

The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, Don Garrett ed., (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza is a collection of essays by prominent scholars about the major facets of the philosopher's works. It contains description and analysis of the major features of Spinoza's philosophy, as well as details about his life and the intellectual and religious climate in which he lived and worked. With certain exceptions, as I note below, the essays are well written, informative and will, as the jacket claims, be of interest both to nonspecialists and to more advanced readers.

In "Spinoza's Life and Works," W.N.A. Klever paints a picture of the setting, the (intellectual, religious, etc.) context in which Spinoza lived and out of which his works arose.

In chapter two, Jonathan Bennett takes up Spinoza's metaphysics: substance monism, the attributes, modes, parallelism, necessitarianism, etc. Bennett is not a sympathetic reader of Spinoza, and he too often misrepresents Spinoza by reading him from a contemporary perspective. He says, for example, that "Spinoza's argument for monism has satisfied nobody," (64) and that a "much better route to monism" is to say that there is "only one *extended* substance," and that "any thinking that gets done must be done by extended substances" (65). However, to say that there is only one extended substance is to give priority to extension over thought, which Spinoza was clearly not prepared to do. Bennett claims to be saving Spinoza from absurdity with his reading, however, the threat is only there if we assume from the beginning a materialism in the way that Bennett does.

With regard to necessitarianism, Bennett finds Spinoza's view "tremendously implausible" (75). About Spinoza's argument for parallelism, Bennett says that if we consider Spinoza to be a *merely competent* philosopher, we must think that he must be able to provide better reasons to accept the thesis than the ones presented. "If he cannot, I give up" (79), Bennett declares in frustration. Bennett goes on to claim that Spinoza's argument that there is no causal interaction between the attributes is absurd and that "something must be done to render all this consistent" (82). It would have been nice to have seen a *more sympathetic reader handle this very important topic, one who is willing to read Spinoza on Spinozistic terms, rather than reading him with such contemporary prejudice.* Bennett seems far more interested in trying to tell us what is wrong with Spinoza's work than in trying to explain it clearly or to tell us why it is of value.

In "Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," Margaret Wilson shows us how "Spinoza's theory of knowledge is firmly anchored in his monistic and necessitarian metaphysics" (90). After giving details of the metaphysics, she discussed Spinoza's "panpsychism," the claim that "there is an idea (or mind) for all bodies, so that all individual things are animate, though in different degrees" (101). Wilson details Spinoza's conception of the different kinds of knowledge (opinion, reason, intuition), adequate and inadequate ideas, truth and falsity. She goes on to discuss Spinoza's claim that it is possible to have "an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God," or Nature. This is contrary to Descartes' view, which rests "on a conception of the mind as a creature separate from God," such that "all truth depends on God's unconstrained will, so that even things that

seen incomprehensible and contradictory to us are not beyond the divine power to bring about" (121). According to Spinoza, since we are finite modes of the one substance, we are able to achieve the highest kind of knowledge, "which proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (116). Thus, "Spinoza's rejection of hyperbolic doubt is not a mere ad hoc epistemological convenience, but has roots deep in his general anti-Cartesian metaphysics" (120).

Wilson goes on to talk about Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian distinction between will and intellect. According to Descartes' theory of belief, the intellect gathers information and creates a judgment, and the will assents to or denies the judgment. According to Spinoza, on the other hand, "Volitions are nothing distinct from ideas: ideas as such necessarily involve affirmation or negation" (124). Spinoza's view marks progress over the "mistaken tendency to think of judgment as involving arbitrary acts of will directed at inert ideas, [which] is bound up with a failure to distinguish correctly the nature of thought from that of extended things" (124).

Alan Gabbey's "Spinoza's Natural Science of Methodology" begins by setting Spinoza's thought within the intellectual climate of the time. A large portion of Gabbey's essay covers Spinoza's early *Descartes' 'Principle of Philosophy'* and Spinoza's physics in contrast to Cartesian physics. In the former text already we find Spinoza's "ideal of a unified body of interrelated demonstrative truths" concerning God or nature. "Spinoza's real *terminus a quo* is the Whole, rather than any of its constituent parts." (157) Gabbey tells us. Thus, in contrast to atomism which attempts to explain the whole through its parts, Spinoza attempts to understand the parts through the ultimate nature of the whole.

