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978-0-521-19888-2 - Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life

Matthew J. Kisner

Excerpt

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Among Spinoza's many philosophical aims and ambitions, none was closer to his heart than helping people to achieve freedom. Each of Spinoza's works on metaphysics, from his early commentary on Descartes' *Principles* to his eventual masterpiece, the *Ethics*, culminates in a discussion of freedom, insisting on its possibility and importance.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the central aim of the *Ethics* is to show us "the way leading to freedom" (5pref). Spinoza's other main body of work, his political philosophy, is also motivated by his concern for freedom. Arguing that "the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom" (*TTP* 20, 6), Spinoza recommends how states should be structured and governed for the protection and promotion of freedom. The central thesis of the *Theological-Political Treatise* quotes Tacitus that the best state allows "every man to think as he pleases and say what he thinks" (*TTP* 20).<sup>2</sup> Even Spinoza's notion of salvation is arguably directed at our freedom, for it arises from union with the eternal, divine nature and, thus, offers a kind of liberation from the power of external forces.<sup>3</sup>

It is surprising, then, that Spinoza's view of freedom has received so little scholarly attention. Most work on Spinoza's philosophy only touches on the subject of freedom, reading him instead as concerned primarily with other goals, such as resolving problems in Cartesian metaphysics or addressing the harmful influence of religious authorities.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is largely that Spinoza specialists, until very recently, have tended not

<sup>1</sup> The *KV* concludes with a section entitled "On True Freedom," while *CM* concludes with a chapter on the human mind, arguing that we have a will and that it is free. Although Spinoza's view on the will changed over time, the same cannot be said for his insistence on the importance of human freedom.

<sup>2</sup> This is the title to chapter 20, quoting from *Histories* 1, 1, 4.

<sup>3</sup> The *KV* claims that divine union makes us "free from change and corruption" (11, 26), though it is less clear that salvation in the mature work involves such a divine union.

<sup>4</sup> For prominent examples of each see Curley (1988) and Nadler (2001). The most notable exception is Bennett, who devotes considerable attention to freedom, only to conclude that Spinoza's view is ultimately incoherent (1984, 324–6).

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to focus on his ethics, which provides the context and motivation for his interest in freedom. Rather, work on Spinoza's philosophy has tended to revolve around issues in metaphysics and epistemology – in the anglo-phone literature – or political philosophy – in the continental literature.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the little research that has been devoted to Spinoza's view of freedom has been narrow in focus, concentrating on the question of how he can consistently maintain the possibility of freedom, given his causal determinism, without considering the issue that most concerned him: the ethical significance of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

This book aims to provide an interpretation of Spinoza's theory of freedom that focuses on this neglected issue by explaining why, for Spinoza, freedom is valuable and how we should go about attaining it. Taking up this task sheds light on not only his theory of freedom, but also his ethics. In order to explain how, it is helpful to consider a natural way of thinking about Spinoza's ethics, what I will call the "therapy reading," found to some extent in most scholarship on the subject.<sup>7</sup> The reading takes its cue from Spinoza's characterization of our highest good as a psychological state of contentment or tranquillity, one that does not depend on external things and, consequently, is immune to the vicissitudes of fortune. Since achieving the highest good is Spinoza's central ethical goal, this reading suggests that Spinoza primarily aims to help us achieve a psychological state of happiness that involves overcoming obstacles to this state, particularly the passions, painful and disruptive passive affects. According to this way of thinking, Spinoza's ethics secures these aims by arming us with knowledge of the true nature of things, which corrects the errors and confusions at the root of the passions and strengthens our rationality, steeling us against

<sup>5</sup> Here I echo Garrett (1996, 269). One should note that there has been significantly more work on Spinoza's ethics since Garrett's assessment, particularly by LeBuffe, Miller and Youpa, though little of it has focused on freedom.

