

Eugene Marshall

The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza's Science of the Mind.

Oxford University Press 2013.

256 pages

\$65.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780199675531)

Spinoza has received marked attention in recent years due to his 'naturalism', or his conviction that everything operates according to the same basic laws. Eugene Marshall's book represents a significant contribution to and advancement of our understanding of Spinoza's naturalistic project, focusing largely (though still not entirely) on his epistemology, psychology, and ethics. Marshall's thesis is that, by unpacking Spinoza's description of the 'rational mind' as a 'spiritual automaton', we can thereby unpack and illuminate much of his philosophical system. I use the word 'system' deliberately: Marshall is concerned not merely to resolve local interpretive puzzles but also to demonstrate that Spinoza's *Ethics* present us with a consistent, richly interconnected whole. As such, *The Spiritual Automaton* is an impressive work of both scholarship and philosophy.

Marshall begins by clarifying the meaning of the title: 'Though the term automaton may bring to mind a robot—something merely mechanical and not at all animated or alive—Spinoza did not intend it that way. On the contrary, he means that the rational mind is a *self-directed mechanism*' (1). Both mechanism and self-direction are crucial for Marshall's thesis. On the one hand, the mind, no less than the body, is explicable in terms of 'simple mechanistic laws' (3). Indeed, by Spinoza's parallelism doctrine, the causal interactions within the mind and the body are isomorphic. On the other hand, the *rational* mind—the mind governed by reason—is able to attain self-direction, or a kind of compatibilist freedom. The *Ethics*, as well as Marshall's book, builds up to an explanation of what this freedom is, and of how we can attain (a degree of) it.

As one of the first steps along this journey, Marshall provides an account of how human beings are able to possess adequate ideas. While Spinoza is insistent that we have some adequate ideas—and why such adequacy is essential for our freedom—commentators have worried that Spinoza inadvertently places adequate ideas out of our reach. Marshall responds to two arguments which attempt to cement this worry. First, there is the infinite series argument. Having an adequate idea of x requires having adequate ideas of the causes of x ; but how can our finite minds achieve this, when the causal series which produced x might be infinite? In response, Marshall contends that the objects of our adequate ideas—God, laws of nature, and the nature of our own body—do not have infinitely many causes. Second, there is the human inadequacy argument. Spinoza maintains that, in order for a mind to possess an adequate idea, that mind must be the adequate cause of that idea; but how can the human mind, which is wholly dependent upon God, be the adequate cause of anything at all? In response, Marshall argues that we are the adequate cause of a thing when our nature is the 'total *proximate* cause' of that thing (95; emphasis added). Thus, our adequate ideas follow directly from the nature of our mind, as opposed to other sources, such as experience. Hence Marshall's crucial thesis that, for Spinoza, adequate ideas are innate.

In order to answer the human inadequacy argument—and in order to lay the groundwork for the rest of his project—Marshall provides an explanation of Spinoza's metaphysics of power, and of his metaphysics of mind. Regarding the latter, the human mind is a complex system of ideas; and its nature, like the nature of all other things, consists in its *conatus* or striving to persevere in existence.

Only when an idea increases the mind's power of striving, decreases it, or causes the mind to act, is that idea an *affect*.

Marshall's discussion of the affects leads into the central subtopic of the book: consciousness. Marshall stresses the indispensability of consciousness to our reading of Spinoza: 'we need some kind of interpretation of consciousness or awareness in Spinoza if we are to understand his philosophy' (6). But unfortunately, while Spinoza invokes conscious awareness at crucial points, he never pauses to explicitly delineate a theory of consciousness. Interpreters have alternately hypothesized that consciousness consists in the complexity of an idea (Steven Nadler), the power of an idea (Don Garrett), or the possession of an idea of an idea (Edwin Curley, *et al.*) However, on Marshall's reading 'consciousness is affectivity' (124). Ideas are affective, or conscious, just when they 'effect a change in the conatus' (118). This can occur when an idea increases or decreases the mind's power, or causes the mind to act—i.e., when it becomes an affect—as well as when an idea fixes the power of the mind. As Marshall acknowledges, his reading is similar to that of Garrett: 'I take Garrett's view to be largely correct' (117). However, while Garrett maintains that the consciousness of an idea just is its power, Marshall argues that an idea becomes conscious only when its power is exercised in the right way—i.e., when it changes the conatus.

