

Spinoza's Metaethical Synthesis of Nature and Affect

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Abstract

In this essay, I evaluate four central metaethical readings of Spinoza's moral philosophy in the literature: unqualified anti-realism, qualified anti-realism, qualified realism, and unqualified realism. More specifically, I discuss the metaethical readings of Charles Jarrett (unqualified anti-realism), Matthew Kisner (qualified anti-realism), Jon Miller (qualified realism), and Andrew Youpa (unqualified realism), each of which captures core aspects of this debate. My conclusions are that (1) Spinoza is neither an unqualified anti-realist nor an unqualified realist and (2) Spinoza's ethical framework represents a qualified synthesis of realist (naturalistic) and anti-realist (affective) features.

Introduction

The metaethical status of Spinoza's moral philosophy is a highly contentious issue. When discussing moral properties in his *magnum opus* the *Ethics*, he appeals to models, desires, judgments, and essential natures, both to critique and to endorse certain ethical views¹.

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¹ All references to the *Ethics* are taken from Morgan, M. L. (ed.) (2002), *Spinoza: Complete Works*, translated by S. Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett, pp. 213-382. I use the following abbreviations when citing passages from the *Ethics*: Ax. = Axiom, Def. = Definition, P = Proposition, S = Scholium, C = Corollary, App. = Appendix, Lem. = Lemma, and Def. Aff. = Definitions of the Affects/Emotions. Roman numerals refer to one of the five parts of the treatise.

However, it is not obvious how all these features relate to each other and whether some are more fundamental than others.

Two central positions in metaethics are moral *realism* and moral *anti-realism*². Moral realism states that moral properties are in some sense natural or subject-independent. A moral property is real in this context if it is directly part of nature or exists independently of a subject's thoughts or feelings in some way. Moral anti-realism, conversely, considers moral properties in some sense to be non-natural or subject-dependent. Anti-realism typically admits of two kinds: unqualified and qualified. Unqualified anti-realism takes moral properties to either have no necessary connection to nature whatsoever or to be wholly dependent on a subject's thoughts or feelings. Here moral properties are not real in the strongest sense, because they represent something illusory, or some sort of construct imposed onto reality. Qualified anti-realism, on the other hand, grants that moral properties may be partly natural or may partly derive their existence from something outside of a subject (i.e., some aspects of reality). Here, moral properties straddle the line between real and not real. On the one hand, they are not real in the way that the laws of physics are real (because they cannot exist without a subject). On the other hand, they are also not imposed on reality (because they rely on some aspect of reality as a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for their existence).

In the literature concerning Spinoza's moral philosophy, we find strong support for all three of these positions. Charles Jarrett reads Spinoza as an unqualified moral anti-realist (namely, a constructivist), Matthew Kisner reads him as a qualified anti-realist (namely, a moderate subjectivist), and both Jon Miller and Andrew Youpa read Spinoza as a moral realist (although they disagree over whether he is or is not foundationally a relativist). These scholars by no means

² Another central metaethical position is skepticism, which critiques the possibility of truth-value concerning moral issues in general, or more particularly the realist vs. anti-realist debate. However, due to (1) Spinoza's commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason in *Ethics* IAx.4 (i.e., the strict intelligibility of everything) and understanding Nature with certainty in IIP32-47 and (2) his explicit criticism of Sceptics in his September 1674 correspondence with Hugo Boxel, there is little reason to think that he would subscribe to this third metaethical position.

exhaust the metaethical literature on Spinoza's ethics, but they are representative of core arguments that support each metaethical position, and as we will see in what follows, I think each provides arguments that greatly help (positively or negatively) in clarifying Spinoza's nuanced position on moral philosophy³. My concern here, however, is not with contemporary metaethical debates about realism vs. anti-realism⁴. While Spinoza may have valuable insights to offer in a contemporary metaethical context, this is a separate topic from understanding Spinoza's metaethical views in their own right, and the former analysis can only be conducted once the latter has been reasonably established. In fact, my argument for (2) partly relies on showing that Spinoza does not cleanly fit into the category of a moral realist or moral anti-realist, primarily because of his positive conception of the conatus as both self-affirmative desire and self-affirmative power. Nevertheless, although we must be cautious of anachronism (i.e., imposing our contemporary metaethical/ethical perspectives and goals on Spinoza as an early modern moral philosopher), the categories of unqualified/qualified realism and anti-realism are a useful tool in illustrating the importance of factors like nature and emotion to Spinoza in his descriptive and normative discussions of good and bad.

Consequently, in this paper I will review three central metaethical accounts of Spinoza's mature moral philosophy⁵. Section 1 will

³ For an overview of moral realist and anti-realist readings of Spinoza in the literature, see Kisner, M. J. and A. Youpa (eds.) (2014), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 5-7.

⁴ For an alternative, more diverse, discussion of the moral realist vs. moral anti-realist debate, and how it relates to Spinoza, see Marshall, E. (2017), "Moral Realism in Spinoza's *Ethics*" in Yitzhak Y. Melamed (ed.) *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 248-265. Marshall relies on specific contemporary approaches to the debate (Paradigms, Literal Truth, and Defining Features). My analysis follows the Defining Features approach, which I take to be the most relevant to Spinoza's ethical framework considered in itself, irrespective of contemporary debate. Although our analyses differ, we both conclude that there are both moral realist and moral anti-realist features to be found in Spinoza.

