

## Spinoza's Free Man

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It is difficult to know what to make of Spinoza's free (or perfect) man. On the one hand, the free man is clearly meant to be a role model for us as we can see in Spinoza's discussion of him in part IV of the *Ethics*. In that discussion we find that the free man obeys reason alone, recognizes that things are good or evil only with respect to our own ends, acts honestly, repays wickedness with nobility, endeavors that others be free in order that they assist him, contemplates life and never death, and loves God above all else. He is called "free" because he is free from the passions: as a master of his own fate, he acts only in the purest self-interest, and is never determined to act by things external to him. The free man "complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life" (IVP66S).<sup>1</sup> But on the other hand, Spinoza makes it perfectly clear that it is strictly impossible for us to become this free man. In IVP4 he demonstrates that each human is always a part of nature and so will always be subject to some external influence. Hence it is not only impossible for us to evolve into perfect humans, but it is also strictly impossible that there be a perfect finite object of any kind. To be perfect, according to Spinoza, a thing must be infinite, since only infinite things have

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<sup>1</sup>*The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, translated and edited by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 584. I follow Curley's citation conventions.

nothing more powerful than themselves that can affect them. Spinoza's perfect man is then an impossible chimera for us, or indeed for anyone, since he is himself impossible.

Now at first this impossibility of the free man seems to be less of a problem than it really is. For there is nothing wrong with striving toward an unreachable goal if there is benefit in the striving. As an athlete you may strive in earnest to be as strong as Hercules, and though you will never execute the fabled twelve labors, you will still become stronger than you would be if you had not set Hercules as your model. We might think initially that this is what Spinoza had in mind with respect to our philosophical constitution: strive as you might to become this impossible figure, and though you will never attain such perfection, you will end up as blessed as can be. The free man is thus an impossible goal, but a useful heuristic.

But we cannot be satisfied with this happy moral since other passages in Spinoza's writings suggest that human freedom *can* be attained. For example, in the final chapters of the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza writes of a "true freedom" that he evidently thinks humans can attain through the intellectual love of God. Of course, the views expressed in Spinoza's early works do not always agree with those found in the later works. But even in the *Ethics* Spinoza seems to indicate that we can attain the same sort of blessedness described in the *Short Treatise*. Spinoza writes that freedom consists in "a constant and eternal Love of God, or in God's Love for men," a love that he takes himself to have already shown to be actual (VP36&S). These passages along with the claims that Spinoza makes regarding the eternity of the mind and its freedom should make us wary of claiming that Spinoza thinks freedom is impossible.

In any case, as I shall argue, Spinoza's attitude towards freedom is more complex than our earlier account allows. In this essay I will argue for a way to understand Spinoza's attitudes that makes them coherent and also helps to explain his doctrine of the eternity of the mind. In brief, I will argue that the perfect man is, according to Spinoza, a *projection* of our essence as

human beings. This essence is perfect in itself, and the perfect man is a conceptual aid meant to help us to understand that essence. Furthermore, it is our duty (if we want blessedness) to recognize how our essence relates to the perfect order of nature, and such a recognition brings a kind of eternity to the mind. The key to this account is in distinguishing two parts of ourselves, the essential and the inessential. Essentially, we are perfect; our task is to try to identify ourselves with that essence and to ignore what is inessential to us. We have only limited success in this identification until the death of the body, when the essential part leaves behind the inessential and lives on in eternity.

This last bit may sound ethereal, and it is. To some readers of Spinoza it may seem incongruous with the hard line he takes toward those who believe in superstitious aspects of religions. But, as we shall see, this view is solid Stoic and Neoplatonic doctrine, shared by such thinkers as Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, and Plotinus. Each of these figures maintained that there is a privileged part of us, the higher soul, which is free from the passions of the body. Furthermore, this higher soul is united with God and consequently is capable of surviving the death of the body. The immortality enjoyed by the soul differs significantly, however, from the immortality often hoped for. It is an impersonal immortality, as significant to our lives now as is any existence our higher part may have had before we were born. By connecting Spinoza's doctrine of the free man to Stoic and Neoplatonic doctrine, we make this interpretation of his doctrine more plausible. For the bulk of the *Ethics*—parts III, IV, and V—cannot be read as anything other than Stoic and Neoplatonic in temperament. If Spinoza agreed with the ancients about how to control one's passions, and if those ancients held beliefs about human freedom that seem to be echoed by Spinoza's claims, then we have all the more reason to ascribe those beliefs about human freedom to Spinoza.

