“A Model of Human Nature We May Look to”:
Spinoza on the Free Man

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Preface

Although Spinoza's paragon of virtue—the free man—appears only briefly in the closing propositions of Book IV of the *Ethics*, he hangs around just long enough to cause significant scholarly confusion. Spinoza tells us there that the free man is the individual who "is led solely by reason" and "thinks of death least of all things." (EIVP67D/GII, 261, EIVP67/GII, 261)**.**[1] His virtue is "as great in declining dangers as in overcoming them," (EIVP69/GII, 262), he strives to avoid the favors of the ignorant (EIVP70/ GII, 263) lives most freely in a state (EIVP73/GII, 265) and "always acts honestly, not deceptively" (EIVP72/GII, 264).

These passages raise two significant problems regarding the free man and his role in Spinoza's ethical system. First, given what Spinoza has to say about freedom elsewhere in the *Ethics*, it seems incredibly difficult for Spinoza to offer a coherent account of *human* freedom at all. These two notions appear to be wholly incompatible. He infamously rejects the traditional libertarian account of free will, arguing that it is an illusion generated by our ignorance of the causes that necessarily determine our actions. Even God, on Spinoza's view, is not free in this sense.

But the problem goes much deeper than this. According to Spinoza's official definition of freedom, offered at EID7, a free thing is that which "exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and of which [its] action is determined by itself alone." (EID7/ GII, 46). Understanding human freedom in this sense would seem to require that each of the free agent's actions be determined through her own nature alone, and further that she must never be acted on by external things. But such a possibility is expressly ruled out by Spinoza's insistence that "it is impossible

[1] All references to Spinoza in what follows are from Curley 1994 and follow the standard notational conventions.

that man should not be a part of nature, or that he should be capable of undergoing no changes, save such as can be understood through his nature only as their adequate cause." (EIVP4, GII, 212). This has led the majority of commentators to conclude that Spinoza's free man is an impossible ideal, incapable of being actualized by any actually existing human being—or worse, to conclude that Spinoza's paradigm of virtue is a completely incoherent and contradictory concept. But we ought to avoid this disappointing result, and aim at a more plausible reading of the free man—especially since, as I plan to argue in what follows, he plays an important role in Spinoza's normative project.

The second problem concerns the actual *contents* of the free man propositions, which pose two primary interpretive difficulties. First, all of the free man propositions in some way reference the finitude of the free man, and most explicitly address his social behavior. This seems inconsistent with the view that the free man is entirely isolated from his surroundings and cannot be acted on from without; for, if the ideal reading were true, it would be impossible for the free man to be finite, since a thing cannot be destroyed except through external causes. Given that Spinoza often talks about the free man in both finite and social terms, another *desideratum* of a reading of the free man is that it be able to account for the free man's humanity and engagement with the world and with those around him; but this is exactly what the prevailing view in the literature cannot explain.

Second, the virtue and freedom (these notions, for Spinoza, are equivalent) of the free man, on any reading, must consist in his successful striving to preserve himself—for this striving, Spinoza argues, constitutes our essential nature, and is the only foundation of value built into his system. But some of the behavioral precepts outlined in the free man propositions—most notoriously, his insistence at EIVP72 that the free man "always acts honestly, not deceptively"—

do not seem to be particularly effective means towards the end of self-preservation, at least in non-ideal conditions. And so we are left with the impression that Spinoza is either confused, or helping himself to suppressed normative principles to which he is not entitled. Surely, honesty and self-preservation are not *universally* consistent.

Spinoza is sometimes read here as making the Kantian mistake of viewing reason's commands to be absolutely exceptionless, a charge which is particularly damning to Spinoza, given that his egoist normative framework does not seem to provide him with the resources to justify such rigorism.[2] A third *desideratum* of a reading of the free man, then, is that it can make sense of this passage and others like it[3] while avoiding this unfortunate result.

Scholarly attention has only recently turned towards the ethics of Spinoza's *Ethics*, after years of research primarily limited to the metaphysical and epistemological projects advanced therein. But confusion persists regarding the exact content of Spinoza's moral system, in part because no consistent account of the free man has been offered in the literature thus far. Spinoza's moral system is, I believe, a deeply plausible one that is relevant to many of our current moral problems, but in order to understand it properly, we must be able to give an account of the free man that is able to make sense of both the concept of the free man and the contents of the free man propositions. Getting Spinoza right here is particularly important given

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[2] See, for example, Bennett 1984, who writes: "It is puzzling that the wrongness of this was not apparent to Spinoza, or to Kant who repeated the error a century later. Granted that reason is supposed to dictate in the same way to everyone, and to speak only in general terms with no reference to *particulars*; but why can it not address itself to *special kinds* of cases? It cannot say 'A lie is permitted this once—just for you.' But must it be so grandly programmatic that it cannot manage a subordinate clause? Why can't it, say, for instance, 'No one should lie except to save his life'?" (317-18). I argue that Spinoza does not, in fact, make the mistake that Bennett attributes to him here.

[3] Della Rocca 2010 points to a passage in the *TTP* where Spinoza also seems to be making an unjustified rigorist claim—specifically, in his criticisms against those who rebel against the state. I think that this claim can be included in my analysis as well.

his equation of freedom and virtue. For Spinoza, our virtue increases directly in proportion to our freedom, and the freest man is also the most virtuous. We cannot afford to have such a shadowy notion of such an important concept.

A proper interpretation of the free man must be able to (i) account for the concept of the free man in such a way as to render Spinoza's ethics plausible, which I argue here that "ideal" readings of the free man are incapable of; (ii) account for the close link between freedom and sociability described in the free man propositions; and (iii) avoid the supposed inconsistency generated by EIVP72 and similar propositions.

In what follows, I offer such a reading. In developing my account, I contrast it with the prominent reading of the free man in the literature, which I call the ideal reading. Proponents of the ideal reading argue that the free man is either a contradictory concept or an impossible state for any actual human being to attain. I urge against both conclusions in favor of an alternative account wherein the free man is fully realizable and fully human.

I set the foundation for my argument with an overview of Spinoza's ethical project. After providing some of the necessary metaphysical and epistemological background, I develop Spinoza's account of moral agency and moral motivation, his *conatus* doctrine. Having this picture in place is essential to what follows, for Spinoza will argue that the free man represents the most successful moral agent, i.e, the individual who is most effective at preserving his being on the basis of reason.

Once the landscape is clear, I turn to my discussion of Spinoza's free man. After a review of the passages in which the free man appears, I explore, and ultimately reject, the view that the free man is either a contradictory concept or an impossible state for any real human being to attain. While many readers have been led to this conclusion in light of Spinoza's apparent

commitment to the impossibility of human freedom, I sketch an alternative account of human freedom that avoids generating this contradiction.

After detailing my arguments against the ideal reading, I defend the view that the free man should be understood as a fully realizable human figure. I argue, in particular, that we must understand the free man as a social being, who depends on others to thrive. In developing my account, I address one of the most serious challenges to this interpretation: the fact that some of the behavioral precepts outlined in the free man propositions—most notoriously, Spinoza's claim that the free man "always acts honestly, not deceptively"—seem to contradict Spinoza's view that the virtue of the free man consists in his successful striving to preserve his being. I offer an alternative reading of these passages that both discharges this worry and brings into clearer relief the importance of communities for Spinoza's ethical system.

A quick note about language: in this work I follow Spinoza in using the gendered language of the "free man." Although there is no good (philosophical) reason to think that the free man could not be a woman, Spinoza clearly does not agree. As he writes in the final lines of the *Political Treatise,* which remained unfinished at his death,

> . . . if women were by nature equal to men, both in strength of character and in native intelligence—in which the greatest human power, and consequently right, consists—surely among so many and such diverse nations we would find some where each sex ruled equally, and others where men were ruled by women, and so educated that they could do less with their native intelligence. But since this has not happened anywhere, we can say without reservation that women do not, by nature, have a right equal to men's, but that they necessarily submit to men. So it cannot happen that each sex rules equally, much less that men are ruled by women. (*TP,* XI 4).

Many scholars have recognized that these unfortunate remarks are inconsistent with the spirit of Spinoza's philosophy, no part of which programmatically rules out the possibility of a free woman. As such, they have chosen to use the updated terminology of the "free person" or the "free individual." I, however, object to this revision, and to others like it in historical scholarship. Although there is much we can learn from the better parts of Spinoza, there is also much to be learned from his mistakes, and it is important not to overlook the very real fact that many otherwise great thinkers of the past harbored false and derogatory views towards women and other groups. Linguistic revisions like "the free person" obscure this fact. In order to learn from our past, we must, first and foremost, be honest about it.

Introduction

Spinoza's Life and Philosophy

I.1. *Spinoza's Life and Works*

Born in 1632 in the thriving Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam, Bento (Baruch/Benedictus) Spinoza was easily one of (if not *the*) most controversial and misunderstood thinkers of the seventeenth century.[4] His philosophy, and more precisely reactions *against* his philosophy, shaped much of European thought in the centuries following his death from respiratory ailments in 1677, at the age of 45. Throughout the latter half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "Spinozism" was largely synonymous with atheism, and being an "anti-Spinozist" served as a kind of shibboleth for entry into "proper" philosophical circles.

After an initial education at his congregation's Talmud Torah school, Spinoza entered the family mercantile business at age 17, until, in 1656, he was excommunicated by the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam with the following c*herem*:

> . . . the *Senhores* of the *ma'amad*, having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, have endeavored by various means and promises to turn him from his evil ways. However, having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and borne witness to to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter.

[4] For an excellent biography of Spinoza, which includes a clear overview of his philosophical positions and works, see Nadler 2018. I rely on Nadler's work throughout this section.

> After all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable *hakkamim,* they have decided, with the [rabbis'] consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written into this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day. (Nadler 1999, 120).

As Steven Nadler has pointed out, this was the harshest writ of excommunication ever issued by the community; it was never rescinded. In the years following his excommunication, Spinoza left Amsterdam, settling first in Rijnsburg, where he set to work on the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (TIE)* and the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, early outlines of the philosophical system presented in the *Ethics*. In 1663 he published a critical textbook on Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*, based in his lessons in Cartesian philosophy to a young student. This was the only work published under his own name during his lifetime, and gave him

a reputation as a follower and expositor of the Cartesian program. His scandalous *Theological-Political Treatise* was published anonymously in 1670; the remainder of his writings, including his masterwork, the *Ethics*, were published by friends following his death in 1677.

I.2 *The Philosophical Project of the Ethics*

Written in a geometrical style similar to Euclid's *Elements*, the *Ethics* consists of five parts: of God, of the Nature and Origin of the Mind, of the Origin and Nature of the Affects, of Human Bondage, *or* of the Powers of the Affects, Of the Power of the Intellect, *or* of Human Freedom. Although scholarly attention has often focused on the metaphysical and epistemological elements of the work, it is called the *Ethics* for a reason, and Spinoza means for the metaphysics and epistemology to serve as necessary preludes to the overall normative project. That being said, before we can dive into the ethics of the *Ethics*, it is worth first giving an (unfortunately brief) overview of the metaphysical project presented in Part I.

After laying down a series of definitions and axioms that most Cartesian philosophers of the day would accept, Spinoza endeavors to show, by means of a simple three-step argument, that only one substance is possible in nature. This substance he terms God, or nature. The argument for this position is as follows:

(1) In nature, there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute (EIP5).

(2) God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, necessarily exists (E1P11).

Therefore (3) there can only be one substance—for if God has all the attributes, and no substance can share an attribute with another substance, there are no attributes left for any other possible substance to possess (EIP14).

Spinoza's arguments for (1) and (2) are both complicated and controversial; it is outside the scope of this project to examine them here. However, is is worth noting that, in only fourteen propositions, using non-controversial conceptions of substance, Spinoza establishes a dramatic metaphysical claim. Although the world *appears* to be populated with numerous distinct entities, all of these things are actually "in" God. Only one substance necessarily exists. Contrast this with the Cartesian claim that each individual mind constitutes a distinct (created) substance, as does material stuff.[5]

This picture has several important consequences, two of which I will mention here. First, the picture of God that emerges from the *Ethics* is dramatically different from the anthropomorphic God of the major Western religions: God is not a benevolent (or vindictive) deity that meddles in human affairs or bestows punishment or grace upon human beings. One cannot pray to Spinoza's God. God, by Spinoza's lights, is co-extensive with nature; they are one and the same. It is therefore not difficult to understand the charges of atheism that dogged Spinoza throughout his life and for centuries after his death.

Second, Spinoza's understanding of what it is to be a *human being* is very different from the traditional Cartesian conception. For Descartes, the human being is a union of two distinct substances: thinking substance, or mind, and extended substance, or body. Spinoza shares this conception in some sense, but denies the Cartesian claim that each individual mind constitutes a distinct (created) substance. Rather, all minds are simply modes of God, falling under the attribute of thought. This might seem like a technical point, but it carries important ethical ramifications. Human beings, according to this conception, are not "special", in the sense that

[5] For an extensive overview of Descartes's conception of substance compared to Spinoza's, see Woolhouse 1993.

they are not distinct, individual substances. Rather, they are parts or modes of God in the same way as tables, houseplants, and chairs are modes of God. This will require a complete re-thinking of human morality, and of the human relationship to the natural world. This is the project that Spinoza undertakes in the remainder of the *Ethics*, and will be my focus in the next chapter.

Chapter 1

The Moral Background

1.1 *Introduction*

Before we can begin to appreciate the numerous puzzles posed by the figure of the free man, we must begin with an overview of Spinoza's basic ethical commitments.

Spinoza's approach to ethics is fundamentally different from that of many of his contemporaries, as well as his successors. To begin with, Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of a human free will (understood as the ability to do otherwise than one does), excoriating the view as a useless fiction. In fact, the general commitment to this kind of freedom is precisely what Spinoza thinks has gone wrong in the history of moral thought. In the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics,* he viciously criticizes moral views that, in emphasizing human freedom, appear to treat human activity as though it were exempt from the causal laws necessarily governing all things. Philosophers who subscribe to this improper view of human freedom, he argues,

> . . .seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common law of nature, but of things which are outside nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself. And they attribute the cause of human impotence, not to the common power of nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. And he who knows how to censure more eloquently or cunningly the weakness of the human mind is held to be Godly. (EII Preface/GII, 137).

The mistaken belief in our free will, in Spinoza's view, stems from our ignorance of the true causes that determine our actions. As he writes in a striking passage:

> . . . so the infant believes he freely wants the milk; the angry child that he wants vengeance, and the timid, flight. So the drunk believes that it is from a free decision of the Mind that he speaks the things he later, when sober, wishes he had not said. So the madman, the chatterbox, the child, and a great many people of this kind believe they speak from a free decision of the Mind, when really they cannot contain the impulse to speak. So experience itself, no less clearly than reason, teaches that men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined . . . (EIIIP25/GII, 143).

So long as we remain ignorant of the true causes of our actions, Spinoza cautions, we will remain powerless in the face of the affects. Moral theories that conceive of human actions as issuing from an imaginary freedom to do otherwise are therefore impoverished and likely to lead us astray. Since proponents of these views are unable to offer an account of how external things might act on us to inhibit or alter our behavior, they are committed to the view that when we fail to act as we should, it is because of vice. But dismissing certain actions as vicious while at the same time ignoring the causes that determine them will not assist us in our goal of reaching true blessedness and freedom, the highest pinnacle of Spinoza's moral system. When we criticize the drunk for her behavior, imagining that it was freely chosen, we overlook the true causes of her vice as well as the true remedy. Only after we gain a thorough understanding of the affects, and of their influence on human behavior, can we devise a method to help the mind overcome their constant and pernicious influence. It is in this spirit that Spinoza vows to "consider human appetites as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (EIII Preface/ GII, 138).

This is a striking claim, and a methodological departure from much—although not all—of the Western ethical tradition. For Spinoza, the method of moral investigation is continuous with the method of investigation in the natural sciences. Since human beings follow the same order of nature that governs all things, their emotions, behaviors and even the possibility of their achieving virtue must be subject to a naturalistic explanation. Spinoza thus eschews the traditional moral language of responsibility, praise, and blame, offering instead an alternative account of human action and motivation which he outlines in the early propositions of Part III. I will explore this account in the next sections.

1.2 *Spinoza's Philosophy of Human Action*

First, Spinoza offers an account of human action, restricting the class of "actions" to those events that have an adequate cause in the agent herself. According to his official definition of action at EIIID2,

> . . . we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e., when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause. (EIIID2/GII, 139).

Spinoza expands further on this distinction at EIIIP1, adding that "our mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, viz. insofar as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily does certain things, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes other things." (EIIIP1/GII, 140).

As Spinoza makes clear here, only human endeavors that are in some way caused by adequate ideas constitute actions; events that have inadequate ideas as their total or partial cause do not count as actions but are instead events that an agent undergoes. In order to fully appreciate this distinction, we must first get clear on the concepts of adequate and inadequate ideas, which are introduced and elaborated on in Part II.

Spinoza's official definition of adequate ideas is not particularly helpful. At EIID4, he defines an adequate idea as "an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, has all the properties—that is, the intrinsic character—of a true idea" (EIID4/GII, 85). He goes on to add a further (although itself not particularly illuminating) explanatory note: "I say intrinsic to exclude what is extrinsic, namely, the agreement of the idea with its object" (EIID4 Exp/GII, 85). Adequacy, whatever it is, does *not* consist in the correspondence (or in any other kind of relation) between an idea and its object. Rather, it is a property of ideas themselves.

There are a couple of points of entry that can lead us to an understanding of adequacy within Spinoza's system. The first requires that we consider any given idea *sub specie aeternitatis*—that is to say, the adequacy or inadequacy of any idea can be understood in terms of where that idea falls within God's idea. As Spinoza puts the point:

> . . . when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, *or* insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but also insofar as he has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that the human Mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately. (EIIP11C/GII, 95).

We can clarify this picture a little bit. As is well known, within Spinoza's universe there is only one substance: God, or Nature. This substance admits of two attributes: thought and extension. All physical things are modes falling under the attribute of extension; all ideas are modes falling under the attribute of thought. As such, all ideas, including our own, can also be thought of as ideas in God, as they are all modes belonging to the one substance (God, or Nature).

Indeed, every human mind is also an idea; specifically, the idea of the human body that it corresponds to in extension ("the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else." {EIIP13/GII, 96}). Although the idea which constitutes the human mind is *intentional,* in that it takes the body as its object, it is important to remember that the mind and the body are not really distinct entities on this picture. Spinoza's parallelism—the idea that every mode of thought has a corresponding mode in extension, and vice versa—demands that the mind and the body be really one thing, understood, respectively, as modes falling under the attributes of thought and extension. To say that the mind is the "idea" of the body is just another way of claiming that the mind is the counterpart to the body (itself a mode of extension) falling under the attribute of thought.

Let us return now to our discussion of adequacy. I suggested above that one way of understanding adequacy has to do with where the idea stands within God's idea, or *sub specie aeternitatis.* According to this understanding, an idea is adequate (for some human being) if it is contained only within the idea that constitutes the human mind. If it requires elements outside of the idea of the human mind to be explained, then it is inadequate (for that human being). Recall: "when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind,

then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately." (EIIP11C/GII, 95).

If the reader finds this way of thinking too abstract, there is another way of conceiving of adequacy within Spinoza's system. This way of thinking requires that we think about ideas not *sub specie aeternitatis* but from the perspective of the individual who has them.