⁵ I do not rule out the possibility that Spinoza may have changed his metaethical views overtime, transitioning from anti-realism to realism, an

explain Jarrett, Kisner, Miller, and Youpa's respective arguments for anti-realism or realism, and in particular what each has to say about the ethical role of nature and/or emotion in Spinoza's philosophy. Section 2 will evaluate the plausibility of each reading, in order to adequately flesh out the complexity of Spinoza's metaethical position. In this section, I argue that Spinoza is (1) neither an unqualified anti-realist nor an unqualified realist and (2) through the conatus committed to a qualified metaethical position which incorporates both realist (i.e., naturalistic) and anti-realist (i.e., affective) features.

Section 1: Positions

Unqualified Moral Anti-Realism

Jarrett argues that Spinoza is an unqualified moral anti-realist, describing the latter's ethical framework as constructivist. It is constructivist in the sense that all normative terms are based on "a constructed or invented concept of an ideal person," and have no meaning outside of the construct⁶. Spinoza's references to "true knowledge of good and evil,"⁷ insofar as they possess truth-value, are therefore grounded exclusively in this construct⁸. Moral properties are, in other words, wholly subject-dependent. In the *Ethics*, Jarrett's primary evidence for this interpretation comes from IVPref., where Spinoza asserts that good and bad "indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are nothing but modes of thinking, or

unqualified position to a qualified position, or vice versa. My concern, however, will be to establish what Spinoza's ultimate position is in his mature moral philosophy, as outlined in the *Ethics*. For a compelling discussion of how and why Spinoza's ethical views may have evolved throughout the course of his life and texts, see Sangiacomo, A. (2019), *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Jarrett, C. (2014), "Spinozistic Constructivism," in Kisner, M. J. and A. Youpa (eds.) *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 57-84, here p. 57.

⁷ Spinoza, B. de (2002), *Ethics*, in Morgan, M. L. (ed.) *Spinoza: Complete Works*, translated by S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 213-382, IVP14-5.

⁸ Jarrett, C., *op. cit.*, p. 83.

notions which we form from comparing things with one another”⁹. He then establishes his intention to adopt a “model of human nature,” with good representing that which brings us “nearer” to being the ideal human and bad that which “prevents” us from approximating this model. This passage, in Jarrett’s view, indicates that good and bad are relational concepts that are derived from a mental construct (i.e., a mode of thinking) concerning the perfect human. Spinoza’s model is represented by his concept of the free human (*homo liber*) in IVP66S-72¹⁰. He argues that what promotes understanding is “certainly good” and what hinders it is certainly bad (IVP27),¹¹ and the free human is said to live “solely according to the dictates of reason,” meaning they are perfectly rational¹². More fundamentally, the free human is “free” because they are the adequate (that is sufficient) cause of all their actions and they possess only adequate (i.e. epistemically complete) ideas¹³ and seemingly no “conception of good and evil”¹⁴. Jarrett argues that the free human, as an ideal model, really represents God qua substance,¹⁵ who (as the only substance) is the adequate (free) cause of all Its actions and whose infinite intellect possesses only adequate ideas that are devoid of conceptions of good and evil¹⁶ ¹⁷. However, since actual human beings are finite modes, meaning we are inadequate (that is partial) causes of at least some of our actions and possess inadequate (i.e.,

⁹ Jarrett, C., *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁰ *Homo liber* is traditionally translated as “free man” by all the scholars discussed here, but both the Latin and Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole make it clear that “free human” or “free person” would be more accurate translations. I concede, however, that in Spinoza’s time “man” would have been used to refer to humanity in general.

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics, op. cit.*, IVP27.

¹² *Ibid.*, IVP67Proof.

¹³ *Ibid.*, IDef.7; IIP40S2; IIIDef.1-2, P1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, IVP68.

¹⁵ Jarrett, C., *op. cit.*, p. 62-3, 82-3.

¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IApp., IP14-18, IIP36Proof.

¹⁷ Here I refer to God as “It,” and avoid the traditional masculine pronouns, in light of the impersonal nature of Spinoza’s conception of God, as evidenced by passages like IP10, IApp., and VP17. Why not use “They” as the common usage wants it? (it’s only a suggestion, I don’t know if Spinoza himself uses “it” in his texts).

epistemically deficient) ideas, we can never actually become God qua substance or realize the model of the free human¹⁸. This is why good pertains to what allows us to *approximate* this model.

Jarrett further argues that the conception of the free human is not derived from our essence, since the model represents an abstract conception of perfect rationality that is ontologically impossible for actual humans to attain¹⁹. The model is thus, contra moral realism, neither naturalistic nor (even partly) subject-independent. In fact, part of what makes Jarrett's position *unqualified* anti-realism is his final claim that the model promotes the elimination or "transcendence" of ethics. Since God and the free human have no conception of good and bad, the closer one comes to achieving the model of perfect rationality, the closer they come to removing the need for, or conceivability of, moral properties²⁰. Of course, no one can achieve the model, but according to Jarrett's constructivist reading Spinoza ultimately takes ethics to be inherently deficient.

Qualified Moral Anti-Realism

Kisner argues that Spinoza is a qualified anti-realist, in the sense that his ethical framework represents moderate moral subjectivism²¹. Kisner foundationally appeals to IVPref.'s assertions about good and bad and combines these claims with IIIP9S: "we do not endeavour, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it"²². Kisner interprets IIIP9S as an assertion of subjectivism, which partly follows from the anti-realist foundation

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIP9, IIP40S2, IVP4, IVP68S.

