

Steven B. Smith. *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. xxvi + 230 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10019-8.



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The Paradoxes of Spinoza's *Ethics* and the Ethics of Reading

The central argument of Steven Smith's new book on Spinoza's *Ethics* can be summed up in the following sentence: the *Ethics* is a profoundly moral work, a book about human freedom and moral responsibility. From the geometrical method of the book to Spinoza's conception of reason as the source of consensus and community, Smith reads the *Ethics* as a work in the moral tradition of self-formation; the *Ethics* is thus a work of moral pedagogy alongside Plato's *Republic*, Rousseau's *Emile*, Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Smith is careful to distinguish this type of work from a *moralizing* work; he explicitly states that one does not get a prescription of what is right and what one ought to do in any particular situation. Rather, Smith tries to show that the *Ethics* offers nothing less than an alternative vision of what the moral life entails, what makes it specifically important for the human endeavor, and how we can best achieve it. This book can thus be read as a sequel to Smith's other book on Spinoza, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, where he stressed the decisive political significance of Spinoza's work, and showed Spinoza's funda-

mental political intention, namely "the creation of a new kind of liberal polity with a new kind of liberal citizen."^[1]

In Chapter 1, "Thinking about the *Ethics*," Smith considers the *Ethics* as a type of book, addressing such questions as the intended readers of the book, its geometrical form and deductive method, and the ethical import of the book. Smith sees the *Ethics* as part of a complex whole that constitutes Spinoza's "system." According to Smith, the *Ethics* has two intended readers. Referring to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) of 1670, where Spinoza directs his essay to the "philosophical reader" (*philosophe lector*) and the multitude (*multitudo*), Smith argues that the book is intended for the "prudent reader," and also for the "common people" who falsely accuse him of atheism. Beneath the strict deductive exterior, Smith emphasizes the rhetorical dimension of the *Ethics*, in particular the way in which Spinoza introduces non-deductive and highly charged bits of argument into the book. Utilizing but also taking issue with other scholars such as Harry Wolfson, Efraim Shmueli, and Gilles Deleuze, Smith urges that the geometrical method, far

from being merely Spinoza's adherence to a strict mathematical model for the purpose of establishing the undisputable truth of his system, is actually a powerful form of constructivism.

According to Smith, efforts to read the *Ethics* as pedagogical device and literary form, as a rhetoric or series of rhetorics, have considerable merit. For Smith, an important moral purpose of the geometrical method has been overlooked: "individual self-creation" (p. 19). The geometrical method is the crowning proof of the self-creation of the individual, the paradigm of the individual as "self-constructed" (p. 19). In this, according to Smith, Spinoza was drawing on the constructivist project of Descartes: the method of analytical geometry was valid for Descartes not because it represented a mirror of nature, but because it was fundamentally and essentially human, an act of human self-creation, "a form of self-making," "a purely self-created system" (p. 20).

In Chapter 2, "Thinking about God," Smith argues that Spinoza's identification of God and nature is not purely formal, but rather moral. To inquire as to what something is, we must inquire how it came to be: real knowledge is causal knowledge, "investigation into the causes or principles of things," and Spinoza demonstrates that God as substance is where the causal buck stops (p. 32). In Spinoza's system, there is no human analogue or model. The understanding of substance (Nature, God) can be derived from principles and premises internal to nature itself. "Reason is the understanding of causes" (p. 36). God is not an individual or an "agent" but rather "a system or, more properly, a concatenated set of causal laws" (p. 39). For Smith, this conception of God and the negation of a God of creation as depicted in the Bible have a strong moral implication. The decisive question is: how does this new view of nature and science as causal knowledge of nature—a program Smith believes Spinoza shares with Descartes—affect morality? Or how can we still speak of freedom in a deterministic universe? According to Smith, the whole point of the *Ethics* is to emancipate the reader from the dangerous projective power of the imagination, which is the cause of error, superstitions, prejudices, and fanaticism. Spinoza's naturalization of substance, *Deus sive naturae*, is a shift away from the agency of God to the agency of human beings. Spinoza's critique of teleology within God/Nature only serves to underscore the significance of human agency.