In arguing for this construal of Spinoza, I will first discuss two seemingly different attitudes Spinoza adopts toward human freedom. I will then integrate these two attitudes by

providing a proper account of the role of the perfect man. Finally, I will relate this account of the perfect man to the account of freedom shared by the Stoics and Neoplatonists. This relation, in turn, will offer insight into Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind.

### FREEDOM AS INDEPENDENCE FROM THE PASSIONS

In this section I will describe in more detail some of the features of the free man pointed out earlier. In fact we will find that independence from the passions is only one aspect of human perfection or freedom, according to Spinoza; in the next section we will explore the other aspect.

The free man, as I have said, is supposed to be free from the tossing-about of the passions. This freedom enhances survival, since the free man is better able to think impartially, and will therefore not be taken in by nature's deceptive ways. But more particularly, this freedom from the passions enhances survival for a physiological reason: the emotional stability of the free man allows his body to function indefinitely as a machine. According to Spinoza, each body has a particular arrangement (*ratio*) of motion and rest among its components, and it is this *ratio* that individuates it from surrounding bodies. The *ratio* is the body's form (*forma*) (IIP13, following lemma 3). Left to its own machinations, a body will continue in its *ratio* of motion and rest indefinitely. Indeed, a body's essence is its striving (*conatus*) to maintain this *ratio* (IIP7). But since, as a matter of fact, a body is never left alone but is always disrupted, its *ratio* is never allowed to persevere. A disruption can be beneficial—as when I digest food that helps my body to continue to function. Or it can be detrimental—as when, with a fever, my bodily motions are excited to such a pitch that I soon become exhausted, and my motions cease entirely, and I am dead (see IVP39). Being parts of nature, we cannot help but suffer these disruptions, and it is for that reason that we are mortal.

The free man, being free from external affects, is immortal, since his *ratio* is never disrupted, and, as we know from IIP4, it is impossible for a thing to carry the seeds of its own destruction. It is this feature that makes the free man so attractive to us. Since we want nothing more or less than our own advantage, and we see that the free man cannot possibly lose his, we endeavor to be like him.

This having been said, it may not be obvious why a free man must be absolutely free from all external influences upon his *ratio*. As we saw above, some influences are beneficial. Why can't a person happen to lead a charmed life and be free (and therefore immortal) simply by never encountering detrimental influences? Or, if everyone must suffer some detrimental influences, why can't we avoid the most harmful ones and actively counterbalance the remainder with beneficial influences so as to achieve a lasting existence? In short, why can't we be free and immortal simply by being lucky or well-managed? In effect, Spinoza takes up these possibilities in IVP4. A well-managed human would be one who was "able to avert from himself changes which could arise from external causes." Spinoza says this human is impossible by IVP3, which reads, "The force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes." IVP3 in turn relies for its demonstration upon IVA1, an axiom asserting that for every singular thing in nature there is another thing stronger than it. So, as I understand Spinoza's response, we cannot manage ourselves well enough to be immortal since there are powers infinitely stronger than us and we have only limited means. Quite literally, we can no more protect ourselves from adverse affects than we can protect ourselves from a massive natural cataclysm like an earthquake.

But why can't it happen that someone out of pure luck just happens never to encounter nature's terrible forces? In IVP4, Spinoza describes this possibility as having the infinite power of nature arranged so that "man could undergo no other changes except those which assist in his preservation." He goes on to

argue that this lucky arrangement of nature would then have to follow from God's infinite power (given the identity, according to Spinoza, of God with the active part of nature, *natura naturans*). And so the order of the whole of nature would have to be deducible "from the necessity of the divine nature, insofar as it is considered to be affected with the idea of some man." In other words, the arrangement of the entire universe could be deduced from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the lucky man, since all things would be arranged for him. And by IP21, Spinoza argues, it would follow that the lucky man would be infinite, and that is absurd, since we know any man to be finite by definition.