¹⁹ Jarrett, C., *op. cit.*, p. 67-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-4.

²¹ For an alternative defense of Spinoza as a moral subjectivist (or "projectivist"), see Lebuffe, M. (2010), *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*, New York: Oxford University Press, Ch. 8-9. It is this subjectivist reading that Youpa chooses to confront in his defense of a moral realist reading. Youpa, A. (2020), *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, ch. 4.

²² Kisner, M. J. (2011), *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy, and the Good Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 94-5.

laid out in IVPref., as well as Spinoza's definition of desire in IIIDef.Aff.1. Good and bad are mind-dependent properties. More precisely, they are mind-dependent properties that come to be based on a subject's desires. Some object *x* is judged to be good or bad, not because of what it is in itself, but rather whether a subject desires to pursue *x* (making it good) or avoid *x* (making it bad). A subject's desires have psychological and normative significance, because Spinoza describes desire in IIIDef.Aff.1 as "the very essence of man [*hominis*] insofar as his essence is conceived as determined to any action from any given affection of itself." Since he argues our essence is the *conatus*,²³ that is an internal striving to persevere in existence, desires are then "expressions of the *conatus*" as our essential, self-preservative nature²⁴. However, Kisner clarifies that not all desires are ontologically or normatively equal. There are two kinds of desires: passive desires and active desires. Passive desires only partly follow from the *conatus* because they are also partly caused by external factors, meaning that they are not fully in harmony with one's essential striving and in some sense are not actually one's own desires. Active desires, conversely, fully represent the *conatus*, making them the true normative standard for good and bad²⁵. In other words, psychologically all of our desires determine our moral judgments, but normatively we ought to follow those moral judgments derived from active desires²⁶.

What makes Kisner's anti-realism "qualified" is that he does not take Spinoza to be treating desire as a sufficient condition, only a necessary one. Kisner concedes that there is a naturalistic dimension to this normative standard. He says that moral "judgments depend on facts about how the world fits our desires, which hold independently of them"²⁷. Radical or unqualified subjectivism holds that desire is a necessary and sufficient condition, because there are no relevant normative factors beyond the subject's feelings (or beliefs). Conversely, moderate subjectivism, which is Kisner's reading of Spinoza, grants that there are necessary and relevant normative

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIP7.

²⁴ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIIDef.1-2, IIIDef.1-2, IIP58.

²⁶ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 91-3, 95n19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103n35.

factors outside of a subject's feelings, meaning desire and these objective factors are necessary but only jointly sufficient in constituting moral judgments. The objective factors reveal natural means by which to satisfy the desires, while the desires dictate what is to be pursued and avoided. We cannot judge something to be good or bad without appealing to natural factors that explain how a given desire is genuinely satisfied, and something cannot be considered good or bad if we do not desire to pursue or avoid it, respectively²⁸. For Spinoza, this point about desire is intimately connected to power of activity. Power of activity is ultimately linked to the conatus: "we call good or bad that which is advantageous, or an obstacle, to the preservation of our being (Defs. 1 and 2, IV); that is (Pr. 7, III), that which increases or diminishes, helps or checks, our power of activity"²⁹. One's natural striving is coextensively understood in terms of desire and power of activity. Something is good insofar as we actively (instead of passively) desire to pursue it and this thing promotes our natural activity and is bad insofar as we actively desire to avoid it and this thing hinders our natural activity. Spinoza's normative standard is therefore not just subjectivist (through active desire), but also naturalistic (what Kisner refers to as "perfectionism") because goodness and badness depend on how things in the world genuinely promote or hinder the perfection of one's nature qua conatus, which is what active desire represents^{30 31}. Moral properties are not based on just any desires, but only desires that follow fully from the subject's objective nature, that is the essential self-preserving desire and activity of the conatus³². Kisner clarifies that his position is not a form of moral realism, despite this naturalistic aspect, because even if something genuinely promotes one's nature, unless there is a desire for this thing it will not be considered good psychologically or normatively³³. It is from this normative foundation of conative desire that Spinoza derives his model of human nature, with this model

²⁸ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP8Proof.

³⁰ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.* p. 88.

³¹ Kisner, M. J. and A. Youpa, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³² Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

representing “the object of our active desires,”³⁴ that is a maximally powerful conatus³⁵ ³⁶. Kisner’s reading of Spinoza’s metaethical framework consequently considers moral properties, in some sense, to be both natural and subjective.

Relativistic Moral Realism

Miller describes Spinoza as a moral realist in a relativistic sense. His reading is grounded in the conatus as our essential physical and mental nature³⁷, with particular emphasis on the intellectual power of the mind to understand³⁸. Our nature qua conatus serves as the foundation for value. Evidence for this claim is found in IVP31C, where Spinoza asserts that “nothing can be good [i.e. beneficial]³⁹ save insofar as it is in agreement with our nature” and insofar as something is “contrary” to our nature it is bad (i.e. harmful)⁴⁰. Something is good, in other words, if it promotes the power of the conatus and something is bad if it frustrates the power of the conatus. In the mental realm, this power is represented by understanding. As a result, what is good for the mind is whatever promotes its power of understanding⁴¹. As Miller points out, however, not all knowledge is equal. The greater in content and scope an instance of knowledge is, the more valuable it will be to one’s overall natural power to understand. With this point in mind, he argues that the most valuable knowledge in Spinoza’s ethical system is of God. As the only

³⁴ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172-3.

