

## BOOK REVIEWS

Nadler, Steven. *Spinoza's "Ethics": An Introduction*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii+281. \$28.99 (paper).

Steven Nadler's new book—*Spinoza's "Ethics": An Introduction*—is an excellent guide to Spinoza's magnum opus and a substantial contribution to Spinoza scholarship. This is precisely the kind of book that Spinoza scholarship in English has needed for a very long time. Spinoza scholars looking for a clear, comprehensive, and up-to-date introduction to the *Ethics* have had to settle for second-best solutions. Henry Allison's *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987) and Frederick Pollock's *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (1899; reissued by American Scholar Publications, New York, 1966) are quite helpful, but both are out of date and out of print. The field of Spinoza scholarship has changed dramatically over the past thirty to forty years, changes that were largely instigated by the publication of Edwin Curley's groundbreaking work *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969). These developments have partly reflected deep changes in the face of Anglo-American philosophy (particularly, the emergence of a new openness to the history of philosophy, even when philosophers of the past advocated positions counter to "common sense"—whatever "common sense" means) and in part formed a critical reaction to the enormous interest in Spinoza that emerged in Europe—primarily France, Italy, and Spain—in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Nadler rightly characterizes the *Ethics* as "an extraordinarily difficult book. . . . To the modern reader its mode of presentation will seem opaque, its vocabulary strange, and its themes extremely complicated, even impenetrable" (x). Indeed, the *Ethics* is a dense text. It appears short, but were its demonstrations to be explicated it would spread over a fair number of volumes. The *Ethics* is a conceptual labyrinth, and Nadler's guide to this labyrinth is very helpful. His eloquent style, clear presentation, excellent mapping of problems and possible solutions, and impressive command of Spinoza's early texts and correspondence result in one of the best introductions to a key philosophical text. His success in providing such an introduction in no more than 280 pages is really admirable.

The nine chapters of the book cover virtually every major doctrine of the *Ethics*. The first chapter is a concise intellectual biography of Spinoza. Nadler's masterful study of Spinoza's life (*Spinoza: A Life* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]) undoubtedly contributes to the completeness and thoroughness of the chapter. In the second chapter Nadler addresses the crucial issue of the role of the "geometrical order" in Spinoza's philosophy. Following a presentation of various views on the importance of this method to the content of the *Ethics*, Nadler concludes (rightly, I believe) that "[Spinoza's] philosophy finds its most adequate expression in [the geometrical mode] of presentation. The system elaborated in the *Ethics* requires that the reader come to see the

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quasi-mathematical necessity inherent among things, and especially the way all things depend on God or Nature” (43). The chapter also includes a helpful discussion of the functions of the various elements of the geometrical method: definitions, axioms, propositions, corollaries, and scholia.

Chapters 3 and 4 of Nadler’s book deal with the metaphysics of part 1 of the *Ethics*. Chapter 3 introduces the ontological building blocks of Spinoza’s metaphysics—substance, attributes, and modes—and his proof of substance monism. Chapter 4 primarily discusses Spinoza’s innovative notion of infinite modes, the thorny issue of the causes of finite modes, and Spinoza’s alleged necessitarianism. In these two chapters Nadler does fine work in contextualizing Spinoza’s claims in the *Ethics* by putting them against the background of Descartes’ views and by pointing out important criticisms by Spinoza’s correspondents and Pierre Bayle.

