

"A FREE MAN ALWAYS ACTS HONESTLY, NOT DECEPTIVELY":
FREEDOM AND THE GOOD IN SPINOZA'S *ETHICS*

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Spinoza devotes the last seven propositions of Part IV (PP67-73) of the *Ethics* to "the free man's temperament and manner of living."¹ Perhaps the most surprising and puzzling of these is IVP72, which asserts that:

(1) A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.

The proposition is surprising because by this point in the *Ethics* Spinoza seems already committed to three other claims which are jointly incompatible with it:

(2) It is always good to act so as to best preserve one's own being.

(3) One can sometimes best preserve one's own being by acting deceptively, not honestly.

(4) It is never good to act contrary to the way in which the free man acts.

This paradox is so striking and fundamental that we can hardly claim to understand, much less evaluate, Spinoza's ethical views unless we know how - or whether - it can be resolved. In this paper, I will be concerned with three questions. First, which if any of (1)-(4) would he reject? Secondly, which of these propositions *ought* he reject, given the fundamental character of his system? Thirdly, to what extent can the resulting ethical theory be an adequate one? I will proceed by considering each of (1)-(4) in turn, describing and evaluating both the grounds for ascribing the claim to Spinoza and the ways in which its ascription to him might be denied. I will argue that Spinoza accepts (1)-(3), and that he would and should reject (4). I will conclude by considering the consistency and practical acceptability of the resulting ethical theory.

I

(1) *A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.* The evidence for claiming that Spinoza accepts (1) appears at first sight to be incontrovertible: he explicitly asserts it as IVP72. But the simple fact that Spinoza *asserts* (1) does not by itself entail that he actually *accepts* it. To reach that conclusion, we require two additional suppositions: first, that he aims to act honestly, not deceptively, at IVP72; and secondly, that he accurately formulates - without, for example, inadvertent overstatement - the proposition that he intends. Either of these suppositions may be questioned.

With respect to the first supposition, the depth of Spinoza's commitment to honesty is precisely what is in question in the interpretation of IVP72; and to cite the proposition itself as evidence of that commitment would simply beg the question in this context. For suppose that Spinoza believes both of the

following: (A) that he would always do best to preserve his own being, or maximize his own advantage; and (B) that he can best preserve his own being or maximize his own advantage by insincerely claiming that the free man always acts honestly. Under those circumstances, consistency would not only *permit* him to make such an insincere claim, it would positively *require* it of him. Indeed, in thus asserting (1) insincerely, Spinoza might not even intend to deceive the truly wise or free among his readers. He might be aiming merely to obtain the honesty of the credulous or to mollify the ignorant, perhaps secure in the knowledge that those who had fully understood the preceding propositions would recognize both the ironic falsehood of (1) and the self-interested grounds that compelled him, from consistency with his own principles, to assert it.

The possibility that Spinoza asserts (1) insincerely cannot, therefore, be dismissed without a hearing. Nevertheless, it is not ultimately convincing, for two main reasons. First, when we seriously consider the proposition's context in the *Ethics* as a whole, it soon becomes implausible that Spinoza should suppose an insincere assertion of (1) actually to serve any useful purpose. Its mere inclusion in the *Ethics* would be unlikely to increase the honesty of others with whom he might have dealings. Nor could it be supposed to play any significant role in warding off persecution from persons otherwise likely to be scandalized by the *Ethics*. For reassuring as (1) is, it is hardly enough to remove the sting from Spinoza's thoroughgoing determinism, his denial of a personal God, his mind-body identity theory, or his rejection of such Christian virtues as pity, humility, and repentance. At the same time, the *Ethics*' straightforwardness about these other doctrines would undermine any attempt to use (1) ironically.

The second main reason is perhaps even more fundamental. If Spinoza did not accept (1), then not only the proposition itself but also the *demonstration* of it must be insincere. To be sure, Spinoza wrote demonstrations in *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* that he himself thought unsound - he must have thought them so, since he rejects some of their conclusions. But there is no internal or external evidence that he fails to take his own demonstration of (1) seriously. The demonstration contains nine explicit steps, the first of which is:

- (i) We call a man free only insofar as he acts from the dictate of reason.

This is stated at IVP66S, and is a consequence of his definition of freedom as adequate self-determination [ID7] and his identification of human self-determination with acting from reason [IIP1]. It directly entails:

- (ii) If a free man did anything by deception, he would do it from the dictate of reason.

He then cites IVP24, which is a central claim of Part IV:

(iii) Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage.

And from (ii) and (iii), he infers:

(iv) If a free man, insofar as he is free, did anything by deception, it would be a virtue to act deceptively.

This, I take it, means that if a free man, insofar as he is free, did anything by deception, then at least some kinds of deceptive actions would be virtues. So construed, it is a reasonable inference from (ii) and (iii), since (iii) identifies acting from virtue with acting by the guidance of reason. Also from (iii) he concludes:

(v) If it could be a virtue to act deceptively, then everyone would "be better advised" (*consultius esset*) to act deceptively to preserve his being.

This follows, given the additional but Spinozistic-sounding assumption that if one does something to preserve one's being "by the guidance of reason from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage," then one is "better advised" to do it. Next, he states:

(vi) If everyone would be better advised to act deceptively to preserve his being, then men would be better advised to agree only in words, and be contrary to one another in fact.