³⁶ Kisner denies that the free human is Spinoza’s main ethical model, partly because the free human’s absolute adequate causality renders them an impossible ideal. Instead, Kisner argues the free human represents a thought experiment that assists us in understanding the nature of reason. *Ibid.*, p. 166-7.

³⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIAx.2, IIAx.4, IIIP6-8, IVP26.

³⁸ Miller, J. (2005), “Spinoza’s Axiology”, in Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 2, p. 149-172, here p. 153, 155, 157-8.

³⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVDef.1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, IVDef.2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, IVP27.

substance⁴² and an “absolutely infinite being” (IDef.6)⁴³, God is the foundation of all being and “has a richer essence” as an object of knowledge than any other being⁴⁴, making knowledge of God “[t]he mind’s highest good”⁴⁵.

Now, by virtue of IVPref.’s assertion that (1) nothing is good or bad in itself and (2) things are good and bad only by comparison, all goods in Spinoza’s system will be relativistic. However, as described above, Miller argues that the conatus provides a naturalistic foundation for value. Natural beings in themselves might not be good or bad, but natural *relationships* between beings can be good or bad, insofar as they agree or disagree with a being’s conatus. Miller further argues that not all relativistic value is the same, because a distinction can be drawn between “circumstantial relativism” and “non-circumstantial relativism.” Relativistic value in general entails that “a good x is valuable iff x is valuable to or for some subject S .” Within this axiological context, *circumstantial* relativism states “that x is valuable iff x is valuable for S , given S ’s actual or possible circumstances,” while *non-circumstantial* relativism states “ x is valuable iff x is valuable for some subject S , irrespective of S ’s actual or possible circumstances”⁴⁶. If something has relativistic value, then it cannot have value without appeal to its relationship to a subject. If this thing is circumstantially valuable, then its value to the subject will change based on circumstances. A prime example of something with circumstantial relativistic value is music, which Spinoza says can be “good for one who is melancholy, [and] bad for one in mourning”⁴⁷. If something is non-circumstantially valuable, conversely, its value to a subject will never change. Miller interprets IVP27’s assertion that whatever promotes understanding will be “certainly” good to mean that understanding is always positively valuable in relation to the subject, regardless of their circumstances⁴⁸. Unlike music, understanding can never cease to be good or become bad/indifferent.

⁴² Spinoza, *Ethics*, IP14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, IDef. 6.

⁴⁴ Miller, J., *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁴⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP28.

⁴⁶ Miller, J., *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁴⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVPref.

⁴⁸ Miller, J., *op. cit.*, p. 162.

Miller claims that some knowledge (e.g., of the weather forecast) will be circumstantially valuable, because sometimes it is not beneficial to the subject, but knowledge of God (for the reasons given above) is always beneficial⁴⁹. Another important distinction in understanding the value of knowledge of God (as the highest good) in Spinoza's system is between *strong* and *weak* unconditional value. Something is "strongly unconditionally valuable iff its value is not contingent on any conditions whatsoever," while something is "weakly unconditionally valuable iff its value is contingent on only a non-circumstantially variable set of conditions"⁵⁰. According to Miller, by virtue of IVPref. and the conatus, nothing in Spinoza's system is strongly unconditionally valuable, because nothing in itself is good or bad; the value of anything is (at least) conditional on its relationship to a conatus. Despite the fact that knowledge of God is always valuable, its value is based on the fact that it promotes the intellectual striving of the conatus, although its non-circumstantial nature in a weak sense grants it unconditional value. The advantage of these distinctions is that they enable us to see that intrinsic value and relativistic value are not mutually exclusive. Knowledge of God, despite being valuable through its relationship to the mental dimension of the conatus, is nevertheless intrinsically (and weakly unconditionally) valuable because of its non-circumstantial value; it represents a natural relationship that is always in itself beneficial to the conatus's intellectual striving. We also see this dynamic reflected in the primary emotion of joy, which is an intrinsically good relation because it always indicates an increase in the conatus' power⁵¹ ⁵². Finally, despite the necessary subject-dependence of Spinoza's relativism, Miller argues that it does not constitute subjectivism, that is the position that there is no objective value or everything of value is merely dependent on a subject's beliefs or feelings. Moral properties are admittedly dependent on a subject's nature, but since this nature is itself part of the objective natural world, this nature-dependence does not represent subjectivity in the relevant sense. Miller concedes that there may be circumstantial goods in Spinoza's

⁴⁹ Miller, J., *op. cit.*, p. 164-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167-8.

⁵² Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP41.

system that are partly dependent on a subject's beliefs/feelings. However, regardless of a subject's beliefs/feelings on the knowledge of God, their nature necessarily dictates that this knowledge (as a non-circumstantial good) will always promote their intellectual power, making it objectively intrinsically good⁵³. In sum, Miller reads Spinoza as both a moral realist and a qualified moral relativist.