Chapter 3 is about "thinking" and contains an account of the three types of knowledge in Spinoza. Smith criticizes the supposed "parallelism" (a term Leibniz used to

discuss Spinoza's system) and shows the weakness in this way of framing Spinoza's identity of the mind and body—that they are the same and are merely understood or perceived as "thinking" or "extended" depending upon our perspective or interest. The question of the last chapter—how does one reconcile human freedom and the determinism of substance—is posed once again and answered in the sections "Freedom and Determinism" (pp. 72-78) and "Rationality and Human Agency" (pp. 78-86). Here Smith develops the most urgent part of his argument that the *Ethics* is a book about human freedom and moral responsibility. Citing the difficulties with great clarity, he proceeds to show that Spinoza's notion of human freedom and agency is not one of contra-causal freedom, of the unconstrained "will," but rather that our knowledge of the causes of things and our insights into the causal nexus of nature create the condition for the possibility of different responses. There are two different "languages" for speaking of and describing human beings: the language of bodies in motion, and the language of minds with reasons and purposes. We are free not because of a free will, but because we "possess intelligence, the ability to understand a situation and respond intelligently to it" (p. 80). As Smith puts it: "Once we understand the causes of our behavior, we are in a better position to control and even resist" destructive behaviors (p. 85). It is not clear from Smith's argument how the difficulties he raises with regard to Spinoza's conception of human freedom and moral responsibility are to be finally resolved. For if our moral grammar does indeed depend on the notion of choice and the ability to consciously decide in favor of an option less governed by the passions and more in line with reason, as Smith himself agrees, it remains unclear how Spinoza's *Ethics* offers the aperture for the intentional alteration of behavior. To say that knowledge of the causal nexus of nature allows us to act with more rationality only begs the question: if substance is essentially determined in its unfolding, then it is difficult to see how human freedom can emerge in a way our moral discourse of conscious choice and deliberate change requires.

Chapter 4 takes issue with the reading of the *Ethics* as a work of scientific psychology along the lines of Descartes's *Meditations* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and as a purely behavioristic psychology aimed at eliminating the role of freedom, the will, and human choice. This view of the *Ethics* cannot do justice, Smith argues, to the central role of human action, agency, and self-reflection contained in Part III of the *Ethics*. Spinoza's *conatus* is read not merely as a striving, a desire to persevere and

maintain life, mere self-interest and survival, but rather, more importantly, as the struggle to increase and expand our capacities for learning, the enjoyment of life, friendship, and community. On this view, *conatus* is much more akin to the modern notion of *empowerment*. *Conatus* has a *telos* not just of survival but of enhancement, expansion, and the fulfillment of life. Spinoza sees *conatus* as a process of struggle against despondency, humiliation, hate, and envy, “vacillations of the mind” that detract from our ability to experience joy and cheerfulness, to realize friendship and community. Key here are the notions of *fortitudo*, strength of character and tenacity, and *nobilitas* in the sense of generosity, and courage. It is only on the basis of these values or moral precepts that human beings, according to Spinoza, are able to develop and maintain strong collaborative relations, friendship, essential ethical bonds required for social and political life (p. 122).

Part 4 of the *Ethics* marks the shift from moral psychology to political theory, and Chapter 5 of Smith’s book attempts to situate Spinoza’s politics as it is presented in the *Ethics* both within the context of political theory at the time (principally Hobbes and Machiavelli) in preparation for the final ascent to Love (Chapter 6). While they share a conception of natural right, Hobbesian contract creates a “third party,” the sovereign, who is authorized to represent and command the common will of the citizens. The Hobbesian state is in large measure a defensive mechanism to protect the liberty of the individual while insuring the security and the peace. “Freedom” is understood here mainly in the sense of “negative liberty,” freedom from external interference. In Spinoza, by contrast, the “contract,” Smith argues, is utterly different. It authorizes the transfer of authority and right from the individual to the people “in their collective capacity” (p. 125). Smith writes, “[t]he Spinozistic contract is not so much an agreement to transfer our natural rights to a third party for the sake of security, but an exercise in the increase in our powers of rational nature and agency” (p. 141). The *Ethics*, according to Smith, is motivated by a political problem: how are the conflicting interests and desires of people to be adjudicated? If diversity of affect and passion, the projections of imagination and self-interest are essential to human beings, what form of state is both most capable of insuring natural right and guaranteeing that mob rule and anarchy do not destroy the constructive bonds of collaboration and community? Only in a democratic republic do people freely consent to the laws and therefore achieve the goal of being truly self-legislating and moral. The *Ethics* is, according to Smith,

“a democratic manifesto through and through” (p. 150).