This claim depends only on the assumption that if one acts deceptively to preserve one's being, then one is agreeing with others only in words, and not in fact - a reasonable assumption, since whoever acts deceptively brings it about that others believe something that he himself does not believe or vice versa. Following this claim, he cites IVP31C, which states:

(vii) The more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, or better, it is for us, and conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature.

IVP31C is ultimately derived from two Spinozistic principles: that whatever pertains to a thing's nature tends to the preservation of its being, and that the same cause always produces the same effect. From (vii), in turn, he derives:

(viii) It is absurd that men would be better advised to agree only in words, and be contrary to one another in fact.

This inference requires only the plausible assumptions that (a) men are never "better advised" to pursue that which is not maximally useful to them, and that (b) "agreeing only in words while being contrary in fact" is a kind of "disagree-

ment in nature" between two parties. Finally, then, from (iv), (v), (vi), and (viii), it follows that:

(ix) A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.

This is, of course, IVP72 - and (1) - itself. Complex as this demonstration may be, it appears to consist of premises and inferences that Spinoza would be likely to accept; it does not look like an attempt at a fraudulent proof. Thus, the first supposition - that Spinoza aims to act honestly at IVP72 - seems warranted.

What of the other supposition, namely that he accurately formulates the proposition he intends? It might be argued that (1) - though not intentionally dishonest - is something of an overstatement, describing as universal what is true of the free man only generally speaking, or in most cases. But Spinoza seems specifically to block this suggestion, while reinforcing the serious intent of his original Demonstration, in the Scholium to IVP72:

Suppose someone now asks: what if a man could save himself from the present danger of death by treachery? Would not the principle of preserving his own being recommend, without qualification, that he be treacherous?

The reply to this is the same. If reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men should make agreements to join forces, and to have common laws only by deception - i.e., that they have no common laws. This is absurd.

Given the apparent sincerity of IVP72, the intent of this Scholium can only be to defend it from even the most plausible of the potential exceptions to it. Thus, I conclude that Spinoza means what he says when he claims that the free man always acts honestly, not deceptively, and that he means the claim to admit of no exceptions.

(2) *It is always good to act so as to best preserve one's own being.* IVD1 and IVD2 present the formal definitions of 'good' and 'evil':

Definition 1: By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us.

Definition 2: By evil, however, I shall understand what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good.

Since Spinoza identifies "one's own advantage" with "preserving one's being" (IVP20,S), however, he can also characterize good and evil in terms of self-preservation; and this is just what he does, citing IVD1 and IVD2 as support, at the outset of IVP8D: "We call good, or evil, what is useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being." (2) follows immediately.

Spinoza's commitment to (2) is thus both evident and fundamental. Since the good *is* the advantageous for Spinoza, and the advantageous *is* the preservation of one's own being, nothing can be better for oneself than self-preservation. To be sure, he also asserts that, "We know nothing to be

certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding" (IVP27). But the preservation of one's being is a logical prerequisite for having understanding; and this fact in itself prevents the preservation or increase of one's understanding from being a good that could *override* the preservation of one's being. Moreover, whatever leads to understanding, in Spinoza's view, by that very fact aids in the preservation of one's being, for two reasons. First, any maintenance or increase in understanding is a maintenance or increase in one's present power of action and the full realization of one's own nature, so that understanding literally *is* a preservation or amplification of one's own being. Secondly, precisely because it is the central element in one's active power and resources, maintaining or increasing one's present understanding also promotes the *future* preservation of one's being.

Spinoza also makes it clear that one's own good cannot be overridden by the good or advantage of any other being. For example, he offers a prospectus of his theory of the relation among different persons' interests at IVP18S:

There are... many things outside us which are useful to us, and *on that account to be sought*. Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those that agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing *more helpful to the preservation of his being* than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all. [emphasis added]

Here Spinoza characteristically emphasizes the extent to which the advantage of different individual persons can coincide. Nevertheless, he states that the interests of other individuals enter into one's own considerations only through their usefulness *to oneself*. This is just what one should expect, given his claim at IIIP20S that "no one, therefore, unless he is defeated by causes external, and contrary, to his nature, neglects to seek his own advantage, or preserve his being," and his claim at IVApp8 that "it is permissible for everyone to do, by the highest right of nature, what he judges will contribute to his advantage."²

Nor can the good or advantage of eternal things - such as "the idea that expresses the essence of this or that human Body, under a species of eternity" (VPP22-23), "the part of the Mind that is eternal" (VPP38-39), or even God himself - override one's own preservation as a good. For nothing can hinder or aid the preservation of an eternal being, nor can such beings have any potential objects of desire for themselves. Hence there is nothing for their "advantage" or "good" to consist in. To be sure, *an individual person* has an advantage in bringing it about that his present stock of eternal (and hence always-existing) ideas should remain as part of *his* mind, and also that it should come to be supplemented by other equally eternal and adequate ideas. But this is simply for that individual to increase his *own* knowledge, and not for him to benefit these eternal ideas. As we have seen, such an increase is not, for

Spinoza, incompatible with one's own advantage or preservation, but is instead precisely that in which one's own highest advantage and preservation consist.