<sup>6</sup> See Parkinson (1975), Kolakowski (1973) and Kashap (1987), the only book-length treatment of Spinoza's view of freedom. One might object that there has been more work on freedom, since Spinoza essentially equates our freedom with our virtue and there has been a great deal of work on the latter. However, one cannot have a complete picture without also considering how his view of virtue also serves as a theory of freedom. This means examining how his view relates to other theories of freedom and to concepts connected with freedom, such as responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> This reading is invoked in the frequent claim that Spinoza's ethics offers psychological therapy; for instance, see Smith (1997, 135; 2003, 8). Elements of the reading are most pronounced in Hampshire (see particularly 1975, 308; 1977, 64), Neu (1977), Gilead (2000), De Dijn (2004), and more recently LeBuffe, who presents the main goal of Spinoza's ethics as correcting our passions by acquiring knowledge and avoiding error (2010, 11). The reader should take my description of the therapy reading with a grain of salt. Like the frequently invoked "standard view," the therapy reading is an idealized description of general trends in scholarship that fails to do justice to the complexity of most interpretations.

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their harmful effects. Consequently, this reading canvasses Spinoza's ethics by explaining, first, his views on the true natures of things, that is, his metaphysics, and, second, his "remedies for the emotions" (sp2os), recommendations for avoiding passive affects and transforming them into active ones. Since Spinoza explains our passive affects as what he calls inadequate ideas, which are the source of error, explaining these remedies also means concentrating on Spinoza's view of how to avoid and correct error. In this way, the therapy reading regards his ethics as primarily providing cognitive psychological therapy: strategies and techniques for changing one's beliefs, thought processes and affective states in order to avoid cognitive error and, thereby achieve greater happiness – though this amounts to a peculiar kind of therapy since it operates through metaphysical investigation rather than reflection on one's personal experiences.

Focusing on the theme of freedom suggests a different way of thinking about Spinoza's ethical aims. For freedom is important to Spinoza, in part, because it is fundamentally connected to our good: freedom amounts to acting from one's own power, what he calls *conatus* or striving, while he understands the good as whatever promotes one's power. It follows that achieving our good necessarily promotes our freedom, so that the aim of attaining our highest good is tantamount to attaining our greatest freedom. In this way, focusing on freedom emphasizes that Spinoza's highest good consists in increasing our power and activity as much as attaining any psychological state. Given this emphasis, it is most natural to read Spinoza's ethics as providing guidance for increasing our power. This reading, unlike the therapy reading, understands the ethics as primarily working toward the practical aim of directing action, rather than the psychological aim of achieving contentment or tranquillity. On this view, Spinoza's ethics investigates the true nature of things not simply because metaphysical knowledge has a transformative effect on our psychology, but also because it identifies what promotes our power so that we may act appropriately. In making this claim, I do not mean to deny that happiness consists partly in attaining a psychological state of contentment or that acting in accordance with Spinoza's ethics requires us to change our thought processes and affective states. I argue, rather, that these therapeutic aims should be understood with respect to the practical aim of directing action. Consequently, my reading differs from the therapy reading primarily in its emphasis.

Nevertheless, this difference in emphasis is important because it directs our attention to aspects of Spinoza's ethics that have been neglected. In particular, the book focuses on Spinoza's practical philosophy, specifically

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his account of reason's practical demands, contained in his theory of the natural law, his view of the virtuous character and what we might call civic virtue, the virtuous activities of citizens.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, I devote less attention to issues that have preoccupied the literature on Spinoza's ethics, such as his remedies of the passions, the psychological techniques for avoiding error and for changing one's affects and mental processes.<sup>9</sup> I justify this on the grounds that these techniques have already received thorough investigation, arguably more than they deserve, since the interest in the subject is motivated to some extent by the mistaken notion that Spinoza's ethics offers such remedies in lieu of a practical philosophy.<sup>10</sup> I will also have relatively little to say about Spinoza's theory of salvation from Part v of the *Ethics*. Here again, there has been ample attention devoted to this subject, partly because salvation amounts to achieving the psychological state that accompanies intuitive knowledge of God and such states have been emphasized by the therapy reading.<sup>11</sup> While I do not mean to deny that salvation is an important part of Spinoza's ethics, it is less important to my investigation since it plays little role in his practical philosophy.

