



On Spinoza's 'Free Man'

ABSTRACT: *In this paper, I examine Spinoza's 'model of human nature' in the Ethics, and especially his notion of the 'free man'. I argue that, contrary to usual interpretations, the free man is not an individual without passions and inadequate ideas but rather an individual who is able consistently to live according to the guidance of reason. Therefore, it is not an impossible and unattainable ideal or incoherent concept, as has often been claimed, but a very realizable goal for the achievement of human well-being.*

KEYWORDS: history of philosophy, early modern philosophy, ethics, agency

It is a good thing that Spinoza's 'free man' is in control of his emotions. Given some of the things that have been said about him over the years, he could be forgiven were he to lose some of his equanimity. Among other things, he has been called 'unrealizable', 'irrelevant', a 'reductio ad absurdum', 'confused', 'inconsistent', and, perhaps most demeaning of all, 'an inadequate idea'.¹ A lesser man (a less 'free' man) would by now have responded with resentment, anger, even hate and revenge. Fortunately, acting on such passions is not in the free man's character.

Spinoza introduces the free man (*homo liber*) in Part Four of the *Ethics*.² By this point, Spinoza has laid out his metaphysics of God or Nature (Part One), his account of the human being and the ways of knowing (Part Two), and an exposition of the passions and the role they play in our lives (Part Three). In Part Four of the work, 'On Human Bondage', Spinoza turns to more properly ethical matters—metaethical and normative—in order to describe the nature of human freedom and happiness and thereby illuminates the condition to which we naturally and necessarily aspire.

In the preface to Part Four, he explains the relevant meaning, for his project, of the terms 'good' and 'evil'. He offers a strictly relational account of such normative language. Nothing is good or bad in itself; value accrues only insofar as something brings about an improvement or deterioration in the condition of an individual.

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¹ These harsh assessments of the 'free man' are found in Bennett (1984), Garrett (1996), De Dijn (2004), Garber (2004), Jarrett (2014), Kisner (2010 and 2011), LeBuffe (2010), and Marshall (2014), among others.

² My apologies for the gendered language throughout this essay. I decided to refer to 'the free *man*' for two reasons: first, fidelity to Spinoza's Latin; second, and more important, for philosophical reasons to avoid confusion. The free man is, on Spinoza's account, a different creature from a person who just happens to act freely on occasion; to keep the distinction, I reserve Spinoza's term 'free man' to refer to the ideal condition, and in the latter case speak of a person who is free.



Things are good or bad only to the extent that they contribute to or diminish the *conatus* (striving) or power of persevering that essentially characterizes every individual in nature, including human beings.

This is where the free man comes in. Spinoza says toward the end of the preface to Part Four that

[i]n what follows, 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. (IV, Preface, G II.208/C 545)³

Spinoza does not explicitly mention the free man in this passage nor indeed anywhere in the first 65 propositions of Part Four. But the free man is that ‘model of human nature [*naturae humanae exemplar*]’ that serves as the standard according to which things are to be judged good or evil.⁴ The free man represents an ideal, one that has a metaphysical foundation in our nature and an informed basis in our understanding. The free man, as a human being of maximal striving or power, is the object of rational desire. And something is good if it promotes our moving closer to that condition and bad if it prevents us from approaching it.

However, the free man has been misunderstood and unjustly maligned in the scholarly literature. In this essay, I argue that the free man is not an inadequately conceived, unrealizable, even impossible model, something that human beings can at best only asymptotically approximate but never actually become. Related to this, I also argue against the claim—usually used to justify the thesis that the free man is an impossible ideal—that the free man is without any passions, devoid of all the passive affects we experience as we live in and interact with the world. On the contrary, the free man represents the ideal condition of our very concrete human nature. He is, in fact, identical with the person who, in Spinoza’s description, acts ‘according to the dictate of reason’. It is certainly a difficult task to achieve this condition, and it requires a good deal of therapeutic work on the passions. But it is a mistake to think that Spinoza regards the free man as an unattainable ideal that lies outside the realm of human possibility.

I.

Before embarking on my account of Spinoza’s free man, let me first briefly explain why any of this should matter.

³ References to the *Ethics* are by the standard notation of Part (roman numeral), definition (Def.), axiom (Ax.), proposition (p), demonstration (dem.), scholium (s), appendix (App), and corollary (c). The abbreviation ‘G’ refers to Spinoza (1925); the abbreviation ‘C’ refers to Spinoza (1985).

⁴ There is general, but not universal, agreement that the free man is the ‘model of human nature’ mentioned in the preface to Part Four. For a dissenting view, see De Dijn (2004) and Kisner (2010).

