**Matthew Kisner**
*Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life.*
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In his *Spinoza on Human Freedom,* Matthew Kisner advocates for a more human Spinoza, one who embraces human limitation. This results in a reading that stands out for its passionate defense of human passivity and dependence. Though his early chapters are not as strong as his later ones, Kisner ultimately provides a compelling new view of Spinoza's ethics. Scholars of Spinoza and early modern philosophy more generally should read this book, but others, e.g., those who study autonomy, would also benefit.

In the first few chapters, Kisner explores the important concept of freedom in Spinoza. First he considers a seeming contradiction in Spinoza's definition of freedom, which requires not only self-determination but also self-causation; this means that only God is free. Nevertheless, Spinoza later suggests that human beings can also be free when he asserts that they have adequate ideas, which, in Kisner's view, problematically requires human freedom.

To solve this problem, Kisner argues that Spinoza actually employs two senses of freedom and of adequacy. He takes 'a human being is an adequate cause' to mean 'a human being is as close to being adequate as a human being can be' (43). In short, human freedom and adequacy really mean a state of lesser constraint, passivity, and inadequacy. Kisner then applies this reasoning to those passages where Spinoza claims that human beings can be adequate causes, specifically, when human minds possess adequate ideas. For Kisner, when Spinoza says that a human mind contains an adequate idea, he must mean that human minds contain some ideas that are less inadequate than others, namely, those received from perception and imagination.

In Chapter 3, Kisner explores a Spinozist conception of autonomy that he finds implicit in Spinoza's concept of freedom. He examines this connection intermittently throughout the text, occasionally contrasting Spinoza's deterministic, naturalistic notion of autonomy with that of Kant's, a contrast that Kant scholars may find useful. In Chapters 4 and 5, Kisner discusses freedom and its relations to power, virtue, and happiness. He works hard to connect these ideas in such a way that he can move freely from concepts of freedom, rationality, and activity to those of power, virtue, happiness. This identification is problematic, however, because Spinoza allows for passive kinds of power-increase and happiness, whereas freedom and activity do not allow for passivity. Spinoza does argue that freedom/rationality/activity is the *highest* form of virtue/power/happiness, but that does not license an unqualified identification. Kisner's qualified, human sense of adequacy/freedom may perhaps reduce the scope of this problem, though those details are not worked out in this text.

Up to this point, Kisner has largely discussed metaphysics and psychology, with the exception of the discussion of autonomy in Chapter 3. From Chapter 6 on, however, ethics is the subject matter, and here Kisner's arguments come into their own. In Chapter 6, he returns to autonomy in Spinoza and connects it to action according to the natural law, a connection that opens up a variety of exciting avenues of discussion for historians of ethics. In Chapter 7, Kisner reframes Spinoza's ethical egoism in a powerful way by arguing that benevolence toward others is not merely instrumentally valuable, but has 'constitutive value', where something has such value when it constitutes something else that has intrinsic value. In other words, rationality has intrinsic value and benevolence partially constitutes rationality, because the rational person, in acting rationally, will act benevolently. And the rational person will act this way regardless of benefit.

Kisner also argues in Chapter 7 that benevolence, for Spinoza, is based on love and that such a love can only arise from passivity, because love necessarily involves the recognition of an external cause of one's joy. In other words, one can feel love only when one is aided, but one can be aided only when one needs help, which is a kind of passivity. One might wonder what Kisner would make of Spinoza's inclusion of active forms of love that do not involve such passivity. Again, his qualified sense of adequacy may be involved here.

In Chapter 8, Kisner takes on the problematic passages where Spinoza discusses a model of human nature, as well as the free man, an ideal human who is entirely active, rational, and free. Traditionally, this 'free man' is taken as a model of human nature that guides us, a claim that Kisner wishes to reject categorically. He argues, instead, that the model of human nature that ought to guide our behavior comes from an understanding of our *conatus*—our striving nature—and consists in an image of the greatest degree of freedom and adequacy humanly attainable, while the impossibility of the free man disqualifies it from the role.

In the final three chapters, Kisner fleshes out this picture, explaining just how the relatively rational, virtuous human being ought to live. Such a life is one based on rational deliberation, which is deliberation guided by (humanly?) adequate knowledge of the human good. Such adequate knowledge is general, however, so necessarily we must employ inadequate ideas of the imagination in order to determine the particulars of our situation and the results of our actions. In short, human rationality is mostly a matter of passive, inadequate ideas.

Similarly, when he turns to consider Spinoza's particular virtues such as fortitude, courage, generosity, modesty, and mercy, these virtues themselves are nothing but affective dispositions to act in certain ways in certain circumstances. Kisner again finds that they are mostly a matter of inadequate ideas and forms of dependence on others, with adequate ideas merely serving to define the good and, thus, serving only as a general guide. This means that human passivity also plays a necessary and critical role in the constitution of human virtue.

Finally, Kisner considers the political conditions in which humans act. Given that human rationality, virtue, freedom, and happiness all involve dependence on external circumstances, it follows that our political conditions are critical. Kisner argues that participation in a democratic state is the best way to live a rational and free life.

By the final chapters of this book, Kisner's project becomes clear: he wishes put the reality of human passivity at the center of Spinoza's ethical thinking—a worthwhile and interesting project. The final few chapters in particular are powerful and persuasive and, for that reason, this book is recommended to anyone with an interest in the subjects discussed.

Nevertheless, two problems arise with Kisner's justification for the project. The first concerns his stipulation of multiple senses of freedom and adequacy. To be sure, Kisner rightfully wishes to emphasize the necessity of human passivity and its important role in Spinoza's thought, but he overemphasizes it at times. Kisner argues that no human being can be an adequate cause or have an adequate idea, because to allow that would be tantamount to calling the human being in question an absolutely free cause. Spinoza's notion of activity is more nuanced than Kisner allows, however. While Kisner requires that a thing be called active only when it is absolutely and eternally free, nonetheless in Spinoza's system adequate ideas can be parts of larger, inadequate minds and, when those adequate ideas act in the right way, the mind of which they are a part can, for a moment, act from those adequate ideas. So, human minds can be adequate causes in certain instances, namely, when their actions issue from the adequate ideas within them. And those adequate ideas themselves? They ultimately reduce to the adequate idea of God, which itself does meet the high standards of absolute adequacy and freedom that Kisner requires. And Spinoza quite explicitly asserts that the human mind contains these adequate ideas. So it looks plausible to say that the human mind, insofar as it is determined to act by these adequate ideas, can be an adequate cause. The second problem involves the aforementioned identification of freedom, rationality, and activity with virtue, power, and happiness. In this identification, Kisner seems to overlook the real value Spinoza assigns to passivity, as well as certain cases of irrationality and bondage. There is no need to try to force passivity into rationality and freedom when Spinoza himself makes room for them in this way.

For the most part, however, these interpretive problems do not undermine Kisner's larger ethical project. This book is an attempt to find a working, human understanding of freedom in Spinoza according to which human freedom is practical activity directed by rational deliberation, which is guided by a relatively adequate understanding of the human good. As such, it is a welcome and successful enterprise.

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