Non-relativistic Moral Realism

Youpa reads Spinoza as a non-relativistic moral realist. He argues that Spinoza's ethical model of human nature, that which provides the standard for good and bad according to IVPref., is explicitly and immediately given to us in IVDef.8: "by virtue and power I mean the same thing; that is (Pr. 7, III), virtue... is man's very essence, or nature, insofar as he has power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his own nature"⁵⁴. The reference to IIIIP7 tells us that this conception of virtue/power, and in turn this model, is derived from the conatus as a metaphysical and psychological foundation. Virtue/power is referenced frequently and foundationally throughout the ethical propositions of the *Ethics*⁵⁵. One's nature is the conatus, and since virtue/power is one's nature, being virtuous/powerful means striving to persevere in existence. The model human being is then the virtuous human being who has optimal power to affirm their existence. The other potential candidate for the model, the free human, Youpa argues is equivalent to the virtuous person⁵⁶. A being is free insofar as their nature is the adequate cause of their existence and actions, which conceptually aligns with the description of virtue⁵⁷. While it seems that only God qua substance can be free in regards to Its existence and actions⁵⁸, Youpa argues that humans qua finite modes can be the natural sufficient cause of their actions to varying degrees and, in some sense,

⁵³ Miller, J., *op. cit.*, p. 168-70.

⁵⁴ Youpa, A. (2020), *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 47-9.

⁵⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP20Proof, IV56Proof, VP42S.

⁵⁶ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IDef. 7, IIIDef.1-2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, IP17C2.

their own existence, as well. This latter ontological point is based on the fact that the conatus is an instantiation of God's infinite self-affirming power, meaning that an individual's affirmation of their own existence through the conatus is part of God's infinite affirmation of Its own existence⁵⁹. In other words, God is free, and insofar as our power is God's power, we are free too. The free human, in turn, represents optimal freedom in the sense of being the natural sufficient cause of their existence and all their actions. However, Youpa does not read the free human as an individual immune to the world and lacking in passivity. The free human is subject to danger and the actions of others, which is why they are an individual and not God, but they naturally and maximally persevere in existence through their conatus and their actions always follow fully from their self-affirming nature⁶⁰, instead of the influences of external factors⁶¹ ⁶². Consequently, the virtuous/powerful person and the free human are not distinct: they are both subject to the world, act according to their nature qua conatus, and function as Spinoza's ethical model.

In light of these points, Youpa argues that Spinoza understands good as "power enhancement" and bad as "power impairment." Something is good insofar as it promotes one's power qua conatus, and something is bad insofar as it impedes one's power qua conatus. These properties are thus both ethical and metaphysical⁶³. We see evidence of this point in IVP8Proof, where Spinoza says that "[w]e call good or bad that which is advantageous, or an obstacle [respectively], to the preservation of our being" (see also IVP41). The core of Spinoza's ethics, in other words, is what Youpa refers to as

⁵⁹ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 128-33.

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP67Proof, IVP69, IVP70-1, IVP73.

⁶¹ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 133-40.

⁶² Youpa argues that IVP68's description of the person "born free" is not the free human. The former, he argues, is a counterfactual person with no passivity to the world. This proposition, in Youpa's view, only tells us that moral cognition requires passivity to the world. Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 136-8. God qua substance lacks moral cognition because It lacks any conceivable passivity. Morality is a genuine phenomenon for individuals, but not God, as a result of this difference.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 51-2.

“wellness” and “illness”⁶⁴. One is *well*, or healthy, when they can successfully follow their nature by affirming their existence. Conversely, one is *ill*, or unhealthy, when they have little power to affirm their existence (with no power representing death). Virtue, as an ethical concept, represents natural wellness and the ethical model of the virtuous/powerful/free human being represents optimal natural wellness, with good being that which promotes wellness and bad that which hinders wellness or promotes illness. Youpa acknowledges that IIP9S and IIP39S seemingly declare desire the standard of goodness and badness, in the sense that moral judgments directly follow from a subject’s desires and not vice versa. However, he argues that emotions, like desire, follow from and represent (like symptoms) changes in the power of the conatus⁶⁵. The foundation here is not desire, but rather one’s objective nature. Spinoza is neither a moral anti-realist nor a subjectivist because (1) there is a natural foundation (through the conatus) for moral properties and (2) moral judgments fundamentally depend on the natural states of the conatus, not desires or other emotions that subsequently represent these states or changes in them⁶⁶. (2) is further reinforced by the fact that not all desires adequately track what is really good for one’s conatus as a whole; passive emotions can lead to excess, and in turn, illness, precisely because they do not follow fully from one’s conatus, and thus can undermine it. As a result, desires can be good or bad and this classification is based on their relationship to one’s objective nature⁶⁷.

Youpa also acknowledges Jarrett’s point that in IIP9 the conatus, in its mental dimension, is said to partly consist in inadequate ideas, that is epistemically or rationally-deficient ideas that one’s mental nature is not the adequate cause of. This passage would seem to indicate that the model is not truly naturalistically-grounded, but rather an abstraction focused only on adequate ideas. Youpa’s response is to clarify that inadequate ideas are inadequate because of what they *lack*, not what they *possess*⁶⁸. All existing ideas, adequate or

⁶⁴ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 81-6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 10-27.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62-72.

⁶⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP41-4, IVP58S, IVP60-1.

