—act from a common principle, a common *ratio vivendi*.<sup>43</sup> But civil law is also action guiding: it prescribes, or proscribes, forms of behavior, providing reliably good reasons for acting, from the subject’s perspective, irrespective of whether the laws are formed from reason. If commands were not action guiding, if they did not prescribe (and motivate) the production of specific forms of action, they would not be laws at all, since they

<sup>37</sup> Note the connection with the *regulae vivendi*, which can also be translated as ‘rules of living’, from the *TIE*.

<sup>38</sup> *TTP* IV.57.

<sup>39</sup> *TTP* IV.57.

<sup>40</sup> For most people the reason for compliance will consist primarily in a fear of punishment annexed to a law; but for some, who see the true purpose of the law, the reason for compliance will be a recognition that laws coordinate behavior and enhance collective power (see *TTP* IV.58). Either way, laws are prescriptive in that they give one reason to believe that one’s greater good or lesser evil consists in compliance.

<sup>41</sup> *TTP* IV.58. This conception of law as a *ratio vivendi* is retained in the *Ethics* (see 4p37s2). The double sense of *ratio* might help to explain why Spinoza prefers the expression *ratio vivendi* to *regula vivendi* in his later writing. For an analysis of the relationship between the descriptive and the prescriptive dimensions to law, see Rutherford, ‘Spinoza’s Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics’, in *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, eds. Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143–67.

<sup>42</sup> See Justin Steinberg, ‘On Being *Sui Iuris*: Spinoza and the Republican Idea of Liberty’, *History of European Ideas* 34, no. 3 (2008): 239–49.

<sup>43</sup> *TP* 3.3.

would not compel the fixed manner of living [*ratio vivendi*] that is constitutive of law.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that, on Spinoza's account, such laws are—or at least ought to be—suited to the customs and psychological propensities of a given people.<sup>45</sup> Thus, they conform to the principle of accommodation.

So, in his account of civil laws, Spinoza gives us a model of prescriptive, action-guiding rules that are specifically accommodated to the psychological dispositions of the affected parties. What is not yet obvious is whether Spinoza's notion of law as *ratio vivendi* reveals anything about his account of the dictates of reason. Rutherford denies any connection. While he acknowledges that the account of law in *TTP* IV indicates that Spinoza does allow for prescriptive principles, he claims that such rules are 'noticeably absent in the *Ethics*'.<sup>46</sup> In what follows, I will show why I think that Rutherford is wrong about this.

#### 4. Dictates, Maxims, and Cognitive Training

To see that the dictates of reason are action-guiding precepts, consider the fact that Spinoza's definition of law in the *TTP* applies not only to civil law, but also to what he calls 'divine law'. Divine law 'looks only to the supreme good, that is, to the true knowledge and love of God';<sup>47</sup> specifically, it tells us what 'rule of life' [*ratio vivendi*] is required in order to know and love God.<sup>48</sup> The constituents of divine law are moral principles, which 'may be called the commands of God, because they are prescribed to us, as it were, by God himself so far as he exists in our minds'.<sup>49</sup> This same conception of divine law is introduced in the scholium to the penultimate proposition of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza equates the moral teachings of Part 4 with divine law.<sup>50</sup> In light of this characterization, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the contents of divine law include the dictates of reason from *Ethics* 4.<sup>51</sup>

To drive home the connection between the notion of law or *ratio vivendi* in the *TTP* and the dictates of reason in the *Ethics*, I propose we carefully examine a crucial scholium of the *Ethics*, 5p10s, in which Spinoza describes a metacognitive technique for

<sup>44</sup> See *TP* 3.8.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, in the *TTP* Moses is presented as an exemplary legislator, whose prudence can be seen through his adoption of laws and policies that are accommodated to the mentality of nomadic ex-slaves, who needed many prescriptions in order to live in peace and security (see *TTP* IV.63). For more on the relativity of governance, see my 'Spinoza's Curious Defense of Toleration', in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, eds. Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210–30.

<sup>46</sup> Rutherford, 'Dictates', 502.

<sup>47</sup> *TTP* IV.59.

<sup>48</sup> *TTP* IV.60.

<sup>49</sup> *TTP* IV.60.

<sup>50</sup> 5p41s.