In focusing on Spinoza's practical philosophy, this book provides something that has been sorely lacking in the literature, a concrete and detailed picture of the good life, that is, a life of freedom and virtue. Such a picture is critical if we are to take Spinoza's ethics seriously: to understand what it is asking of us and to try it on, so to speak. In the absence of such a picture, the therapy reading suggests that a good life is primarily devoted to intellectual activities, such as scholarly study and contemplation.<sup>12</sup> However,

<sup>8</sup> Spinoza's practical philosophy has received shockingly little attention, aside from some general discussion of his normative ethical principles, such as ethical egoism. Some have suggested that Spinoza does not even have a practical philosophy: "the *Ethics* offers no laws or rules of behavior – their very form would be misleading – and it does not tell us what actions the wise will perform" (Schneewind 1998, 222). Smith claims that Spinoza's ethics "offers no answer to the question 'what ought I to do'" (2003, 27). Similar reasoning leads Broad to conclude that Spinoza's *Ethics* "is not a treatise on ethics in our sense of the word" (1930, 15). LeBuffe is more attentive to Spinoza's practical prescriptions (2007; 2010, Chapter 10), providing an exhaustive inventory of Spinoza's explicit prescriptions in the *Ethics*. However, LeBuffe focuses primarily on prescriptions for correcting errors of the imagination, rather than on what I regard as the main sources of Spinoza's practical philosophy, his accounts of the natural law, civic virtue and the virtuous character.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 9 does consider Spinoza's psychological techniques for changing our mental processes, though it focuses on how these changes influence our choices and actions.

<sup>10</sup> For a recent discussion of these techniques, see Lin (2009).

<sup>11</sup> There is a section or chapter on salvation in almost all general and introductory works on Spinoza. See also Rutherford (1999).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Smith argues that Spinoza identifies the highest good "exclusively with the contemplative ideal" (1997, 142). Rutherford argues that Spinoza understands the highest good of a rational being as "a life of pure thought" (2008, 506). Along these lines, Bidney claims that "the body is the source of all passivity and is the cause of human servitude. Properly speaking, virtue pertains only

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if we understand a good life as devoted not just to achieving a psychological state by acquiring knowledge, but more broadly to maximizing one's activity, then this assumption seems less plausible. Rather, my approach suggests that freedom involves stamping one's causal footprint on to the world. While Spinoza admittedly holds that our power is best served by leading a rational life (4app5), this does not imply a preference for intellectual activities. For he holds that rational ideas increase our activity not only in the abstract metaphysical sense of increasing our mental power, but also in a practical sense, by directing us to engage actively in the world through forming friendships, treating others with kindness and participating in the life of the state. Moreover, a free life cannot be insulated from practical, worldly considerations, since Spinoza recognizes that developing and exercising our rationality depends upon material conditions, including political conditions, such as a state that promotes the free exchange of ideas. In this way, a free life looks much like recent work has come to understand Spinoza's life, as profoundly engaged in the world – indeed, as aiming for nothing less than the transformation of the very political and social fabric of early modern life.<sup>13</sup>

While focusing on Spinoza's practical philosophy leads me to a number of distinctive conclusions, three deserve special mention here at the outset. First, I argue that Spinoza's ethics is better equipped to account for traditional morality than has been appreciated. It is not uncommon to think of Spinoza as a kind of iconoclastic, almost Nietzschean figure, challenging the most basic assumptions of morality.<sup>14</sup> A variety of reasons are offered to support this conclusion. First, it is argued that Spinoza, in denying the possibility of mind–body causation, also denies the possibility that humans can bring about their own actions, and thus, of moral agency.<sup>15</sup> Second, it is argued that Spinoza's causal determinism rules out the justification for attributing praise and blame and, thus, the grounds for moral evaluation.<sup>16</sup> Third, some argue that morality imposes laws in the sense of normative

to human reason which constitutes the active essence of man; there is no corporeal virtue at all" (1940, 278).

<sup>13</sup> This is according to my reading of Israel (2001).

<sup>14</sup> Of course, this view is praised for bravely reconceiving moral philosophy more than criticized as immoral; see Frankena (1975, 85–7).

<sup>15</sup> See Irwin (2008, 180–4). Irwin also argues that understanding ourselves as the cause of our actions is a confusion that Spinoza's ethics aims to overcome.