⁶⁸ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 54-9.

inadequate, follow from God's nature, are part of Its infinite intellect, express truth (in some way) in their content, and thus genuinely represent knowledge⁶⁹. Inadequate ideas represent inadequate knowledge that is inferior to adequate knowledge, but this deficiency stems not from such ideas being inherently false, but rather epistemically incomplete because they represent "fragmentary" understanding of the truth of something in the context of an individual mind⁷⁰. Insofar as an idea is part of God's infinite intellect it expresses God's infinite intellectual power and is adequate (i.e. represents complete understanding of something). Insofar as an idea is part of the mind of an individual, as a finite mode of God, it expresses (through the conatus) their intellectual power. When the idea of something is adequate, that means God's complete understanding of it is represented by that individual mind alone. When the idea is inadequate, that means the individual's mind only partly represents God's complete understanding. Youpa's point is that the model is based on what is present in one's nature, in this case their intellectual power, not what is absent. An inadequate idea involves inferior power to an adequate idea, but the former still expresses natural power because it expresses (albeit partial) understanding. And because it represents power, an inadequate idea (as a passive emotion) can be circumstantially good⁷¹. The partial inadequate causality of the conatus consequently, for Youpa, does not undermine the naturalistic foundation of the model of human nature.

Youpa's final argument concerns Spinoza's apparent relativism. He grants that some things have relativistic value in Spinoza's ethical framework. Deeds (i.e. behaviour following from emotions) and external objects have relativistic value. Deeds (as effects) derive value from the active (good) or passive (good or bad) emotions that motivate them⁷², while external objects (as causes/means) derive value instrumentally from whether they promote or hinder one's natural power⁷³. In both cases, the things in question are not the source of their value, because they are neither good nor bad in

⁶⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IP14-5; IIP4, IIP32, IIP36, IIP40S2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. IIP35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, IVApp. 2-3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, IVP58-9S.

⁷³ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 104-7.

themselves⁷⁴; rather, their value comes from their respective relations to the conatus, making such value relational (which is why good and bad are described as “modes of thinking”)⁷⁵ and “derivative”⁷⁶. Youpa argues, however, that the value of promoting or impeding natural power per se is not relativistic. An increase or decrease in power has no source for its value than one’s natural power per se⁷⁷, making the value of promoting/impeding power non-relational, constitutive, and “underivative”⁷⁸. What of IVPref.’s assertion that things are neither good nor bad per se and that good and bad are modes of thinking? Here Youpa’s view is that the preface’s claims must be restricted to derivative goodness and badness because Spinoza’s metaphysics precludes increases and decreases in natural power from having relational value⁷⁹. Youpa therefore reads Spinoza as a non-relativistic moral realist, by virtue of the naturalistic and underivative goodness of promoting one’s natural power qua conatus.

Section 2: Evaluation

In my view, the least plausible account in the literature discussed above is Jarrett’s unqualified anti-realist reading of Spinoza. Kisner, Miller, and Youpa all provide compelling evidence for the conatus as a naturalistic foundation for moral properties. Youpa, in particular, answers Jarrett’s objection to a conatus-based model through his explanation that inadequate causality positively represents a certain degree of natural (namely, intellectual) power, as well as his reading of the free human as subject to passivity despite the latter’s conatus being the adequate cause of their existence and actions. The primary issue with the constructivist reading is that it fundamentally reduces Spinoza’s ethical model to an arbitrary choice. Jarrett argues that the model, as a construct, is about approximating God’s perfect adequate knowledge, and the free human, in this vein, represents a perfectly rational human being. However, *why* is approximating God qua

⁷⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVPref.; IVP59Proof2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, IVPref.

⁷⁶ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 74, 77-80, 103, 106-7.

⁷⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP41.

⁷⁸ Youpa, A., *op. cit.*, p. 79n15, 82-6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77-80.

adequate cause and striving to be optimally rational better than being an inadequate cause (e.g. being subject to the world) or irrational (e.g. merely following what experience teaches us)? Why is this apparent model better than any other model? Spinoza tells us early on in the *Ethics*, namely in IAx.4 and IP11Proof2, that he is axiomatically committed to some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which states that all phenomena must have a definitive explanation and there can be no brute (i.e. inexplicable) facts⁸⁰. Since Jarrett argues that we cannot truly appeal to one's nature qua conatus, the divine and rational focus of the model becomes a brute fact, which is in direct conflict with a core foundation of Spinoza's philosophy.

With that said, maybe the explanation for this model's superiority is its transcendence of ethics. Approximating God and the free human bring us closer to ridding ourselves of the need for ethics. There are however two problems with this explanation. Firstly, why is being free of ethics better than needing it? This explanation still reduces to a brute fact. Secondly, we cannot, by virtue of Spinoza's metaphysics, actually be God or the free human (as Jarrett reads this ideal), so we cannot actually transcend ethics. No matter how closely we approximate the model, we are still going to think in terms of goodness and badness, and thus be subject to ethical concerns. What makes this unachievable model better than a realistic model? Ultimately, if Spinoza's ethical model is to be justified and in line with his own philosophy, it cannot be separate from his views on nature. Of course, these issues may speak to deficiencies in Spinoza's thinking, rather than Jarrett's reading of his ethical framework. Jarrett, for his part, expresses concern that Spinoza's apparent unqualified anti-realism, particularly the transcendence of ethics, is untenable⁸¹. This point is only valid, though, if other plausible readings of Spinoza's meta-ethics are absent, which this paper (and the literature

⁸⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the potential role of the PSR in Spinoza's philosophy as a whole, see Della Rocca, M. (2008), *Spinoza*, New York: Routledge; Garber, D. (2015), "Superheroes in the History of Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 53, n° 3, p. 507-521; Lin, M. (2013), "The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza", in Della Rocca, M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 133-154.