The idea which constitutes the human mind is itself made up of many ideas (EIIP15/GII, 103), each corresponding to a state or affection of the human body. The mereological relationships found in the body are mirrored in the ideas in the mind; just as my kidney is a part of my body, so there is a corresponding kidney idea which is part of the idea which constitutes my mind. This holds in every case whatsoever: there is no part or affection of the body of which there is not a corresponding idea which is a part of the idea which constitutes the mind. [6]

However, Spinoza is clear that these bodily ideas, at least insofar as we ordinarily perceive them, are not adequate. This is because our experience of our own body is often mediated through things outside of us: a cold wind might cause me to suddenly become more aware of my nose and ears; a spoiled egg might turn my thoughts to my stomach. "The ideas of the affections of the human body," Spinoza tells us, "insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused," for,

> . . . the ideas of the affections of the human body involve the nature of external bodies as much as that of the human body . . . and must involve the nature not only of the human Body, but also of its parts, for the affections are modes . . . with which the parts of the

[6] This might, at first glance, appear to lead to some strange consequences. For example, does Spinoza think that we have an idea of, and thus conscious awareness of, individual cells in our kidneys, or other obscure physical processes that take place in the body? However, we need not think that all of these ideas are ideas that we are consciously aware of, thus avoiding this strange result. For more on this, see Nadler 2006, 158.

> human body, and consequently the whole body, are affected. But . . . adequate knowledge of external bodies and of the parts composing the human body is in God, not insofar as he is considered to be affected with the human mind, but insofar as he is considered to be affected with other ideas. Therefore, the ideas of these affections, insofar as they are related only to the human Mind, are like conclusions without premises, i.e. (as is known through itself), they are confused ideas, q.e.d. (EIIP28D/GII, 113).

Because many of our ideas of our bodily affections are mediated through ideas of other things, they cannot be adequate. The same is true for many of our perceptions of external things: when I perceive a cat, what I often perceive is not simply the cat itself but parts of my own body along with it—the way the cat triggers my allergies, for instance. My ordinary perception of the cat is incomplete (since I lack a causal understanding of how that idea connects to other ideas) and also confused (because ideas of parts of my own body are also contained within my idea of the cat).

What this shows is that inadequate ideas are those that are somehow mutilated (that is, incomplete) and confused (containing a mixture of several ideas simultaneously). They are not, strictly speaking, false, as for Spinoza falsity consists only in privation and not in anything positive.

Here, a problem seems to arise, as from this description it might initially appear that it is impossible for us to have any adequate ideas whatsoever.[7] After all, Spinoza tells us that, "the mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body," (EIIP23/GII, 110), that the idea of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of either the human body or the human mind (EIIP27/GII, 112 and EIIP29/GII, 113), and further

[7] Some commentators have read Spinoza as making this strong claim, see especially Della Rocca 1996, 183.

that "the idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of a human body." (EIIP25/GII, 111). If we cannot have adequate knowledge of our mind, or our body, or of external things, there seems to be little left to know

However, we must resist saddling Spinoza with the claim that it is impossible for human beings to obtain adequate knowledge; this is decidedly not his view. To see why, it might be helpful to consider the question of adequate and inadequate ideas with reference to a related distinction that Spinoza draws between kinds of knowledge.

1.3. *The Three Kinds of Knowledge*

Spinoza introduces this distinction at EIIP20S2. I will quote the entire passage here in full, as I will refer back to it frequently in what follows:

> . . . from what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:
>
> 1. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the the intellect . . . for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;
>
> II. from signs, e.g. from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine things . . . these two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.
>
> II. Finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things . . . this I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.

> IV. In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. As this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essences of things.
>
> I shall explain all these with one example. Suppose there are three numbers, and the problem is to find a fourth which is to the third as the second is to the first. Merchants to not hesitate to multiply the second by the third, and divide the product by the first, because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their teacher without any demonstration, or because they have often found this in the simplest of numbers, or from the force of the demonstration of P7 of Book VII of Euclid, viz., from the common property of proportionals. But in the simplest numbers none of this is necessary. Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see that the fourth proportional number is 6—and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance, we see the first number to have to the second. (EIIP40S2/GII, 122).

I will now discuss these three kinds of knowledge in order. The first kind of knowledge (opinion or imagination), as we have just seem, itself has two forms: knowledge based in sense perception, and knowledge based in signs (that is, knowledge based in written or spoken language, the testimony of others, pictorial representations, etc). Spinoza often refers to the first kind of knowledge as "knowledge from random experience" (see above, e.g.) In a work that pre-

dates the *Ethics*, *The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*[8], Spinoza illustrates this kind of knowledge by means of the following examples:

> I know only from report the date of my birth, who my parents were, and similar things, which I have never doubted. By random experience I know that I shall die, for I affirm this because I have seen others like me die, even though they had not all lived the same length of time and did not all die of the same illness. Again, I also know by random experience that oil is capable of feeding fire, and that water is capable of putting it out. I also know that the dog is a barking animal, and man a rational one. And in this way I know almost all of the things that are useful in life (C14/GII, 11).

When knowledge is based in perception, arising, say, from the testimony of others or on the basis of inference from similar experiences, it is classified as knowledge of the first kind. There are a couple of things to note here.

First, for Spinoza knowledge of the first kind is not useless. Although perhaps mutilated and incomplete, it can still serve some pragmatic function, and has some connection to what is real. This is partially explained by Spinoza's conception of error—in his view, things are false not because they fail in representing or connecting to some thing, but because they are somehow mutilated, missing an important element:

> . . . there is nothing positive in ideas that constitutes the form of falsity (by P33); but falsity cannot consist in absolute privation (for it is Minds, not Bodies, which are said to err, or to be deceived), nor also in absolute ignorance. For to be ignorant and to err are different. So it consists in the privation of knowledge that inadequate knowledge of

[8] It is worth noting that as Spinoza carves up the distinction in this text, there are four kinds of knowledge, not three. However, his view here is similar enough to his mature view that this text can be meaningfully referred to here.

> things, *or* inadequate and confused ideas involve . . . to explain the matter more fully, I shall give [NS: one or two examples]: men are deceived in that they think themselves free [NS; i.e., that they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing or forebear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom—that they do not know any cause of their actions. (EIIP35/GII, 117).

That is, error is not something positive, but rather indicates that the idea is somehow incomplete. The error that lies in the idea of human free will is that part of the idea is missing, namely, the idea of the true causes that determine our actions. The erroneous idea of free will is therefore an incomplete idea that contains only one of the necessary elements: the idea that human beings do this or that.

As such, knowledge of the first kind, although potentially subject to error, can still be incredible useful for the pragmatic purpose of moving through everyday life—not much more than this is needed in order to know that I should avoid touching a hot stove, or that I should run away quickly from an oncoming bear. In this way the first kind of knowledge bears some resemblance to the Cartesian notion of moral certainty.[9] Descartes suggests that there are certain bits of knowledge for which we may not possess definitive demonstrations; nevertheless, we are able to be certain *enough* about them for practical purposes. Although we must seek absolute certainty in some matters,

> . . . it would be disingenuous, however, not to point out that there are some things considered morally certain, that is, as having sufficient certainty for application to

[9] For more on this notion, see, e.g., Garber 2001, ch. 6.

> ordinary life, even though they may be uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God. (*Principia* V, 205).

In addition to being pragmatically useful, it is worth noting that the first kind of knowledge is so classified not primarily in virtue of its content, but in virtue of its justification. Notice that in the above example of the fourth propositional, one and the same bit of knowledge (i.e., the solution to the problem of the fourth propositional) was capable of being understood through the first, second, and third kinds of knowledge, depending on how the solution was reached or justified by the knower. In Spinoza's view, any bit of knowledge is capable of being known in either the first, second, or third way. This will become clearer when we consider more closely the nature of actions and passions, for, in Spinoza's view, "an affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it" (EVP3/GII, 283). But more on this in what follows.

In order to get a clear handle on knowledge of the second kind, or knowledge that arises "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things" (EIIP40S2/GII), we must first clarify Spinoza's conception of common notions, first dealt with directly in the *Ethics* at EIIP38:

> *Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately.*
>
> Demonstration: Let A be something which is common to all bodies, and which is equally in the part of each body and in the whole. I say that A can only be conceived adequately. For its idea (by P7) will necessarily be adequate in God, both insofar as he has the idea of the human Body and insofar as he has the ideas of its affections, which . . . involve in part both the nature of the human body and that of external bodies. That is . . . this idea will

> necessarily be adequate in God insofar as he constitutes the human Mind, *or* insofar as he has ideas that are in the human mind. The Mind therefore . . . necessarily perceives A adequately, and does so both insofar as it perceives itself and insofar as it perceives its own or any external body. Nor can A be conceived in any other way, q.e.d.

As the above passage shows, the second kind of knowledge involves an understanding of the common properties of things, those features that similar bodies share. Spinoza sometimes speaks of the common notions as general and clear axioms (see, for instance, EIP8D: "but if men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of [this proposition] . . . indeed, this proposition would be an axiom for everyone, and would be numbered among the common notions" {EIP8D/GI, 49)**.** Knowledge of common notions is clear, universal, and accessible to all, if properly attended to.

Some scholars have argued that since the common notions are general ideas of the essences of things, then the second kind of knowledge must relate to general things only—that is, we do not have knowledge of the second kind regarding particulars. [10] Knowledge of particular things, on this view, pertains only to knowledge of the third kind. However, as I argued above, it is clear that the distinction between kinds of knowledge comes down to a distinction regarding how knowledge is justified, *not* the objects of that knowledge. [11] Recall that in the example of the fourth proportional, the same piece of mathematical knowledge was able to be known according to all three types. As such, we should think of the second kind of knowledge as a type of knowledge that is justified through inference to general essences, rather than as a knowledge solely *about* general essences. This lines up with a point Spinoza makes in a footnote to the *TTP*:

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[10] See, for instance, Curley 1973, MacIntosh 1972.
[11] This point is also made in Carr, 1978.

> . . . for just as someone who does not properly know the nature of a triangle does not know that its three angles are equal to two right angles, so one who conceives the divine nature confusedly does not see that it pertains to the nature of God to exist. But for us to be able to conceive God's nature clearly and distinctly, we must attend to very simple notions, called common notions, and connect them with those pertaining to the divine nature. (*TTP XII* n.12/ GIII, 158).

As the above passage shows, knowledge of the second kind includes not only knowledge of general things, but also knowledge that is justified by an inference from a general essence to knowledge of some particular. An understanding of the common properties of bodies and other things allows us to make inferences about particulars that fall under those categories. The knowledge that arises from this process will always be adequate.

Finally, there is the third kind of knowledge, intuitive knowledge, which is little-defined or understood. Spinoza often speaks of it in aspirational terms ("the greatest virtue of the mind . . . *or* its greatest striving, is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge" {EVP26/GII, 227}), but there is much disagreement among scholars as to what exactly it amounts to.[12] While a full analysis of the third kind of knowledge is outside the scope of this project, Spinoza explains at EIIP40S2 that "this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essences of things." (EIIP40S2/ GII, 122). This connection between knowledge of God and knowledge of the third kind is stressed throughout the *Ethics*: "therefore the Mind, insofar as it is eternal, is capable of knowing all those things which can follow from this given knowledge of God, i.e., one of knowing things by the third kind of knowledge . . .therefore the Mind, insofar as it is

[12] See, e.g. Wilson 1996, Rutherford 1999, Melamed 2013.

eternal, is the adequate, *or* formal cause of the third kind of knowledge" (EVP31/GII, 229). Whereas the second kind of knowledge consists in an inference from a general property to a particular, the third kind of knowledge consists in an inference from knowledge about *God* to knowledge about particulars. That is, to know something according to the third kind of knowledge is to know exactly where that thing falls within God's idea.

To recap: knowledge of the first kind is inadequate, where knowledge of the second and third kinds is necessarily adequate. And we can now carve up the distinction between adequate and inadequate knowledge in terms of *ways of knowing* or *means of justification.* Knowledge that is gained through sense perception, through the testimony of others, or from written language or signs, is inadequate. Knowledge that arises from common notions, inferences from general properties to particulars, or from intuitive knowledge about God is adequate.

1.4 Actions and Passions

Let us return to where we started. We saw that an agent acts when her behavior is directed by adequate ideas; she is passive when her behavior is directed by inadequate ideas. This claim now has further content. When an agent's activities are based in knowledge justified through common notions, or through knowledge of God, she acts. When her activities are based in knowledge gained through the senses, or from testimony or signs, she is passive. As we will see in what follows, there is an important sense in which passionate behaviors are those that are directed from without, whereas actions stem from the agent alone. This is because for Spinoza, having adequate knowledge is equivalent to not being acted on from without.

This leads us to the free man, an individual who, according to Spinoza, *always* acts on the basis of adequate ideas, and never acts on the basis of the passions. Given the prominent role that

the passions have to play in our lives, we might wonder whether or not such an individual is really possible. I will turn to this question in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Spinoza's Conception of Freedom

2.1. *Introduction*

The "free man" [*homo liber*] makes only a brief appearance in the *Ethics,* in a series of seven propositions at the end of Part IV. The placement of these passages initially appears somewhat odd, as the majority of Part IV is devoted not to a discussion of human freedom but of human bondage—that is, of the various ways that human action is controlled and constrained by the affects. Nevertheless, I suggest that we can read these passages as forming a bridge between the Part IV discussion of human bondage and the extensive analysis of human freedom which is the focus of the first half of Part V.

The scholium to EIVP66, then, marks the transition between Spinoza's analysis of human bondage and his brief account of the free man, which serves as an introduction to his discussion of human freedom. At EIVP66, Spinoza remarks that, since we have at this point in the *Ethics* concluded our study of the affects and of their various causal powers,

> . . . we shall see easily what the difference is between a man who is led by affect, *or* by opinion, and the one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or not, does only those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those things which he knows to be most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly. (EIVP66S/GII, 261).

Spinoza continues: "hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter, a free man. I now wish to note a few more things concerning the free man's temperament and manner of living." The seven free

man propositions immediately follow this remark. I will reproduce them here in full, as they are essential to our study.

2.2. *The free man propositions*

EIVP67: *A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.*

Demonstration: A free man, i.e., one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone, is not led by Fear (by P63) but desires the good directly (by P63C), i.e., by P24, acts, lives, and preserves his being from the foundation of seeking his own advantage. And so he thinks of nothing less than of death. Instead, his wisdom is a meditation on life, q.e.d.

EIVP68: *If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free.*

Demonstration: I call him free who is led by reason alone. Therefore, he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas, and so has no concept of evil (by P64C). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good, q.e.d.

Scholium: It is evident from P4 that the hypothesis of this proposition is false and cannot be conceived unless we attend only to human nature, *or* rather to God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is the cause of man's existence. This, and other things I have now demonstrated have been indicated by Moses in that story of the first man. For in it the only power of God conceived is that by which he created man, i.e. by the power by which he consulted only man's advantage. And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of

knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he ate of it, he immediately feared death, rather than desiring to live; and then that, the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing more useful to him than she was, but that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see EIIP27) and to lose his freedom and that afterwards this freedom was recovered by the Patriarchs, guided by the spirit of Christ, i.e., by the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for himself (as we have demonstrated above, by P37).

EIVP69: *The virtue of a free man is seen to be as great in avoiding dangers as in overcoming them.*

Demonstration: The affects can neither be restrained nor removed except by an affect contrary to and stronger than the affect to be restrained (by P7). But blind Daring and Fear are affects which can be conceived to be equally great (by P3 and P5). Therefore, an equally great virtue of mind, *or* strength of character (for the definition of this, see EIIIP59S) is required to restrain Daring as to restrain Fear, i.e. (by Defs. Aff XL and XLI) a free man avoids dangers by the same virtue of mind by which he tries to overcome them, q.e.d.

Corollary: In the free man, a timely flight is considered to show as much Tenacity as fighting; or the free man chooses flight with the same Tenacity, or presence of mind, as he chooses a contest.

EIVP70: *A free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors.*

Demonstration: Everyone judges according to his own temperament what is good (see EIIIP39). But a free man strives to join other men to him in friendship (by P37), not to repay men with

benefits that are equivalent in their eyes, but to lead himself and others by the free judgment of reason, and to do only those things that he himself knows to be most excellent. Therefore, a free man will strive, as far as he can, to avoid the favors of the ignorant, so as not to be hated by them, and at the same time yield only to reason, not to their appetite, q.e.d.

Scholium: I say *as far as he can*. For though men may be ignorant, they are still men, who in situations of need can bring human aid. And there is no better aid than that. So it often happens that it is necessary to accept favors from them, and hence to return thanks to them according to their temperament [i.e. in a way that they will appreciate]. To this we may add that we must be careful in declining favors, so that we do not seem to disdain them, or out of greed be afraid of repayment. For in that way, in the very act of avoiding their hate, we would incur it. So in declining favors we must take account of what is useful and honorable.

EIVP71: *Only free men are very thankful to one another.*

Demonstration: Only free men are very useful to one another, are joined to one another by the greatest necessity of friendship (by P35 and P35C1) and strive to benefit each other with equal eagerness for love (by P37). And so (by Defs Aff XXXIV) only free men are very thankful to one another, q.e.d.

Scholium: The thankfulness which men are led by a blind Desire to display toward one another is for the most part a business transaction or entrapment, rather than thankfulness. Again, ingratitude is not an affect. Nevertheless, ingratitude is dishonorable because it generally indicates that the man is affected with too much Hate, Anger, Pride, or Greed, etc. For one who, out of foolishness, does not know how to reckon one gift against another, is not ungrateful; much less one who is not moved by the gifts of a courtesan to assist her lust, nor by those of a thief to

conceal his thefts, nor by anyone else like that. On the contrary, he shows firmness of mind who does not allow gifts to corrupt him, to his or the general ruin.

EIVP72: *A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.*

Demonstration: If a man, insofar as he is free, did anything by deception, he would do it by the dictate of reason (for so far only do we can him free). And so it would be a virtue to act deceptively (by P24) and hence (by the same proposition) everyone would be better advised to act deceptively to preserve his being. I.e. (as is known through itself), men would be better advised to agree only in words, and be contrary to each other in fact. But this is absurd (by P31C). Therefore, a free man, q.e.d.

Scholium: Suppose someone now asks: what if a man could save himself from the present danger of death by treachery? Would not the principle of preserving his own being recommend, without qualification, that he be treacherous? The reply to this is the same: if reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men make agreements, join forces, and have common rights only by deception—i.e., that they really have no common rights. This is absurd.

EIVP73: *A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself.*

Demonstration: A man who is guided by reason is not led by Fear (by P63) but insofar as he strives to preserve his being from the dictates of reason, i.e. (by P66S), insofar as he strives to live freely, desires to maintain the principle of common life and common advantage. Consequently (as we have shown in P37S2), he desires to live according to the common decision

of the state. Therefore, a man who is guided by reason desires, in order to live more freely, to keep the common laws of the state, q.e.d.