Thus, the good, for Spinoza, is the advantageous; that which is most advantageous to oneself is one's own preservation; and the advantage of others cannot be ranked ahead of one's own as a good, even in the case of those beings that do have an "advantage." I conclude, therefore, that he is fully committed to (2), without exception.³

3. *One can sometimes best preserve one's own being by acting deceptively, not honestly.* Although Spinoza maintains that the greatest good - understanding - can be enjoyed equally by all (IVP36), he also holds that for the mind to be "equally capable of understanding many things," the body must be "equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature" (IVP45S), so that the pursuit of understanding also requires intermediate goods to keep the body functioning properly. Thus he states at IVP39:

Those things are good which bring about the preservation of the proportion of motion and rest the human Body's parts have to one another [i.e., continued life]; on the other hand, those things are evil which bring it about that the parts of the human Body have a different proportion of motion and rest to one another [i.e., death, as IVP39S indicates].

And again, at E IVApp27:

The principal advantage which we derive from things outside us... lies in the preservation of our body. That is why those things are most useful to us which can feed and maintain it, so that all its parts can perform their function properly.

It seems an unmistakable fact, however, that circumstances can arise in which one's physical life can be preserved only by actions that would ordinarily be regarded as deceptive. Certainly there are cases in which successful competition for a limited supply of physical necessities will demand such actions. Moreover, there are also cases in which such actions are necessary to ward off an external danger - for example, when escape from immediate execution requires fraudulently offering one's guards a sum of money that one cannot actually command. Were it not for the Scholium to IVP72, it might be suggested that the abstractness of Spinoza's argument prevents him from noticing such cases. But the Scholium makes it clear that he has indeed noticed the possibility of such cases, and takes them seriously.

Given that he recognizes cases in which death can be avoided only by actions ordinarily deemed deceptive, then, Spinoza could deny (3) only by holding either (a) that preserving one's physical life in such cases does not constitute "*best preserving one's being*," or (b) that preserving one's physical life in such cases does not constitute "*deception*." Let us consider the first of these alternatives.

Spinoza makes several mitigating claims about physical death. He asserts that "a free man thinks of nothing less than of death" (IVP67); that "the more

the Mind understands things... the less it fears death" (VP38; see also VP39-S); and that "death is less harmful to us, the greater the Mind's clear and distinct knowledge, and hence, the more the Mind loves God... [T]he human Mind can be of such a nature that the part of the Mind which we have shown perishes with the body... is of no moment in relation to what remains" (VP38S).

Upon examination, however, none of these remarks implies that one can ever best preserve one's being by actually choosing death over an alternative that involves continued life. The free man does not think of death, according to Spinoza, simply because he directly pursues the good rather than avoiding evil; hence the free man directly pursues the good of life, rather than being consumed with thoughts of death (IVP67D). The person with understanding has less fear of death because he is less subject to negative affects in general (VP38D). He is also less harmed by death, since, to the extent that a person gains knowledge, he brings it about that a greater and more important part of his mind consists of knowledge that is eternal. This means that a relatively smaller and far less significant portion of his mind is something that is absolutely destroyed by death (VP38D). As one gains in understanding, one begins to approximate, *as a limit*, a state in which one would be totally unaffected by death, or any other potential harm. But this limit could actually be reached only by an infinite being whose mind contained all knowledge and was not at all bound by imagination. Hence, Spinoza's doctrine does not entail that death could ever cease to be *of any harm at all for any finite human being*, who must remain a part of nature (IIIP4). On the contrary, death does constitute for us the end of at least *some* portion of the mind, even if the least important part, and hence constitutes a failure to preserve one's being completely. Moreover, death is the end of any prospect of further *increasing* one's understanding or that portion of one's mind that *is* eternal; indeed, it is the end of any prospect of *additional* gain at all. Thus, Spinoza writes at IVP21:

No one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time he desires to be, to act, and to live, i.e., to actually exist.

Hence, despite the *declining* importance of death to the wise man, any actual human being who acts, even deceptively, so as to save his physical life will always preserve his being better to at least some extent than one who does not.

The second approach to denying (3) would be to argue that no action can properly be regarded as *deceptive* if it is required to preserve one's being. Spinoza maintains, following Hobbes, that it is impossible completely to promise or contract away one's right of self-preservation, regardless of what one may say or do (TTP XVII; see also TP II-III). As a consequence, he holds that all compacts and promises should be understood to be operative only so long as they do not conflict with the preservation of one's being, since no compact or promise could possibly prevent one from pursuing the preservation of one's being. Because compacts and promises have this implicit limitation, it might be suggested, "violating" them for the sake of self-preservation is not, in Spinoza's view, really deception.

This suggestion is unsatisfactory, however, for several reasons. First, although Spinoza states explicitly (TTP XVI) that everyone has the right to break a promise when he judges that doing so will be advantageous (a minimal claim that follows from his assertion that 'right' and 'power' are co-extensive), he nevertheless characterizes such actions as practices of *deceit* (see also TP III, 17). And he does not give any indication that he is using the term 'deception' in any more restricted way in the *Ethics*. On the contrary, IVP72 and its Scholium strongly imply that he is speaking of deceit in the ordinary sense. For the reason why deception cannot be a virtue is said to be that it produces a circumstance in which persons do not agree in nature. And every case of deception in the ordinary sense - whether for self-preservation or not - is a case in which persons disagree in nature, since deception of any kind entails producing in others beliefs different from one's own.

Thus, although he does not assert (3) explicitly, Spinoza's position clearly commits him to it, and does so in such a way that he could hardly have been unaware of that commitment.