Spinoza has long been neglected and underappreciated as a moral philosopher. In Anglo-American scholarship and teaching especially, the focus on Spinoza's *Ethics* was for a long time centered on Parts One and Two. Discussions of his views on substance (God or Nature), on necessity and freedom, on the relationship between mind and body, and on ideas and knowledge dominated the field of Spinoza studies, presumably to provide a neat spot for him between Descartes and Leibniz in the canon of early modern metaphysics and epistemology. The result of this, however, was that many, especially undergraduate students reading Spinoza in a course on the history of modern philosophy, were left wondering why the work was called *Ethics* since as far as they could tell no ethical questions were addressed. It was only the brave explorer who went past the first two parts of the work and ventured into the territories of Part Three, with its account of the psychology of the affects, and Parts Four and Five, in which Spinoza turns to virtue and freedom, who would get a better sense of Spinoza's overall project and would come to see especially the import of the difficult metaphysical propositions about God, nature, and the human being as far as achieving relief from a life in bondage to the passions is concerned.⁵

Spinoza's moral philosophy is a version of eudaimonism. The goal is living well and, through virtue and understanding, achieving happiness and even 'blessedness [*beatitudo*]'. If the true and ultimate condition of human well-being is in principle unattainable or even incoherent, that would seem both to represent a serious philosophical flaw in Spinoza's theory and to detract from its interest as an account of the good life. After all, a moral philosophy that presents a *summum bonum* that is beyond our reach becomes, to my mind, less attractive. But I believe that regardless of what one may think of his metaphysics, Spinoza as a moral thinker does have something interesting and attractive to offer us and that his conception of the free man and human flourishing is not a regrettable mistake or a logical confusion but a coherent ethical notion that is at least worth taking seriously.

2.

I begin with some Spinozistic preliminaries.

By the end of Part Three of the *Ethics* and through the early propositions of Part Four, Spinoza has drawn a fairly dark picture of our ordinary lives. Having completed his account of the passions—defined (at III, Def. 3) as externally caused changes (increases and decreases) in an individual's condition or *conatus*—that typically govern our desires, he says that 'from what has been said it is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate' (IIIp59s).

However, things begin to brighten considerably with IVp18. In this and the following propositions, Spinoza moves beyond the pathetic picture of a life enslaved to the passions and begins depicting the model human life, the *exemplar* that

⁵ The situation has improved remarkably over the last couple of years with studies like those of Kisner (2010 and 2011), LeBuffe (2010), and Kisner and Youpa (2014).

represents the perfection of human nature and the maximization of its power of persevering. He does not (yet) call this model the free man, but rather a life guided by reason. It is a life in which an individual, on the basis of ‘adequate ideas’—a clear and distinct and true understanding of things—actively does and pursues only what is truly beneficial and useful for himself (as well as for others).

Spinoza defines activity in terms of causality. An individual in nature is active to the extent that it is the adequate (sufficient) cause of its condition and of what it does. By contrast, an individual is passive to the extent that its condition and actions are in part determined by the way in which it is affected by other things. Put another way, a being is active if what it does follows from or is an expression of its *conatus* or nature alone; and it is passive if what it does reflects, at least in part, the *conatus* or nature of some other being that is acting on it.

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by IV, Def. 1), 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. (IV, Def. 2)

Spinoza also equates activity with freedom. There is no such thing as freedom of will; that is a mere illusion based on the false belief that there is such a faculty and on our ignorance of the causes that affect us (IIp35s). Nor does freedom require a lack of determination. There is nothing in Spinoza’s cosmos that is not causally determined. Rather, freedom is a matter of autonomy and causal independence relative to external things. To be free is essentially to be self-determining; to do and to act on the basis of one’s nature (again, *conatus*). This is Spinoza’s definition of freedom at the beginning 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’ (I, Def. 7). Strictly speaking, only God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) is absolutely free, since only God or Nature exists from the necessity of its nature alone. However, finite individuals in nature can be more or less free, since they can be more or less self-determining. What the free and active person does is an expression of his nature alone; what the enslaved and passive person does is an expression of both his nature and of the way in which he is affected by external things.

In the case of human beings, Spinoza also equates activity and freedom with being motivated and guided by adequate ideas. All human beings are egoistically motivated to pursue what they believe to be in their own self-interest and supportive of their striving to persevere. For a human being to be active and free means that what he desires and what he does is determined by the clear and distinct ideas in his mind, by a true knowledge of what really *does* contribute to maintaining and increasing his *conatus*. On the other hand, to be passive and enslaved (‘in bondage’) is for desire to be led by inadequate ideas, the ‘confused and mutilated’ mental states (the passions) that come by way of the senses and the imagination. ‘The actions of the mind arise from adequate ideas alone; the passions depend on inadequate ideas alone’ (IIIp3).

Freedom, in other words, is all a matter of whether a person does what he does because of what he knows or because of how he is made to feel by external things. To the extent that a person has inadequate ideas, he is acted upon. To the extent that these inadequate ideas guide his choices, what he does follows not from his own nature alone but from his own nature combined with the natures of external causes. To pursue something because it is a source of intense physical pleasure is to be determined as much by the nature of that thing as by one's own nature. On the other hand, a person whose behavior is determined solely by his adequate ideas and not by the way external things affect him is truly active and truly free. What he does follows from his nature alone (*his* adequate ideas) and is certain to be in accordance with and supportive of that nature's striving to persevere.