Scholium: These and similar things we have shown concerning the true freedom of man are related to Strength of Character, much less that a man strong in character hates no one, scorns no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, and is not at all proud. For these and all things which relate to true life and Religion are easily proven from P37 and P46, viz. that Hate is to be conquered by returning Love, and that everyone led by reason desires for others the good he wants for himself. to this we may add what we have noted in P50S and in other places: a man strong in character considers this most of all, that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and hence, that whatever he thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust and dishonorable, arises from the fact that he conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused. For this reason, he strives most of all to conceive things as they are in themselves, and to remove the true obstacles to knowledge like Hate, Anger, Mockery, Pride, and the rest of the things we have noted in the preceding pages. And so, as we have said, he strives, as far as he can, to act well and rejoice.

Although all of these propositions will be discussed in greater length in what follows, there are a few things to note at the outset. First, as Matthew Homan has suggested, the seven free man propositions can be naturally grouped into two categories: those that describe the behavior of the free man in relation to adverse circumstances [P67-P69] and those [P70-P73] that situate the free man within a social context (Homan 2015, 82). These two categories will turn out to be significant, for, as we shall see shortly, at least one prominent interpretation of the free man

paints a picture of the free man as an individual who, as a matter of fact, cannot face adversity or live among others.

The second thing I would like to flag here is that although the seven propositions above are commonly understood as "the free man passages," there are many more passages in the *Ethics* that depict the life of the free man. It is worth noting that the final proposition in this set, EIVP73, does not nominally deal with the free man but instead refers to "the man who is guided by reason." However, it is clear that Spinoza intends for these two terms to be equivalent, as the placement of EIVP73 at the end of the free man discussion clearly shows. Spinoza says as much: "I call him free who is led by reason alone" (EIVP68).

Given this equivalence, there are many more "free man" passages than the seven traditionally so-called (EIVP67-73). For instance, we also learn that the man who is guided by reason always agrees in nature with other rational men (EIVP35), "necessarily strives to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason" (EIVP37), "strives to repay the other's anger, hare, or disdain towards him with love and nobility" (EIVP46), depends less on hope (EIVP47S), has no use for pity (EIVP50), follows the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils (EIVP65) and does not obey laws out of fear (EIVP37).

In addition to those passages that describe the man guided by reason, Spinoza also makes reference to the "wise man" on numerous occasions throughout the *Ethics*. For instance:

> Nothing forbids our pleasure except a sad and savage superstition. For why is it more proper to relieve ourselves of hunger and thirst than to rid ourselves of melancholy? My account of the matter, the view I have arrived at, is this: no deity, nor anyone else, unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power or misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, signs, fears, and other things of that kind, which are signs of a weak

> mind. On the contrary, the greater joy with which we are affected, the greater perfection to which we pass, that is, the more we participate in the divine nature. To use things, therefore, and to take pleasure in them as much as possible—not, of course, to the point where we are disgusted with them, for there is no pleasure in that—this is the part of the wise man. *It is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself with pleasant food and drink, with scents, and with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, with music, sports, theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to any other.* For the human body is composed of a great many natures, so that the whole body may be equally capable of understanding many things at once. This plan of living, then, agrees best with our principles and with common practice. So if any other way of living [is to be commended], this one is best, and to be commended in every way. (EIVP45S/GII, 244, emphasis mine).

In my view, the "free man" and the "wise man" also pick out the same individual, although there is some scholarly debate on this point. Both Karolina Hubner and Sanem Soyarslan have asserted that the "free man" and the "wise man" are distinct figures who play different roles within Spinoza's ethics. Hubner does not really offer an argument for making this distinction, but merely mentions it in passing in a brief footnote:

> In addition to the 'free man', Spinoza also describes a state of *near* human perfection, the 'wise man' who 'still require[s] new and varied' things, and exercises his causal powers in moderation (EIVP45S/GII, 244). The activities in which the wise man engages—music, theatre, sports—are all ways of exercising reason, applying adequate general ideas to possible objects of such ideas. (Hubner 2014, 138, n.49).

In an unpublished paper, Soyarslan fleshes out this distinction further. While, according to her view, the free man is an individual who follows the commands of reason without exception (and is thus, in her view, an impossible status for human beings to attain, given the necessity of our bondage) the wise man is the individual who "has attained intuitive knowledge and blessedness" (Soyarslan, 15). The wise man has not overcome human bondage and is still subject to the passions, but, through his intuitive knowledge of God, has achieved a state of mental tranquility that allows him to calmly bear life's circumstances. In describing this character, she cites the following passage from EIVapp, which for her best characterizes the life of the wise man:

> But human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, , if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of Nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, that is, the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied (*acquiescet*) with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction (*acquiescentia*). For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor be absolutely satisfied (*acquiescere*) with anything except what is true . . (EIVApp XXXII/GII, 276).

Although Soyarslan is more explicit about this, both she and Hubner appear to be motivated in drawing this distinction by the belief in, as Soyarslan nicely puts it, "the importance for moral philosophy to present an ideal within our reach" (Soyarslan, 12). Both Hubner and Soyarslan hold that the free man is an ideal that cannot be actualized. But if this is the case, then any moral

system that depends on this ideal to provide guidance for our actions becomes far less plausible. Thus, they both must appeal to the wise man as a figure that can play this action-guiding role. However, if we deny, as I will in future chapters, the claim that the free man cannot be instantiated, then the impetus for drawing this distinction goes away.

And there is, in fact, no textual evidence for drawing this distinction. [13] Spinoza certainly never draws it himself; further, he often describes the free man and the wise man in strikingly similar terms:

> It is clear how much the wise man is capable of, and of how much more powerful he is than one who is ignorant and driven only by lust. For not only is the ignorant man troubled in many ways by external causes, and unable to ever possess true peach of mind, but he also lives as if he knew neither himself, nor God, nor things, and as soon as he ceases to be acted on, he ceases to be. On the other hand, the wise man, insofar as he is considered as such, is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind. (EIVP42S/GII, 308).

Here, the free man and the wise man are both contrasted with the ignorant man, who is led by "affect", "opinion" or "lust" and is subject to the uncertain fluctuations of external things. That these figures are given the same foil gives us strong reason, I suspect, to take them as equivalent. And although the positive description of these individuals varies somewhat in these passages (the free man is the individual who "complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those

[13] Soyarslan does provide a textual argument for her view, and argues that the discussion of the wise man in the context of Part V lends strong support to the idea that the wise man is the blessed man, *not* the man who is guided by reason. However, I think that the similarities between Spinoza's descriptions of these figures, as well as the lack of any explicit mention of this distinction by Spinoza, override this evidence for her view.

things which he knows to be most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly", whereas the wise man is "hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things . . . never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind") these are simply two ways of describing the same condition. The positive description of the wise man in the above passage closely resembles the following description of the "man who is guided by reason" (that is, the free man):

> These and similar things we have shown concerning the true freedom of man are related to Strength of Character, i.e. (by IIIP59S), to Tenacity and Nobility. I do not consider it worthwhile to demonstrate separately here all the properties of Strength of Character, much less that a man strong in character hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, scorns no one, and is not at all proud . . . To this we may add . . . that a man strong in character considers this most of all that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and hence, that whatever he thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonorable, arises from the fact that he conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused. For this reason, he strives most of all to conceive of things as they are in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge, like Hate, Anger, Envy, Mockery, Pride, and the rest of the things we have noted in the preceding pages. (EIVP73S/GII, 265).

Being "hardly troubled in spirit", given Spinoza's repeated emphasis on the psychological turmoil that the affects can wrought, seems to be the same state as the one in which one "hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, scorns no one, and is not at all proud." Likewise, "being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of

things", considering "most of all things that follow from the divine nature" and striving "most of all to conceive things in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge" are also the same condition.

As such, in what follows I will treat the "wise man", "the free man", and the "man guided by reason" as equivalent.[14] With this in mind, let us now turn to the first puzzle that the free man propositions raise concerning the nature and status of the free man.

2.3. What kind of freedom does the free man possess?

There is significant scholarly controversy surrounding this question, but a natural place to begin to look for an answer is with Spinoza's official definition of freedom, presented in the opening pages of the *Ethics*:

> That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner. (EID7/GII, 46).

EID7 is referred to five times within the formal geometrical apparatus of the *Ethics*. The first three references [EIP17C2, EIP32S, and EIP33S] occur within the context of an extended discussion of God's freedom. There, Spinoza informs us that "God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one." (EIP17/GII, 61). Spinoza argues further at EIP17C2 that "God alone is a free cause. For God exists from the necessity of his nature (by P11 and P14C) and acts from the necessity of his nature. Therefore (by D7), God alone is a free cause, q.e.d." (EIP17D/GII, 61).

[14] Nadler 2015 also makes this point.

From these remarks we can see that God's freedom is contrasted not with necessity, but with external compulsion. All of God's effects *must* follow from the laws of his own nature (EIP17D/GII, 61), for, as Spinoza has already demonstrated (EIP15), there is nothing outside of God, and so there is no external cause that could constrain him or his actions. But the fact that God's effects are necessitated by his nature does not conflict with his freedom. Spinoza neatly summarizes this view in an October 1674 letter to Schuller: "even though God exists necessarily, still he exists freely, because he exists from the necessity of his own nature alone. So God understands himself, and absolutely all things, freely, because it follows solely from the necessity of his nature that he understands all things. You see, then, that I place freedom not in a free decree, but in a free necessity." (CII, 427/GIV, 265).

Spinoza takes great care to distinguish his sense of freedom (freedom in the sense of being uncaused by anything external) with the "vulgar" or ordinary conception of divine freedom (freedom in the sense of being uncaused, period). As he remarks:

> . . .others think that God is a free cause because he can (or so they think) bring it about that the things which we have said follow from his nature (i.e. which are in his power) do not happen or are not produced by him. But this is the same as if they were to say that God can bring it about that it would not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles; or that from a given cause the effect would not follow—which is absurd (EIP17S1/GII, 61-2).

Spinoza may well have Descartes in his sights here, who at times argues that God is free in the sense that he could have willed that the basic features of the world be otherwise than they are. In a 1630 letter to Mersenne, for example, Descartes explains that God freely willed even basic mathematical, logical, and moral truths, and could therefore alter them if he so desired: "you ask

what *necessitated* God to create these truths; and I reply that he was just as free to make it not true that all the radii of a circle are equal—just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things" (CSMK: 25/AT I, 153). God freely chose to create the world as it is, in the sense that God *could* have brought another world with different properties into existence. His actions are not necessitated by any prior cause, whether that cause be internal (related to God's essence) or external.

Spinoza suggests that previous thinkers have felt the need to attribute this version of freedom (freedom in the sense of being uncaused, period) to God as a means of preserving his omnipotence, for if God were incapable of doing otherwise (i.e., of actualizing possibilities other than those which he actually does actualize), this would constitute a limit on his power. That is, it would seem to entail that there are certain states of affairs that it is beyond God's power to make actual, i.e., worlds where two plus two equaled five.

Spinoza counters this line of thought by arguing that the common conception of divine freedom actually *undermines* God's omnipotence. According to this view, God understands infinitely many more things that he will ever be able to create, "for, otherwise, if he created everything he understood [NS: to be creatable] he would (according to them) exhaust his omnipotence and render himself imperfect" (EIP17C2/GII, 62). But if God understands more than he creates, it follows that God is unable to bring about everything that he supposedly has the power to bring about. That is, he is not all powerful.

In contrast, Spinoza argues that his conception of God—a God unconstrained by external things, whose effects flow necessarily from his nature—is better able to account for God's omnipotence:

> . . .some consider this a slander and belittling of God. But such talk comes from a misconception about what true freedom consists in. For it is not at all what they think, viz. being able to do or omit something good or evil. *True freedom is nothing but [being] the first cause, which is not in any way constrained or necessitated by anything else,* and only though its perfection is the cause of all perfection. So if God could omit doing this, he could not be perfect. For being able to omit doing good or bringing about perfection in what he produces can only be through a defect (CI, 82/GI, 32, emphasis mine).

As a matter of fact, Spinoza holds that the error of his rivals in considering God's freedom is far greater than their belief in God's ability to do otherwise. For Spinoza, it is also a mistake to think of God as having a free will, in that it is a mistake to think of God as having a "will" at all. To begin with, although many are accustomed to think of the will as a faculty of affirmation and denial that God (and perhaps human beings—but more on this in a moment) possesses, there is, in truth, no such faculty in God. Instead, Spinoza argues, there are only singular affirmations and denials, which are not separable from the ideas to which they are attached. When God affirms the truth of (or "selects," to speak loosely and ultimately inaccurately) certain physical or logical laws, God's affirmation is contained within the idea of those laws, and is not something secondary. There is no faculty of the will, distinct from the intellect, that chooses from a range of possible options; God's "willing" is inseparable from his understanding. To illustrate this point by means of an example, God does not conceive of a three-sided triangle, and then afterwards decide to instantiate (to affirm or deny) that idea. For God to conceive of a three-sided triangle is for God to affirm that a triangle has three sides.

According to Spinoza's diagnosis, the illusion of the will as a faculty distinct from the intellect comes from our natural tendency to form universals out of particulars; "so intellect and will are to this or that idea, or to this or that volition, as 'stone-ness' is to this or that stone, or man to Peter and Paul" (EIIIP48/GII, 129). From a series of affirmative ideas, we construct the fiction of a separate faculty of will, but in truth this faculty has no reality beyond the abstraction. All that exists are singular affirmations or denials, contained within the ideas themselves.

Since the "will" is not a faculty but only a certain mode of thinking (that is, a certain affirmation or denial) it does not make sense to conceive of God's "will" as being free. Spinoza argues extensively for this position in the demonstration to EIP32. Will is simply a certain mode of thinking, he argues, and each mode of thinking can neither exist nor produce an effect unless it is determined to produce that effect through some other cause (EIP28) and so on ad infinitum. It follows that each act of willing (each affirmation or denial, each mode of thinking) must be determined by something prior.

From what we have said, we can see clearly that Spinoza's conception of divine freedom departs not only from the common conception of freedom as the ability to do otherwise, but also from any view that takes God's freedom to at least partially involve some deliberation on the part of a distinct faculty of the will. This conception is far too anthropomorphic to be palatable to Spinoza. God does not, as Leibniz will later argue, pick the best from a series of possible options; he does not deliberate at all. [15] Instead, God's freedom must be understood only in the sense of his being unconstrained by anything else, determined to act by the necessity of his nature alone: "there is no cause either extrinsically or intrinsically, which prompts God to act, except the perfection of his own nature" (EIP17C1/GII, 61).

[15] For more on Leibniz on divine freedom, see Jolley 2005, ch.5.

So much for divine freedom. Let us now consider EID7 in relation to human beings.

It is worth noting first that although Spinoza uses the term "free" to identify the free man [*homo liber*], EID7 is not referred to in any of the free man propositions. In fact, with the exception of two references at EIIIP17S and EIIIP49D (which are both clearly intended to express some kind of hypothetical situation or counterfactual—"for if the mind, while it imagined non-existent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice—*especially if this faculty of imagining depended only on its own nature, that is, by EID7, if the mind's faculty of imagining were free*" [EIIIP7S/GII, 154, emphasis mine]; "a thing *we imagine* to be free must be perceived through itself, without others" [EIIIP49D/GII, 177, emphasis mine]) Spinoza only invokes EID7 in his discussions of divine freedom. And yet he offers no other explicit definition of freedom in the *Ethics*.

In his many discussions of human freedom Spinoza is concerned, just as in the divine case, to undermine the common conceptions of free will, which he takes to be detrimental to the project of morality. The "vulgar" or ordinary conception of free will that Spinoza denies to human beings is analogous to the kind of freedom he also denies to God (in fact, he suggests that since humans frequently err in anthropomorphizing God, they likely extended their faulty conception of human freedom to the divine case as well). It is the kind of freedom Descartes intends to capture with statements like the following: "the will, or freedom of choice . . . simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid" (CSM II:40/AT VII, 58).

We have already seen Spinoza's rejection of a separate faculty of affirmation and denial in the divine case; he makes exactly the same point about human beings. Affirmations or denials

are not separate attitudes that attach secondarily to ideas. They are instead contained within the ideas themselves. Human beings cannot suspend judgment or decide which of some set of possible options is good; to have a desire is already to affirm that the thing desired is good. Further, like God, human beings do not possess the ability to do otherwise than they have done, but unlike in the divine case, this is not explained by the fact that their effects follow necessarily from their natures. Instead, all human behavior follows necessarily from preceding causes, and so on ad infinitum.

Although Spinoza argues that a similar mistake is made in both the human and divine cases, he offers different diagnoses as to why the illusion of free will persists in each case. Recall that with God, the belief in an erroneous conception of human freedom stemmed from a desire to preserve God's omnipotence. On the other hand, human beings believe themselves to be free in the ordinary sense because they are ignorant of the preceding causes that necessarily determine their actions:

> . . . so the infant believes that he freely wants the milk; the angry child that he wants vengeance, and the timid, flight. So the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the Mind that he speaks the things he later, when sober, wishes he had not said. So the madman, the chatterbox, the child, and a great many people of this kind believe themselves free when they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined, *and that the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves,* which therefore vary as the disposition of the Body varies. For each one governs everything from his affect, and those who are torn by contrary affects do not know what they want, and those not moved by an affect are very easily driven here and there (EIIIP2S/GII, 143).

Spinoza's analysis of the affects and the causal role they play in their behavior comprises the majority of Part III, which we have already explored in depth in previous chapters. The essential point here is that just as God's "willings" are simply his ideas, so our "decisions" are simply our appetites, determined by our affects. But the fact that the affects are *always,* without exception, the causes of our behaviors often escapes our notice, leading to a false belief in our freedom and in a separate, undetermined faculty of the will. I may believe that I freely choose to watch the day's tenth episode of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* rather than work on this dissertation, but it is only because I am not aware of the complicated affective story that lies in the background of this "choice" (in this case, likely some deep pathology).

However, this mistaken conception of human freedom must be eradicated if we wish to make any significant moral progress. The belief that man is free in the ordinary sense, that he "disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself" leads us to "bewail, laugh at, disdain, or (as usually happens) curse" human weakness and vice, rather than attempting to understand these things through their natural causes (EIII Preface/GII, 137). Without a thorough understanding of the affects and of their causal power, we cannot hope to lessen their often pernicious effects and make any real progress towards increasing our power and virtue. The tendency towards praise and blame, which depends on the illusion of free will, is not morally useful in Spinoza's view. This is one of the main messages of the *Ethics*, and one of Spinoza's primary goals therein is to undermine these destructive tendencies so that we can begin to make real moral progress.

Given the overlap between the traditional conceptions of divine and human free will, we might expect Spinoza to offer a correction in the human case that is structurally similar to the one that he offers in the divine case. That is, we might expect for him to argue that, although

human beings are of course not free in the sense of being able to do otherwise than they do, they *can* be free in the EID7 sense, the only sense of freedom that has been officially defined in the *Ethics.* But in spite of the language of the "free man," Spinoza explicitly denies that human beings can be free in the EID7 sense. To see why, let us take a closer look at EID7 and how it might apply (or really, fail to apply) in the human case.

According to EID7, in order to count as free, the free man must (a) exist from the necessity of his nature alone and (b) be determined to act by himself alone. These two conditions are jointly necessary for EID7 freedom, but neither condition can be satisfied by any human being.