(4) *It is never good to act contrary to the way in which the free man acts.* In Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza characterizes actions in four different ways, each *prima facie* relevant to ethics: he speaks (a) of "good" actions, or of those that achieve "a good"; (b) of actions performed "under the guidance of reason," or "from the dictate of reason"; (c) of actions performed "from virtue," or whose performance is "a virtue"; and (d) of actions that "a free man" would perform. Commentators generally treat the four characterizations as co-extensive. And this procedure appears to have some basis in the text. For according to IVP18S, "reason demands... that everyone... seek his own advantage... (and) preserve his own being as far as he can," i.e., do that which is good for him; (IVD1, IVP8D) while IVP66S states that "one who is led by reason... I call... a free man." These statements seem to imply that "good actions" and "actions of a free man" are both co-extensive with "actions performed from the dictate of reason," and hence that they are also co-extensive with each other - which entails (4). Virtue, in turn, enters in through IVP24 (cited in the demonstration of IVP72) which asserts that "acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being... by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage."

But does Spinoza really intend *all* of these terms to be co-extensive? He devotes the Preface of Part IV to just two evaluative distinctions: "perfection and imperfection, good and evil." He begins by explaining the use of the term 'perfect' (*perfectus*, from *perficere*) in terms of its etymological sense of "completed" or "finished." Originally, he maintains, the term referred only to artifacts known or believed to be completed in the way intended by their authors. Under the influence of the false supposition that nature creates everything for a purpose, however, the term gradually came to refer more generally to the extent to which a thing, even a natural object, matches the generic "model" of its kind that each person forms on the basis of his own common experience.⁴ Thus the term generally reflects only a "mode of thinking" rather than a real feature of the objects themselves, and is applied differently by different persons

depending on the character of the "universal ideas" or models that they happen to have formed. 'Good,' in contrast, primarily expresses our desire for something; as he has already claimed at IIP9S, we do not "desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it." Thus, it too reflects only a mode of thinking, and indicates "nothing positive in things, considered in themselves," since "Music is good for one who is *Melancholy*, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf." It too is highly variable in its application, since what is judged to be good will depend on the judge's particular desires, which are often passions.

Spinoza's intent is to adapt these previously subjective predicates to designate objective practical *relations*. Thus he concludes near the end of the Preface:

But though this is so, still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, 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. (See also TdIE, 13, which is similar.)

Although the definitions of both pairs of terms employ the notion of a "model of human nature," they are by no means identical. The perfect/imperfect distinction, as defined here, applies only to persons, whereas the good/evil distinction applies to things of all kinds, including actions. Once we have the concept of perfection, of course, we can also speak of the actions that the perfect man would perform. But, although the point has apparently not been noted, even this latter concept need not be co-extensive with the concept of good actions. Someone is *perfect* to the extent that he presently *approximates* to the model or ideal; whereas something is *good* to the extent that it *aids us in becoming like* this model or ideal. *Prima facie*, there is no reason why an action that would be good for someone to perform, in this sense, should also be the action that the perfect man *would* perform - unless, perhaps, the agent in question were already perfect.

Consider an analogy. Suppose that our model or ideal were that of a person leading the characteristic life of the idle rich. Now, for someone who is already one of the idle rich, idle behavior would be "good" in the sense that it would help him to remain or become even more like the chosen model. For the poor man, however - who aspires to the model without having yet achieved it - idle behavior would be an "evil," likely to prevent him from obtaining the wealth needed to live the life of the idle rich; for him, in contrast, hard work would be a "good." The point is a simple one: when one has not yet achieved a certain kind of existence, the actions that one must perform in order to achieve

it are not necessarily the actions that one will characteristically perform once one has achieved it.

After concluding his discussion of perfection and goodness in the Preface, Spinoza begins Part IV itself by offering formal, numbered definitions of 'good' and 'evil' (IVDD1-2), and goes on to use them frequently. Strikingly, however, despite the fact that by far the largest part of Part IV's Preface is devoted to a discussion of them, 'perfect' and its cognates do not occur at all in the Definitions, Axioms, Propositions or Demonstrations of Part IV, and they occur only four times, all in passing, in the Scholia (twice in IV 18S, once each in IVP45S and IVP58S). This omission is explicable, however. For the Preface defines "perfection" in terms of approximation to "the model that we set before ourselves," without actually specifying what that model is. The model itself is developed gradually throughout the course of Part IV, culminating in the portrait of the free man at IVP 67-72. (Presumably this initial lack of specificity about the model is also what accounts for the variation in the definition of "good," which is defined at IVD1 simply in terms of what is useful "to us," rather than in terms of what is useful for "approaching nearer to our model of human nature," as in the Preface.) Hence, we are to understand what human perfection is, and how the perfect man acts, in large measure at least, by understanding what the free man is, and how the free man acts. Freedom provides a specification of what human perfection actually consists in.

But for the same reason that the class of "good actions" need not be co-extensive with "actions of a perfect man," in Spinoza's sense, they also need not be co-extensive with "actions of a free man." Thus, I propose that we interpret Spinoza as holding *both* that the *ideal* or model free man would never act deceptively, *and* that deception may under some circumstances nevertheless be good for actual human beings who have not fully achieved this ideal. These circumstances will be the (generally rare) ones under which deception is genuinely necessary to preserve one's life or otherwise aid in the preservation of one's being.⁵

II

This proposed interpretation resolves the original paradox by rejecting (4). Before it can be accepted, however, it must be examined in greater detail. In particular, we must consider whether it is compatible with (a) IVP72 itself; (b) the Demonstration of IVP72; (c) the Scholium to IVP72; and (d) the remainder of Part IV.