Gabbey goes on to argue that the conventional view that Spinoza eschews all teleology is mistaken. Last, Gabbey distinguishes between a Baconian conception of science and Spinozism: "we often assume uncritically the Baconian distinction between observation and experiment, between Nature left free for human inspection and nature subjected to human inquisition," (180) which distinction assumes a separation between humans and nature. Spinoza would of course reject such a distinction and separation. "Whether led by reason or by desire alone, no human being does anything except in accordance with the laws and rules of nature" (*Political Treatise*, ii), Spinoza claims.

Michael Della Rocca's "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology" unhappily begins with the claim that "The general metaphysics, the application of this to psychology, and the psychology taken on its own all fall prey to grave gaps and incoherencies" (193). Della Rocca details Spinoza's attempt to derive psychology from metaphysics, given his belief that humans are modes of the one substance. The link between the metaphysics and the psychology is Spinoza's account of self-preservation. *Ethics* 3p6 says: "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being." This striving to persevere is extended to the idea that all things strive to increase their power of acting and to prevent any decrease in their power of acting. Della Rocca finds some "obvious" counterexamples to *Ethics* 3p6, and believes that Spinoza's claims about the power of acting not only do not follow from 3p6, but are simply false.

The psychology concerns what Spinoza claims "affects:" desire, joy and sadness. Desire is effectively equivalent to striving, and joy and sadness are the affects associated with an increase and a decrease in power of acting, respectively. Della Rocca goes on to discuss prudential desires, or future-directed striving; and altruism, both of which Spinoza declares to be impossible. Della Rocca ends by arguing that Bennett does not successfully show that Spinoza rejects teleology, and that he is merely rejecting divine teleology and not teleological explanation *per se*.

Throughout Della Rocca finds threats to Spinoza's "naturalism," his desire not to treat human beings differently from the rest of nature. One wonders, however, if Della Rocca himself is conceiving of the naturalism in a properly Spinozistic fashion, when he says things like: "a man, for Spinoza, consists of a mind and a body" (219). This is a very misleading thing to say, given the identity of the attributes in Spinoza. The mind and body are not two different things; they are rather the same thing. Della Rocca, like Bennett, seems to conceive this identity thesis in a distinctively contemporary way. This is evidenced by Della Rocca's bizarrely introducing Davidson to help explain Spinoza. He even claims: "there are many important similarities between Davidson and Spinoza in the philosophy of mind" (263, footnote 70). The introduction of someone like Davidson here clearly shows a contemporary prejudice here about the relation of the attributes, thought and extension, one which Spinoza himself would not have held.

In his "Spinoza's Ethical Theory," Don Garrett explains how Spinoza's ethical theory derives from his theory of nature and his understanding of human psychology. The latter involves: the substance/mode relationship; necessitarianism; the identity between thought and extension; the conatus doctrine (the idea that such thing strives to persevere in its existence); the affects; and Spinoza's discussion of character. Garrett next details Spinoza's definitions of ethical terms: Bondage; perfection; good and evil; virtue.

Though human beings are often enslaved to their passions, there are cognitive means to achieving a certain freedom from them. Further, according to Spinoza, there is an intimate relationship between virtue and understanding. "Knowledge of God is the Mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God," (*Ethics* 4p28) Spinoza tells us.

Garrett goes on to explain that, "ethical propositions of the *Ethics* themselves do not command, exhort, or entreat the reader." Further, "ethical propositions can report straightforward natural truths, and the subject matter is not radically distinct from the study of nature" (286). This is of course due to Spinoza's conception of individuals as modes of the one substance.

Interestingly, Spinoza's ethics has elements of both consequentialism and virtue ethics. Spinoza's highest virtue is the "achievement of adequate understanding," which understanding "brings a participation in the eternal that is *itself* a kind of perseverance in one's being." Thus, "the highest virtue is not merely a *means* toward self-preservation; it is *itself* a *kind* of self-preservation. That is, the very consequence at which Spinoza's consequentialism aims is also...a state of character" (297).