If I were to conclude my review here, it would be overwhelmingly positive. Interesting insights into the moral and political significance of Spinoza’s *Ethics* abound, and the argument is sustained with constant reference to the text and the terms of that text. However, in the last chapter, appropriately titled “The Authority of Reason,” Smith tips his hand in favor of a decidedly Straussian reading that, in my view, breaks off the interesting discussion underway, and all of the conflicts and dilemmas about morality and polity in favor of an unambiguous and one-sided authorization of reason. This authorization of reason stands in stark contrast not merely to many of Spinoza’s most prescient insights into human being and society, but many of Smith’s own admissions concerning the difficulties of the text as well.

Smith’s discussion of the *Pantheismusstreit* in Germany (1785-1790) does not add anything substantial to our understanding of that debate. Indeed, Smith’s discussion of it conflates F. H. Jacobi’s position with that of the “Romantics” (Smith never mentions which “Romantics” he is speaking about), throws Jacobi in the same basket as Herder and Hamann (according to Smith, Jacobi was “along with Herder and Hamann” (p.185) the instigator of the debate), and thereby blurs very important historical distinctions and demarcations in German intellectual history. He unites Jacobi and the “Romantics” in their crusade against the principle of sufficient reason. To state, however, that “Jacobi and the Romantics limited reason in order to make room for faith” does not quite grasp the complexity of the discursive situation in Germany in the period 1790-1800 (p. 189).

It is not clear to this reader why Smith made the excursion into the *Pantheismusstreit* at all, except perhaps to set up the opposition between orthodoxy and atheism in a way that prepares the reader for the final Straussian gesture that seeks to reconcile the two opposing sides, albeit in a way that obscures, I think, the real difficulties and dilemmas of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. My own view, and the view of many in the German Studies field, is that Jacobi’s either/or reading of Spinoza in his *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* (1785) does not do justice to the intricacies of Spinoza’s text, fundamentally misses key innovations of his philosophy, and is motivated by concrete historical conservative political and religious interests.[2]

While Smith seeks to “keep alive the tension of conflict between faith and reason” and urges a Straussian openness and attentiveness to the power of each, he actually provides a rationalistic argument based on the eco-

conomic metaphor of mutuality, reciprocity, and reconciliation (p. 199). The difficulties of Spinoza's text become part of the Straussian *Bilanz* that accords each side a place under the harmonizing voice of authoritative reason. Thus, instead of recognizing the profound conflicts and struggles of Spinoza's text, Smith's is an attempt to smooth over and to push us rhetorically beyond those vacillations of the mind and the projections of the imagination that, as Spinoza well knew, hold sway always and most precisely at the point where we believe to have transcended them. In this regard, it is surprising not to find mention of Nancy Levene's excellent treatment of the Straussian reading of Spinoza's *TTP* and its implications and consequences, and how we might forge a path beyond the Straussian reading of the "accommodated" Spinoza to find a Spinoza, according to Levene, with a far more "multi-faceted notion of reason coupled with a concept of interpretation which leaves both reason and religion sovereign, separate but not mutually contradictory." [3] At stake here, as Levene aptly shows, is nothing

less than "the question of what constitutes an ethical interpretation." [4]

Notes

[1]. Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 20.

[2]. See, for example, Günther Baum, "Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi und die Philosophie Spinozas," in *Spinoza im Deutschland des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Eva Schärmann, Norbert Waszek und Frank Weinrich (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002), pp. 251-265.

[3]. Nancy Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Without Strauss," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10 (2000): pp. 37-110, here p. 83.

[4]. Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation," p. 110.

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