<sup>51</sup> See Kisner, *Human Freedom*, 116. I would only qualify Kisner's statement that 'divine laws are the same thing as the dictates of reason from 4P18S' (116), by noting that in the *TTP* divine law comprehends not only the dictates of reason from *Ethics* 4, but also those teachings that contribute to the third kind of knowledge and to the intellectual love of God [*amor intellectualis Dei*] from *Ethics* 5.

strengthening the power of reason. The problem that Spinoza is seeking to address here arises from the fact that our minds follow two different orders: the order of the imagination and the order of the intellect. The imagination follows the ‘common order of nature’ [*ordo communis naturae*], the order in which ideas get associated due to happenstance encounters with external objects. By contrast, the order of the intellect proceeds deductively, with adequate ideas following from other adequate ideas, all of which depend solely on our own nature.<sup>52</sup> While our freedom, or our greatest happiness, consists in having powerful intellects, our minds initially and for the most part follow the order of the imagination. And even when we have true or adequate knowledge, this knowledge on its own is often overpowered by the force of passions.<sup>53</sup>

Acquiring a powerful intellect and a habit of virtue requires training and habituation such that one can begin to overcome these cognitive deficiencies.<sup>54</sup> This training, described in 5p10s, involves impressing upon one’s mind a certain *recta ratio vivendi*.<sup>55</sup> He writes:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living [*ratio vivendi*], or [*seu*] sure maxims of life [*dogmata vitae*], to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.<sup>56</sup>

By conceiving of a *recta ratio vivendi* and joining it to memory we can exploit the resources of the imagination to make it serve intellectual ends.

The technique described in this scholium may be seen as drawing on two classical traditions. The more familiar point of reference is the Stoic tradition of cognitive therapy.<sup>57</sup> The practice of adopting metacognitive strategies to overcome one’s passions and inconstant ideas was central to Stoicism.<sup>58</sup> In Letters 94 and 95 to Lucilius, in which he defends the

<sup>52</sup> 2p29s; Epistle 37; *TIE* 86.

<sup>53</sup> 4p17.

<sup>54</sup> In a letter to his friend Johan Bouwmeester in which he roughly outlines a ‘method such that thereby we can make sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance’ he concludes by noting that for its successful implementation ‘there is needed constant meditation [*assiduam meditationem*] and a most steadfast mind and purpose, to acquire which it is most important to establish a fixed way and manner of life [*certum vivendi modum et rationem statuere*], and to have a definite aim in view’ (Epistle 37).

<sup>55</sup> The connection between ‘acquir[ing] a habit of virtue’ and ‘learn[ing] the true rule of living’ [*veram vivendi rationem*]’ is made explicit at *TTP* XVI.196.

<sup>56</sup> 5p10s.

<sup>57</sup> For a more detailed discussion of how Stoicism informs Spinoza’s thought, see Susan James, ‘Spinoza the Stoic’, in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 289–316.

<sup>58</sup> This Stoic tradition also informed a crucial background text for the cognitive therapy of the *Ethics*, namely, Descartes’s *Passions of the Soul*. Despite the fact that Spinoza lambastes the work in the preface to *Ethics* 5, Descartes provides a similar account of how the adoption of metacognitive strategies may be used to gain control over the passions. Descartes gives us two examples of how we train our minds—through ‘forethought and diligence’—to recall certain important rules for directing the mind: ‘For example, when we are unexpectedly attacked by an enemy, the situation allows no time for deliberation; and yet, I think, those who are accustomed to reflecting upon their actions can always do something in this situation. That is, when they feel themselves in the grip of fear they will try to turn their mind from consideration of the

importance of adopting rules or precepts [*praecepta*] against Aristo's skeptical challenges, Seneca discusses the need to train oneself to maintain focus on one's general aims and to constrain the impulses that thwart the efficacy of practical rules, claiming that 'without such training a man cannot strive with all his heart after that which is honourable, or even with steadiness or gladness, but will ever be looking back and wavering.'<sup>59</sup> Such training involves imprinting certain principles on the mind so that they are always ready to hand.<sup>60</sup>