The first condition specifies that the free man must *exist* through the necessity of his own nature, and cannot be caused by anything external. But it is not possible for any human being to meet this condition, for, as we have seen, God is the only individual to whom this description applies:

> Except for God, there neither is, nor can be conceived, any substance (by P14) i.e. (by D3) a thing that is in itself and conceived through itself. *But modes* (by D5) *can neither be nor be conceived without substance.* So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone. But except for substances and modes there is nothing (by A1). Therefore [NS: everything is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God, q.e.d. (EIP15D/GII, 56-57, emphasis mine).

Human beings, as finite modes, cannot be conceived except through the divine nature. This tension is surely in the mind of one commentator when he writes that the idea of the free man is "the idea of God, or more circumspectly put, the idea of a being whose description only God fits. The ideal of a human being is then to be God. It is impossible for a human being to be God,

however, for that would require that a mode (which is not in itself) be a substance (which is in itself)" (Jarrett 2014, 62).

According to the second condition, the free man must *act* solely from his own nature; his effects cannot be determined by anything external. It is difficult to pin down exactly what it might mean for a human being to act according to her nature, as Spinoza is quite sketchy in filling out the details of what he means by "human nature". However, a few things are clear.

Recall that the nature of any thing is its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in its being. Insofar as we are rational beings, then, we will necessarily strive to preserve our rational nature:

> The striving to preserve itself is nothing but the essence of the thing itself (by IIIP7), which, insofar as it exists as it does, is conceived to have a force for persevering in existing (by IIIP6) and for doing those things that necessarily follow from its given nature . . .But the essence of reason is nothing but our Mind, insofar as it understands clearly and distinctly (see the definition of this in IIP40S2). Therefore (by IIP40), whatever we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding. (EIVP26/GII, 227).

The free man, "who lives according to the dictate of reason alone," will have a nature that consists in this rational striving (EIVP67D/GII, 261). And so the free man is the individual who "is always led by reason . . .complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be most important in life" (EIVP66). Being led by reason amounts to being guided by adequate ideas, and so the free man, according to this description, *always* acts on the basis of adequate ideas concerning what will really promote his *conatus*, and *never* allows inadequate ideas to determine his actions.

Many commentators have taken this to entail the further claim that the free man *possesses no inadequate ideas whatsoever.* [16] From this it would seem to follow that the free man has no passions and can never be affected by anything external, either to his benefit or to his harm, since inadequate ideas are those that are based in passions and reflect how other bodies act on us. This line of thought is pursued, for instance, by Dan Garber:

> . . .a free man is one who has adequate ideas and adequate ideas alone . . .so, the individual whose behavior derives from adequate ideas (reason) therefore acts rather than is acted upon; thus the free man is free from all passion . . .From this follows one extremely important consequence. Because all the behavior of the perfectly rational individual derives from his own nature, because he only acts, and cannot be acted upon, he is, in a sense, causally isolated from the rest of the world: he can act on other things, but other things cannot act on him. (Garber 2004, 186).

Of course, it is impossible for any human being to attain the state that Garber describes. Spinoza says as much:

> It is impossible that Man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause (EIVP4/GII, 213).

The tension between the passionless state of the free man and the necessity of human engagement in the world has led many commentators to endorse an interpretation that I will call the *Inconsistency Reading (IR)*. According to this reading, the free man represents an impossible ideal precisely because his nature is in some way inconsistent with human nature. I take the following remarks to be representative of versions of this view:

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[16] I take this point from Nadler 2015, 113.

. . .from a thing's being completely free, it follows that it is completely self determined and utterly independent of external causes; on the other hand, from a thing's being a man, it follows that it is necessarily a part of nature and subject to external causes. . .the concept of the free man is the concept of a limit that can be approached but not completely attained by finite beings. (Garrett 1995, 231)

> . . .the idea of a perfectly free human being is, taken literally, inconsistent. For to be completely free, one must act from the necessity of one's nature alone, uninfluenced by external forces. But this cannot be achieved by any human being, because 'it is impossible that man should not be a part of nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his nature alone, of which he is the adequate cause.' (Garrett 1995, 289).

> . . .it is thus our very finitude that . . .makes it impossible for us to be perfectly self-sustaining. To the extent to which we are finite, it is impossible to realize the model of human nature, the perfect character to which we aspire. Or, to put it a different way, the idea of a perfectly free and rational person is incoherent; perfect freedom and rationality conflict with the finitude implicit in human personhood . . .a finite creature is always subject to perishing through another more powerful creature. So if we are to be imperishable, as our perfect freedom and rationality entails, then we must be finite creatures. But we are not. (Garber 2004, 198).

. . .the model or ideal is then that of a completely (or solely) rational being, as Spinoza puts it (and perhaps clarifies it) in EIVP67D, "he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason." Such a person could not exist (in time). Only God acts solely from the necessity of his nature, i.e., only God is the adequate cause of everything he does. (Jarrett 2015, 62).

. . .of course . . .the idea of a 'free man' is a contrary to fact hypothesis. As Spinoza says in EIVP4D, 'it is impossible that a man should undergo no changes except those of which he is the adequate cause.' However, 'if men *were* born free [*si homines liberi nascerentur*] they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free' (EIVP68). Spinoza is quite explicit that the first clause, the hypothesis, is false. We can only conceive it if we abstract the essence of a person from its context. (Rosenthal 2014, 89).

Spinoza is in a bind about the place of sense perception in the life of a free man. On the one hand, a free man is intelligently self-interested: he does what will in the long run be best for himself, given the prevailing circumstances; and so he must inform himself about how he is situated in the actual world. On the other hand, his freedom—like his reasonableness—consists in his being self-caused. And that requires his not using his senses. (Bennett 1984, 324).

It is important to note that in certain respects rationality and virtue are, within Spinoza's system, unattainable ideals for human beings. Since activity goes along with rationality

> and virtue, to be fully rational and virtuous (or, equivalently, to be such that one has only adequate ideas) one would have to be fully active and not subject to outside influences. But, as Spinoza emphasizes (EIVax and EIVP4) nothing within nature and thus, no human being, is capable of such full activity. Such a status is reserved for the one substance, God . . . (Della Rocca 2004, 127-128)

Although the finer points of these views may vary, I present them here as a composite, as they all seem to me to reflect one basic point: the free man cannot possibly be instantiated, because *human* freedom is impossible. Rather than picking out any possible human being, the free man is a hypothetical (Rosenthal) God-like figure (Jarrett); an individual who is completely self-determined (Garrett), independent of external causes and uninfluenced by external forces (Garrett, Della Rocca), perfectly self-sustaining (Garber), infinite and imperishable (Garber), completely and solely rational (Jarrett), and perhaps even completely void of sense-perception (Bennett).

Proponents of *IR* must hold that freedom is a univocal notion for Spinoza, and that human freedom is therefore the same as divine freedom. As I will argue in a later chapter, I think that freedom is *not* a univocal notion for Spinoza, and that there are actually two distinct notions of freedom at work in the *Ethics*. This fact, in my view, provides sufficient reason to reject *IR,* since it rests on a misinterpretation of Spinoza's view of human freedom. However, I also believe that accepting *IR* leads to a number of unnecessary problems for Spinoza, and that it cannot give us an adequate account of the role of both the free man and the free man *propositions* in Spinoza's moral system. I will argue for both of these claims in the next chapter.

Chapter 3
The Inconsistency Reading

3.1 Introduction

The *Inconsistency Reading,* I have argued in the previous chapter, might be able to make good sense of the tension between EID7 and EIVP4. But it raises a number of other questions concerning the free man and the role that he is meant to play within Spinoza's moral project.

The first is a question about the purpose of the free man propositions, and the purpose of the figure of the free man more generally. Granting the assumption that the free man is an impossible ideal, what kind of role ought we to take this figure to be playing within Spinoza's moral system? Is he, for instance, an ideal that we ought to emulate, or is he merely meant to be a hypothetical characterization of perfect freedom?

We can ask similar questions about the role that the free man *propositions* are meant to play within the *Ethics.* How should we understand the descriptions of the free man's behavior? Are the free man propositions meant to be prescriptive or action-guiding, *for us*? If not, then what purpose do they serve?

The second interpretive issue concerns the specific contents of the free man propositions. According to *IR,* the free man is a God-like, causally isolated figure who is devoid of passions and is never harmed or helped by anything external. But the free man described in the free man propositions is an individual "whose virtue is as great in avoiding dangers as in overcoming them" (EIVP69), who sometimes lives among the ignorant but strives, when he can, to avoid their favors (EIVP70), who is both thankful and useful to other free men (EIVP71) and who lives best in a state (EIVP73). This does not sound like the passionless, contextually isolated

individual that *IR* describes. Can proponents of *IR* account for the incongruity between thee descriptions in a way that remains faithful to the text?

An interpretation of the free man ought to be able to address both his role and the contents of the free man propositions in a way that is both internally and textually consistent. But, as I argue here, when we get further into the details of *IR*, we wind up with a picture of the free man that looks very strange. In this chapter, my goal is to survey some prominent versions of *IR* with these questions in mind. In doing so, I hope to sketch a picture of the free man as he emerges from *IR,* a picture that I will challenge in future chapters.

3.2 Is the Free Man the Model of Human Nature?

I will begin with a discussion of the *role* that the free man is meant to play in the *Ethics*, according to champions of *IR.* Many further identify the free man with "the model of human nature" from the EIV Preface, who Spinoza introduces following an extensive discussion of the role that models play in our process of forming normative judgments. [17]As Spinoza explains there, although normative terms like "good" and "bad" indicate "nothing positive in themselves" and are nothing other than "modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another,"

> . . . still, we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful for us to retain these same

[17] I do not want to suggest here that *IR* is co-extensive with the view that the free man is the model of human nature. Although the views have often gone together in the literature, they need not—it is conceivable that one could hold the view that the free man is the model of human nature and reject *IR*. In this section, the view I am discussing is the conjunction of these two positions—the view that the free man is the model of human nature along with a commitment to *IR.*

> words with the meaning that I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we certainly know is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to the model. (EIV Preface/ GII, 208).

Rather than picking out intrinsic properties of things, evaluative terms such as 'perfect,' 'imperfect,' 'good,' 'evil' etc. are instead judgments that we form upon comparing like particulars. In his speculative history of these concepts, Spinoza explains that the notion of 'perfection' at first applied only to artifacts. As human beings built houses, wove fabrics, and so on, they used these terms in order to indicate whether or not they had completed these projects according to their aims. It was only later that we came to apply these terms to artifacts that we did not make ourselves, depending on the purpose or end we ascribed to their creator:

> . . . if someone sees a work (which I suppose to be not yet completed) and knows that the purpose of the Author of that work is to build a house, he will say that it is imperfect. On the other hand, he will call it perfect as soon as he sees that the work has been carried through to the end its author decided to give it. (EIV Preface/GII, 205).

Eventually, as Spinoza tells it, we came to apply these terms to natural things as well as to man-made artifacts, in spite of the fact that nature has no fixed purposes and does not act for the sake of any end. As we started to form universal ideas by abstracting them from like particulars, we came to call those tokens "perfect" which accorded with our universal ideas of that type, and "imperfect" which agreed less with those ideas. However, since most universal ideas do not track

real essences and depend on the particular disposition of the individual (EIIP40S2), our notions of perfection and imperfection are in some sense fictions, mere modes of imagining.

Spinoza argues further that the evaluative judgments 'good' and 'bad/evil' are also modes of thinking, "*or* notions we form because we compare things to one another" (EIV Preface/GII, 208). As they are frequently employed, they do not track positive or intrinsic features of things, but are instead terms that we assign to individuals relative to our own ends and desires. A sandwich, for instance, might be good for a person who is hungry, bad for an individual who has just completed the Coney Island Hot Dog eating contest, and indifferent for a chair. Thus, "one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, bad, and also indifferent," depending on our ends (EIV Preface/GII, 208).

It is at this point in the discussion where Spinoza introduces the so-called "model of human nature." To repeat the relevant passage:

> . . .still, we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to retain these same words with the meaning that I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we certainly know is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to the model. (EIV Preface/ GII, 208).

This is a puzzling passage that has been often discussed within the literature. For one thing, it is unclear how far this discussion is meant to extend. Does Spinoza mean to suggest here that *all* universal ideas are inadequate and imaginative, or *only* these ideas as they are commonly

employed? Further, is Spinoza arguing here that *all* normative judgments are relative to our individual ends, making him a relativist about value?

To complicate matters further, Spinoza never again makes explicit reference to the so-called 'model of human nature'. This omission has led some commentators, most notably Jonathan Bennett, to suggest that the model of human nature plays no real role in the project of the *Ethics* at all:

> . . . this passage must be a relic of a time when Spinoza planned to make the concept of a favored model of mankind do some work for him in the body of Part 4 . . . what we have here is a palimpsest, bearing traces of earlier stages of Spinoza's thought. He planned to put 'models' at the center of everything, then changed his mind, but omitted the necessary repairs. (Bennett 1984, 296).

Bennett's uncharitable view, however, is a minority one. Many commentators instead suggest that the 'model of human nature' does re-emerge in the *Ethics*, in the figure of the free man. This is the position held, for instance, by Edwin Curley:

> . . .I take it that Spinoza's view is that we can form a general idea of a kind of person, and that once we have done so, this general idea sorts itself out from the other general ideas of man we might have as being the kind of person we necessarily desire to be. The most general characterization of that kind of person is that he/she possesses a much greater power of action than any other being a human being is capable of becoming . . . but we might equally characterize that person as free (cf. EIVP67-73) or guided by reason. Though there is no explicit talk of models, the whole of Part IV of the *Ethics* is the construction of the ideal of a model human being. And when we are told that cheerfulness is always good and melancholy always evil (EIVP42), or that hate can never be good

> (EIVP45) or that he who lives according to the guidance of reason strives, as far as he can, to repay the other's hate, anger, and disdain toward him with love and nobility (EIVP46) we are being told what kind of person to be, and what things will be useful to us in becoming the kind of person we would necessarily desire to be if only we could form a conception of that kind of person. (Curley 1988, 123).

And also by Steven Smith:

> The *exemplar* clearly serves a normative function, allowing us to judge the quality of our lives and identify the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving that ideal. The idea of human nature . . . is clearly an illusion to the life of the free person developed in the last part of the *Ethics*. (Smith 2003, 135).

In fact, even if they do not make it explicit, most commentators appear to hold the view that the free man is the model of human nature described in the Part IV Preface. [18] And so, the role that the free man plays in the *Ethics,* according to this view, is the role described there. The free man is a standard against which we can measure our own perfection and imperfection, and can also help us in determining whether any given action is 'good' or 'bad'. Insofar as we strive to persevere in our being and increase our *conatus*, we strive to become as much like the free man as possible; actions are 'good' that bring us nearer to this model of the free man.

3.3 Is the model free man an adequate idea, or an inadequate one?

However, more questions can be raised concerning this rough sketch. First, commentators are divided concerning the epistemic status of this model of human nature as an idea. According

[18] For an interesting argument, more charitable than Bennett's, that the free man is *not* the model of human nature, see Kisner 2010.

to one camp, the free man (the model of human nature) must be an inadequate idea, based in the imagination and not in reason. [19]

It might appear that this view follows straightforwardly from *IR.* For if one accepts that the impossibility of *human* freedom according to EID7 renders the idea of a free man incoherent, then it is clear that the idea of a free man cannot be based in reason. [20] Alternately, one might be led to this conclusion on the basis of Spinoza's language in the EIV Preface. If Spinoza means to suggest there that *all* models of natural things are inadequate ideas, then it would follow that the idea of the free man, as a model of human nature, is necessarily inadequate as well. This reading of the Preface is what motivates Jerome Schneewind, for example, to suggest that the idea of the free man must be an inadequate one:

> . . . it is true that good and evil are nothing in themselves, but we cannot help seeing the world in terms of what helps or hinders our self-preservation. And although only God knows completely what might preserve us, we can set up what Spinoza calls an ideal of man that can serve as a model for us, to guide us in our strivings. This model will display the human characteristics most conducive to our self-preservation. Even our ability to imagine such a model is due to one of our defective ways of thinking, which leads us to imagine ideas of perfection. We get ideas of perfection by forming indistinct ideas of classes of vaguely similar things. Seeing everything in terms of our ends, we might imagine that some members of the class are more completely suited for them than others, and therefore better. We call those perfect and condemn those that lack some of their features as imperfect. If we imagine human beings as a class, we can say that its members

[19] Commentators who hold this view include Garrett 1996, Schneewind 1998, Jarrett 2002, Rousset 2004, and Garber 2004.
[20] See, for instance, Garber 2004.

> are more or less perfect according to how close they come to the model. (Schneewind 1997, 218).

Schneewind follows a straightforward reading of the EIV Preface in his description of the free man here. From comparing many instances of human nature, we can come up with a composite idea of what the most powerful and virtuous human being might look like, if he existed. This idea, as an imaginative universal, is relative to our ends (in this case, the end of self-preservation) and not based in reason (EIIP40S2). But it can nevertheless give some content to our normative evaluations, even if this content is not grounded in the thing itself.

Conceiving of this model, even if it is inadequate, might also help us in guiding our everyday actions. Don Garrett, for instance, connects the imaginative ideal of the free man to Spinoza's discussion of practical maxims for living, which also have an imaginative component. These maxims are discussed in EVP10, where Spinoza introduces them as a possible remedy against the power of the affects. This remedy involves memorizing certain practical precepts in order to keep them ready-at-hand when the relevant circumstances arise:

> . . . the best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive of correct principles of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready. For example, we have laid it down as a maxim of life (see EIVP46 and EIVP46S) 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 of reason 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 is we join the

> image of a wrong to the imagination of this maxim, it will always be ready for us (by EIIP18) 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 highest satisfaction of the mind that comes from the right principle of living (by EIVP52) and that men, like all other things, act from the necessity of nature, then the wrong, or Hate arising from it, will occupy a very small part of the imagination, and will be easily overcome. Or if the Anger which usually arises from the greatest wrongs is not so easily overcome, it will still be overcome, though not without some vacillation. And it will be overcome in far less time than if we had not considered these things beforehand in this way. (EVP10S/GII, 287-288).

This passage describes an important component of Spinoza's moral psychology and his therapeutic remedy against the affects. [21] Since we naturally group certain images together (EIIP18/GII, 106), if we can orient our mind so as to group certain principles of self-preservation together with images of scenarios in which these principles might apply, then we will not be caught off guard when faced with difficult choices. The relevant maxim will be in the forefront of our minds.

As Garrett understands this process, the maxims that we should meditate on are the descriptions of the behavior of the free man. If we frequently imagine how this individual *would* act, then we will be better prepared in determining our own actions. [22]

This process is an extremely important element of Spinoza's overall remedy for the passions; I do not want to overlook it here. As I will discuss in greater detail in later chapters,

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[21] For a more detailed exposition of this process, see Steinberg 2014.
[22] However, in Garrett's view, it does not follow from this that we will always act as the free man does—a position that I will discuss later in this chapter.

Spinoza is clear about the fact that only affects can eradicate other affects; as such, the imagination surely has an important role to play in our journey toward blessedness and freedom. But I think we would be misled if our appreciation of this imaginative process led us to the conclusion that the idea of the free man is an inadequate one, and that the only purpose of the free man propositions is to provide us with these imaginative maxims. When it comes down to it, if the free man, as a model of human nature, is an inadequate idea, then there is no reason to privilege this model over any other possible model of the good life. But this cannot be what Spinoza has in mind. Although the imagination has an important role to play in the project of the *Ethics*, the practical maxims described in the above passage, and the free man propositions, must be understood as grounded in objective facts about what is best for the preservation of human nature, not in haphazard abstractions from like particulars.