It is worth noting, however, that the presence of adequate ideas in a person's mind, even if they are greater in number than the inadequate ideas, is by itself insufficient to render that person free and active. What matters, according to Spinoza, is not just what you know but also how affectively powerful that knowledge is. The human mind is an agonistic arena, with adequate and inadequate ideas struggling for dominance. Those ideas with the greater affective power will win out and effectively determine desire. The presence of a true idea is not by itself—in its *truth*—sufficient to conquer false beliefs and the desires that arise from them. Just my knowing that something unpleasant is nonetheless good for me (taking bad-tasting medicine, for example) is not going to defeat my passionate resistance to doing it. Only the strength of the affect that in part constitutes a true belief can overcome the affects of the inadequate ideas of the senses and the imagination. (To put it crudely, I have to really want to take that medicine and get better in order to overcome my resistance to taking it.) 'No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered an affect' (IVp14). To the extent that adequate knowledge represents an increase in the mind's power of acting, it will involve an affective dimension that is opposed to the affect accompanying 'the other imaginations by which the mind is deceived'. In other words, only affects can oppose affects. 'An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained' (IVp7).

A person, therefore, is free only to the extent that his adequate ideas are more powerful, affectively speaking, than his passions/inadequate ideas and thus constitute the dominant desires and the determining factors in what he does.

The desires which follow from our nature in such a way that they can be understood through it alone are those that relate to the mind insofar as it is conceived to consist of adequate ideas. The remaining desires are not related to the mind except insofar as it conceives things inadequately, and their force and growth must be defined not by human power, but by the power of things that are outside us. (IV, Appendix, G II.266/C I.588)

We are generally only very imperfectly free—even, according to Spinoza, only rarely free—since most of our lives are led under the sway of the passions. Even those who

are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, and who have thereby gained a significant store of adequate ideas, are not always determined to act based on those adequate ideas alone.

3.

Spinoza's moral philosophy seems, then, to involve a series of equivalences. We have seen that activity is the same as freedom, that freedom is the same as being self-determining, and that being self-determining is the same as being in such a condition that one's adequate ideas (which follow from one's own intellectual nature alone and not the natures of other things) are more affectively powerful than one's inadequate ideas, and the former therefore determine one's actions.

This is where Spinoza's rationalism comes into play, not so much as a metaphysical or epistemological principle, but as a moral one. For Spinoza now identifies being active, free, and determined by adequate ideas with 'living according to the guidance of reason'. This is because adequate ideas are the product of reason and intellect. They represent a rational or intellectual (rather than sensory or imaginative) understanding of oneself—of one's body and mind, their place in nature, and what truly benefits and harms them.

Reason's guidance comes embodied in what Spinoza calls (in IVp18) the 'dictates of reason [*dictamina rationis*]'. These rational prescriptions are grounded in the individual's *conatus* and represent a kind of enlightened propositional expression of that natural striving for perseverance and power. They demand

that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead man to a greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can. (IVp18s)

More important, reason also provides guidance on how to achieve these ends. It does so universally and objectively, without regard to a person's particularities. Like Kant's categorical (moral) imperatives, the dictates of reason transcend personal differences and make universal demands on human behavior. This is clear from Spinoza's claim in IVp72, where he considers whether the person guided by reason would ever act deceptively, that 'if reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men'.

Among the first things that reason demands is that 'we ought to want virtue for its own sake, and that there is not anything preferable to it, or more useful to us'. But because we are necessarily always a part of Nature and unable ever to bring it about 'that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us', reason also prescribes that we should strive to possess the 'many things outside us which are useful to us' (IVp18s). Spinoza insists that 'men who are governed by reason—i.e., men who, from the guidance of reason [*ex ductu rationis*], seek their own advantage—want

nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men. Hence, they are just, honest, and honorable' (IVp18s.iii).

The person living according to the dictates of reason helps others achieve this condition of rational virtue and thus acts benevolently toward them. He does this not out of sympathy or pity (which are passions) but because he perceives that it is in his own best interest (i.e., conducive to the maintenance of his own *conatus*) to do so. He is also cheerful, kind, and forgiving. He is not susceptible to the many attitudes that are a source of strife among people: hate, envy, mockery, disdain, anger, vengeance, and other evil affects. '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, or nobility' (IVp46). Hope and fear do not govern his actions, nor is he given to pride, scorn, humility, or despondency (IVp48–55).

In fact, what the person who is guided by reason strives for above all else is understanding (*intelligere*), and he does not judge anything else useful for himself except what leads to understanding (IVp26). What he wants for himself is

to perfect, as far as [he] can, [his] intellect, or reason. . . . 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., his highest desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things which can fall under his understanding. (IV, App. IV, G II.267/C 588)

According to Spinoza, it is this life of reason that is our goal. We human beings, whether we realize it or not (and it may take reading Spinoza's *Ethics* to realize it), naturally and necessarily strive to achieve this condition of rational activity and self-determination.⁶ This is because every individual is moved by its *conatus*, by its essence or nature, to preserve its power or activity and even to increase it as much as possible; and a life lived under the guidance of reason represents a more powerful condition and a fuller realization of our *conatus*. An individual living such a life, therefore, is the *naturae humanae exemplar*, the 'more perfect' human being, on the basis of which things are judged to be good or bad, depending on their utility for our attaining this condition.