IVP72 requires that the ideal free man would *never* act deceptively; but in discussing (3), we concluded that - for Spinoza - any actual human being *would* always best preserve his being by choosing an act of deception over death, if those were the only alternatives. Since the free man always does what is best to preserve his own being, we may appear to be involved in a contradiction that the mere rejection of (4) cannot resolve. In fact, however, what this shows is only that no actual human being is the ideal free man. But this consequence is just what we should expect, since the concept of a *completely*

free man involves a contradiction. From a thing's being completely free, it follows that it is completely self-determined and utterly independent of external causes; on the other hand, from a thing's being a man, it follows that it is necessarily a part of nature and subject to external causes. Like the concept of the complete "agreement in nature" among persons that would result in a complete coinciding of interests and advantage (see note 2), or like the complete understanding that would make the whole of one's mind eternal so that death mattered not at all, the concept of the free man is the concept of a limit that can be approached but not completely attained by finite human beings.⁶

The final unattainability of these ideals does not completely undermine their cognitive value for Spinoza, however. For they can be used to convey at least two important things: first, that the presence of one characteristic can be fully explained through the presence of another characteristic; and second, that the former characteristic will - other things being equal - vary with the increase or decrease of the latter. Thus, the beneficiality of human beings to one another can be fully explained through their agreement in nature, and will tend to increase as that agreement increases. Lack of concern with death can be fully explained through the eternal part of the mind, and the mind will tend to have less fear of death as this part of the mind becomes a larger part of the whole. Similarly, a person's honesty (when it is a consequence of the endeavor to agree in nature with others) can be fully explained through his freedom, and his honesty will tend to increase along with his freedom, in Spinoza's view. For as a person becomes more free, he will lose the characteristic motives for dishonesty: he will forego the pursuit of temporary, competitive goods such as wealth, fame, and sensual pleasure; he will come to understand more clearly the value of society, friendship, and human aid, and the importance of honesty in procuring those goods; he will become more able to achieve goods by cooperative rather than deceptive means; and he will become less and less susceptible to harm. On the other hand, whenever deception is still required, it must be explained at least partly through the person's lack of freedom, including his dependence on external goods and his inability to achieve his ends by the more permanently beneficial means of producing agreement in nature between himself and others. Hence, those who are most free will also be most honest. Insofar as they are free, they will never deceive; though it will nevertheless remain true that, insofar as they are living, finite, human beings, they cannot be assured that they will never find it necessary to do so.

The proposed interpretation is thus compatible with IVP72; and it is also, I believe, compatible with its Demonstration. As we have seen, the demonstration seeks in effect to provide a *reductio ad absurdum* of the supposition that a free man could act deceptively "*insofar as he is free*." Insofar as he is free, Spinoza argues, the free man acts from the dictate of reason, hence virtuously, and hence does what he is "better advised" to do. But deception is an instance of persons failing to agree in nature, whereas what is best, or maximally useful, is that persons should agree in nature. Hence, he concludes, a free man cannot act deceptively insofar as he is free. The only difficulty here is with the meaning of the phrase 'be better advised' (*consultius esset*). The demonstration entails

(via the simple conjunction of steps (vi) and (viii)) that one can never be "better advised" to act deceptively to preserve one's being. Hence, if we interpret "one is better advised to do x" as simply equivalent to "it would be good for one to do x," then it will follow that it can never be good to act deceptively, contrary to the proposed interpretation.

I see no reason to interpret the two expressions as equivalent, however. Indeed, if we do so, we threaten to invalidate Spinoza's inference from (vii) to (viii) (i.e., from the claim that things are best for us as they most agree with our nature, to the claim that it is absurd that men would be "better advised" to agree only in words and not in fact). For it is *not always good* to refrain from an action that will produce a less-than-optimal state of affairs - not unless the alternative of producing the optimal state instead is actually *within one's power*. More specifically, it need not be good for one to refrain from deception, even though it involves a lack of agreement in nature between persons, *if all* of one's actually-feasible alternatives *also* involve a lack of agreement in nature - such as competition for scarce life-saving goods - plus greater harms as well. (Compare, for example, IVP58S, which asserts that Shame, "though not a virtue," is still "a good" if the only alternative is conceived as that of being shameless through lack of desire to live honestly.) Hence, if the Demonstration is to be valid, we must understand "better advised to do x" as meaning something more like "*ideally* advised to do x." With that understanding, there is no conflict between the Demonstration and the proposed interpretation.

Before leaving IVP72, we must also consider its Scholium. There, as we have seen, Spinoza asks whether, if one faced a choice between death and treachery, the principle of preserving one's own being would not "recommend without qualification" that one be treacherous. His response is that "if reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men should make agreements to join forces, and to have common laws only by deception," which he says is absurd. On the proposed interpretation, the principle of preserving one's own being *does* sometimes recommend treachery or deception - but it does *not* do so "without qualification." Specifically, it does not ever do so for the (ideal) free man, whose character is directly under discussion. To the perfectly free man, even death would be no harm whatever; rather, he would seek only to maximize the agreement in nature between himself and others. Similar considerations apply to the question of whether "*reason*" can recommend deception "without qualification." *Insofar as* one is guided by reason, one maximizes one's agreement in nature with others and cannot be harmed even by death, since the part of the mind involved in reason is eternal. In fact, since the free man's freedom *consists* in his having and acting on adequate ideas, the ideal of a life completely guided by reason is simply another way of formulating the ideal of the completely free man. Moreover, reason itself, because it can be common to everyone, must give the same counsel to all, as the Scholium implies. It therefore cannot dictate the preservation of one being *over* another. The fact that our necessary preference for our own being is *not* at the same time

equally a preference for preserving the being of others, arises not from our common reason but rather (inevitably) from our passivity, finiteness, and hence lack of agreement in nature with others. If we were *perfectly* guided by reason, our good and the good of others would indeed *perfectly* coincide.