Although Spinoza appears to suggest in the EIV Preface that *all* universal ideas are inadequate, and that *all* normative judgments are relative, we should resist this reading. For Spinoza's discussion in the Preface is limited to a specific class of universals and normative judgments specifically, those concepts as they are ordinarily formed. He does not mean to suggest that there is no room for adequate universal ideas or for non-relative evaluative judgments; he means only to suggest that these ideas, *as they are normally formed and employed,* are often inadequate.

Let me start with the case of universals. Spinoza appears to treat them with derision both in the EIV Preface and in his extensive discussion of universal ideas at EIIP40S2:

> . . . those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc. have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g. of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining—not entirely, of course, but still to the

> point where the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they agree in, namely, insofar as they affect the body . . . but it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all [NS: men] in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what they body has more often been affected by, and what the Mind imagines or recollects more easily. For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—e.g. that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal. And similarly concerning the others—each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. Hence it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things. (EIIP40S/GII, 121).

It is tempting to read this discussion as a blanket condemnation of all abstractions.[23] But this would be a mistake.[24] For immediately following this discussion Spinoza clarifies that our universal notions admit of three kinds:

> . . . it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions; (I). from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience; (II). From

[23] And indeed, many have read it this way: see for instance Pollock 1880, p. 150-1, Wilson 1996, pp. 114, Matson 1990, pp.87.

[24] For an excellent treatment of Spinoza on universals, which I largely follow here, see Hubner 2015.

> signs, e.g. from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.
>
> (III). Finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, and P40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.

Of these three processes, only the first two produce universal notions that are inadequate. There is room in Spinoza's system for adequate universal ideas, specifically, the common notions.

As Spinoza explains, there are certain things that all bodies have in common in virtue of being bodies (that is, in virtue of being modes of extension); likewise, all minds have certain things in common in virtue of being minds (in virtue of being modes of thought). All extended bodies will have shape, size, and so on, and all minds will share in certain features as well (admittedly, Spinoza does not fill this picture out much). Our ideas of these shared properties are necessarily adequate, since, as modes of extension and of thought, we are able to access these attributes without the influence of external things (EIIP38/GII, 118).

I contend that we can also have an adequate knowledge of our own species essence, for the same reason. In one of his descriptions of the common notions and their source, Spinoza writes:

> I say expressly that the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused [NS: and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, i.e., so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long

> as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions. For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly. (EIIIP29/GII, 114)

As I understand the distinction that Spinoza is drawing here, our notions are inadequate in the same way Spinoza pinpointed in his discussion of defective universals: when they are derived from our random experience of external bodies and the various ways that those bodies act on us. However, when these notions are the product of an internally-determined reflection of the nature of things and their agreements and opposites, they are adequate. In just the same way that we can internally access common properties of extended things by reflecting on our own existence as modes of extension, we can access certain common properties pertaining to human nature by reflecting on our own existence as modes of thought and extension in human form.

While there has been some doubt that Spinoza can make room in his system for species-essences[25], it is clear that Spinoza employs a general conception of human nature throughout the *Ethics*, and many of his central claims would be impossible to understand without allowing for such a conception. Consider, for instance, the following argument that Spinoza gives in EIP8S:

> . . . if, in nature, a certain number of individuals exists, there must be a cause why those individuals, and neither more nor fewer, exist. For example, if twenty men exist in nature (to make the matter clearer, I assume they exist at the same time, and that no others previously existed in nature) it will not be enough (i.e., to give a reason why twenty men exist) to show the cause of *human nature in general;* but it will be necessary in addition to show the cause of why not more and not fewer than twenty exist. For . . . there must

[25] For an overview of the relevant literature, see Hubner 2015.

> necessarily be a cause why each [particular man] exists. But this cause . . . cannot be contained in *human nature itself*, since the *true definition of man* does not involve the number twenty. (EIP8S/GII, 50, emphasis mine).

This argument, which constitutes a crucial step in Spinoza's argument for monism, would not be comprehensible without the presumption of a rationally-based, universal human nature. Similarly, the argument that Spinoza relies on to ground altruistic behavior, the argument from shared natures, depends on the presumption of a non-imaginative (rationally-based) universal human nature:

> . . . insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it cannot be evil (by EIVP30). So it must either be good or indifferent. If the latter is posited, viz., that it is neither good nor evil, then (by A3), nothing will follow from its nature that aids the preservation of our nature i.e., (by hypothesis) that aids the preservation of the nature of the thing itself. But this is absurd . . . hence, insofar as it agrees with our nature, it must be good . . . from this it follows that the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature. (EIVP30D/GII, 230).

Some conceptions of human nature will be inadequate; specifically, those that are formed through the kind of process described in the EIV Preface or in EIIP40S. But there is, I suggest, an adequate idea of human nature. Just as with the common notions, we are able to form this idea if our thoughts are determined by an internal reflection on the common properties that we share with all other human beings, rather than from the random order of experience.

Let us take stock. First, if we consider the idea of the free man to be an inadequate, imaginative idea that is meant to serve as a "model of human nature," then there is no reason to

privilege this model of the good life over any others. But Spinoza is clear that there is something special about this model—that it is, as I will argue, the true depiction of human freedom. Although commentators like Garrett and others have been led to read the model as inadequate due to a misunderstanding of Spinoza's conception of universals, there is, I argue, room in the *Ethics* for a universal idea of human nature that is based in reason.

But there are some readers who subscribe to *IR* but agree that the idea of the free man, as a model of human nature, is nonetheless adequate. Although, according to this reading, the idea of *human* freedom is inconsistent, the idea of the free man is adequate because it is the idea of God or of God's power, expressed in a certain and determinate way.

3.4 The Model Free Man as an Adequate Idea

This position has recently been argued for by Andrew Youpa:

> . . . the idea of a free man . . . is the idea of *conatus*. It is the idea of God's power expressed in a singular thing . . . Man's power is a share of God's power of adequate cognition. Therefore, if we attend only to man's power of adequate cognition, we are thereby conceiving the free man, the free man conceived under the attribute of thought. It is the idea of God's power expressed in a singular thing . . .Man's power is a share of God's power of adequate cognition. Therefore, if we attend only to man's power of adequate cognition, we are thereby conceiving of the free man, the free man conceived under the attribute of thought.

Karolina Hubner defends a similar position, although she gives more content to what it might mean to "attend only to man's power of adequate cognition":

> . . .this is what Spinoza's model of human nature represents, I suggest: a pure reasoner—an ideal being who *is* only qua reasoning—in hypothetical conditions in which external causes are neither needed, nor obstruct one's actions. (Hubner 2014, 138).

Since this model is an adequate idea (specifically, the adequate idea of God's power of thought), it avoids one of the problems that faced the first interpretation we considered: it is not just one imaginative model of the good life among many possible options. Further, this reading has some textual support. In a controversial passage at EIVP68, Spinoza writes:

> If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free . . .I call him free who is led by reason alone. Therefore, he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas, and so has no concept of evil (by P46C). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good . . .*It is evident from P4 that the hypothesis of this proposition is false, and cannot be conceived unless we attend only to human nature, or rather to God, not insofar as he is infinite, but only insofar as he is the cause of man's existence.* (EIVP68/GII, 261).

As this passage is often read, the idea of a *free man* is impossible, since it is impossible for any actually existing human being to have only adequate ideas. We can only conceive of human freedom if we conceive of "*God, not insofar as he is infinite, but only insofar as he is the cause of man's existence."* This passage thus seems to strongly support the view that the idea of the free man is an adequate idea of a certain expression of God's power, and not anything grounded in human nature as it is actually instantiated.

But if this is the case, then we might wonder about the use of this idea as a model for *human nature*. Recall that, if we understand the free man as the model described in the EIV Preface, then we will use this idea to

> . . . understand by good what we certainly know is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more or less perfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to the model. (EIV Preface/GII, 208).

Let us grant the assumption that the adequate idea of the free man, the model of human nature, is the idea of God's power of thinking, or the idea of a "perfect reasoner". Combining this with the EIV Preface, we get a picture where we set this model before ourselves as a standard for normative evaluation. From this, we see that those things that get us closer to perfect reasoning are good—those that bring us further from perfect reasoning are bad. And we are more or less perfect, insofar as we more or less approximate God's power of thinking. This is clearly how Hubner understands the pragmatic use of the model:

> . . .in combination with other adequate, abstract general ideas (for instance, ideas of 'cause' and 'effect' or 'increase' and 'decrease'), the rational general idea of a human being as reasoner allows us to form further general ideas. Among these is the idea of an unhampered exercise of reason, a state in which a pure reasoner self-sufficiently produces all possible adequate general ideas. And this is what Spinoza's model of human nature represents, I suggest: a pure reasoner—an ideal being who *is* only qua reasoning—in hypothetical conditions in which external causes are neither needed, nor obstruct one's actions. The true judgments about the human good that this model enables us to make will represent necessary consequences that different kinds of causal interactions have on the power to reason. Some of these interactions nurture this sort of power; others hinder

> it. Our 'true' and 'abstract' knowledge of human good will consist of such abstract, conditional, and species-relative causal truths. (Hubner 2012, 138).

Though this interpretation gives us a coherent model of human nature, the problem for this reading arises when we attempt to connect it to the actual *contents* of the free man propositions, which do not seem to describe God's power of thinking but instead give us a picture of an embodied and causally connected-individual. Recall that several of the free man propositions describe the free man in social relations with others (EIVP70-73), while others describe the free man in relation to adverse circumstances (EIVP67-69). But this reading requires that the free man, i.e, an ideal reasoner, not be challenged by things external or be causally related to others.

One way around this problem is to think of the free man propositions as a kind of thought experiment, one that shows us the limits of actual human power and agency. The free man propositions describe the kinds of characteristics that will co-vary with our level of freedom[26]. By imagining God's power with respect to human life, we are able to determine which actions we can take to be more or less powerful; and we are also able to grasp the very real limits of our finitude.

The problem with this view is that it entails that the ideal state towards which human beings strive is to be God, or at least, God-like. That is, we strive, according to this view, to be pure reason itself, completely divorced from the passions and from all of the other things that make us human. The "model of human nature we which we may look to" is therefore not recognizably human at all. This is not a state that most of us would actually desire to attain, and it is not, as I will argue, the human good that Spinoza has in mind.

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[26] See, for instance, Garrett 1986, 231.

But if the so-called model of human nature is an adequate idea, and is not the idea of God, then what does this idea amount to? I will address this question in the next chapter.

Chapter 4
A Model of Human Nature Which We May Look To

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we wondered about the role that the figure of the free man is meant to play within Spinoza's system. We saw that many commentators identify the free man with the "model of human nature which we may look to" described in the EIV Preface. I will argue here that this is the correct way of understanding the role that the free man plays within Spinoza's ethics. The figure of the free man offers us a complete picture of human virtue, providing us with a clear image of the perfection we strive to attain and a signpost by which to track our moral progress.

We saw, however, that there are a number of ways of reading the claim that the free man is the model of human nature. Dismissing the uncharitable idea that the model of human nature is merely a product of careless editing, a relic from an earlier draft of the *Ethics* (Bennett 1984, 296) we saw that the free-man-as-model is commonly understood either to be an inadequate or imaginative idea of human nature, or an adequate idea not of human nature but of God. Neither of these solutions appeared satisfactory. If we consider the model of human nature to be an inadequate or imaginative idea, then there is no reason to privilege this model over any other possible model of human nature. The free man becomes one picture of the good life among many. But given Spinoza's singular focus on this figure throughout the text of the *Ethics*, it is clear that this is not what he had in mind. The model is clearly meant to hold some special significance as the *true* model of the human good.

If we follow the second interpretation, and understand the idea of the free man to be an adequate idea either of God or of God's power, then we lose, as one scholar puts it, the ability for

Spinoza's ethics to present us with "an ideal within our reach" (Soyarslan, 12). Since human beings, necessarily a part of nature, can never become God or even God-like, this reading leaves us without an adequate standard by which to guide our actions or track our moral progress. This reading also engenders a common misinterpretation of Spinoza's moral philosophy that still remains prominent in the literature: the view that the highest aim of Spinoza's ethics is to become as God-like as possible by shaking off the very things that make us human, the affects and the ever-present influence of the world of which we are essentially a part. As many continue to interpret the moral project of the *Ethics*, the goal is to become an individual who feels no passions or emotions, even in the face of incalculable loss or great increase. The goal is to become an individual who is entirely disengaged from the societal and political situation in which he lives, who is neither helped nor harmed by his neighbors, countrymen, and friends. On some readings, the goal is as extreme as to become an individual requiring no external supports whatsoever to sustain him, including oxygen, water, and food (Garber 2004).

Not only is this condition unattainable, but it does not present us with a very attractive model of the good life. It ignores the important role, both good and bad, that the emotions play in our moral decision making. It ignores the significant burdens, benefits, and responsibilities that come along with a life shared with others. And it ignores Spinoza's own admonitions: "there is no singular thing in Nature that is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason;" (EIVP35C1); "it is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another" (EIVP45S). Very few of us would opt in for a life devoid of passions,

green plants, and social connection, as contending with and enjoying these things is precisely what makes us human.

It is the prevalence of this misreading that partly explains Spinoza's relatively minor presence in the history of moral thought. But his is not an ethics with nothing to say to us; his moral system provides us with a much richer picture of the good life than this misreading suggests. Far from an ethics of self-sufficiency and isolation, Spinoza's ethics recognizes the important role that the emotions play in our moral lives, and offers counsel on effectively living with others and engaging with external things. It is a deeply human picture of morality, not an ethics of ideals.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate this point by showing that the free man, the model of human nature which we may look to, is an adequate idea of not of God, but of a *perfected human nature*. As such, it is possible (if difficult) for actually existing human beings to attain this perfected status. By showing this, I hope to show that Spinoza's moral philosophy is more than capable of presenting us with "an ideal within our reach."

4.2. Is an Adequate Idea of Human Nature Possible?

As I discussed in chapter 3, many readers argue that the model of human nature must be inadequate due to Spinoza's ambiguous position regarding the cognitive status of universals. He sometimes appears (such as at EIIP40S2) to argue that all universal notions are somehow inadequate and defective, based not in a thing's true nature but on how it arbitrarily affects part of our body. If this is right, and if all ideas of universal notions are inadequate, then the idea of a model of human nature must be inadequate as well. Recall Schneewind:

> . . . although only God knows completely what might preserve us, we can set up what Spinoza calls an ideal of man that can serve as a model for us, to guide us in our strivings. Even our ability to imagine such a model is due to one of our defective ways of thinking, which leads us to imagine ideas of perfection. We get ideas of perfection by forming indistinct ideas of classes of vaguely similar things . . . if we imagine human beings as a class, we can say that its members are more or less perfect according to how close they come to the model. (Schneewind 1997, 218).

However, as I argued earlier, the process described in EIIP40S2, which leads to inadequate ideas of universals, is merely one of the ways of forming universal notions. It is also possible, Spinoza explains, for us to form adequate universal ideas through the use of the common notions. Through recognition of certain properties that all bodies share, we are able to form ideas of their natures that are necessarily adequate (EIIIP38/GII, 118). Since our minds are ideas of our bodies, we are able to access and reflect on these properties without the aid of anything external; it is this fact that allows for these ideas to be adequate, issuing from the agent alone. In the same way, since we are in possession of a human nature, we are able to reflect on the common properties that we share with all other human beings in order to come to a conception of human nature that is an adequate idea.

It is therefore possible to come to an adequate understanding of the model of human nature. Fleshing out this concept will be our task in the next section.

4.3. The Adequate Idea of Human Nature in General

Before we can give content to the conception of a perfected or model human nature, we must first get a handle on what Spinoza has in mind by human nature more generally. As I

argued previously, it is clear that Spinoza relies on and employs such a concept throughout the *Ethics*; the arguments presented at EIP8S, EIIP10, and EIVP29, for instance, require an adequate conception of human nature in order to work. In addition to these passages, Spinoza frequently refers to human nature as co-extensive with *conatus*, or with the striving of an individual to persevere in their being. Take, for instance, EIIIP56S;

> . . .Desire is the very essence, *or* nature, of each [man], insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something.

Our power, or our *conatus,* is what underlies all of our doings, whether passive or active. We strive to avoid those things that decrease it. This is an essential part of our nature; we cannot exist without this striving. This connection is also evident at Definition of the Affects I:

> . . . I did not wish to explain Desire by appetite, but was anxious to so define it in that I would comprehend together *all of the strivings of human nature* that we signify by the name of appetite, will, desire, or impulse.

And at EIIIP7 and its demonstration:

> . . . the power of each thing, *or* the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—i.e, by (EIIIP6), the power, *or* striving, by which is strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, *or* actual essence of the thing itself, q.e.d.

We see from these passages that an essential element of human nature in general is human power or *conatus*. However, identifying human nature exclusively with *conatus* does not do much to individuate the concept of *human nature* from the nature of all other things, as *all things* possess *conatus*: "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (EIIIP6).

It is worth exploring Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine in further detail here. Introduced in EIIIP6, the argument for this position is found in the demonstration that immediately follows the proposition:

> . . . for singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by EIP25C), that is, (by EIP34) things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, *or* which takes its existence away (by EIIIP4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by EIIIP5).
>
> Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d.

Spinoza sees the *conatus* doctrine as following directly from the conjunction of two claims: first, that each thing, as an affection or mode of one of God's attributes, is nothing other than a finite expression of God's power and activity, and second, that nothing can contain within itself a principle of its own destruction. The first claim, that singular things are "nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way" (EIP25C) is one of Spinoza's basic metaphysical commitments. Particular things, on his view, are not individual substances, but are instead finite and determinate expressions of the infinite power and activity of God.

The second claim, that things cannot contain (as part of their essence) a principle of their own destruction, is established in the two propositions that precede EIIIP6. In EIIIP4, Spinoza argues that no thing can be destroyed, except through an external cause. This claim—which Spinoza appears to take to be self-evident, citing no previous elements of the *Ethics* in its

defense—is extended at EIIIP5, where Spinoza insists that things of a contrary nature, which are therefore capable of destroying each other, cannot exist in the same subject.[27]

Putting these two claims together yields the following argument: insofar as each thing is just a finite parcel of God's activity, and since each thing cannot contain a principle of its own destruction within itself, each thing will continue to express God's power and activity until it is destroyed by an external cause. Otherwise stated, what Spinoza is saying here is that each thing will continue to do whatever is necessary to maintain its existence until it is impeded by something external. This, for him, is equivalent to the claim that "each thing, insofar as it can, strives to persevere in its being." [28]

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[27] The logic that supports EIIIP4 and 5 has long puzzled Spinoza scholars. Spinoza seems to be arguing something like this: if a thing were capable of destroying itself, then it would have to contain within itself some principle necessitating its destruction. But since the essence of a thing also affirms that thing's existence (this is stated in the demonstration to EIIIp4), this would require that a thing's essence contain *both* an affirmation of that thing's existence and a principle of its destruction. And this, Spinoza argues, is absurd, for if this were the case, then the essence of a thing would be contradictory, simultaneously affirming and denying the existence of the subject. So, it follows that things can only be destroyed through an external cause. This inference is, of course, problematic. As Bennett notes, Spinoza here seems to fail to consider the possibility that these principles—that is, contrary principles of existence and destruction—might somehow be time-stamped so as to avoid contradiction. As he argues, "from (Fx and Gx at T_1) it can follow causally that (Fx and Gx not at T_2)—which is to say that a G thing can cause itself to be non-G later. There is no logical or causal impossibility in this because…time differences turn lethal contradictions into harmless changes. And this harmlessness remains even in the special case where (Fx at T_1) leads causally to a state of affairs at T_2 which precludes x's existing at all" (Bennett, 235). While a full analysis of this argument is outside the scope of this paper, I think that Bennett's objection here is serious. For more on this, see Bennett, ch. 10. Further, Della Rocca 2008 discusses some interesting counterexamples to this principle, and reviews possible Spinozistic responses; see especially 138–145.