<sup>16</sup> Bidney argues that a wise man, because he understands that everything is necessary, does not praise and blame or hold people responsible (1940, 323). Bidney also argues that we value the praise and blame of others because of purely social conventions, not reason (328). Broad argues that for Spinoza "praise and blame must be removed from ethical judgments" because there is no possibility of humans acting otherwise (1930, 44).

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commands, whereas Spinoza is only interested in laws as descriptions.<sup>17</sup> Fourth, some argue that morality imposes obligations that may be contrary to our own interests, whereas Spinoza upholds ethical egoism, the view that we are only ethically required to pursue our self-interest.<sup>18</sup> Fifth, Spinoza argues that a truly free man would not form the ideas of good and bad (4p68), which suggests that a basic form of moral evaluation is some sort of illusion.

However, if we focus our attention squarely on Spinoza's practical philosophy, we find that none of these charges is warranted. Chapter 3 shows that the first charge is based on a misreading of Spinoza's parallelism and, against the second, that Spinoza regarded his causal determinism as consistent with notions of praise, blame and responsibility. With respect to the third charge, Chapter 6 shows that reason, according to Spinoza, prescribes natural laws, which are roughly analogous to moral laws, since they are universal, normatively binding commands; he even holds that natural laws are impartial to some degree, since they are formulated from the perspective of reason, which does not take account of our individual perspectives. With respect to the fourth charge, I show in Chapter 7 that Spinoza regards acting for the good of others as valuable in and of itself, regardless of the consequences. It follows that benevolence is valuable even when the consequences of doing so oppose one's own interests, perhaps sufficiently valuable that we should sometimes act with benevolence regardless of harmful consequences to ourselves. Finally, Chapter 5 shows, contrary to the fifth charge, that we can have knowledge of good and bad. Thus, correcting these confusions shows that Spinoza's ethics holds us to normatively binding, impartial, practical laws, directing us to the good of others, much like conventional morality.

My second conclusion is that Spinoza offers a more nuanced and attractive view of human passivity than is often recognized. The therapy reading, emphasizing Spinoza's interest in attaining a psychological state of contentment, suggests that he regards the passions as necessarily opposed to virtue. According to this suggestion, Spinoza follows the ancient Stoics in aiming

<sup>17</sup> Den Uyl argues that Spinoza's laws can be reduced to two types, neither of which is genuinely normative: universally true descriptions, like the laws of physics and conventional political and social laws, which are only binding in virtue of their political and social enforcement mechanisms (1983, 3–5). On this basis, he concludes that Spinoza offers “no normative moral standards” (88). Relatedly, Rutherford argues that Spinoza's natural laws are not normative or universally binding (2008, 500–2) and Curley argues that the natural law places no practical demands, prohibiting nothing (1991, 97).

<sup>18</sup> Frankena claims that Spinoza cannot offer a moral philosophy because of his normative egoism (1975, 96).

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to rid us of passions, striving toward the ethical ideal of *apatheia*.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it is sometimes supposed that Spinoza's freedom amounts to freedom from the passions.<sup>20</sup> Since Spinoza understands the passions as ideas that arise when we are passively affected by external objects, this reading suggests that his ethics aims to eliminate human passivity as much as possible, a suggestion that is embraced by those who read Spinoza's ethics as aiming to make us perfectly active beings, like God.<sup>21</sup> This reading is problematic, first, because claiming that the passions are necessarily harmful and opposed to virtue appears inconsistent with Spinoza's other commitments. He claims that passive desires can be good (4app3) and that our understanding and power benefit from experience (4p38; 2p13post4), which requires our being passively affected by external objects.<sup>22</sup> He also admits that there are passive joys, which entails that being passively affected by objects can increase our power and, thus, be good.<sup>23</sup> Second, the reading suggests that an ethically ideal human would have no sensations, since they arise from our passivity to external things, a conclusion which has been criticized as patently absurd.<sup>24</sup> Third, the notion that all passivity is harmful has been criticized on ethical grounds as constituting an inhumane intolerance of weakness and vulnerability. Thus, Nussbaum claims that, for Spinoza, "passive dependence checks and inhibits our very being, which is a project of seeking our own flourishing. For Spinoza, in effect, the very humanness of life is a problem to be solved."<sup>25</sup>