⁸¹ Jarrett, C., *op. cit.*, p. 84.

in general) shows not to be the case. Kisner, without embracing a moral realist reading, is able to coherently grant a natural foundation to Spinoza's ethics while nonetheless acknowledging that ethical properties must be either mind or subject-dependent (through desire). Good and bad are properties that derive their existence from interactions between beings, that is how they affect each other's respective natures by satisfying or frustrating desire.

Kisner's qualified anti-realist reading, and how it relates to Miller and Youpa's respective realist accounts, leads us into a discussion of the traditional conceptual framework of moral realism vs. moral anti-realism (at least as it concerns the literature on Spinoza). As outlined above, there are three main positions in this debate: unqualified anti-realism, qualified anti-realism, and realism. Kisner's position is *anti-realist* because he takes moral properties to be partly dependent on the feelings (i.e., active desires) of a subject in Spinoza's ethical framework. His position is *qualified*, because he concedes that desire is not a sufficient condition for moral properties; there are also necessary naturalistic considerations concerning how things in the world genuinely promote/frustrate the power of the conatus. What is notable here is that Kisner agrees with Miller and Youpa that moral properties are in some sense natural, and not a mental construct (contra Jarrett). The crucial difference is Kisner's emphasis on the foundational necessity of *desire* qua conatus, in contrast to Miller and Youpa's emphasis on the foundational necessity of *natural power* qua conatus. What is curious about the framework of this metaethical debate is that only the anti-realist reading is permitted a qualified position. The burden of proof seems to be on the realist reading, as we see with Miller and Youpa, to show that goodness and badness are either not dependent on the subject's beliefs/desires in any meaningful sense or that these beliefs/desires are a necessary consequent of an objective natural foundation. If one admits any necessary subjective element to Spinoza's ethical foundation, Spinoza must be a moral anti-realist. But why is the burden proof not on the anti-realist reading? We could argue with equal plausibility that if there is any naturalistic foundation to this ethical framework, Spinoza

must be a realist⁸². If we are to treat both metaethical positions equally, then they should both be permitted a qualified sub-position.

My ultimate point here is that, while unqualified realism and unqualified anti-realism are mutually exclusive, it is not certain that qualified realism and qualified anti-realism in principle share this exclusivity, particularly in the context of Spinoza. For the reasons that Kisner, Miller, Youpa, and I give above he is not an unqualified anti-realist. In a qualified context, however, all three scholars make good points about the conatus as a metaphysical foundation. Miller (assuming we classify his reading as qualified realism) is correct that our natural essence is self-affirming *power*. Kisner (as an anti-realist) is correct that our natural essence is self-affirming *desire*. Fundamentally, the conatus represents both natural power and natural desire, power and desire being equivalent⁸³. Miller and Youpa fail to acknowledge that desires do not merely follow from the conatus, the conatus itself is a form of desire. On the other hand, Kisner fails to acknowledge that what Spinoza means by conative desire is something different than our usual conception of desire. Desire tends to be understood negatively, in the sense that we desire insofar as we lack something. While desires that follow from the conatus often fit this conception, conative desire itself is not negative. Conative desire is positive, because it is equivalent to self-affirming power that is actual and not potential. The conatus is not a mere capacity to express one's existence that may or may not be realized. As Kisner himself puts it, natural power is not "like the power of a battery"⁸⁴. Existing or living is identical with acting⁸⁵. What these points indicate is that Spinoza, in a qualified sense, is both a realist and an anti-realist. The qualified positions of this debate, at least in the context of Spinozist metaethics, arguably differ in terms of *emphasis* rather than kind. The qualified realist reading should concede some subject-dependence because moral properties, by virtue of their relationship to the conatus as desire, are not like physical properties, but this reading can emphasize that the conatus as power is the naturalistic standard for

⁸² Marshall, in fact, argues that the burden of proof should be on the anti-realist reading. Marshall, C, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

⁸³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, III P7 Proof.

⁸⁴ Kisner, M. J., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁸⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP24.

these properties. The qualified anti-realist reading, conversely, should concede that moral properties, by virtue of the conatus as power, are natural, but can emphasize that these properties are partly (and relevantly) subject-dependent in terms of the conatus as desire.

Youpa, however, seems to present us with an unqualified realist reading of Spinoza. Contra Kisner, he treats desire as ontologically and ethically subsequent to the conatus. As discussed above, Kisner has a valid point that desire is our essence. When evaluating a desire as active or passive, or good or bad, we are appealing to this desire's relation to one's essential self-affirming power and desire. The fact that conative desire is a unique, unconventional (positive) form of desire might help Youpa's case, but the fact still remains that, if one's nature is the moral standard, something cannot be good or bad without an essential feeling of striving concerning it. In this respect, a *qualified* realism is more plausible (keeping in mind the above point about emphasis). However, even if Spinoza is only a qualified moral realist, we can still differentiate between Youpa and Miller's views based on the relativistic debate. Youpa could be seen to be reading Spinoza as a stronger realist than Miller, because the former argues there is a foundational non-relativistic good: the promotion of natural power. The crucial difference between them is that Miller (like Jarrett and Kisner) considers IVPref.'s discussion to be more central and pervasive than Youpa. In IVPref. Spinoza says things cannot be inherently good or bad and good and bad are relational. Miller takes this claim seriously and concludes that anything that has value must have relational value, even increases in power. Nothing is valuable, under this reading, without having some relationship to the conatus. Youpa, conversely, takes IVPref. to be restricted to deeds and external things qua derivative goods; it is not, in his view, talking about the conatus itself.