[28] Many commentators view the official argument for the *conatus* doctrine as highly problematic. Though a number of objections to it have been proposed in the literature, a particularly troubling problem is this: EIIIP4 and EIIIP5 seem to be negative propositions that are not capable of supporting the positive conclusion of the argument. That is, it does not seem to follow automatically from the fact that a thing cannot be destroyed except through an external cause that a thing *actively* strives to promote its existence; the inference here seems to be too strong. As one scholar puts it (quite colorfully!): "To exclude a cause of destruction is not to provide a cause of fresh phenomena, and secure the development of a determinate history; and it is nothing less than

This striving for perseverance is nothing other than the essence of each singular thing, and can serve as a principle of individuation:

> . . . from the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by EIP36), and things are able to produce nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature (by EIP29). So the power of each thing, *or* the striving by which is (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—that is, (by EIIIP6), the power, *or* striving, by which is strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, actual essence of the thing itself, q.e.d. (EIIIP7D, GII, 146).

That is, what makes me a distinct object, separate from the chair with which I may temporarily be united, is my striving to preserve *this* particular organization of parts, *this* particular ratio of motion and rest.

From this, it is obvious that *conatus* must be essential to human nature. But Spinoza intends for the *conatus* doctrine to apply to all things, and not just human beings. This should not be surprising, given Spinoza's radical naturalism. Recall that Spinoza seeks an ethical framework that does not treat human beings as though they were "a kingdom within a kingdom," exempt from the laws that govern the rest of the natural universe. Instead, human behavior is to be explained through the same principles that necessarily govern all things—specifically, each individual's drive for self-preservation.

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this that Spinoza lays upon the shoulders of his *conatus*, when he plants it and sets it to work in our human nature. It is not content with offering a dead-weight against non-existence: it keeps at a distance whatever would reduce, and selects and appropriates whatever may increase, the scope of the nature to which it guards" (Martineau, quoted in Delahunty, 222). This objection is particularly potent, for, as we will see in a minute, Spinoza often describes *conatus* as a striving for *increase* in power of existence, and not simply inert survival. For more on this, see Della Rocca ch. 4, Delahunty 220–226, and Allison 124–131. For a defense of this argument, see Garrett 2002.

That being said, Spinoza does offer a further account of how the *conatus* doctrine applies specifically to human beings. When *conatus* is related to the mind, it is expressed through the will; related to the mind and the body together, it is expressed through our appetites. We strive to preserve our being both consciously and unconsciously; when this striving is conscious, it is called desire.

For Spinoza, the only difference between appetite and desire is that we are necessarily conscious of our desires. However, both our appetites and our desires ultimately aim at the same thing, the preservation of our being. We are always, essentially, motivated by self-interest. Spinoza's picture of human motivation is therefore thoroughly egoistic: he believes that the *only thing* that can motivate us to act is whatever we believe will further our striving.

Conatus, while essential to human nature, cannot give us a complete picture of human nature, since it is shared with all other things. This conception is given more content when we consider our striving alongside our affective nature. In addition to identifying human nature with *conatus*, Spinoza also describes human nature through the lens of our affects, as, for instance, at EIIIP56S (to continue a passage quoted above):

> . . . Desire is the very essence, *or* nature, of each [man] as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something . . . Therefore, as each [man] is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc. . . .—i.e. as each has his nature constituted in one way or the other, so his Desires vary and the nature of one Desire must differ from the nature of the other as much as the affects from which each arises differ from one another.

Although Desire, striving or *conatus* constitutes a large part of our essence, the contents of these desires will vary according to the way that things affect us and the various passions and emotions

we possess. This interplay between striving and desire accounts for our individual natures. Depending on the experiences we have and the objects and individuals that we interact with, we will tend to respond in certain ways or to possess certain passions. These responses will affect the kinds of things we strive towards or against.

Spinoza's theory of the affects, or the emotions, is entirely dependent on the *conatus* doctrine. The affects are the increases or decreases we experience in our power of acting (our *conatus*). When our striving is frustrated, we experience a decrease in our power, or a "sad affect." Conversely, when we experience an increase in our power of acting, we experience a joyful affect. Crucially, for Spinoza the affects are neither the cause nor the result of these increases or decreases in our power of acting: a joyful affect just *is* the increase in our power, just as a sad affect *is* its decrease.

The affects have two possible sources: they can be generated internally, arising from within the agent, or they can come from without, as a result of the way that an agent is acted on by external things. If an affect is internally caused (that is, if it can be explained solely through the nature of the individual whose power is increased or decreased), then it is an *active* affect. If, on the other hand, the affect has a complete or partial cause in something external, it is a *passion.*

It follows that the joyful affects, or the increases in our power of acting, can have either an external or internal source, but that the sad affects can only arise from without. The explanation this is fairly straightforward given what has been said already. Since our individual essence cannot contain within it any principle of its own destruction, and since our individual essence just is our striving for self-preservation, we cannot bring about, without the influence of external causes, anything that frustrates this goal.

Combining Spinoza's theory of the affects with the *conatus* doctrine gives us a complete picture of human motivation. Since joy represents an increase in our power of acting (and sadness a decrease), we are naturally and necessarily motivated to do whatever we can to increase our level of joy, and to avoid those things that cause us sadness. With this principle, Spinoza is able to account for a wide range of human behavior: our aversion to tasks that we believe will be unpleasant; our desire to be in close proximity to those we love; our disgust at spoiled food, our fears of heights, spiders, and airplane travel; our desire for the esteem of others, and so on. Indeed, Spinoza argues, human motivation can *only* be understood in this way: there is nothing that can motivate us to do anything other than our desire for an increase in our power (our desire for joy) and our desire to avoid a decrease in our power (a desire to avoid sadness).

Returning to our discussion of human nature in general, we can see that although individual natures will vary according to circumstance, there are general ways that human beings, because of their shared constitution—the general makeup of the human body and nature of the human mind— will tend to act and be acted on. Many of Spinoza's references to "human nature" throughout the *Ethics* involve descriptions of general psychological and emotional tendencies that human beings tend to share. We see this, for instance, at EIIIP32S:

> . . . for the most part human nature is so constituted that men pity the unfortunate and envy the fortunate and (by EIIIP32) [envy] them with greater hate the more they love the thing that they imagine the other to possess. We see, then, that from the same property of human nature from which it follows that men are compassionate, it follows that these same men are envious and ambitious.

And at Definition of the Affects 29 Exp:

> . . . these affects—humility and despondency—are very rare. For human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can . . . So those who are believed to be most despondent and humble are usually those who are the most ambitious and envious.

And at EIVP4:

> . . . for example, we have shown that human nature is so constituted that each of us wants the others to live according to his temperament. And indeed, in a man who is not led by reason this appetite is a passion called Ambition, which does not differ much from Pride. On the other hand, in a man who lives according to the dictate of reason it is the action, *or* virtue, called morality.

The *Ethics* is filled with similarly broad descriptions of human psychology; in fact, the entirety of Part III is devoted to cataloging the emotions and explaining their general influence on our behavior. Some of the affects are helpful to us in our striving; others are ultimately destructive. We sometimes struggle to tell the difference. But we can see from this discussion what human nature in general amounts to for Spinoza: the striving to persevere in our particular form of human being, with and against the affects. Just as it is essential to our nature to strive to increase our human power of acting and existing, so it is essential to our nature to be affected in certain ways and, in turn, to affect others.

4.4. *The Model of Human Nature We May Look To*

Having established Spinoza's conception of human nature in general, we are now in a position to investigate what the model of human nature, or a perfected human nature, might look like. As we have just seen, to be human is to strive to persevere in one's being, both in spite of

and with the help of the affects. This picture has important ethical consequences. Things are "good" that assist us in our striving for preservation, and "bad" if they impede this striving. Since we automatically (whether consciously or not) desire those things that bring about an increase in our power of striving or activity, it follows that "we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, desire it" (EIIIP9S).

Of course, this does not entail that it cannot be the case that some of the things that bring us joy, and so some of the things that we desire, are ultimately harmful to us. It is possible, for instance, to imprudently privilege a temporary increase in power over a longer-lasting one, and therefore to make a decision that does not ultimately benefit us all things considered. I might believe, for instance, that reaching for a second or third glass of wine will increase my power, as the temporary burst of joy that the wine brings me is more immediate than the reality of the next day's hangover (a certain and definitive decrease in my power of acting). Although the wine is still good for me, in some sense (I will never choose a course of action that does not lead to *any* increase in my power of acting), it is not *as* good as water would have been. We make these kinds of mistakes all the time, when our limited perspective and the power of certain affects lead us to trade a greater joy for a lesser one.

Spinoza offers numerous psychological explanations for this kind of mistake, but it ultimately comes down to this. We strive to preserve our being both insofar as we have adequate ideas, and insofar as we have inadequate ones (EIIIP9). As we saw in previous chapters, inadequate ideas are those that reflect how things act on us, rather than issuing from our true natures. So long as we use inadequate ideas to guide our striving, we are more likely to get it wrong, to be swayed by the powerful pull of something external away from our true good.

This brings us back to the model of human nature from the EIV Preface who, I contend, is the same figure as the free man. To repeat the relevant passage:

> . . . As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, bad, and also indifferent. For example, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad for to one who is deaf. *But though this is so, still, we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning that I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model.* But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.

Although we have seen most of this text before, it is now possible to put this passage into greater context. Given what we have said above, in one way it does not make sense to talk about an absolute and objective "good" or "bad" for Spinoza. These terms simply correspond to increases

or decreases in our power of acting and the things that cause them, and these might be different for different people in different circumstances. However, there is a model of the good life that represents our highest power of acting, our perfected human nature. We can use this model as a necessary signpost when assessing our own actions and as a goal to strive to attain, as well as the goodness (and badness) of things. This model is the free man.

4.5. *The Free Man: A Perfected Human Nature*

> Before offering my account of the free man, I want to flag a portion of the text above:
>
> . . . but the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, *or* form, to another. *For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect*. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.

Recall that, according to one reading of Spinoza, the model of human nature (that is, the free man) is the adequate idea of God, or of God's power of acting. Although I previously offered independent arguments against this view, this passage seems to confirm that this is not the right way of understanding this model. For to be God is not to be human, and *a horse is destroyed as much it it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect.* We saw above that human nature involves the striving to persevere in one's being, alongside the affects. The model of human nature must be an expression of this nature and not of another, even if that other nature is ultimately more perfect.

Fortunately, Spinoza provides us with numerous descriptions of exactly this individual: the free man, the wise man, or the man guided by reason. This individual has a number of key

characteristics. Primarily, he is guided, in his striving to increase his power and preserve his being, by adequate ideas, that is, by ideas that issue from his own nature, and not from the nature of things outside of him: “I call him free who is led by reason alone” (EIVP68).

As we saw before, this is often taken to mean that the free man *has* no inadequate ideas, and is never acted on from without. This makes the free man an impossible figure (“it is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” {EIVP4}) and also seems to conflict with what I have said above, when I argued that the free man, as a model of human nature, must be an expression of human nature itself, which is necessarily acted on and affected.

The key to this puzzle, as Steven Nadler has pointed out, is in understanding that while the free man may possess inadequate ideas, they are not action-guiding for him (Nadler, 2015). It is worth fleshing this out a little. First, recall that what primarily distinguished adequate ideas from inadequate ones was not the content of the idea, but the method of their justification. This entails that any idea which is inadequate can be transformed into an adequate one. It follows further that our passions, or the emotions which arise from our being affected by external things, can be transformed into adequate ideas and therefore into active affects. Spinoza says as much at EVP3 and its demonstration and corollary:

> *. . .an affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it* . . . an action which is a passion is a confused idea . . . Therefore, if we should form a clear and distinct idea of the affect, this idea will only be distinguished by reason from the affect itself, insofar as it is related only to the Mind. Therefore, the affect

> will cease to be a passion, q.e.d. The more an affect is known to us, then, the more it is in our power, and the less the Mind is acted on by it.

The more that an individual increases his knowledge of God, of the affects, and of the necessary connections that hold between all things, the less that he is under the sway of the passions. Spinoza describes this, in the above passage, as a process of separating the passion from the idea. As we examine our passions, we are able to separate their affective component from their actual content. This will allow us to see the idea in a new light, such that we are no longer negatively affected by it. Although Spinoza does not always describe this process clearly, the descriptions he does give are reminiscent of modern-day therapeutic practices such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or EMDR. The goal is to carefully examine an idea until we are able to understand it and interact with it through reason's affective component, which in turn will increase our power, rather than diminishing it.

This explains why Spinoza often describes the greatest striving of the mind as a striving to increase our understanding, or knowledge of God (EVP25). As he suggests elsewhere,

> . . . in life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason. In this one thing consists man's highest happiness, *or* blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of the mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God. But perfecting the intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature. So the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., by his highest Desire, *by which he strives to moderate all the others*, is that by which he strives to conceive adequately both himself and all things that can fall under his understanding. (EIVAPPIV, emphasis mine).

As the free man increases his understanding, he increases his ability to control the affects and moderate their power over him. It follows that man's true blessedness is to maximize his understanding and gain complete control over the affects. It is in this way that he acts solely on the basis of adequate ideas and their affective power (despite being a part of nature) and never allows things external to him to determine his actions.

This reading can help to shed light on a rather bizarre passage, EIVP68 and its demonstration and scholium, which is often called upon in defense of the *Ideal Reading.* There, Spinoza writes:

> *If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free.* . . I call him free who is led by reason alone. Therefore, he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas, and so has no concept of evil (by P46C). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good, q.e.d. . . It is evident from P4 that the hypothesis of this proposition is false, and cannot be conceived unless we attend only to human nature, *or* rather to God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar only as he is the cause of man's existence. This, and the other things I have now demonstrated seem to have bee indicated by Moses in that story of the first man. For in it the only power of God conceived is that by which he created man, i.e., the power by which he consulted only man's advantage. And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he ate of it, he immediately feared death, rather than desiring to live; and then, that the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing in nature more useful to hum than she was; but that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself; he immediately began to imitate the affects (see EIIIP27) and to lose his

> freedom; and that afterwards this freedom was recovered by the Patriarchs, guided by the Spirit of Christ, i.e., by the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for men the good he desires for himself (as we have demonstrated above, by P37).

As this passage is often read, what Spinoza is arguing here is that it is impossible for a man to have only adequate ideas ("it is evident from P4 that the hypothesis of this proposition is false,") which is supposed to entail that the free man is an impossible figure. In light of what we have said above, however, it is possible to read this passage as much more nuanced. Since "good" and "bad" relate to our affects, an individual who had never lived in the world or been affected by external things would naturally have no conception of them. However, there is no such individual; we are all subject to the passions. Spinoza's re-telling of the Adam and Eve story here, however, makes it clear that freedom is still possible for such individuals: "and . . . afterwards his freedom was recovered by the Patriarchs, guided by the spirit of Christ, i.e., *by the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for himself*". Freedom is still possible for an individual who experiences the affects if he is able, through increasing his knowledge of God, to learn to moderate them and turn them into active affects such that they no longer negatively control his actions.

It does not follow from this, however, that the ultimate goal of the *Ethics* is to eradicate the passions entirely, and to reach the emotionless state that I suggested above was so unpalatable. The free man, as the ultimate expression of human nature, can never be without passions, and will continue to experience deep grief, great joy, and the myriad other emotions that come along with being an embodied being necessarily connected to things outside of him. The difference between the free man and the ordinary man, then, is not that he does not

experience these intense emotions but that he does not allow them to take control. Through his understanding and the rational process of turning passive affects into active ones, is able to feel these emotions but act on them productively.

In addition, the free man, through his knowledge of the affects, is able to skilfully use things outside of him in order to increase his power of acting. Recall: "it is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another" (EIVP45S). And, as I will argue in the next chapter, this knowledge of the affects and their moderation will also allow the free man to skillfully manage the affects of those around him, both in his effort to increase their understanding and to increase their harms.

This, then, is the free man that emerges from the *Ethics*. He is a model of a perfected human nature, which, as *human* nature, strives to preserve his being but always does so as an affected being, who is necessarily a part of nature. Although he cannot eradicate his passions, he is able, through an increase in his understanding, to control them and to use them to his advantage.

I suggested in an earlier chapter that the notion of freedom, for Spinoza, is not univocal. We are now in a position to see the difference between human and divine freedom. God is free in the sense that he is not compelled by anything external, precisely because there is nothing external to God. But human beings can be free in spite of, and because of, their necessary connection to all other things.

However, a difficulty for my reading still remains. It is one thing to say that the free man is able to moderate his passions such that they no longer control his actions. It is another thing,

however, to say that a free man could have complete control over the material circumstances in which he lives, such that he can always direct his actions through adequate ideas. How might a free man act in response to political tyranny, scarcity of resources, or the burdens placed on him by passionate individuals? I will address this question in the next chapter, through an analysis of EIVP72, where Spinoza addresses these issues directly.

Chapter 5

Spinoza on Deception: A Problem for the Non-Ideal View?

5.1. Introduction

In previous chapters, I have argued that in order to make sense of Spinoza's ethics, we must conceive of the free man not as an ideal figure but as a fully realizable, socially-embedded being. However, a significant challenge for this interpretation still remains.

Even if we can make sense of the *freedom* of the free man in light of Spinoza's determinism, many of Spinoza's descriptions of the free man's behavior and way of life seem to be at odds with his ethics of self-preservation. As we have seen, the free man is the individual who is most effective at preserving his being on the basis of reason. He always acts on the basis of his understanding of what is really good for him, rather than being led about blindly by his passionate nature. This successful striving for self-preservation constitutes the free man's essential nature, and is the sole foundation of virtue that is built into Spinoza's moral system. The free man is virtuous *only* to the extent that he effectively preserves his being according to the guidance of reason.

However, some of the behaviors attributed to the free man in Book IV appear to be contrary to this aim. The most vivid instance of this is Spinoza's insistence at EIVP72 that the free man "always acts honestly, not deceptively." This passage, with its Kantian echoes, has puzzled many readers. As numerous real-world examples show, there are clearly some instances in which deceptive means might be useful or even necessary for self preservation. And so we are left with the impression that Spinoza is either confused or helping himself to suppressed

normative principles to which he is not entitled. Surely, honesty and self-preservation are not *universally* consistent.

This issue points to a greater problem that remains for the reading of Spinoza's ethics I have advanced so far. It is all well and good to cultivate one's stock of adequate ideas, and to work hard to turn passive affects into active ones. But we cannot forget the fact that we live in non-ideal conditions, surrounded by occasionally bad actors and in competition for limited resources. It seems as though there must be some times in which adequate ideas alone will not do; the free man will necessarily be inhibited in his striving by external conditions.