Finally, the proposed interpretation must be reconciled with the passages cited at the beginning of the present section [viz., IV 18S, IVD1, IVD8, IV 66S] which seemed jointly to suggest a commitment on Spinoza's part to (4). The key passage is the one at IVP18S, which reads in full:

Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it demands 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. [emphasis added]

This seems to entail that, if deception is advantageous and hence good under some circumstances - as the proposed interpretation requires - then reason will demand deception; and since (by IVP66S and IVP72D) the free man does what reason dictates, it seems to follow that the free man will, after all, engage in deception. First, however, it must be noted *why* reason is said to demand that everyone seek his own advantage: because reason demands nothing contrary to nature. But for Spinoza, *nothing* occurs "contrary to nature," so that in this sense, everything whatever occurs by the "demand of reason." It is one thing to say that certain behavior is "demanded by reason" in this sense, and another to say that the behavior can be attributed entirely to one's *own exercise* of reason, or to reason as it is manifested in the agent himself. Secondly, it is quite compatible with the present interpretation that reason in each person *should* demand the preservation of that person's being, in the sense that whatever one does from the dictate of reason is, to that extent, conducive to one's own being. The present interpretation requires only that for those who are not governed entirely by reason - everyone at some time or another - some of the acts conducive to the preservation of one's being may not be *entirely* due to reason, or freedom. For both of these reasons, the passages cited need not entail a commitment to (4); hence the passages are compatible with the present interpretation.

The interpretation I have proposed and defended is thus compatible with everything Spinoza claims in the *Ethics*. It not only resolves the original paradox, it also provides the only resolution of that paradox that does not violate fundamental Spinozistic doctrines. Finally, it is strongly suggested by his account of perfection and the good in the Preface to Part IV. I therefore conclude that he both should and would have rejected (4) for the reasons suggested by that interpretation.

III

Consistency and Practical Acceptability. Of the various tests to which ethical theories can be submitted, two of the most fundamental are those of consistency

and practical acceptability. An adequate ethical theory must be internally consistent; and it must also be such that we can, upon critical reflection, eventually bring ourselves to accept the judgments of approval and disapproval that the theory makes of various actions and features of character. Spinoza's ethical theory is, I believe, often thought to fail one or both of these tests - particularly with respect to IVP72.

I have already argued that Spinoza is guilty of no direct inconsistency in the case of the paradox considered, since he rejects the last of the four jointly inconsistent propositions. Nor is his theory rendered inconsistent through its employment of such literally contradictory models as that of the "free man." For Spinoza intends his assertions about such models to be understood only as describing certain relationships between two or more variable characteristics - in the present case, freedom and honesty - of real individuals. (See TdIE, 57 for a discussion of the way in which formulations that verbally resemble discussions of "fictions" can be used to state truths.) And although the completely free, reasonable, and virtuous man is a necessarily unreachable ideal, it is by no means unusual for an ethical theory to put forward an ideal that cannot, by the theory's own lights, be fully achieved by any actual person. It is also not inconsistent to characterize as "good" some actions that are not regarded as completely "free," "reasonable," or "virtuous." Spinoza aims, of course, to minimize the divergence between the "good" and the "perfect." Nevertheless, some residual divergence is inevitable in his theory, as is evident most clearly in the case of choosing between death and deception. But some such divergence is a potential feature of any ethical theory that places, as Spinoza's does, primary emphasis or value on features of character: in any such theory, the possibility exists, unless blocked by special features of the theory, that actions necessary to achieve the valued character should be different from those manifested by the valued character. Although this is certainly a complication in an ethical theory, it is not a contradiction.

This complication does, however, pose some initial difficulty when we try to subject Spinoza's ethical theory to the test of practical acceptability. For we cannot determine whether we can accept a theory's judgments of approval and disapproval until we can determine what those judgments are; and it is not initially clear what actions and features of character Spinoza's theory does approve. The *Ethics* avoids mere exhortation, aiming instead to state and demonstrate facts that will themselves be inherently motivating. But *whose* motivation provides the test of "approval"? On the one hand, we can speak of what the perfectly free man would be motivated to do by his knowledge (i.e., what actual persons would do *insofar* as they were motivated only by reason and not by features of their finiteness); *or* we can speak, on the other hand, of what even the most free and most knowledgeable of finite human beings would *actually* be motivated to do, given their finite knowledge and their finite situation. The perfectly free man would never be motivated to deceive others or harm their interests; an actual, relatively-free individual, however, can at any time find himself in circumstances in which he *would* be necessarily motivated to deceive or otherwise harm others for his own advantage. Should we think

of Spinoza's ethical theory as "approving" the self-preserving deceptions of relatively free individuals, on the grounds that the theory pronounces those actions "good" for those individuals? Or should we rather think of such actions as outside the approval of the theory, on the grounds that they are - though predictable and even inevitable - due at least in part to our personal limitations and differences, and thus foreign to the very highest ethical ideals we can hold in common?