The importance of impressing key teachings on the mind was also stressed in the classical rhetoric and *ars memoriae* tradition, in which memory was seen as essential to prudence, one of the cardinal virtues.<sup>61</sup> The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*—long thought to have been written by Cicero—presents memory as the 'treasure-house of the ideas supplied by Invention', the reservoir of past discoveries and insights.<sup>62</sup> According to this work, the power of memory can be strengthened through a variety of techniques, including the reduction of ideas to vivid, sensible images.<sup>63</sup> Versions of these techniques persisted into the medieval period. Aquinas, for example, stresses the ways that sensible images, or phantasms, can serve the intellect: 'we remember less easily those things which are of subtle and spiritual import; and we remember more easily those things which are gross and sensible. And if we wish to remember intelligible notions more easily, we should link them with some kind of phantasms, as Tullius teaches us in his Rhetoric.'<sup>64</sup>

Similar views about the connections between memory, imagination, and practical reason were still very much alive in the late renaissance and early modern periods leading up to Spinoza's *Ethics*. Francesco Guicciardini draws on the classical image of memory as a 'treasure-house' to point to its importance in making knowledge efficacious. In a passage that Spinoza would surely have appreciated, he writes: 'How different theory is from practice! So many people understand things well but either do not *remember* or do not know how to put them into practice! The knowledge of such men

danger by thinking about the reasons why there is much more security and honour in resistance than in flight. On the other hand, when they feel that the desire for vengeance and anger is impelling them to run thoughtlessly towards their assailants, they will remember to think that it is unwise to lose one's life when it can be saved without dishonour, and that if a match is very unequal it is better to beat an honourable retreat or ask quarter than stupidly to expose oneself to a certain death' (AT 11.487–8/CSM 1.403–4). The process whereby we come to think about the right things at the right times is only accomplished through gradual habituation. For those who have applied sufficient forethought and diligence, invoking the right rules and maxims at the right times will become second nature. Spinoza's account is distinguished from Descartes's in that (1) Spinoza denies that such control could ever be absolutely accomplished, and (2) Spinoza regards the suggestion that the mind could gain control over the body as unintelligible, replacing this with the view that the mind gains control over *itself*, as reason restrains or tempers the imagination.

<sup>59</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales [Epistles]*, vol. i, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), Epistle 95, §4; cf. Epistle 95, 36–40.

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., *Epistles* 94, §26.

<sup>61</sup> See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

<sup>62</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 205.

<sup>63</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 209ff.; see also Cicero, *De Oratore*, vol. i, trans. E. W. Sutton, completed by H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 469–71.

<sup>64</sup> *Aristotelis libros De sensu et sensato, De memoria et reminiscencia commentarium*, ed. R. M. Spiazzi (Taurini: Marietti, 1949), 93; cited in Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 71.

is useless. It is like having a treasure stored in a chest without ever being able to take it out.<sup>65</sup> For knowledge to be practical, it must be memorable. And, in *The Advancement of Learning* Francis Bacon stresses that in order for the fruits of the intellect to be memorable, they must be converted into sensible images, or emblemized: ‘Emblem reduceth conceits intellectual to images sensible, which strike the memory more; out of which axioms may be drawn much better practise than that in use.’<sup>66</sup> Bacon’s subsequent description of the ‘duty and office as rhetoric’ as ‘apply[ing] Reason to the Imagination for the better moving of the will,’<sup>67</sup> or ‘contract[ing] a confederacy between the Reason and Imagination against the affections,’<sup>68</sup> captures the very rationale behind the metacognitive strategy Spinoza describes in 5p10s: by joining rational principles to the imagination, reason can colonize the imagination, exploiting the resources of the latter and expanding its own dominion.

Viewing Spinoza’s account in light of these traditions, we can begin to appreciate the significance of general rules or principles. In defending the value of precepts or rules in one’s cognitive training, Seneca notes that even if they do not remove ignorance and inconstancy, they aid virtue in several ways, including by ‘refresh[ing] the memory’ [*renovant memoriam*].<sup>69</sup> And Guicciardini and Bacon both recognize that if reason makes use of the resources of memory, it should issue general maxims, which, because they can be joined to the imagination, will be more useful than more subtle truths that would lie fallow, like the treasures locked inside in an unopened chest. Guicciardini makes the connection between maxims and memory quite explicit, calling his collection of maxims *Ricordi*, signifying both that they were personal reflections and that they were meant to be reflected upon: ‘read these *Ricordi* often, and ponder them well. For it is easier to know and understand them than to put them into practice. But this too becomes easier if you grow so accustomed to them that they are always fresh in your memory.’<sup>70</sup> And Bacon, in assessing the relative merits of aphoristic and methodical (or systematic) approaches to the delivery of knowledge, notes that aphorisms, however incomplete they may be, have the virtue of ‘digesting [the idea] in a sensible method; and for this reason are better suited for making knowledge practical.’<sup>71</sup> Maxims, aphorisms, or simple rules are easy to imagine or encode, and so they can be effectively fused to one’s memory. Spinoza’s maxims of life, then, which express a correct *ratio vivendi*, are primed to be welded to one’s memory.