The standard solution to this puzzle in the literature is to accept the ideal reading and deny that the free man can ever actually be instantiated in the real world. Since the free man does not correspond to any possible person, we do not have to think of him in all too human terms. He will never find himself confronted by any of the messy real-world circumstances that might necessitate deceptive actions, and so will never be forced to lie to save his life. Many readers have extended this claim further, suggesting that since it is impossible for us to ever become the free man, we should not read Spinoza's claim in EIVP72—or in any of the other free man passages, for that matter—as providing behavioral advice for us mere mortals.[29] That is, the actions that would be good for the person striving to become *like* the free man might be importantly different from the actions of the actual free man. The tension between Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation and his insistence on universal honesty is therefore apparently dissolved.

I have already argued that we ought to reject ideal readings of the free man. I will not re-hash that argument here. But I do want to point out that, in the case of the lying proposition (as

[29] See Garrett 1986, 231.

well as in the case of the other propositions which describe the free man's behavior and way of life) the ideal reading strips Spinoza's moral system of much of its luster. If the free man is an impossible ideal who would never actually face a real dilemma between honestly and self-preservation, this passage becomes nearly trivial. Since the problem can only be dissolved if the free man is not viewed as a model for actual human behavior, Spinoza appears not to be able to offer much useful moral guidance for real human beings who happen to find themselves in imperfect circumstances.

Further, as I have already suggested, the ideal reading places too much of an emphasis on the free man's isolation, raising doubts about Spinoza's ability to tell an adequate ethical story about a life shared with others. But, as we have seen, shared communities are at the heart of Spinoza's ethics—a fact which ideal readings of the free man cannot account for.

In light of this, we cannot rely on the ideal reading to get us out of the puzzle posed by EIVP72. But once this strategy is rejected, the task of devising an interpretation of the lying passage that is consistent with Spinoza's philosophy at large becomes even more daunting. How is it possible that the free man, a real human being striving to preserve his being in a richly complex world, would never tell a lie?

In this chapter, I argue that Spinoza's view on the morality of deception is not inconsistent with his ethics of self-preservation, and is in fact much more nuanced than it initially appears. Although EIVP72, taken alone, appears to express a moral principle that can never admit of exceptions, to conceive of Spinoza's position here as unyielding to circumstance risks rendering Spinoza's ethics incoherent, and threatens to obscure Spinoza's rich and varied philosophy of social life. Like all of the propositions in the *Ethics,* EIVP72 does not come out of a vacuum but is inextricably linked with all of the propositions that precede it, a fact that

commentators tend to ignore when they focus on it in isolation. Rather than relying exclusively on a surface reading of EIVP72 to settle the question of Spinoza's position on deceit, we should look more closely at the arguments on which it depends—arguments, incidentally, which all highlight the close connection between the perfection of our rational nature (i.e., our virtue) and social life—to develop Spinoza's philosophy of deception more fully. This will help us to see how the free man—a perfected version of human nature—can maintain his virtue (his striving towards self-preservation) in an imperfect world.

Once we shift our attention to the arguments upon which EIVP72 depends, we will find that Spinoza draws a distinction between "bad" kinds of deceit (*dolus malus)* and "good" kinds of deceit (*dolus bonus*). According to his view, deception is good (*dolus bonus*) if it serves to promote the harmony of a rational community and the perfection of its members, and bad *(dolus malus*) if it undermines these goals. Thus, EIVP72 affirms, rather than conflicts with, the social picture of the free man we have developed so far.

5.2. EIVP72D: Deception and the Dictates of Reason

I begin by considering the demonstration to EIVP72 and the scholium that accompanies it, which commentators have pointed to as containing Spinoza's "official" argument for the categorical immorality of deception. Puzzlingly, Spinoza here seems to anticipate the very problem that this proposition poses for his account of the free man:

> . . . If a man, insofar as he is free, did anything by deception, he would do it from the dictate of reason (for so far only do we call him free). And so it would be a virtue to act deceptively (by EIVP24) and hence (by the same proposition), everyone would be better advised to act deceptively to preserve his being. That is (as is known through itself), men

> would be better advised to agree only in words, and be contrary to one another in fact. But this is absurd (by EIVP31C) Therefore, a free man and so on, q.e.d.
>
> Scholium. Suppose someone now asks: what if a man could save himself from the present danger of death by treachery? Would not the principle of preserving his own being recommend, without qualification, that he be treacherous? The reply to this is the same. If reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men should make agreements to join forces and to have common laws only by deception—that is, that they really should have no common laws. This is absurd. (EIVP72D, GII, 264).

The argument here initially appears to proceed something like this: commands of reason are universal. They cannot admit of exception or be adjusted according to particular circumstances. The free man is the individual who always acts according to the guidance of reason, and acting to preserve oneself according to the guidance of reason is identical to acting virtuously.[30] Therefore, if the free man ever acted deceptively in service of self-preservation, deceptive actions would be both a command of reason and a virtue. But deceptive actions, as Kant will argue later, undermine both themselves and a society based on contracts. Given the myriad of benefits that living in an organized state confers on individuals[31], this would have the absurd result of reason recommending something *disadvantageous* for survival. Deceptive actions can

[30] Spinoza justifies this assertion with reference to an earlier proposition: "acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage" (EIVp24/GII, 226).

[31] Spinoza frequently argues that organized society is essential for individual freedom, see, for example EIVp73d/GII, 265.

therefore *never* be recommended by reason, and so the free man, led only by reason, will never act deceptively.

Although this is a natural reading of the argument, there are significant drawbacks to interpreting the demonstration and scholium in this way. First, as is also true in the case of Kant's analogous "murderer at the door" argument, this line of reasoning is not particularly convincing. Second, Spinoza does not appear to be committed to the conception of reason that is implied by this reading of the demonstration. Although his "dictates of reason" are sometimes interpreted as moral rules, there is compelling reason to believe that Spinoza does *not* intend for his dictates of reason to serve as normative principles dictating individual behavior, as reading the passage in the above manner would require.[32] Further, in other passages which describe the behavior of the free man, his rationally-guided actions appear to be much more responsive to nuance and particular circumstance. For instance, although the free man should, in general, strive to avoid the favors of the ignorant, doing so is not always possible, and different kinds of action might be required by reason depending on the circumstances.

Instead, we should focus on the connection between deception and social relations that Spinoza emphasizes in this passage. After all, deception is necessarily a social act, and living with others complicates and expands our moral framework. As Spinoza points out in the demonstration to EIVP72, if deception were a virtue, this would entail that "men would be better advised to agree in words, and be contrary to one another in fact," an absurd recommendation. In light of this, one strategy we might pursue is to develop an argument for the conclusion that living in community with others is *always* beneficial to our self-preservation, and further that

[32] Rutherford 2008 provides a persuasive argument that the dictates of reason are not meant to be normative.

deceptive actions *always* undermine these kinds of community relations. If we can establish the truth of these two claims, then we can explain and justify the universal prohibition against lying proposed in EIVP72. However, as we shall see after examining attempts at this strategy in more detail, although Spinoza does believe that living in community with others is always beneficial to our self-preservation, it is *not* the case that deceptive actions always undermine community relations for Spinoza. This approach, while initially plausible, will not work.

5.3. Three arguments concerning self-preservation and community

Spinoza does believe that living in community with others is *always* beneficial to our striving. He insists that "those things which are of assistance to the common society of men, or which bring it about that men live harmoniously, are useful; those, on the other hand, are evil which bring discord to the state" (EIVp40/GII, 241). In Spinoza's view, evil things are those which really do interfere with our self-preservation; on the other hand, things are useful if they are conducive to the preservation of our nature. According to this line of reasoning, living discordantly with others must always interfere with our ability to preserve our own being.

But in order to pursue the strategy outlined above, we must also be able to establish the truth of the second claim, and to explain why deceptive acts threaten our ability to live in peace with others and promote their perfection, *in every case*. At first glance, Spinoza's arguments might seem to suggest that he is aiming at this ambitious conclusion.[33] However, a closer examination of the arguments Spinoza gives in support of his philosophy of social life shows us something surprising: Spinoza's view is that deceptive actions do *not* always interfere with our

[33] For instance, Nadler 2015 takes Spinoza to be committed to this claim.

ability to form stable communities and promote perfection in others, and are in fact sometimes beneficial toward achieving that end. If we look at the arguments Spinoza gives in favor of social organization, we see that these arguments support the claim that certain kinds of lies are in fact permissible, and point to a principled basis for distinguishing good lies from bad ones. It is to these arguments that I now turn.

Spinoza references the first argument for the importance of community to self-preservation, "the argument from shared natures," in the demonstration to EIVP72 itself. There he instructs the reader, curious as to why it might be "absurd" for men to agree only in words and have no common laws, to refer back to the corollary of EIVP31 ("insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good.") The argument given there, a kind of argument from elimination, is difficult to follow, but the basic structure goes something like this: anything that shares our nature must either be harmful, indifferent, or good for us. A thing that shares our nature cannot be indifferent or harmful to us. So, it must be good for us.

We might think that the argument from shared natures generates a neat answer to the question at hand. This is the strategy, for instance, that Nadler pursues: "the problem with lying and other forms of deceptive behaviors is that they bring about differences and division between individuals. If I tell a lie to someone, I put us at odds with respect to our beliefs, attitudes, and values" (Nadler 2016, 265-66)." In other words, other human beings are helpful to me in virtue of sharing a nature with me, but if I act deceptively, I somehow bring it about that our natures diverge. Thus, someone who was once helpful to me is now harmful to me—a very bad result from the perspective of self-preservation.

But in order to fully assess the merits of this suggestion—which will ultimately turn out to be untenable—we need to figure out exactly what Spinoza has in mind when he talks about

two things sharing a nature. We might initially think that Spinoza intends to divide natures into species types, arguing, for instance, that all human beings share a nature in common in virtue of being human beings, just as all hedgehogs share a nature in common in virtue of being hedgehogs.

While there are certainly moments where it sounds like Spinoza intends for "natures" to stand in for a species concept ("the most advantageous thing to a man is that which agrees most closely with his nature, that is (as is self-evident), man" [EIVP35C1/GII, 233]) a closer look at his arguments shows that this cannot be exactly what he had in mind. That other human beings agree with us in species is not sufficient to guarantee that they agree with us in nature, and so is not sufficient to guarantee that they will be automatically helpful to us. The reason this is so is explained by the pernicious influence of the passions on human behavior.

Spinoza argues this point explicitly at EIVP32: "insofar as men are subject to passive emotions, to that extent they cannot be said to agree in nature." Recall that when an individual strives to pursue her being on the basis of adequate ideas, her actions are expressions solely of her own rational nature (shared with all other rational beings) and do not contain traces of external things. Thus, when individuals act to preserve their being on the basis of adequate ideas, they can be said to agree in nature: "man acts absolutely according to the laws of his own nature when he lives under the guidance of reason and only to that extent is he always necessarily in agreement with the nature of another man" (EIVP35c1/GII, 233). On the other hand, the more our behavior is motivated by the passions (or by inadequate ideas), the more passive we are. Instead of being determined by an understanding of our true goods, we are slaves to the external bodies that act on us. Our behavior is more reflective of other bodies than our own. The passionate agent does not clearly and distinctly express her own nature (the same nature she

shares with other rational beings). Therefore, the more inadequate ideas we have, the less we can be said to agree in nature.

Still, we might wonder why being motivated by the passions *guarantees* that we will differ in nature from other human beings. Obviously, a passionate individual will have a distinct nature from the individual who is guided by reason, but why is it not possible for two individuals to share the same passion, and thus the same nature? We might imagine, for instance, as Spinoza does in EIVP34D, two men whose actions are determined by their love of the same woman.[34] Although the lovers in this case might share an object of desire, they cannot be said to share identical passions or natures, for their affective responses differ depending on how the object affects their different parts.

This understanding of what it means to share a nature compels us to qualify the argument from shared natures. Rational natures are shared; passionate natures are distinct. Those who act from the basis of reason are therefore automatically helpful to other rational individuals; on the other hand, those with passionate natures can harm both each other and those with rational natures. Thus, what the argument from shared natures shows is that the ideal state, from the perspective of self-preservation, is a community populated entirely by free men.

Spinoza's position here is supported by ample anecdotal evidence. When we look out into the world, we see that the things that divide people are explained through the passions. Take, for instance, Spinoza's analysis of hate. In Spinoza's view, "hate is a sadness, accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (EIII, Definition of the Affects VII/ GII, 193). When we hate someone, what we really experience is a decrease in our power, tied to an idea of an external thing: "to hate someone is to imagine him as the cause of one's sadness, and so he who hates

[34] This objection is raised by Bennett 1984, 303.

someone will strive to remove or destroy him" (EIIIP39D/GII, 170). Strong affects such as these can lead us to behave injuriously toward others, increasing interpersonal discord and strife. Further, when we are motivated by inadequate ideas, we are likely to be concerned with obtaining the kinds of goods that are unstable and cannot easily be shared. Competition for these goods (things like wealth, honor, fame, political power, and so on) leads to faction and division. Insofar as we are motivated by the passions, we are vulnerable to strife.

The same is not true free men, or individuals whose behavior is guided by understanding of their true good. The free man, whose actions are expressions solely of his own nature (shared with all other rational beings) will necessarily agree in nature with all other free individuals, and so will automatically be benefitted by and benefit them. To begin with, the goods at which the free man aims, understanding and perfection, are non-finite and non-competitive, and so the free man will not be led by competition into divisive clashes with others. But there is also a more positive sense in which free individuals necessarily and automatically benefit one another. Each of us represents only a finite and narrow parcel of God's infinite nature, and though we strive toward knowledge of the whole, we are limited in what we can achieve on or own. Joining forces with others who strive toward knowledge of God broadens our view and increases our power, "for if . . . two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one" (EIVP18s/GII, 221).

It follows that, insofar as we strive to promote our power and understanding, a rational principle of self-preservation would recommend that we work to bring about such a community, if we can. As the free man progresses towards perfection, he comes to strive for the perfection of all those with whom he lives as well as his own; that is, he comes to strive to realize this free

community. This is because, according to Spinoza, a rational person always benefits from helping others become more rational.

Spinoza offers a couple of arguments for this point. One is that promoting perfection in others keeps us on track to pursue it ourselves: "the good which man wants for himself and loves, he will love more constantly if he sees that others love it . . .so he will strive to have the others love the same thing." (EIVP37 Alternate Dem/ GII, 236). Another is that it is simply easier to pursue our own perfection if we do not have to worry about potential harms inflicted on us by others. It is therefore to our benefit that we seek to form social bonds:

> . . .it is impossible for men not to be part of nature and not to follow the common order of nature. But if he lives among individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged. On the other hand if he is among such as do not agree at all with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself. (EIVAppVII/ GII, 268).

If an act of deception brings it about that individuals previously close in nature become more distant, then deception no longer seems to be a rational act. Thus, the argument from shared natures explains why the free man, even in his striving for his own preservation, would never act deceptively. However, this solution is not as simple as it initially appears; for this argument establishes only that the free man ought never to act deceptively in his dealings with *other free men*.[35] Crucially, the conclusion of this argument cannot be extended to the free man's dealings with irrational individuals (who have primarily inadequate ideas).

[35] Therefore, any strategy that attempts to use the argument from shared natures to get Spinoza out of the puzzles generated by EIVp72 is untenable; I particularly have in mind here the line of argument advanced in Nadler 2015.

But why does the argument from shared natures not show that the free man should act honestly in his dealings with everyone? First, recall that the free man and the unfree man do not share an identical nature. Therefore, the unfree man does not necessarily benefit the free man (in the way that other free men do). It follows further that the unfree man is potentially *harmful* to the free man. For insofar as the irrational man is subject to the passions, his actions are often motivated by affects such as paranoia, fear, anger, and excessive love. To the free man, then, the unfree man could possibly represent a significant obstacle to his striving.

Here, we might object that it is precisely because the irrational man is so different (and thus possibly harmful) to us that we ought to be honest in our dealings with him. For, if we engage with him honestly, then we can promote his rationality, and attempt to lessen his share of inadequate ideas. In so doing, we bring his nature closer to ours, as a principle of self-preservation recommends.

The problem with this objection is that there is no reason Spinoza can give to explain why acting honestly, by itself, would ever promote rationality in someone whose ideas are primarily inadequate. By Spinoza's lights, we cannot make someone more like us, and thus more useful to us, through honest actions alone. The reason for this can be found in Spinoza's insistence that truth alone can never remove the presence of an inadequate idea or calm a strong affect: "nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true" (EIVP1/GII, 211). What this entails is that simply telling someone the truth about something will not be enough to counter some inadequate idea that they have. If someone believes, for instance, that the sun is two hundred feet away from the earth, simply telling her the sun's true distance will not, by itself, remove this inadequacy.

The point I want to make can be better understood if we examine it simply in terms of the affects. Just as inadequate ideas cannot be removed simply by the presence of the true,

> . . . so it is, with the other imaginations by which the mind is deceived, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the body, or that its power of acting is increased or diminished: they are not contrary to the true, and do not disappear on its presence. It happens, of course, that we wrongly fear some evil, and the fear disappears upon our hearing news of the truth. But on the other hand, it also happens, when we fear an evil which is certain to come, that the fear vanishes on our hearing false news. So imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of things we imagine. (EIVP1S/GII, 211).

The affects, like inadequate ideas, cannot be countered by truth, but only by stronger and contrary affects. Truth alone is therefore not sufficient to free someone from bondage. It follows that simply being honest with someone who is unfree does not suffice to increase her rationality or to promote her perfection.

To summarize: the argument from shared natures establishes only that *free men* are necessarily useful to one other. It does not support the further claim that the unfree man is useful to the free man (precisely because they do not share an identical nature in common). As such, this argument can only establish that the free man has a self-interested reason not to damage his social relationships with other free men by acting deceptively, for it is only the free man who is automatically useful to the free man.

If acting honestly could promote rationality in the unfree (bringing them closer to us in nature, and thereby making them more useful to us), this would generate a self-interested reason

for honesty in our dealings with them. As we saw above, bringing it about that *more* of the people who surround us are free and useful would always be a good thing; an expanded principle of self-preservation would recommend it in every case. But since inadequate ideas and affects cannot be removed solely by the presence of the true, simply being honest with someone cannot make them more rational. In fact, that the affects require the presence of stronger contrary affects to eradicate them might suggest a prima facie reason why the free man *ought* to be deceptive in some cases, if the promotion of rationality in others is his aim.

To see this more clearly, consider Paul, who has primarily inadequate ideas. Paul is very concerned about how others perceive him. Feeling that he is well liked and respected in his community brings him a great deal of joy, and because of this he strives to increase his popularity even further. Unfortunately, Paul's obsession with his social standing makes him unbearable to be around. Because he is unable to relax in social situations, he is a consistently awkward presence at work functions; his constant paranoia that others are judging him leads him to behave standoffishly; and he continually, much to the annoyance of everyone he knows, seeks assurance that others like and respect him.