While Spinoza is obviously concerned with the ways that passive emotions can harm us and our freedom, he says nothing to indicate that the passions, as a category, are necessarily bad, opposed to our virtue or freedom.<sup>26</sup> He claims only that our virtue consists in our activity, which

<sup>19</sup> It is very common to draw this conclusion in passing, for instance, see Sandler (2005, 73). The view is central to James' reading of Spinoza (see, for instance, 1993, 298–9; 2009, 223–4). While LeBuffe admits that the passions can have some value, he regards it as minimal, amounting to combating competing passions (2010, 19–21). The view is also held in a less explicit way by those who argue that the model of human nature is the free man, since this entails that Spinoza's ethics asks us to become perfectly active, having no passive affects. The most notable dissenters are Goldenbaum (2004) and Moreau (1994), who argues that Spinoza leaves an important role to experience as a necessary supplement to reason.

<sup>20</sup> See Smith (2003, 7), Irwin (2008, 191), Broad (1930, 30) and Bidney (1940, 300).

<sup>21</sup> See Levene (2004, xi), Youpa (2010a, 75).

<sup>22</sup> Spinoza's view on the value of experience is documented in Moreau (1994) and Curley (1973a).

<sup>23</sup> For this reason, Hoffman (1991) and LeBuffe (2009) regard Spinoza's view on the possibility of passive joy as a problem that must be solved. Kisner (2008) responds.

<sup>24</sup> This is Bennett's reason for arguing that Spinoza's theory of freedom is incoherent (1984, 324–6).

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum (2003, 502).

<sup>26</sup> The closest Spinoza comes to such a claim is in 4pref: "man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself,



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is consistent with the view that certain kinds of passivity can be good in the sense that they are conditions for our activity or help to promote our activity. On the contrary, focusing on Spinoza's view of freedom makes clear that he did not regard passivity or the passions as wholly negative. Spinoza defines freedom as being self-caused, which implies that no creature except God can be completely free. Consequently, in order to make sense of Spinoza's ethical claims about freedom, we must read his ethics as concerned with a distinct category of human freedom, the greatest degree of activity and self-determination achievable by us. This category of human freedom necessarily involves a degree of passivity in virtue of our nature as finite things, which necessarily depend on and are passive to external things. On this reading, achieving the ethical aim of freedom requires us to eliminate only the kinds of passivity and passions that harm our power. In fact, this aim requires us actually to increase other kinds of passivity, those which are required for and promote human activity. These include not only sensation, but also food, shelter and the friendship of rational people, since being passively affected by them leads us to imitate their behaviors. Along these lines, Chapter 10 shows that we develop the virtuous character largely through channeling our social tendency to imitate others. Furthermore, Chapter 9 argues that passive or inadequate ideas, on Spinoza's view, play an indispensable, positive role in practical and moral reasoning, allowing us to interpret and apply reason's practical directives and indicating morally salient features of practical situations, such as our own degree of perfection. In this way, my reading shows that Spinoza not only tolerates certain kinds of human passivity, but also embraces them as contributing positively to a life of freedom. Indeed, Spinoza identifies our highest good with the love of God, which amounts to a recognition of how our existence and powers depend on other things, as Chapter 7 argues.

Third, my reading shows that there is greater cross-pollination between Spinoza's ethics and politics than is often recognized. *Prima facie* one would expect these projects to be closely connected, since Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* at roughly the same time. Spinoza's circle and wider audience certainly regarded his radical politics as buttressed by his deeper metaphysical commitments. However, following the

but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse." However, the passage argues that our bondage consists not in merely *having* affects or passions, but rather in being so subject to them that one is unable to control himself. On this view, the passions do not lead us into bondage unless they render us unable to control ourselves. Since reason is essential to our nature, as I will argue, this entails that the passions are only harmful when they direct us contrary to reason.