4.

This brings us, at last, to the free man. The phrase 'free man' does not appear in the *Ethics* until IVp66s. And the way the phrase is first introduced makes it evident that, contrary to what some scholars have asserted, the free man is identical to the

⁶ More precisely, what we naturally and necessarily strive for is joy, or an increase in our power. And the condition of maximal power for a human being is this life under the consistent guidance of reason—the life of the free man. However, a person in bondage to the passions will not make this connection, and so he will not consciously strive for the life of reason.

person who lives according to the dictates of reason.⁷ That is, while the term ‘free man’ is first found only in IVp66s, the concept of the free man has already been at work throughout Part Four in the propositions devoted to the person living under the guidance of reason.

This is especially clear if we consider precisely what Spinoza says in IVp66s. Having just demonstrated that ‘from the guidance of reason we want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one, and a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one’ (IVp66), Spinoza goes on to say in the scholium to this proposition that

[i]f these things are compared with those we have shown in this Part up to P18, concerning the powers of the affects, we shall easily see what the difference is between a man who is led only by an affect, or by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or no, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one’s wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly.

The subject here is still the person guided by reason. But then Spinoza immediately notes that ‘I call the former a slave [*servum*], but the latter a free man [*liberum*]’. So, the free man is identical with the person who in his life is led by reason—that is, the individual who has been the subject of the previous forty-seven propositions.

As if that does not clinch the matter, Spinoza ends this scholium—and thereby introduces the next seven propositions, all devoted explicitly to the free man and his behavior—by saying that ‘I wish now to note *a few more things* concerning the free man’s temperament and manner of living’ (my emphasis). This, of course, means that what Spinoza has already been discussing, a life under the guidance of reason, is continued in the subsequent discussion of the free man. Thus, I see no reason to doubt that the free man and the person living under the guidance of reason are one and the same and many good reasons to believe that they are.

Among these reasons is that the behavior exhibited by the free man is, as one would expect, identical with the behavior of the person living under the guidance of reason. Notably, Spinoza does not bother repeating most of the attitudes or actions of the rational person when describing the free man, but rather continues as if we are now simply adding to the list of those elements of the mind-set and social behavior exhibited by the rational person. The free man ‘leads himself . . . by the free judgment of reason, and . . . [does] only those things that he himself knows to be most excellent’ (IVp70). He will avoid the praise and favors of the ignorant as far as he can (IVp70), never act deceptively (IVp72), and be thankful for the goods that he obtains (IVp71). Above all, Spinoza says, in one of the more memorable phrases of the work, that the free man does not obsess about death.

⁷ Garber (2004), for example, believes that the free man and the person living according to the guidance of reason are not the same; see also Bennett (1984), Youpa (2010), and Kisner (2010). On the other hand, Jarrett (2014) agrees that the free man is identical to the person living according to the guidance of reason and not simply introduced for the first time in IVp66s.

'A free man thinks least of all of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death' (IVp67). Like Socrates on the eve of his execution, the free man is not afraid of dying. He will not dwell on the end of his durational existence or worry about what the end may or may not bring. On the contrary, the free man is focused on living and seeking his own advantage. He is consumed with the joys that a powerful, active, and self-sufficient life brings.⁸

One point on which Spinoza does repeat himself only reinforces this identification of the free man with the person living under the guidance of reason. In IVp70dem, he claims that 'a free man strives to join other men to him in friendship', and the justification he offers for this is simply IVp37, in the first scholium to which he has shown that 'a man who lives according to the guidance of reason is bound to join others to himself in friendship'.

All the evidence, then, points to identifying the rational person with the free man, with the latter being just a paradigmatic and perfect instance of the former. That is, the free man is the person who is ceaselessly and without exception guided by reason and its adequate ideas. The free man never fails to do what reason commands. But the person living by the guidance of reason—representing our condition of maximal power and activity—is the 'model of human nature' toward which we naturally and necessarily strive.⁹ Therefore, it must follow that the free man is that model.

And this apparently is where the trouble begins.

How, one might ask, can the model or ideal for our lives be a life that is so unlike our own—in fact, a life that, it might seem, cannot possibly be like our own?

The problem has been put in two different ways. First, the condition of the free man has been claimed to be unrealizable by existing finite creatures such as ourselves. Second, the condition of the free man is said to be not only inconsistent with our finite lives, but inconsistent in itself, an incoherent notion.

Both ways of framing the problem arise from a particular way of interpreting Spinoza's free man. According to this reading, the problem is not just that the free man is guided exclusively by reason and adequate ideas in his actions; it is not merely that passions/inadequate ideas have, relative to adequate ideas, insufficient affective power and efficacy upon his desire. Rather, on this reading, the free man *does not have any passions or inadequate ideas*. The free man so interpreted is not just active and not just always active; he is purely and solely active, 'perfectly active' (in the words of several scholars), experiencing no passivity whatsoever. His *conatus* is not ever affected, positively or negatively, by external things.¹⁰ By Spinoza's standards, on this reading the free man is effectively *outside* of nature.