One way to resolve this interpretive dilemma is to ask what kinds of actions and features of character Spinoza or the Spinozist *himself* would approve. The affects that come closest to capturing ethical approval and disapproval are "favor" (*favor*, translated by Elwes as "approval," and by Shirley as "approbation") and "indignation" (*indignatio*).⁷ The former is defined as "Love toward someone who has benefited another," while the latter is defined as "Hate toward someone who has done evil to another" (IIIDefAff19, 20). Given these terms, we can now ask what the Spinozistic attitude would be toward someone who, for example, employs deceptive means to preserve his own life at the expense of the lives of several innocent persons; or toward someone who, in the same circumstances, chooses to sacrifice his own life to save the others.

Let us consider first the person who chooses deception and self-preservation. It follows from IVP51S that the Spinozist's attitude toward him will not be one of indignation, for Spinoza there asserts that "Indignation, as we define it... is necessarily evil." (Certainly many critics will hold that the Spinozist's lack of indignation - in this case, and in general - by itself demonstrates that the theory cannot pass the test of practical acceptability. I am inclined to think, on the contrary, that the doctrine that indignation is always an evil is one of the theory's most attractive features.) But if the Spinozist will not respond with indignation, neither will he respond with favor. For favor is a species of love, which, in turn, is defined as "Joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause" (IIIP13S). Although the deceiver has benefited himself, he has also harmed others directly and harmed the institution of honesty as well. He will therefore not have produced much joy in the Spinozist. Nor will he himself have been the free or adequate cause of his own action, since to the *extent* that a person is free, he acts honestly and not deceptively. For each of these two reasons, he will not be the object of love or favor for his action. Rather, the Spinozistic attitude toward such a person will be that his action was a predictable phenomenon of nature, due in part to inevitable human weakness and deserving to be understood, but calling for neither indignation nor favor.

What, then, of the person who makes the opposite choice, sacrificing through honesty his own life for the sake of benefiting others? Once again the Spinozist will not respond with indignation, since it is an evil. Favor, on the other hand, "is not contrary to reason, but can agree with it and arise from it" (IVP51). Yet in the case of any actual self-sacrificing person, self-sacrifice cannot be due to the person's being so completely free that his own death does not matter to him at all. Any actual person who sacrifices his own life must therefore be failing to achieve his own advantage and the preservation of his own being. Hence the sacrifice must be the result of his being overcome by

passions, such as pity, passionate love, fear of regret or punishment, or a misguided desire for fame or praise. For this reason, even though the action is beneficial to others, the person himself cannot be regarded as the free or adequate cause of the benefit. The Spinozist would therefore respond with little favor towards the agent, once again regarding his action instead only as an operation of nature - this time, perhaps, a more fortunate one - that results in innocent lives being saved. Thus on *neither* alternative would any actual person facing a choice between deception and death win Spinozistic favor. This is an example of a situation - that in which one can *benefit* others only by deceiving them is another - in which there simply can be no completely virtuous action to perform, because the situation itself involves a conflict that manifests ultimate lack of power.

The conclusion which seems to follow, namely that Spinoza would never approve of a person who sacrificed his own life to save the lives of innocent persons, may be taken by many to show that his ethics cannot, after all, pass the test of practical acceptability. However, it is somewhat misleading to conclude that *Spinoza* would not approve of such a person. For just as we must distinguish the *actions* of the ideal free man from those of even the most free of actual persons, so we must distinguish the ethical *reactions* of the ideal free man from those of even the most free actual persons. Insofar as Spinoza himself is governed by reason, he will neither approve nor disapprove of self-sacrifice. But insofar as he himself is a part of nature, and as such is subject to affects not entirely rational, it is quite possible that, through his imaginative fellow-feeling with others and the natural tendency to ascribe freedom to human actions whose causes we do not know in detail, Spinoza himself might feel some considerable favor or approval for a self-sacrificing individual - and perhaps even some indignation towards the person who preserves himself through deception.

Thus, if we find that we cannot fully bring ourselves to adopt the ethical attitudes that Spinoza claims one must adopt insofar as one is guided by reason alone, Spinoza might well agree that we cannot permanently and completely attain those attitudes. Any actual human being will be influenced in his ethical judgments not only by pure reason, but by his passions as well. Spinoza would add only that, as we come to gain understanding, we must then at least *begin* to approximate those reasonable attitudes more closely. This claim, if not obviously right, is at least not obviously wrong. Spinoza's *own* ethics at least, even if not also those of the Spinozistic perfectly free man, are arguably capable of passing the test of practical acceptability.

Conclusion. In this paper, I have argued that Spinoza does not contradict other doctrines in the *Ethics* when he claims that the free man always acts honestly, not deceptively. I believe that, in coming to understand the reasons why he can make this claim without contradiction, we gain a better appreciation of the character of his ethical theory in general, and of the considerations that are involved in assessing its practical acceptability. I have not shown that his ethical theory is consistent in all of its parts, nor that it is practically acceptable in all of its consequences, nor that it passes the other important tests to which

an ethical theory might be subjected. A fortiori, I have not shown that it is true. I do hope at least to have suggested, however, that Spinoza's ethical theory has greater resources, and is of greater plausibility and philosophical interest, than is sometimes supposed.