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therapy reading tends to obscure the connection between the two projects, because it regards the ethics as primarily aiming to help rationally disposed people to eradicate false beliefs. Since Spinoza's politics is concerned with managing the masses, people who are generally too irrational to respond to – or, even, to be interested in – such assistance, this reading suggests that the ethics and politics have different aims and audiences, a conclusion which partly explains the unfortunate tendency to focus on only one set of writings, without considering how they illuminate one another.<sup>27</sup> This way of thinking has led some scholars to conclude that these projects are concerned with different and even inconsistent notions of freedom: the ethics aspires for the positive freedom that comes from liberating ourselves from the passions, whereas the politics aims for negative freedom in the sense of less restrictive political conditions. These two notions clearly cannot be equivalent since only the former requires rationality, whereas the latter is possible for even the passionate multitude.<sup>28</sup>

Focusing on freedom, however, illuminates the important connections between Spinoza's ethics and politics. While it is true that the politics is uniquely concerned with managing the inevitably irrational segment of the population, the works are unified by a common concern with helping people to attain freedom. Moreover, the projects are connected by a common conception of freedom, for Spinoza's politics aims to promote not freedom in the negative sense of an absence of government interference, but rather the positive, ethical freedom that comes from becoming more rational and, thus, virtuous citizens. In support of this view, Chapter 11 argues that Spinoza defends democracy on the grounds that citizens' participation in the activity of the state promotes their rationality. While Spinoza recognizes that not all people can become rational, he nevertheless advocates political measures that encourage rationality for all, from the most enlightened to the most brutish. Consequently, part of the task of Spinoza's political philosophy is to provide precisely the same sort of practical guidance as his ethics, indicating how to act in order to become free. It follows that political freedom is a subset of freedom generally; politics

<sup>27</sup> The claim that Spinoza's ethics and politics have fundamentally different aims in this sense is defended by Sacksteder (1975, 122) and Smith (1997, 11). The notion that the two projects are concerned with different populations, who have different capabilities and ambitions, is upheld by Smith (1997, 143; 2003, 6) and Yovel (1989b, 108). Strauss represents the most extreme version of this view, arguing that Spinoza's political writing cannot be read literally, since it is targeted at an audience that Spinoza regards as incapable of understanding his true views (1952, Chapter 5, especially 177–200).

<sup>28</sup> This view is defended by Sorrell (2008, 156–7). Prokhovnik similarly supposes that Spinoza distinguishes personal freedom from political liberty (2004, 203–8).

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is just one particular venue in which we can become self-determined and rational.

In addition to helping us understand Spinoza, my reading helps us to better appreciate the relevance of his views for ongoing philosophical discussion. In pursuing this line of argument, this book runs contrary to a recent trend in the history of philosophy – particularly of epistemology, metaphysics and natural philosophy – to shy away from considering how historical figures speak to contemporary concerns.<sup>29</sup> Part of the reason for this trend is the concern that such work imposes anachronistic concepts and categories, thereby distorting historical work. To address this concern, we should recognize at the outset that philosophical questions are framed with respect to a background of historically particular concerns and assumptions, such that the questions addressed by philosophers of the past are rarely the same as ours today. However, this recognition does not threaten the possibility of constructing a dialogue between current and historical philosophy. On the contrary, it makes the possibility of dialogue more appealing, since we stand to learn at least as much from the different ways that philosophical questions have been framed as we do from the way they have been answered. The history of philosophy reveals ways of thinking that, while once taken for granted, often appear surprising and original today. Conversely, history challenges us to see our own historical circumstances through the eyes of another, leading us to rethink views that we have taken for granted. In this way, history provides us with a fresh perspective over our own concerns and problems. The ongoing contributions of Aristotle, Hume and Kant to contemporary ethics provide familiar examples of how productive such dialogue can be.

I should be clear, however, that in aspiring to engage in, or, at least, to pave the way for such a dialogue with Spinoza's views on freedom, I do not aim to defend them in a robust sense. Doing so would require answering the most serious objections to Spinoza's views, showing that they can defend our deepest commitments and evaluating them with respect to other approaches, all given the standards of contemporary philosophy. I am in no position to take up such a task, if for no other reason, because Spinoza's ethical theory is too poorly understood for me to be able to take up this task without becoming mired in exegesis. Rather, I aim to do something that is a necessary preliminary to taking up such a project, to draw our attention to Spinoza's most promising views. Showing that his views are promising means considering their particular strengths in

<sup>29</sup> For a sympathetic explanation of this trend, see Garber (2001, Chapter 1).