With increases in power there is an internal, self-reflexive dimension that is not present in other things of value. Spinoza equates virtue with the conatus and asserts that it "should be sought for its own sake" and there is "nothing... for the sake of which it should be sought"⁸⁶. Here Spinoza seems to be saying that striving to persevere in existence is solely intrinsically good. Miller argues that

⁸⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP18S.

some relativistic goods are intrinsically good, because a natural relation (like an increase in power) can be non-circumstantially good in itself. With this relativistic mindset, the conatus is only good due to its relation to itself. But is this self-reflexive relation a relation in the relevant, relativistic, sense? Youpa's argument focuses on relativism in an extrinsic sense, where there must be an interaction between two or more distinct things. If we are talking about a thing's interaction with itself, we do not have a relation in this sense, and thus we lack the requisite foundation for traditional relativistic value. *Prima facie* we might say that an increase in power is a relation because it represents how the conatus positively interacted with something. However, two points may be given in reply. Firstly, in the case of an active pleasure, the conatus is interacting with itself to increase its power, which would preclude it from being a relation in the extrinsic sense. Not all increases in power would then be relevantly relational. Secondly, even in a relational context (i.e., with a passive pleasure) the increase itself is not the relation, but the *effect* of that relation. An increase is a positive change in the conatus' natural power, and so as Youpa says, when explaining the value of an increase we are not appealing to anything external to the conatus' power itself. Miller is correct that intrinsic value and relativistic value are not mutually exclusive. However, based on the analysis just given, there is reason to think that knowledge of God is, in fact, non-relationally good. The value of this knowledge is self-reflexive. Understanding is valuable because in itself it constitutes and promotes the intellectual power of the conatus; it is not part of a relevant relation, because it *is* the mental dimension of the conatus. Youpa seems to be right therefore that Spinoza's ethical discussion of the conatus departs from IVPref.'s discussion of relational value. Of course, we could grant that there are two kinds of relativistic relations: intrinsic and extrinsic relations. However, doing so in this context only weakens the notion of relativistic value to a degree that robs the relativistic reading of much meaning. At best, we can only attribute to Spinoza a weak, uniquely self-reflexive, relativist foundation.

Youpa's strong realist reading consequently may be more plausible than Miller's weak realist reading, considering Spinoza's ethical remarks about the conatus' intrinsic value. Ultimately, however, if we take Spinoza's metaethical status to be qualified (and do not place the

burden of proof on either side), there are undeniable realist (naturalistic) and anti-realist (affective) aspects to his moral philosophy.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored four central metaethical readings of Spinoza's moral philosophy in the literature, these positions being unqualified anti-realism, qualified anti-realism, unqualified realism, and qualified realism. Jarrett represents the unqualified anti-realist camp, Kisner qualified anti-realism, Miller qualified realism, and Youpa unqualified realism. In my analysis of these positions, I concluded that the least plausible are the unqualified positions. Unqualified anti-realism is untenable because it (1) conflicts with Spinoza's commitment to the PSR, by rendering the model of human nature an arbitrary or inexplicable abstraction and (2) fails to consider the importance of the conatus as a naturalistic foundation. Unqualified realism is problematic because Spinoza considers some form of desire (i.e., the conatus as self-affirmative striving) to be one's essence, meaning moral properties are partly subject-dependent in the relevant sense. Moreover, if we treat IVPref.'s denial of the intrinsic goodness or badness of beings as ethically foundational, as Jarrett, Kisner, and Miller persuasively do, there are also sufficient grounds to reject this unqualified position. The two most plausible readings are then qualified anti-realism and qualified realism. However, I argued that these qualified positions do not differ in kind, but rather in emphasis, because the qualified nature of each reading requires it to grant some truth to its opponent (i.e., the anti-realist reading must concede moral properties are natural through self-affirmative power, while the realist reading must concede such properties are partly subject-dependent through self-affirmative desire). As well, I found that a non-relativistic qualified reading of Spinoza may be more plausible than a relativistic reading, not because Spinoza's framework lacks any relativistic value, but rather because his ontological and ethical discussions of the conatus's power (and changes in it) seems to assign to this power non-relational (in the extrinsic sense), or self-reflexive, intrinsic value.

Spinoza's ethical framework therefore incorporates realist and anti-realist elements. This mixture of elements might lead us to conclude that discussion of realism vs. anti-realism lacks any meaning in the context of his moral philosophy, because we cannot give Spinoza a definitive metaethical classification as a realist or anti-realist. However, this conclusion is problematic. It assumes, as I said above, that qualified positions must be mutually exclusive, like their unqualified counterparts. But what is the purpose of a qualified position? A qualification can, in some instances, indicate the nuance of a position that it is not narrow in content or scope. Such a position tends to be easier to support and more plausible than an unqualified position, because it can synthesize its main argument with other plausible views. According to Kisner, it is likely that Spinoza employs so many different concepts, and links them closely together, because it gives his system "greater conceptual resources" to engage with a variety of views, by capturing the partial truths he finds in each of them⁸⁷. His qualified position, in other words, enables Spinoza to synthesize the most persuasive aspects of both realism (i.e., the naturalistic dimension) and anti-realism (i.e., the affective dimension), which makes for an ethical system rich in content *and* scope.

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