It does not seem like telling Paul the truth (that he is clingy and intolerable) will benefit him. In fact, doing so could possibly make his behavior more irrational and irritating, as he will experience sadness, and thus, in Spinoza's terms, undergo an overall decrease in power. After all, Spinoza reminds us that "when the mind imagines its own lack of power, it is saddened by it" (EIIIP55/GII, 182) and that "this sadness is more and more encouraged if we imagine ourselves to be blamed by others" (EIIIP55C/GII, 182) In contrast, falsely assuring Paul that others feel

affection for him might increase his joy, thereby countering the fear of rejection that leads him to behave badly in social situations.[36]

Intuitively, this kind of lie appears to be morally acceptable. Often, something less than perfect honesty seems appropriate in situations where the truth would do more harm than good, and where the lie is of little consequence. In an interesting twist, Spinoza's ethical theory seems particularly well-equipped to accommodate this intuition. Because Paul's overall power of acting would be decreased upon hearing the truth, being deceived appears to be what is *good* (in Spinoza's sense) for Paul in this situation.[37]

A similar case, albeit with higher stakes, comes from the behavioral economist Daniel Ariely. As a teenager, Ariely was involved in a fireworks accident that resulted in severe burns to over seventy percent of his body. As he began his treatment at the hospital, he claims that his doctors deliberately withheld information from him about the severity of his condition:

> All burn patients above 30% are at risk of losing their lives. And nobody told me—nobody told me that. I actually don't think anybody really told me what to expect…I didn't know how long it would be. I didn't know how painful it would be. I didn't understand what burns are. Nobody actually gave me this, you know, really sad view about how the future will evolve from the perspective of the burns.

In addition to concealing information about his long-term prognosis, doctors and nurses also deceived him about the specific details of certain treatments:

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[36] See also EIIIp53/GII, 179 and EIIIp53s/GII, 180.
[37] Spinoza himself seems to agree with this intuition. See e.g. Ep. 15 (Curley, *Collected Works*, 215/GIV, 72-73) and EIVappXXV/GII, 272.

> I remember one surgery. This was a surgery to my right hand. And after this surgery they couldn't put casts on my hand, of course, because it was the skin. You can't put casts on the skin. So instead, what they do is put these metal nails through the bone to hold the fingers. So I kind of had two nails coming from the side of my thumb and a nail coming in each finger throughout the whole finger and…kind of basically lots of needles poking out. And six weeks later, they were going to take off these nails. And I asked the nurse, when are they going to schedule the operating room to take these out? And she said 'Oh, you know, don't worry about it. We're just going to take them out in the department . . . it doesn't hurt at all'. And it turns out, it really hurts . . . And it took a while to take out these—I don't know—15 nails or so. But think about the three weeks I would have had the agony of being afraid. This way, I had the same pain but without the dread that came up with it.[38]

Were the doctors and nurses justified in deceiving Ariely? Intuitively, many of us might think that they were. Arielly himself admits that had he been aware of the severity of his condition at the outset, he might have attempted suicide; being told by the nurse that the procedure would not be painful spared him weeks of intense fear and anxiety. Spinoza can easily accommodate this intuition. Someone in the grip of the intense affects that would likely follow a severe injury is not in the right state of mind to appropriately respond to the truth. In Ariely's case, his doctor's honesty likely would have intensified those passions and decreased his power of acting. Honesty would not increase his rationality but would significantly impair it.

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[38] Ariely, Daniel and Vedantam, Shankar. "Everybody Lies, and That's Not Always a Bad Thing". *Hidden Brain.* Podcast audio, March 27, 2017.

We might worry that this opens the door to a troubling form of paternalism. Although our intentions may be good, perhaps we should still avoid these kinds of "benevolent" lies on the assumption that the agent herself tends to know what is best for her, and outside meddlers are more likely than not to be wrong. Although this is a common argument against this kind of benevolent lie, Spinoza, notably, would not share this concern. Spinoza seems far less troubled by paternalism than many other thinkers. As Matthew Kisner explains, "Spinoza's conception of autonomy is friendlier to paternalism than many accounts because he disagrees with the notion that autonomy consists in doing what we like. For Spinoza, irrational preferences cannot be autonomous, even if they have been chosen without any obvious manipulation or coercion. Consequently, he must accept the possibility that it can promote autonomy to prevent one from acting on her preferences, if her preferences are irrational. In this respect, we can promote the autonomy of others by 'making' them be rational"(Kisner 2011, 61-62).

Still, one might argue, even if honest behavior can never *directly* contribute to an increase in the rationality of others, isn't it possible that behaving honestly plays a secondary role in promoting virtue in irrational individuals? Since our ideas must be affectively powerful (and not just true) in order to motivate us, simply telling someone the truth will not move them closer to freedom. But perhaps there is another way that we could accomplish this goal by always acting honestly, not deceptively.

The "imitation of the affects" argument may be able to assist us here. This argument does not require that individuals share an identical nature in order to be useful to one another. Instead, it depends on the more limited premise that individuals need only be *similar* to one another to be mutually beneficial to each other. And although there are many differences between the free man and the irrational man (owing to the fact that the irrational man's behavior is more an expression

of the nature of other bodies than of his own), he is still similar to the free man in that they are both human beings, endowed with reason and capable of striving for virtue and understanding. In EIIIP27, Spinoza argues that we tend to "imitate" the affects of those we perceive to be similar to us, whether those affects are sad, joyful, or related to desire. "Simply because we imagine that someone loves something, we thereby love the same thing," he explains, and "…from the fact that we imagine someone to be averse to something, we shall be averse to it" (EIIIP31D/GII, 164). That the affects are imitative in this way might provide us with an alternative explanation as to how the rational person could promote virtue in others who are not fully rational.[39] That is, by acting rationally and virtuously, the rational person could provide a model for the irrational to imitate. Unfortunately, however, the imitation of the affects argument cannot provide us with a reason why *acting honestly* would always help to promote rationality in others. For on this view, the rational person promotes rationality in others simply by acting virtuously—that is, by best preserving her virtue and perfection. In order to establish that deception was at odds with this task, we must already assume that honesty is a kind of virtue, and to do so would be to beg the question. Therefore, if deception is required for the free man to preserve his power of activity (in other words, to act virtuously), the argument from the imitation of the affects seems also to require that the free man act deceptively in order to promote rationality in others. So far, none of Spinoza's arguments concerning the connection between self-preservation and social life have shown us why deception might always be inimical to this aim.

We have seen that Spinoza believes that a community made up entirely of free individuals is the ideal state for the free man, from the perspective of self-preservation. Only free

[39] This is the strategy pursued by Della Rocca, "The Imitation of the Affects", 137.

men are *necessarily* and automatically useful to one another. However, this does not entail that there are no benefits to be gained from living cooperatively with passionate individuals. On the contrary, Spinoza asserts that sharing our daily labors with others is essential to our striving for perfection. It seems difficult to make much progress in increasing our knowledge of God if we alone must ward off bears, mill our own grains, weave our own fabrics, and so on. The free man lives better in a state, in part, as we have seen, because cooperation affords us more time and energy to devote to our pursuit of understanding and perfection.

But in order to gain the most benefit from social life in imperfect conditions, the free man must engage with the irrational cautiously. He should promote their rationality when he can, but should also be careful not to incite their passions against him:

> It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships. But skill and alertness are required for this. For men vary—there being few who live according to the guidance of reason—yet generally they are envious, and more inclined to vengeance than to compassion. So it requires a singular power of mind to bear with each one according to his understanding, and to restrain oneself from imitating their affects. (EIVAppXII-XIII/GII, 269).

The "skill and alertness" Spinoza describes in this passage will sometimes include deceit. Some forms of dishonesty and dissimulation (avoiding pointing out the faults of others, observing various norms of etiquette in spite of our true feelings, remaining silent in certain contexts about our most intimate secrets and beliefs) are necessary for a healthy society. If we all went around saying exactly what we were thinking, it is likely that we would quickly irritate, if not completely alienate, those with whom we live.

The *Ethics* is full of such admonitions to tread lightly in our dealings with others. Take, for instance, the proof that accompanies EIVP70, "the free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors":

> For every man judges what is good according to his own way of thinking. Thus the ignorant man who has conferred a favor on someone will value it according to his own way of thinking, and if he sees that the recipient values it less, he will feel pain. Now the free man tries to establish friendship with others and not to repay men with favors that are equivalent in their eyes. Rather he tries to guide himself and others by the free judgment of reason and to do only those things that he himself knows to be of primary importance. Therefore, to avoid both the hatred of the ignorant and the need to comply with their expectations, and so as to make reason his sole ruler, he will endeavor as far as he can to avoid their favors.

However, Spinoza immediately qualifies this point in the accompanying scholium:

> I say "as far as he can" for men, however ignorant, are still men, who in a time of need can bring human help, than which nothing is more valuable. So it often happens that it is necessary to accept a favor from them, and consequently to return it so as to give them satisfaction. Furthermore, we should exercise caution even in avoiding their favors so as to avoid appearing to despise them or be reluctant through avarice to repay them, thus giving offense by the very attempt to escape their hatred. Thus, in avoiding favors one should take account of what is advantageous and honorable.

As this passage shows, a delicate balance must be achieved when dealing with those whose nature is primarily passionate in order to avert their harms. Imagine, for instance, that a friend

buys me a very expensive diamond bracelet to celebrate my birthday. I, a free woman, know that material items are not true goods; it is not my style to give or receive such elaborate gifts. However, my friend, who is motivated primarily by the passions, values the gift according to her own way of thinking, and will be saddened or offended if I do not repay her in kind, or at least, acknowledge the gift with a show of gratitude that I do not feel reflects its true value.

If it were truly the case that the free man "always acts honestly, not deceptively", then I would reject the gift, and perhaps tell my friend that true happiness and fulfillment cannot be found in the acquisition of material objects. But this is not what Spinoza recommends. Instead, he advocates for a more cautious approach. On the one hand, I want to avoid getting into these situations when I can, as constantly finding myself in the situation to repay such debts runs against my rational nature. On the other hand, it is extremely important that I not isolate myself from others, and these situations might sometimes be impossible to avoid. In these cases, I should carefully respond to the favor in recognition of the value placed on it by the one who offers it. Although I know that the true good does not consist in material items, I might overstate the value of a gift or its importance to me in order to avoid offending a friend. This, I argue, is a form of deception, although a kind of deception that Spinoza thinks might be necessary for social life to run smoothly.

Skillful means are required to identify the passions that motivate others, and to determine the proper response to those passions. This skillful engagement with others is an instance of the free man pursuing, on the basis of reason, his true goods. When he responds to the passionate individual in a manner appropriate to ameliorate their specific passions and avert the potential harms that they pose, he acts on the basis of adequate ideas about what really will promote his perfection and the perfection of those with whom he lives. That is, he acts virtuously.

Let us take stock. According to the hypothesis we have been considering, what is wrong with deception is that it undermines our ability to form meaningful social relationships with others, and joining and participating in a stable community is the best strategy to pursue from the perspective of self-preservation. Communal living aids us in promoting our perfection, and further, as we progress morally, we come to strive to promote the perfection of our entire community along with our own. However, when we looked more closely at Spinoza's philosophy of social life, we saw that deception can sometimes promote, rather than impede, our goal of promoting stable communities. It is easier to live with others if we do not offend them; those with unorthodox views can live more peacefully, in many cases, by concealing them in public contexts (consider Spinoza himself: he published the scandalous *TTP* anonymously, and declined to publish his philosophical views during his lifetime). And though it should always be our primary goal to promote rationality in others, and bring it about that more of the people with whom we share our lives are guided by reason, these ends are sometimes better achieved through deceptive means instead of honest ones. Although some lies are harmful, others may be beneficial or even necessary.

5.4. A distinction between kinds of lies: dolus malus and dolus bonus

Although other readers have missed this, Spinoza himself recognizes this point, and the need for communities to draw a distinction between *dolus bonus* (good deceit) and *dolus malus* (bad deceit). In a note to his discussion of deception in the *TTP,* he explains:

> In a civil state, where it is decided by common law what is good or bad, deception is rightly separated into good and bad. But in a state of nature, when everyone is a judge for himself and has the highest right of prescribing and interpreting laws for himself, and

> also even to abolish them insofar as he judges it to be more useful for himself, in the state of nature it is not possible to conceive of someone acting *dolo malo* (out of malicious deception).

In the state of nature, it is impossible to distinguish between good and bad kinds of deception, because there are no community relations that we aim to preserve. However, once we organize into communities, we need to draw a distinction between those kinds of deception that promote our common good and those which undermine it.

Therefore, while EIVP72 is often read as categorically prohibiting all forms of deception, Spinoza's view on the matter is actually far more nuanced. In the Latin text of EIVp72 itself, Spinoza echoes the qualified language found in the *TTP* note: "homo liber nunquam *dolo malo*, sed semper cum fide agit."[40] The free man never acts out of malicious deception. But not all deceptive acts fall under the category of *dolus malus*.

How can we tell the difference between *dolus bonus* (good forms of deception) and *dolus malus* (malicious deceit)? On the basis of what has been said above, we can surmise that deception is good if it serves to promote the harmony of a rational community and/or the perfection of its members, and bad if it undermines these goals. Determining the kinds of lies that fall into each category will not be an easy task. It will take some skill and attention to on the part of the free man to determine which kinds of falsehoods fall into which category under the circumstances at hand. In particular, the free man will need to pay attention to the passions that motivate the individuals with whom he is dealing, in order to determine whether honesty or some form of deception will be the most tactful approach. In the case of socially-anxious Paul, or of

[40] GII, 264, emphasis mine.

the burn victim, the free man might see that deception is the best way to tame these passions and to promote rational perfection in others. In such cases, lies are "good", as they contribute to decreasing the passionate nature of individuals around us, making it more likely that they will be in a position to provide us aid. Although this task will require skill and attention, if the free man acts with faith [*cum fide*], on the basis of adequate knowledge about what will really benefit him and those with whom he lives, he can be said to act virtuously.

5.5. Deception and the Free Man

This chapter began with two worries about EIVP72. First, it seemed that Spinoza's insistence that the free man "always acts honestly, not deceptively" conflicted with the picture of the free man that Spinoza draws in the *Ethics*. If the free man's virtue consists only in his successful, rationally guided striving for his own perfection, why would the free man act honestly if deception turned out to be the best means to this end?

However, we saw that this puzzle only arises if we commit Spinoza to a view about the morality of deception that is too strong. Spinoza is not claiming, categorically, that the free man never acts deceptively, only that he never acts *dolo malo,* that is, in a way that would undermine the stability of his community and the perfection of his neighbors.

This nuanced account of the morality of deception is consistent with Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation. Given that Spinoza holds that living in community with others is the most effective means of preserving our being, it is always in our best interest to preserve these community relations. Although honesty is sometimes the best path toward living harmoniously with others, sometimes community stability can best be achieved through deception. Similarly, we want to bring it about that those with whom we live are as rational as possible, and that they

are not under the sway of passions that could cause them to be harmful to us. Sometimes, dealing honestly with such individuals is the best means of achieving this. But at other times, a more creative approach might be necessary, and this approach might require deception.

We worried, second, that in arguing that deceptive actions can never be virtuous, that Spinoza seemed to be advocating for an implausible moral principle. But instead, we see that Spinoza has given us an account of the morality of deception that is compelling even today. Lies, when told in the interest of community stability or to promote rationality in others, can be virtuous. Pernicious lies are those that undermine the perfection of others or that erode a rational social order.

This standard tracks many of our intuitions about the morality of certain kinds of deceit. On this view, it will be generally impermissible to lie in order to obtain competitive goods (money, social standing, or political power), as doing so will tend to fracture our relationships with others, and will therefore not help us to attain our true good. It is impermissible, generally, to make a lying promise, or to enter into a contract that one has no intention of honoring, for the very same reason. However, lies which serve to ensure the stability of our communities and promote perfection in others, including many forms of white lies and dissimulation, are not only permissible but may in fact be obligatory.

This brings us back to the question that I raised concerning the free man's ability to preserve himself in imperfect circumstances. Will cultivating adequate ideas be enough to help the free man ward off the harms that come to him from without? We are now closer to an answer to this question. Although there may in fact be some circumstances in which the free man is overcome by external things (i.e., there is not much help to be found in adequate ideas if one is hit by a bus; although cultivating adequate ideas might help one to largely avoid this situation),

by paying careful attention to his surroundings, the free man is able to transform even the passions of others into active affects. This requires that he engage fully with the world, not isolate himself from it.

I want to conclude this chapter by reflecting on some important implications that this understanding of EIVP72 has for our understanding of the free man, and the role that this figure plays in Spinoza's ethical project. As I have been arguing throughout this work, readings that take the free man to be an ideal figure, completely divorced from all human circumstance, are at odds with the explicit emphasis that Spinoza places on the importance of social life in promoting our perfection. For Garrett and others who advocate for the ideal reading, the fact of our engagement with the world is evidence of our imperfection. [41] But rather than presenting us with a model of human nature completely divorced from the human condition, Spinoza is arguing in passages like EIVP72 that the possibility of our perfection is intimately bound up with others. This generates an obligation for all of us to work to improve the conditions in which we live, and to promote rationality in others and rational communities as far as we can. Given the turbulent times in which Spinoza lives, it makes perfect sense that he eventually arrived at this conclusion. Given the turbulent times in which we live, the point is well taken today.

[41] In Garrett's view, the fact that the free man might have to act deceptively in order to preserve his life "shows . . . that no actual human being is the ideal free man". He continues: "this consequence is just what we should expect, since the concept of a *completely* free man involves a contradiction. From a thing's being completely free, it follows that it is completely self-determined and utterly independent of external causes; on the other hand, from a thing's being a man, it follows that it is necessarily a part of nature and subject to external causes (Garrett 1990, 230-31).

Conclusion

Spinoza is not generally taken to be an important figure in the history of moral thought. Part of the reason for this omission, I contend, is that his moral philosophy has long been misunderstood as an ethics of ideals. According to the traditional understanding of Spinoza's normative project, engendered by the ideal reading, what we strive toward in striving towards virtue is to become as much like God as possible. According to this view, should isolate ourselves from the world and from others. We should work to ignore, repress, and eventually eradicate, all of our emotions. We should become purely rational beings, disengaged from the very project of being human.

But who among us would choose such a life? Who would choose to give up the passions, joys, and heartbreaks that come along with an ordinary human life? Who would want to live without support from others? And how would such a thing even be possible, given that that these are the very things that make us human?

The ideal reading, I have argued, gives us an ethical system that is at once highly implausible, highly unpalatable, and, in pointing us towards an ideal it is impossible for us to attain, philosophically unsound. But I hope to have shown here that this is not the correct way of understanding Spinoza's ethical project. Spinoza's ethics is in fact incredibly nuanced, and alive to the realities—both good and bad—that accompany a well-lived human life. Far from recommending that we eradicate the emotions, Spinoza offers a rich and complex analysis of them and the role that they play in our ethical lives. Rather than supress the passions, we must study them closely so we can understand how to harness them for our advantage. The perfected model of human nature towards which we strive is an individual who strives to preserve his being, in light of and with help from the affects.

Similarly, while Spinoza is often read as prescribing social isolation in favor of rational retreat, we have seen that the ideal Spinozist agent is deeply engaged with the community in which he lives. He works to form strong communities and promote rationality in those with whom he lives, and he must pay close attention to the nuances and complexities of social situations and to the passions that guide others. The free man *must* be a part of the world in order to thrive.

Once we acknowledge these realities, we can see how much Spinoza's ethics still has to teach us.

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