Finally, Marshall turns to human bondage and human freedom, where much of the prior discussion is tied together nicely. We are in bondage when we are moved by causes other than our own nature. This occurs when we act from inadequate ideas. In this connection, Marshall provides informative discussions of the illusion of free will and akrasia in Spinoza. By contrast, and recalling the notion of an adequate cause, we are free when we succeed in acting from our own nature. This occurs when we act from adequate ideas. Thus, in order to attain our freedom, our latent adequate ideas must become affects—that is, we must become conscious of them. But how are we to achieve this? Here Marshall stresses the associative mechanisms of the Spinozistic mind: 'it is not reason alone, nor mere possession of adequate knowledge, that delivers us unto salvation, but properly formed associations among affects' (187). In fact, both in bondage and in freedom, the mind obeys associative principles between ideas. In his discussion of these principles, Marshall rightly draws similarities between Spinoza and Hume.

This last point, regarding Spinoza's associationism, is an instance of a global virtue of Marshall's book: it embraces the many different sides of Spinoza. We should understand him as '*both*—a rationalist and a mechanist, naturalizing God and divinizing Nature, favoring the life of pure reason and one guided by the affects of joy and love' (229-30; emphasis added). Marshall's presentation, like Spinoza's himself, is admirably nuanced. Marshall is aided in this regard by a healthy skepticism towards the principle of charity. In the context of his reading of Spinoza on consciousness, he writes: 'it was never my goal to demonstrate that Spinoza "got it right" by 21st-century lights. Indeed, I am suspicious of readings of historical figures that attempt to show such successes in the name of charity' (137, fn. 62). While Spinoza's naturalism is friendly to contemporary sensibilities, Marshall's Spinoza does not neatly conform to many of our other paradigms, consciousness as affectivity being only the most visible example. This makes *The Spiritual Automaton* more, not less, worthy of study.

At the same time, the account of consciousness is the part of the book which perhaps most requires further development. While Marshall holds that the consciousness of an idea consists in its affectivity, many of his arguments only imply weaker conclusions, such as that the consciousness of

an idea and its affectivity covary, or that an idea is conscious in virtue of its affectivity. To consider some formulations: ‘This suggests that Spinoza links being conscious of one’s reason for acting with its being an affect’ (124); ‘we are self-conscious in virtue of having the affect of desire’ (126); ‘We are aware of [sensory perceptions], perhaps, just because they matter to us, because they impact our conatus’ (136). It is unclear how to get from statements of this type to the conclusion that consciousness *is* affectivity. It is also unclear that Marshall needs this constitutive claim when he draws upon his interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of consciousness in subsequent chapters. For example, in his discussion of the eternity of the mind, Marshall argues that consciousness as affectivity explains why consciousness cannot survive the death of the body: ‘Without the body, there can be no affects, so, after the death of the body, the mind cannot be conscious’ (227). But this remains true if affectivity is merely a necessary condition for consciousness. Overall, Marshall’s case for some connection or other between consciousness and affectivity is strong; but what that connection is, and how it impacts our understanding of Spinoza’s other doctrines, are questions which could have been explored in more depth. This is especially so, given Marshall’s insistence that seemingly small advances to our understanding of consciousness in Spinoza can in fact have wide-ranging consequences (recall that Marshall finds Garrett’s reading insufficient even though it is ‘largely correct’).

None of this is to deny the weighty contributions that Marshall makes throughout, not only with respect to consciousness, but many other topics as well. He consistently succeeds in his goal of enhancing our systematic understanding of Spinoza’s philosophy. As such, *The Spiritual Automaton* is an exciting and fertile book.

Alex Silverman

(Society of Fellows)

University of Chicago