8 As Yitzhak Melamed has pointed out to me in correspondence, the analogy with Socrates is not totally apt, since for Socrates (as portrayed in Plato's *Phaedo*) the philosopher seems to be perpetually focused on dying, given that philosophy is 'a preparation for death'. By contrast, Spinoza's free man is not afraid of death because he thinks of death not at all. For a discussion of Spinoza on the joys of living, see Smith (2003).

9 Again, only the philosophically enlightened person will recognize that what he is in fact striving for is the life of reason/freedom. A greedy person, for example, will be moved by the striving to increase his power, but he will not see that striving as satisfied by the life of reason.

10 See Garber (2004: 184), Kisner (2010: 92–3), LeBuffe (2010: 187), and Jarrett (2014: 62). Bennett (1984: 325) says that 'it is hard not to see Spinoza as committed to offering sensory deprivation as an ideal'.

But, the first sort of objection runs, human beings, as finite creatures in nature, are always and necessarily subject to passive affects, to having their *conatus* (in body and mind) modified, for better or for worse, by external things. Spinoza could not be more clear about this, and it is something on which all parties agree:

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 own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause. (IVp4)

From this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires. (IVp4c)

The problem, then, is that actually existing human beings cannot possibly realize the ideal of the free man when he is interpreted as being without passions. For durationally existing human beings, unlike the free man on this reading, will *always* experience passions. This would presumably be true even of persons who in their concrete lives consistently follow the guidance of reason. Such rational individuals would, according to this reading, be free in only a deficient or secondary sense. What makes such ordinary people ‘free’ (i.e., quasi-free) is not that they have no passions—like all living human beings, they *do* have passions—but that their adequate ideas are regularly affectively stronger than their inadequate ideas and thus serve to determine their desire.¹¹ By contrast, on this reading the ideal free man, because he is supposed to be an individual without any passions whatsoever, ‘could not actually exist [in time] . . . no actual human being who exists in time can attain or “match” the model, and thus be a perfect person’ (Jarrett 2014: 61, 63).

What follows from this, we are told, is that the free man is ‘a theoretically convenient limiting case, like the concept of an ideal gas—one whose molecules have zero volume’ (Bennett 1984: 317). Part Four, on this reading, ‘tells us how to move towards greater freedom’, but we must remember that ‘we cannot go the whole way’ (Bennett 1984: 317). One cannot attain the ideal, but only ‘become more or less perfect . . . closer to or farther from the ideal’ (Jarrett 2014: 63). ‘Only God’, it seems, can realize this ideal (Jarrett 2014: 62–3).

Daniel Garber, in an important and well-known article, offers an elegant presentation of just this interpretation and the problem it generates. Garber was inspired by the ‘dilemma’ faced by Dr. Nahum Fischelson, the main character in the Isaac Bashevis Singer story ‘The Spinoza of Market Street’. Dr. Fischelson is devoted to Spinoza’s philosophy. He tries to live according to what he sees as

¹¹ This is why Kisner distinguishes the free man from the person who, acting under the guidance of reason, is free to some degree. Kisner says that ‘the free man is introduced without fanfare in a scholium and treated entirely within the span of ten propositions’ (2010: 98). But this cannot be right, since Spinoza’s language in the relevant propositions implies that he has already been talking about the free man, well before explicitly introducing those words.

the *Ethics*' 'model of human nature', only to discover, to his great sorrow and regret, that he cannot do without human companionship and the passions that it necessarily brings. The problem, according to Garber, is that Spinoza's free man cannot possibly be instantiated in a human life. This is because the 'complete rationality' demanded by true freedom requires, on Garber's reading, total self-reliance and therefore an absence of social interaction and of the passive affects that accompany it. Thus, the free man 'has adequate ideas and adequate ideas alone . . . the free man is thus free from all passion'; 'he can act on other things but other things cannot act on him' (Garber 2004: 185–6). The free man is, for this reason, 'a rather unsociable fellow' (193), and Garber concludes that Dr. Fischelson would have been better off being guided by the dictates of reason rather than by the model of the free man.

The free man, on this reading of his nature as passionless that Garber and many others have offered, is reduced to an asymptote. He is 'an impossibility' and 'not to be taken seriously at all as . . . something that actually serves to guide [one's] behavior' (Garber 2004: 203–4).

The second sort of objection to Spinoza's free man also relies on seeing the free man as devoid of passions or inadequate ideas. But rather than concentrating on the fact that this renders him impossible to instantiate in actual human existence, it focuses on the internal incoherence of the concept of an individual who is supposed to be an example of human nature *and* perfectly free and passionless. Regardless of whether or not the free man can exist in this durational world, with its infinitely complex series of causal nexuses, the concept of a human being without passions is self-contradictory. As one scholar puts it, 'a human being is inescapably subject to events that do not causally originate in his nature. To be free is to exist and act from one's nature alone (I, Def. 7). It follows that a human being cannot be free' (Youpa 2010: 66). To look at the argument another way, a human being is, according to Spinoza's metaphysics, a 'finite mode of Nature'; however, finite modes are always and necessarily acted upon by other things, by other finite modes; therefore, while such human beings can be free in one sense, the concept of a human being rules out, a priori, being free according to the model of the free man. 'The free man is a confused representation of our freedom' (Kisner 2010: 101).¹²

5.

