

Beth Lord

Spinoza's Ethics.

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You might be forgiven for wondering why we need another introduction to Spinoza's *Ethics*. There are three fairly recent, excellent introductions: Genevieve Lloyd's *Spinoza and the Ethics* (1996); Steven Nadler's *Spinoza's 'Ethics': An Introduction* (2006); and Michael Della Rocca's *Spinoza* (2008). Nevertheless, no introduction is better suited to first-time readers, among philosophy students or the Spinoza-curious in the wider public, than Beth Lord's *Spinoza's Ethics*. Whereas the other introductions are especially helpful for those with a foundation in the history of philosophy and even some sense of debates within Spinoza studies, Lord's text (in the series 'Indiana Philosophical Guides') was written for the brand new reader. Lord has written an illuminating guide that takes the student through the five parts of Spinoza's *Ethics* with an inviting, conversational style that does not shy away from difficult questions. Spinoza's *Ethics* is not part of the traditional introduction to early modern philosophy course, but it is increasingly being taught to beginning undergraduates. Given this, and the growing interest among non-philosophy students and the educated public—prompted by such popular works as Jonathan Israel's sweeping *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), and Rebecca Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza* (2006)—such an accessible introduction is especially welcome.

The guidebook is meant to be read alongside the *Ethics*. It thus follows the order of Spinoza's text and discusses sets of propositions as the development of various strands of argument. It instructs readers to pause and, for example, read Propositions 1-5 of Part 1 together, before moving on to a different component of his argument for the simplicity of substance. Lord dedicates more elaborate discussion to crucial but problematic propositions, like Proposition 11 of Part 1, Proposition 7 of Part 2, etc. It thus serves as a good map for new readers, who are often bewildered by Spinoza's geometrical method, in addition to explaining his major teachings. The book includes various study aids, including a glossary, suggestions for further reading, examples of questions students are likely to encounter, and even tips for students writing about Spinoza.

The great strengths of the book are the wealth of examples that Lord offers and her anticipation of and response to questions frequently posed by new readers. As someone who has taught Spinoza's *Ethics* many times, it was interesting, instructive, and even amusing to see her answers to questions that I receive most every semester. For example, in reaction to Spinoza's claim that a mind is perceptive in proportion to the capacities of its body, students frequently ask how Spinoza could explain Stephen Hawking, or whether cats, by that logic, are geniuses. Lord proposes an understanding of differentiated corporeal perception that explains why the Olympic athlete does not necessarily have a mind that is superior to a person in a wheelchair. Students are also

often taken aback by the juxtaposition of Spinoza's critique of anthropocentrism and his assertion that we can rightfully use nonhuman animals in any way we see fit. Lord offers a thoughtful and substantial response to this common question. Although I disagree with some elements of her navigation of the problem of ethics and nonhuman animals in Spinoza (120-22), it is useful and fun to eavesdrop on another teacher's effort to think with Spinoza in response to questions to which the text does not provide a definitive answer. It will be beneficial for teachers and students alike to reflect upon Lord's metaphors, examples, and analogies to see if they really do seem to capture Spinoza's thought. The reader can ask herself whether finite modes really are like waves on the ocean of substance—a metaphor frequently used by Lord—and will surely learn from the effort to sort through other possible images for the relationship between finite and infinite being.

If I have any criticism of the book, it is that sometimes Lord's examples seem a bit too casual, and upon reflection become problematic. For example, when describing the common notions, she mentions correctly that some properties, like motion and rest, are common to all bodies, while others, like self-propulsion, are common only to certain types of bodies. She proceeds to mention that the ability to walk on two legs is common only to human bodies, which is obviously not true (78). While this is surely an innocuous oversight that Lord has since noticed, another slightly more complicated example also seems a bit offhand. In her discussion of Spinoza's doctrine of *conatus*—the claim that the essence of each singular thing is its striving to persevere in being—she mentions the fact that we often desire what does not preserve our being. She notes that those desires that do not contribute to our endeavor to persevere include nicotine or a yearning to visit Peru (92). As a Spinozist of Peruvian descent, I question this example. Presumably she means that the desire to visit Peru is indifferent to our desire to persevere in being, and not that it is self-destructive like the yen for nicotine. Nevertheless, I might better be able to preserve my characteristic proportion of motion and rest (my essence) by maintaining a connection to that part of my family, culture, and language. More generally, someone who ardently enjoys travel, adventure, or Incan art might better preserve himself as the kind of being he is by desiring a trip to Peru. It is not obvious to me that a desire for a place is indifferent to the essence of a particular mode when considered as a finite individual with a particular natural history of desire. Still, it is precisely this kind of disagreement with her example that I found useful as a fellow teacher of Spinoza's philosophy.

As with any interpretation of Spinoza's magnum opus, scholars will certainly have objections to Lord's account, as well as to the examples she chooses to illustrate Spinoza's difficult metaphysical, psychological, and political teachings. Yet the deftness with which Lord passes between technical discussion and concrete examples from everyday life will make her book both enjoyable and instructive to a wide range of readers.

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