The title of Edwin Curley's essay, "Kissinger, Spinoza and Genghis Khan," refers to Henry Kissinger's comment that he is no Machiavellian, that he is rather influenced by Spinoza. Curley finds this ironic, since "Spinoza is arguably the most Machiavellian of the great modern political philosophers" (315). Curley spends some time here distinguishing Spinoza and Hobbes, noting that, "unlike Hobbes...Spinoza had a marked preference for democracy" (317). Further, Spinoza criticizes political philosophers for "conceiving men not as they are but as they wish them to be" (329), and Curley argues that Spinoza must have Hobbes in his sights here as well, since "Hobbes does...found the legitimacy of the sovereign on men's willingness to surrender all their natural rights to him, and the sovereign's power on their willingness to stand by that promise come what may" (330). For Spinoza, this is flawed psychology, since there are strict limits to the power that the sovereign has over the thoughts and feelings of his subjects.

The essay centers around Spinoza's belief in the coextensiveness of right and power. Curley says, "the doctrine that right is coextensive with power should not be thought of as a doctrine which *identifies* right with power..." Rather, "he is saying that there is no transcendental standard of justice by which...actions can be judged" (322). The comparison with Machiavelli, however, does not concern this particular issue. Rather, "the most important point of similarity between Spinoza and Machiavelli...lies in the preference they both have for a form of republican government in which the people act as a check on their leaders" (322). Since, for Spinoza, the power that the leaders have "depends on the willing obedience of their subjects," the leaders "must beware of trying for too much control over their subjects' minds and tongues, lest they alienate their subjects," (332) and thus lose the right to rule, which is coextensive with the power (over the sympathies of the people) that they have.

In "Spinoza's Theology," Alan Donagan points out that "Spinoza believed that Descartes had shown that the physical universe is an unbounded extended plenum, in which bounded or finite things exist as modifications," and that "Spinoza saw Descartes's scheme as the foundation of a new theology as well as of a new physics" (348). After considering the way Spinoza derives his metaphysics from "Descartes's scheme," Donagan discusses Spinoza's one substance arguments, and reminds us that "to happen according to the laws of Nature and to happen according to the knowledge and will of God are one and the same," (354), which ultimately means that "Spinoza's God cannot rationally be worshipped" (356).

Donagan goes on to discuss Spinoza's view of: Scripture and revelation; miracles; and prophets. He concludes by discussing Spinoza's necessitarianism, and the understanding that "everything that human beings do or undergo...are done or undergone according to the laws of imminent causation that constitute God's or Nature's essence," and that "since God's essence is perfect, it is absurd to wish that anything that happens should happen otherwise" (375). This understanding, then, translates into the "intellectual love of God," which is "an action, not a passion: the action of a rational being...who adequately cognizes that, since God is the substance of which he is a finite mode, his own existence would be unthinkable unless God were exactly as he is" (377).

Richard Popkin sets the background for Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in chapter nine, "Spinoza and Bible Scholarship." The Amsterdam Jewish community was atypical. Many of the community had settled in Amsterdam, having fled countries where they had been forced to be "secret Jews," under the oppression of the Inquisition. Many in the community did not know Hebrew, and, Popkin reports, many had difficulty understanding "what they were supposed to do, and what they were supposed to believe" (384). Spinoza himself was amongst the first generation of Jews born in Amsterdam, and he did know Hebrew.

Popkin tells us that Spinoza's radical Biblical interpretation does have its roots. For example, the challenge that Spinoza raises about the authorship of the Pentateuch can be found already in Hobbes and Isaac La Peyrère.

However, Popkin states (though this "was not completely original" either) "Spinoza began a quite different way of examining and evaluating Scriptural texts than his predecessors employed. The literalism and the contextualism led to a completely secular reading of the Bible" (396). Given Spinoza's metaphysics, and his acceptance of a strong version of the principle of sufficient reason, he "excluded any supernatural or divine element in the Biblical text" (399). This means, for example, that it is impossible for the prophets to have known anything "different from what can be known by ordinary persons through reason and experience" (397). What is really original with Spinoza, Popkin says, is the way Spinoza separates the divine law, the word of God and the historical Scriptures. He thus "totally secularized the Bible as a historical document" (403), and was "baldly willing to claim that the historical scriptures are some men's messages to man" (404).

In "Spinoza's Reception and Influence," Pierre- François Moreau traces the use and misuse of Spinoza since the time of his writing. He touches upon such figures as: Leibniz, Pierre Bayle, Diderot, Hegel, Victor Cousin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, George Eliot, Freud, and Borgès, who were all, in one way or another, influenced by Spinoza.

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