1. All quotations are from Curley (1985), sometimes modified to incorporate corrections made in the second printing.

2. It may be noted that the passage cited from IVP18S mentions another kind of being in addition to individual persons: the "one Mind and one Body" that all persons who strive together can compose. Certainly the advantage of this composite being will be the overriding good *for that composite being*, just as the advantage of an individual human being overrides the advantage of any individual bodily organ *for that human being*. But this does not entail that the advantage of the composite being as a whole could, in a case of conflict, override the advantage of an individual part or member *for that part or member*. Spinoza clearly implies the contrary when discussing the advantage of parts of the human body at IVP60,D.

Steinberg, "Spinoza's Ethical Doctrine," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22 (1984), 303-324, argues that the relations of organs to the whole body and to each other provide a model of how human beings can be so related that the true advantage of each must always completely coincide with the advantage of mankind as a whole, and hence also with that of every other human being. Unfortunately, however, these relations cannot provide the required model. The well-being of an organ, though intimately related to that of the body of which it is a part, does not completely coincide with it. The preservation of a particular body may require, for example, the non-preservation of one of its organs (as in cases of surgical removal); correlatively, the preservation of a particular organ may be a long-term harm to the body as a whole. The well-being of an organ also does not coincide completely with the well-being of any other individual organ - for example, when medical treatment needed to save one organ causes the death of another. Steinberg's conception does not explain why the advantage of an individual human being cannot similarly diverge from the advantage of another human being or from that of mankind as a whole - particularly in such crucial cases as a forced choice between dishonesty and death.

To be sure, Spinoza does hold that when human beings gain in understanding, they agree more closely in nature with one another (IVP35). And if human beings ever became *exactly* alike in nature, their advantages would then necessarily coincide completely (IVP31). But this ideal is only an approachable limit, not a completely attainable possibility. For as long as human beings remain finite parts of nature, they will always differ in at least *some* respects. Most importantly, perhaps, the specific "actual essence" of human being X will always be an endeavor to preserve the being of X, whereas the actual essence of human being Y will always be an endeavor to preserve the being of Y (IIIP7). One's own being, though greatly aided by other human beings of similar nature, does not literally entail and is not literally entailed by the being of any or all others. Hence, one's own good or preservation cannot be *identified* with the good or preservation of other persons or of mankind as a whole.

3. For a way of denying (2) based on a reading of IVDD1-2 that I reject, however, see note 5 below.

4. Even the term's most general and objective philosophical sense, in which it refers to a thing's degree of reality or being, is originally due to this same false supposition, combined with the tendency to think of all individuals in Nature as members of a single kind or genus. This is a sense that Spinoza has already employed at IP11S and IID6, and he regards his account of the "perfect man," described below, as a special case of this philosophically useful - though etymologically unfortunate - meaning of the term. (See also KV II, 4.) For

good discussions of Spinoza on moral language, see Edwin Curley, "Spinoza's Moral Philosophy," in Grene (1973), 354-376; and Bennett (1984), 289-299. However, Curley suggests taking "perfection" to be an absolute notion and "goodness" to be a matter of approximation; he otherwise draws no distinction between them (see especially p. 359). Bennett suggests that the notion of a "model of human nature" in the Preface to Part IV is a "relic" of an earlier period of composition, and plays no role in the body of Part IV. 5. Two paradoxes similar to the original one can be generated by replacing the term 'good' in (1)-(4) with 'a dictate of reason' and 'a virtue,' respectively. Since Spinoza equates "the free man's actions" with "actions done from the dictate of reason," (IVP66S and IVP72D) and further equates the latter with "actions done from virtue," (IVP24 and IVP72D) he cannot deny the resulting correlates of (4). Precisely because of their equivalence to the actions of the ideal free man, however, the requirements of virtue and reason cannot, in his view, exhaust the good or the self-preserving for finite human beings. Thus, he would reject the resulting correlates of (2). So, for example, where preserving one's own being requires deception, doing so will be neither a dictate of reason nor a virtue - though it is a personal good. (For what *may* be a weaker use of 'reason,' according to which reason "teaches" whatever is advantageous under the circumstances, see TP II, 17.)

It should also be noted that one might insist on treating the first person plural as essential to Spinoza's definitions of 'good' and 'evil.' On this interpretation, the "good" would be only that which we know to be useful to *all of us*. If a case should then arise in which the preservation of one's own being would conflict with the welfare of others, there would simply be no "good" thing to do. Although the text does not completely rule out this reading of his definitions, I do not believe that he intends it. However, if we do read the definitions in this way, then Spinoza must accept (4) but deny (2). For the "good" would then be restricted to that which reason could counsel all men jointly, so that good would become co-extensive with the perfect - at the expense of losing some of its connection to the preservation of one's *own* being.

6. Bennett (1984), 317, rightly suggests that we "might see the concept of the 'free man' as a theoretically convenient limiting case, like the concept of an 'ideal gas.'"

7. Although Spinoza also writes of "praise" (*laus*) and "blame" (*vituperium*), these are defined (IIIP29S) as "the Joy with which we imagine the action of another by which he has striven to please us," and as "the Sadness with which we are averse to his action," respectively. Favor and indignation are thus both more general in their scope and less tied to the imagination.

Colofon

Don Garrett, 'A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively': Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's 'Ethics'. In: Edwin Curley & Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and directions: The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference* (1986: Chicago, Ill.). Leiden: Brill, 1990, pp. 221-238.