<sup>65</sup> Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections [Ricordi]*, Series C, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), §35.

<sup>66</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230. The process of emblemizing constitutes half of the ‘art of memory’ (230), and the art of memory contributes crucially to the strengthening of intellectual power (see ‘Letter to Sir Henry Savile’, in *The Major Works*, 118). Spinoza was almost certainly familiar with the Latinized version of *The Advancement of Learning*, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*.

<sup>67</sup> *The Major Works*, 238.

<sup>68</sup> *The Major Works*, 239.

<sup>69</sup> Epistle 94, §21.

<sup>70</sup> Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, §9.

<sup>71</sup> *The Major Works*, 234–5.

But how exactly do these maxims relate to the dictates of reason? To answer this, we must consider the examples that he gives us in the continuation to the scholium:

For example, we have laid it down as a maxim of life (see 4p46 and p46s) that hate is to be conquered by love, or nobility, not by repaying it with hate in return. But in order that we may always have this rule ready when it is needed, we ought to think about and meditate frequently on the common wrongs of men, and how they may be warded off best by nobility. For if we join the image of a wrong to the imagination of this maxim, it will always be ready for us (by 2p18) when a wrong is done to us. If we have ready also the principle of our own true advantage, and also of the good which follows from mutual friendship and common society, and keep in mind, moreover, that the highest satisfaction of mind stems from the right principle of living [*ex recta vivendi ratione*] (by 4p52), and that men, like other things, act from the necessity of nature, then the wrong, or the hate usually arising from it, will occupy a very small part of the imagination, and will easily be overcome.<sup>72</sup>

The maxims cited here are nothing other than dictates or teachings of reason found in *Ethics* 4: hate is conquered by love (4p46d and 4p46s); nothing is more useful to man than the society of other men (4p18s, 4p35s); and virtue, or reason, gives rise to the greatest satisfaction of the mind [*acquiescentia*] (4p52).<sup>73</sup> Nor should it be surprising that the *ratio vivendi* that we are to conceive is constituted by reason's dictates, since in the appendix to Part 4 he claims that the preceding moral teachings reveal the correct *ratio vivendi* (G II.266). And he concludes the discussion of the technique of committing the *ratio vivendi* to memory in 5p10s by claiming '... he who will observe these [rules] carefully—for they are not difficult—and practice them, will soon be able to direct most of his actions according to the command of reason'.<sup>74</sup> The dictates of reason are general, simple, memorable teachings, and, as such, they can contribute vitally to the mental conditioning process that makes rational conduct possible.<sup>75</sup> By 'meditating' on these dictates and joining the imagination of these maxims to the cases in which we would want these maxims to be salient, we can gain greater control over our thought processes, so that we tend to think about the right things at the right times.

## 5. The Three Challenges Rebuffed

We are now in a position to address directly the question of how reason's dictates aid deliberation and to consider how the three challenges cited in the beginning of this essay might be met. The first challenge was that Spinoza's dictates of reason are nothing

<sup>72</sup> 5p10s.

<sup>73</sup> See n. 8 on the equivalence of acting from the guidance of reason [*ex ductu rationis*] and acting from the dictates of reason [*ex dictamine rationis*].

<sup>74</sup> 5p10s.

<sup>75</sup> For a further analysis of 5p10s and what it reveals about the relationship between reason and the imagination, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, 'Incomplete Rationality', in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man*, eds. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), 15–35.



but adequate ideas of the causal connections between things, rather than prescriptions of how one should act. This objection ultimately collapses into one of the two other objections. Let me explain why. Among the adequate ideas that we can form are ideas of affect-types and action-types that follow from, and enhance, our power. It would seem, then, that some of these adequate ideas would be prescriptive for us.