The problem with the two arguments just stated is that they rely on a premise that conflates being a free man with being free of all passions. As yet another recent scholar claims, 'the concept of a person with an ideal understanding' is 'a person with maximal, or even complete, understanding or at least *one who has only adequate ideas*' (Jarrett 2014: 62, my emphasis). But what is the justification

¹² Huenemann (1997: 105) offers both kinds of objections. After claiming that '[the free man] is called "free" because he is free from the passions' and that 'Spinoza makes it perfectly clear that it is strictly impossible for us to become this free man', he concludes that '[i]t is not only impossible for us to evolve into perfect humans, but it is also strictly impossible that there be a perfect finite object of any kind'.

for this final qualifying phrase, ‘. . . who has only adequate ideas’? Why should we think that Spinoza intends the free man to lack all interaction with external things, to be free of all passions and inadequate ideas—in short, to be ‘outside of Nature’—and thus to be both an unrealizable ideal and a confused, incoherent notion?

In fact, we should not interpret the free man in this way.¹³ Since, as I have shown, the free man is identical with the person who (unfailing) lives under the guidance of reason, the free person is no less subject to passive affects than the rational person is. The point I wish to make is that acting under the guidance of reason to the extent of being a free man does *not* mean having only adequate ideas. What it *does* mean is that the nature of such a person, through his adequate ideas, is the sufficient cause of all of his actions, even if he is also subject to changes brought about by other things and thus susceptible to passive affects. In other words, the free man is the man who, while experiencing passions, never lets those passions determine his actions; he always does what reason dictates. This is the sense in which freedom means self-determining.

We know that the free person always does what reason directs him to do. But he still experiences passive affects/inadequate ideas, although these passions never successfully serve to guide his action. The most effective way to establish this reading, given my assumption that the free man is identical with a person who (consistently) lives under the guidance of reason, is by considering a number of propositions in Part Four that reveal precisely what the rational person does, thinks, and values through the guidance of reason.

Spinoza notes that ‘we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us’ (IVp18s). One of the important functions of reason in the life of the rational person is that it prescribes ways of dealing with things ‘outside ourselves’. These external things include both other human beings and ordinary items (including those that contribute to bodily nourishment). In Spinoza’s scheme, external things can be a source of joy (*laetitia*) when they are the cause of an increase in an individual’s *conatus* or power, and they can be a source of sadness (*tristitia*) when they cause a decrease in an individual’s *conatus*. Reason prescribes that we seek out good things, those that actually help preserve our being (IVp19); however, good things are a source of joy, which is a passion when it is caused at least in part by an external thing. Therefore, reason prescribes that we seek out sources of joy.

Among the things that bring joy to the rational person, and thus to the free man, are other human beings leading lives of rational virtue, and so reason prescribes to him that he unite with others who share his nature (and that he act to improve the lives of others so that they *do* share his nature). It is useful for the free man to live among those who also live according to the guidance of reason (IVp37),

¹³ Exceptions to this way of reading Spinoza are rare, but see Alquié (2003). Alquié (who equates ‘l’homme libre’ with ‘l’homme sage’) notes that the free man ‘vit dans le temps, dans le monde, dans la cite . . . le sage aura toujours des affections . . . le sage verra son corps soumis aux autres corps, et donc son âme remplie d’idées inadéquates. Il percevra, il imaginera, il aura des passions’ (326–7).

not least because this only reinforces his own rational behavior: 'The good which man wants for himself and loves, he will love more constantly if he sees that others love it' (IIIp31). The free man, like the person living under the guidance of reason, will therefore 'form associations' (IV, App. XII) and 'join himself to others in friendship' (IVp37s1; IVp70dem). This general sociability certainly indicates an important respect in which the free man is affected passively by the individuals surrounding him. He will, Spinoza says, 'rejoice' in certain human relationships in which he finds himself and which he perceives to exist among others (IVp51, alt. dem.).

Spinoza notes that the free man will even marry, for 'marriage certainly agrees with reason, as long as the desire for physical union is not generated only by external appearance but also by a love of begetting children and educating them wisely' (IV, App. XX). Presumably, the marriage, while not motivated or directed by lust or governed by inordinate love, will also not be a passionless union.

In addition to other human beings, the free man—the person who lives *solely* according to the guidance of reason—will certainly need bodily nourishment, food and water, to at least a subsistence level. 'To be preserved, the human body requires a great many other bodies' (IVp39dem). And these 'other bodies', in so far as they contribute to the preservation of the free man's body (and therefore of his mind) and the perseverance of his *conatus*, will be a source of (passive) joy.

In fact, the life of the free man will not be one of austerity, sensory deprivation, or the ascetic self-denial of bodily pleasures. The free man will not, *pace* Garber, withdraw from the world. Rather, he will know how properly to use the world to his own advantage. He will partake in moderation of those things that aid his *conatus* and bring him joy, but at the same time avoid any excessive pleasures that would debilitate the body and inhibit the mind.