While the first part of the *Ethics* seems to have little to say about the nature of human beings qua human beings (in fact, it seems to provide an outline of God’s view of the world with occasional glimpses about human misconceptions and anthropomorphisms), part 2 zooms in on those things “that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness” (*Ethics*, pt. 2, preface). Indeed, Nadler’s next three chapters deal with Spinoza’s view of the human mind (chap. 5), his theory of knowledge (chap. 6), and his elaborate theory of human passions (chap. 7), the last of which Nadler wittingly titles “*Psychologia Geometrica*.” The eighth chapter addresses Spinoza’s moral theory. In a keen observation Nadler stresses that for Spinoza, “[since] the human being is part of nature, moral philosophy is a sub-discipline of the study of nature” (238). For many this attempt to derive “ought” from “is” may seem as desperate as the attempt to turn copper into gold, yet as far I can see, Spinoza is deeply committed to such moral alchemy. This is only one of several bold transformations that Spinoza attempts in his discussion of morality. Equally ambitious is Spinoza’s attempt to derive genuine commitment to others (which is not motivated by mere prudence) from a strictly egoistic metaphysics that takes self-preservation as the deepest and weightiest drive in the behavior of any finite being. Nadler’s clear presentation of the various pressures, conflicts, and problems within Spinoza’s moral theory is laudable and achieves far more than one could expect from a chapter in an introductory book.

One of the book’s more impressive qualities is that in addition to presenting a clear and unbiased outline of the main scholarly disputes in current Spinoza literature, it also takes a stand on a series of crucial issues, one of which is Spinoza’s enigmatic discussion of the eternity of the mind in part 5 of the *Ethics*. According to Nadler the key to understanding this notion is his dialogue with medieval Jewish rationalism, which tended to reject the popular belief in personal immortality (248, 268–69). For Spinoza the only way one can increase one’s share in eternity is by increasing the adequacy of one’s knowledge. Indeed, Nadler ventures to claim that “Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge, the body of adequate ideas that persists after one’s death is, for all intents and purposes, the ‘acquired intellect’ posited by Maimonides and others, and which they use to explain what they call ‘immortality’” (269).

An introduction that takes a stand and presents new theses is likely to

provoke objections; this is a trait which I definitely take to be a virtue, not a vice. I found Nadler's secularizing reading of Spinoza particularly thought provoking. The dispute over the so-called religious nature of the book is quite old and is not going to be resolved here, but let me make a few points. Nadler is definitely right in seeing Spinoza as an enemy of popular and anthropomorphic religion (114). I am less convinced, however, by his claims that "Spinoza certainly does *not* mean by 'God' what the Judeo-Christian religious tradition means by 'God.' . . . The God of Judaism and Christianity is a transcendent being, ontologically distinct from the world it creates; Spinoza's God . . . is not transcendent but immanent. God, for Spinoza, is not a supernatural being that stands outside the world; God *is* nature" (113). I am not sure whether the very notion of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" is coherent (traditionally, Jewish philosophers felt far closer to the Islamic philosophical and theological tradition and clearly shared the latter's critique of the anthropomorphic element of the Trinity). I also believe that pantheism was not anathema in either Jewish thought or mysticism (in fact it seems to play a central role in the two most influential traditions, the Kabbalah and Hasidism), and I even wonder whether Spinoza's God doesn't have some transcendent elements. It is true that Spinoza takes a position which is diametrically opposed to any sort of negative theology by arguing that "God's essence is known to all" (*Ethics*, pt. 2, proposition 47), but it is equally true that for Spinoza, nature, as we know it (i.e., extended nature and thinking nature), is just a tiny aspect of what there is. In addition to extension and thought, God—the sole substance in Spinoza's system—has infinitely many other attributes that are unknown to us and will never be known by us (Spinoza, Letter 66). This creates a huge gap between the human and the divine perspective, a gap which does create a certain sense of transcendence. Similarly, I believe that Spinoza's adoption of the sharp Avicennian distinction between self-necessitated existence (i.e., "Eternity") of God and the externally necessitated existence (or, "Duration") of modes creates a further gap between God and all other things. I am not sure that Nadler's secular reading of Spinoza cannot explain Spinoza's ascription of eternity to nature (i.e., God), but I do think that it is a very serious challenge to this reading.

It is a pleasure to read (or rather, study) Nadler's book, and it is a pleasure to respond to its challenges. This engaging introduction to Spinoza's *Ethics* is highly sophisticated, lucid, and comprehensive. It makes significant contributions to Spinoza scholarship, and I have little doubt that it will be a great asset to both beginning students and advanced scholars.

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