However, there are two problems with taking such adequate ideas as prescriptive, and these are nothing but the two other challenges to reason's dictating capacities. First, some of these law-like descriptions are so vague that they offer no real practical guidance, no sense of how we are to satisfy these descriptions. For instance, one can know that from reason we will promote harmonious relations with other humans, but this tells us nothing about what we should actually *do* to promote harmony. The concern here is that the advice that one might extract from these descriptions is not specific enough to guide action—this is the vacuity problem. Moreover, even if the descriptions are specific, as with the descriptions of the free man, it is by no means obvious that what is rational or good per se is rational or good for us *in situ*—this is the applicability problem. So, the first challenge reduces to one of the other two challenges. How are these concerns to be met?

Let's start with the vacuity problem, the concern that dictates of reason are too general to be useful. This concern assumes that in order for a bit of advice to be useful, it must prescribe precise forms of action. But a set of maxims for living well might be useful even when they are platitudinous. Relatively banal truths of reason ('love conquers hate', etc.), including important theoretical truths, such as true ideas about one's ultimate aims,<sup>76</sup> might not tell one precisely what to do, but, when internalized, they can nevertheless play an important role in gaining greater control over the passions. They can serve to nudge the mind back onto a more rational path and to fix one's mind such that, as Spinoza puts it in the *TIE*, one restrains oneself from useless pursuits (37, 40) and maintains a certain constancy in one's actions.

So when Bennett grumbles that Spinoza's advice from 5p10s is 'not deep or original',<sup>77</sup> he might be right, but he is wrong to insinuate that this is in itself a shortcoming. Some of the most useful moral maxims—such as the golden rule—may be boring old bromides that are easy to recall. Seneca makes this point forcefully in response to something like the vacuity problem cited above:

People say: 'What good does it do to point out the obvious?' *A great deal of good; for we sometimes know facts without paying attention to them. Advice is not teaching; it merely engages the attention and rouses us, and concentrates the memory, and keeps it from losing grip.* We miss much that is set before our very eyes. Advice is, in fact, a sort of exhortation. The mind often tries not to

<sup>76</sup> See once again Epistle 37 to Bouwmeester on the importance of having a steadfast purpose or 'prescribing a definite end [*certum aliquem finem praescribere*]'. Compare with Seneca, *Epistles* 95, §45, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.2.

<sup>77</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 324.

notice even that which lies before our eyes; *we must therefore force upon it the knowledge of things that are perfectly well known.*<sup>78</sup>

The dictates of reason need not be insightful, surprising, or highly specific to be useful; humdrum wisdom can direct or emend the mind in salutary ways if it ‘concentrates the memory’ and thereby ‘forces upon [the mind] knowledge of things that are perfectly well known.’

What about the applicability challenge, the concern that reason’s dictates do not determine the good *in situ*, and so do not prescribe how *we* should act *now*? The first thing that we should note in response to this concern is that even if the contents of the rules are not accommodated to circumstantial particulars, the adoption of rules *itself* is an act of intrapersonal accommodation, a way of compensating for one’s own infirmity, one’s bondage to the imagination.<sup>79</sup> If reason is to achieve maximum efficacy, it will need to glom onto the associative networks of the imagination which commonly direct our mind. This requires habituation. And the ideas of reason that are best suited for the process of habituation are simple, general ideas that can be formulated as maxims. Such general ideas range over a variety of circumstances, and can thereby be joined to a wide array of images. If reason is to reorient the mind by colonizing the imagination, it is going to have to supply ideas that may be frequently elicited, ideas that may be formulated as simple, lapidary maxims that can infiltrate one’s memory. The dictates of reason fit this bill perfectly.

And even if these dictates are liable to lead one astray on occasion, there is reason to think that their saliency in the process of deliberation might still be a very welcome thing, given the difficulty of apprehending the good *in situ*. While Spinoza does not himself highlight this point, it goes some distance in resolving a puzzle in Spinoza’s *TTP*. The puzzle concerns Spinoza’s advocacy of absolute obedience to the laws of the state. At several points in the *TTP* Spinoza recommends a settled policy of deference to the will of the sovereign, going so far as to describe the ‘just man’ as one who sees the true rationale of the laws, and hence ‘steadfastly’<sup>80</sup> and with ‘fixed intention’<sup>81</sup> obeys the rules of justice. But one might wonder why Spinoza would encourage the adoption of a blanket policy of compliance when he is keenly aware of the possibility of laws that are not just bad, but so bad that they run contrary to the very purpose of law, namely peace