To use things, and take pleasure in them as far 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 a wise man [*vir est sapientis*]. It is the part of a 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. (IVp45s)

Such participation in the pleasures of the world will, of course, entail inadequate ideas in the mind of the *vir sapiens*, the person living under the guidance of reason, that is, the free man.¹⁴ What is important, however, is that in the free man these passive affects/inadequate ideas, as pleasant and useful as they are, remain subordinate as motivational elements to adequate ideas. The passions brought about by the free man's mundane engagement are not affectively strong enough to

¹⁴ Hübner (2014: 138 n49) argues that the wise man is not to be identified with the free man or 'one who is led by reason alone'. But the context of the relevant passage will not bear out such a distinction; it is clear that we are still in the midst of a discussion of 'he who lives according to the guidance of reason'.

determine desire. Rather, it is his reason that guides him to pursue and partake of these worldly joys to the degree that he does. His enjoyment of food, drink, etc., is an active enjoyment in so far as it is done under the guidance of reason. He eats and drinks the way he does not because of the pleasure it brings him but because he knows that it is essential for his well-being.

It may even be that the free man experiences, on occasion, hate, anger, fear, and other ‘evil affects’, as he is disturbed by the behavior of other people (either because he directly suffers some hurt or perceives others to suffer). However, these passions ‘will occupy a very small part of the imagination, and will easily be 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’ (Vp10s). This is why the free man, conquering these feelings within himself, will ‘repay the other’s hate, anger, and disdain toward him, with love, or nobility’ (IVp46).

In short, what distinguishes the free man is not that he experiences no passions or inadequate ideas whatsoever, but that he is in control of himself. He is active, not passive, in what he does. His desire and behavior follow the command of reason, not that of the passions. The freedom of the free man lies not in the absence of passions but in their lack of efficacy.

As far as desires are concerned, they, of course, are good or evil insofar as they arise from good or evil affects. But all of them, really, insofar as they are generated in us from affects which are passions, are blind . . . and would be of no use if men could easily be led to live according to the dictate of reason alone. (IVp58s)

Through his ‘strength of character [*fortitudo*]’, Spinoza says, the free man can ‘restrain’ the passions—at least those that he cannot ‘remove’ by transforming them into adequate ideas by understanding them—and keep them from determining his actions (IVp69). He acts on the basis of what he knows to be in his interest, not based on what makes him feel pleasure. He knows the goods and evils of the world and excels at navigating them. As Spinoza says in the paragraph in which he first uses the phrase ‘free man’, the man who is led by reason ‘complies with no one’s wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life’ (IVp66s).

What makes the free man ‘free’, then, is that his actions are consistently determined by his adequate ideas. He has passions/inadequate ideas, but he *never* acts on their basis. Desire always takes its lead from adequate ideas, because the free man’s adequate ideas are always affectively stronger than his inadequate ideas. This exceptionless rational consistency is what distinguishes him from the more ordinary person who generally follows the dictates of reason. ‘Self-determining’ does not mean ‘perfectly active’ or ‘solely active’ if the latter are taken to imply that there is no passivity; what it does mean is simply that an individual is not ‘determined to do what the common constitution of external things demands’ but rather ‘what his own nature, considered in itself, demands’ (IVp37s1).

6.

Still, all is not entirely safe and secure with my reading of the free man. There is one notorious proposition that would seem to pose an insuperable problem for the claim that the free man experiences passive affects and has inadequate ideas and is thus, at least in principle, an ideal that can be realized in a human life. At IVp68, Spinoza says:

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

Dem.: 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 IVp64c). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good, q.e.d.

Since the concepts of good and evil derive from our awareness of how external things affect us for good or ill—this awareness is precisely what inadequate ideas are—the apparent implication of this proposition is that a free person is, qua free, not affected by external things. Someone born free and remaining free, it would seem, does not have the concepts of good and evil because, given his congenital freedom, he does not suffer any increase or decrease in his power brought about by anything outside of him. By contrast, someone who is not born free but becomes free over the course of his life will no longer experience passions, but he presumably will retain the concepts of good and evil from that period of his life when he was subject to passive affects. Or so the proposition would appear to imply.

So interpreted, IVp68 takes us right back to the reading of the free man according to which it is an impossible ideal, just because human beings are necessarily always subject to passive affects.

The first thing to note about this proposition is what Spinoza says in its scholium: 'It is evident from IVp4 that the hypothesis of this proposition ['If men were born free . . .'] 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.' The appeal to IVp4 for the falsehood of the antecedent of IVp68 might seem to be telling, since the claim of that proposition is that '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 own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause'. This has led many scholars to read IVp68 and its scholium as implying that the free man is not a part of nature, that he undergoes no changes brought about by external things, and thus that he is an existential impossibility.

But notice that what is said by Spinoza to be 'false' is not that the free man can exist, but only that a person might be *born free*. A human being is necessarily a part of nature throughout his entire life, and it is simply false that at the beginning of that life reason and adequate ideas have the affective upper hand—that he is free

at birth. Living under the guidance of reason, and thus being free, is not a gift of nature but something that must be achieved through great effort.