<sup>78</sup> Seneca, *Epistles* 94, 25, my emphasis. The same theme is continued in the subsequent passage: ‘And whatever is wholesome should be often discussed and often brought before the mind, so that it may be not only familiar to us, but also ready to hand. And remember, too, that in this way what is clear often becomes clearer’ (*Epistles* 94, §26). However, in another letter, Seneca points out that simply memorizing the maxims of others does not give one adequate moral knowledge: ‘to chase after choice extracts and to prop his weakness by the best known and the briefest sayings and to depend upon his memory is disgraceful. . . . He should make such maxims and not memorize them’ (Epistle 33 [in *Epistles*, vol. ii], §7).

<sup>79</sup> Spinoza suggests that this technique should be tailored to one’s particular foibles: ‘For example, if someone sees that he pursues esteem too much, he should think of its correct use, the end for which it ought to be pursued, and the means by which it can be acquired’ (5p10s).

<sup>80</sup> *TTP* IV.58.

<sup>81</sup> *TTP* XVI.203.

and security.<sup>82</sup> Surely there are instances when it would be better *for the sake of peace and security* to disobey the laws or to rebel. And yet Spinoza condemns rebellion even when doing so would bring ‘obvious’ gains.<sup>83</sup>

One way of understanding Spinoza’s resolution to this puzzle is that he thinks that it is better to cleave to a policy of obedience because the alternative practice of making case-by-case determinations is unstable. As he puts it in the concluding chapter of the work, the very chapter in which he advances his most spirited and thoroughgoing defense of the freedom of speech, ‘the key is to leave decisions about any kind of action to the sovereign powers and do nothing contrary to their decision, even if this requires someone acting in a way contrary to what he himself judges best and publicly expresses. . . . stability could not be maintained if everyone lived according to his own judgment.’<sup>84</sup> It is better for people to follow an entrenched principle of obedience, even knowing that following this principle will occasionally produce outcomes that are contrary to the very conditions that justify the principle, since the alternative decision procedure of making case-by-case determinations yields worse results.<sup>85</sup> General rules, then, might be useful guides for thought and action not only because they can be effectively joined to the imagination, but also because they are stable, even if fallible, guides to the good *in situ*.

## 5. Concluding Note on the Free Man

Having argued that the dictates of reason, as general rules or maxims, are invaluable practical principles in spite of the three concerns with which we opened this essay, let me conclude by suggesting how the preceding discussion of reason and the imagination might help to cast further light on the importance of the free man passages. If, as many have thought and as I have suggested, it does not *always* serve us well to imitate the free man, what is the value of fleshing out a potentially misleading exemplar? At this point the reader might anticipate my response: the free man is a crystallized, salient *image* that represents a set of rational rules. Because these rules coalesce into a single, potent image that is easy to invoke and to join with other salient images, the rules encoded in this image will be ready to hand. One’s conception of the free man is the conception of a *recta ratio vivendi*. If we keep this image before us, we are

<sup>82</sup> Spinoza’s defense of freedom of speech suggests that the state could enact many laws—for instance, laws that attempt to regulate freedom of conscience or speech—that would be destructive to peace. One might wonder, for instance, whether the just man would comply with a law that required all citizens to report suspected atheists to the authorities.

<sup>83</sup> *TTP* XVI.204. For an alternative analysis of why Spinoza opposes rebellion even when it promises clear gains, see Michael Della Rocca, ‘Spinoza’s Criticism of the Rebel’, in *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, eds. Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 168–91.

<sup>84</sup> *TTP* XX.253.

<sup>85</sup> See Fred Schauer, *Playing by the Rules: A Philosophical Examination of Rule-Based Decision-Making in Law and in Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

invited regularly to ask ourselves, 'what would the free man do?' The image of the free man, then, is suited to the proclivities of our cognition, in particular our reliance on the imagination. And even if the model sometimes leads one astray, on the whole one could do much worse than to habituate oneself to act honestly, to affirm life rather than fear death, to uphold the common advantage afforded by the state, and so forth. The idea of the free man might well function, then, as a kind of Trojan Horse through which reason infiltrates and colonizes the imagination.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>86</sup> I want to thank the editors of this volume for their perceptive feedback on an earlier draft. I am also grateful for the challenges and suggestions that I received when I presented earlier versions of this essay at colloquia in College Station, Halifax, and New York City.