Still, the claim that ‘he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas’ is puzzling. Presumably, even someone born free and remaining free, as an actual living person, will be affected by things in the world, and thus will have some inadequate ideas. Even if he, through his rational virtue, is so successful at navigating his way through the world that he is able to avoid all evils, he will at least experience some passive joys, if only through the nourishment he must take in to persevere. The demonstration says that a person is free if he is ‘led by reason alone’; it does not say that a person is free if he has only adequate ideas. Thus, I fail to see why a person who, *per impossibile*, is born free should not have any inadequate ideas, even if each of those inadequate ideas is an instance of joy.

Let me suggest that the key to understanding IVp68 as consistent with my reading of the free man may lie in its scholium. The scholium shows that what Spinoza has in mind with the person who is ‘born free’ is not an actual individual living in the world who just happens to start out life under the guidance of reason. Spinoza there equates conceiving a person as ‘born free’ with conceiving him outside of nature—or, to use a term from Spinoza’s epistemology in Part Two, conceiving him ‘under a form of eternity [*sub specie aeternitatis*]’ (IIp44c2). That is, to consider a person as born free is to consider only his eternal essence as a finite mode of infinite substance (God or Nature) without relation to other finite modes. It is to think only of his human nature itself or of God considered solely as ‘the cause of man’s existence’. And to think only of his human nature itself as a finite mode of God is to engage in a kind of intellectual abstraction and limit one’s conception only to the power (*conatus*) of the human being. Naturally, then, it does not include situating that power in the causal nexus of other finite powers that living in the world involves and that is the source of passive affects/inadequate ideas. It is, in other words, to conceive of a human being not merely as being led by his adequate ideas, but as consisting only in adequate ideas. On my reading, then, it is to conceive something very different from the free man.

This is not a flawless interpretation of IVp68, I admit. And there are other plausible readings. One might object that the scholium equates being a free man with being outside of nature. But given the overwhelming evidence that Spinoza’s free man in IVp67–73 is identical with the person living under the guidance of reason in IVp18–66, and thus that the free man is subject to (but not determined in his actions by) passions, the burden of proof seems to have shifted to those who, impressed by what they see in this one proposition, IVp68, want to turn the free man into an impossible ideal.

7.

One of the most important propositions of Spinoza’s *Ethics* is IVp4: ‘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’. This claim, we can assume, is applicable

to all human beings, including those who have reached that condition of superb rationality and maximal power identified as the free man.

The conception of such an ideal individual, in relation to which things are judged good or bad according to whether or not they are useful for attaining that condition, is present throughout Spinoza's oeuvre, including his earliest writings. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (ca. 1658), Spinoza notes that 'man conceives a human nature much stronger and more enduring than his own, and at the same time sees that nothing prevents his acquiring such a nature, he is spurred to seek means that will lead him to such a perfection' (G II.8/C 10). In the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (early 1660s) he insists:

When we have conceived an idea of a perfect man in our intellect, that [idea] could be a cause of our seeing (when we examine ourselves) whether we have any means of arriving at such a perfection. Therefore, whatever helps us to attain that perfection, we shall call good, and whatever hinders our attaining it, or does not assist it, we shall call evil. (Part II, Chapter 4, G I.60/C 103)

In both of these works, there is no indication that Spinoza thinks that perfecting ourselves or 'acquiring a human nature much stronger and more enduring than [one's] own' is either an impossible, unattainable ideal or an incoherent notion. On the contrary, he seems to regard it as, at least in principle, something that can be achieved by a living human being. After all, the passage from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* continues as follows: 'This, then, is the end I aim at: to acquire such a nature, and to strive that many acquire it with me'. I have argued that this is true also of the free man in his mature masterpiece, the *Ethics*.¹⁵

Now it may turn out that becoming a free man, while in principle possible, is so difficult—given the self-mastery required—that it is practically impossible.¹⁶ The passions are extremely powerful, and they tend to govern much of our ordinary lives. Even the person in whom the adequate ideas of reason are maximally affectively potent and thus whose *conatus* is at the peak of its powers will eventually succumb under the influence of passive affects. 'There is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger', Spinoza says in the axiom to Part Four. It follows directly from this, he notes in IVp3, that 'the force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes'. Not even the free man, then, is immortal. He may enjoy a long and happy existence, one lived under the guidance of reason and doing only what is most important, but eventually the passive affects—those involving disease, decay, and other infirmities brought about by the forces of nature—will get the better of him as well.

¹⁵ Some scholars suggest that Spinoza, in fact, changed his mind on this question between the earlier writings and the *Ethics*; see, for example, Garber (2004).

¹⁶ Temkine (1994: 441) suggests that for Spinoza there have been a small number of historical individuals who *were* free men: Thales, Socrates, Solomon, and Christ.

Perhaps the best we can all hope for is to persevere as long as possible under reason's tutelage, and thereby approximate, as close as we can, the ideal but perfectly human condition of the free man.

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