Now this argument is only as good as IP21, which is unfortunate, since IP21 has a remarkably obscure demonstration. But let me try for an argument that is at least similar to the one Spinoza seems to have in mind. If a lucky man is possible, then it must be possible for the entire order of nature to be deduced from the natures of God and the lucky man, since nature would be arranged for this fortunate fellow. But we know from another proposition, IP23, that every infinite mode follows only from God's infinite attributes, or from one of God's attributes insofar as it is modified by another infinite mode. And this contradicts our claim that the entire order of nature (itself an infinite mode) could follow from God's nature (an attribute) insofar as it is modified by the lucky man (a finite mode). So such a lucky man must be impossible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>My appeal to IP23 seems more apt than Spinoza's appeal to IP21, since IP21 claims that anything following from the absolute nature of any of God's attributes must be eternal and infinite. But Spinoza is not claiming in IVP4 that the lucky man would have to follow from the absolute nature of God. He is claiming instead that the entire order of nature would have to follow from the nature of God and the nature of the lucky man, and that contradicts IP23 more obviously than IP21. So maybe Spinoza meant to invoke IP23 instead.

In any case, Spinoza's general line is that we can be neither well-managed nor lucky enough to escape those powers stronger than us. And so being free, in this sense, is metaphysically impossible. But despite the impossibility of being free, Spinoza seems to think that the notion of a free man can have significant heuristic value for us in our efforts to secure our own survival. In the remainder of this section, I would like to describe this value in greater detail. I shall examine the role of the free man in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TEI*), in the *Short Treatise*, and in the *Ethics*, IVPP67–72. This examination will give us a better idea of what the free man is supposed to mean to us. Then, in the next section, I will consider some remarks Spinoza makes about freedom in other passages, according to which freedom can be obtained.

Spinoza makes it clear in the *TEI* that the notion of a free or perfect man, or the notion of a human nature stronger and healthier than our own, is of instrumental value in discerning what is good for us and what is bad. He writes:

But since human weakness does not grasp [the eternal order of nature] by its own thought, and meanwhile man conceives a human nature much stronger and more enduring than his own, and at the same time sees that nothing prevents his acquiring such a nature, he is spurred to seek means that will lead him to such a perfection. Whatever can be a means to his attaining it is called a true good; but the highest good is to arrive—together with other individuals if possible—at the enjoyment of such a nature.<sup>3</sup>

Now this passage is obscure in a number of ways. It seems that since we can conceive of a human nature other than our own, and since we are not able to conceive the eternal order of nature,

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<sup>3</sup>*Collected Works*, p. 10.

we are prompted to achieve this other, greater nature. These claims are obscure because it seems wrong to say humans have more than a single nature (since it is presumably a single nature which makes us all human) and it would be seemingly futile to try to change one's nature.

But Spinozists should not balk at the claim that an individual can adopt a variety of natures. Spinoza makes this claim explicitly in IVP39S: "The human body can nevertheless be changed into another nature entirely different from its own." "Nature" is ambiguous here; it could mean *essence* or *form*. I think he means that a human body can adopt a variety of forms. He goes on to claim that no reason compels us to say that a body dies only when turned into a corpse; a body "dies" when it transforms into another body, and this involves a change in the arrangement of motion and rest among its parts, or a change in form. He gives the example of a Spanish poet who underwent such changes (in memory, which necessarily involve bodily alterations) that we can properly call him a different person. And furthermore the normal transition from infant to adult involves a number of changes of "nature," one for each change in the *ratio* of motion and rest in an individual's component parts. So perhaps when Spinoza claims that we strive to adopt a human nature other than our own, he is saying nothing more than that I might strive to be an athlete, or a slouch, or any human with a nature different from my own—that is, a human who strives to maintain a different *ratio*.

In any event, this passage from the *TEI* tells us that we are spurred toward perfection partly because of the idealization we hold of a human nature stronger than our own, and that this idealization helps us toward our greater good. The idealization is therefore of significant instrumental value. We are spurred toward the means of acquiring this stronger nature since pursuing those means will make us stronger and more enduring even if the strongest nature forever eludes us.

Another aspect of the instrumental value of the notion of a perfect human is explained in the *Short Treatise*:



I must conceive a perfect man, if I want to say anything regarding man's good and evil. For if I discussed the good and evil of, say, Adam, I would confuse a real being with a being of reason—something a true Philosopher must scrupulously avoid. . . . What we can say of man's end must be grounded on the concept in our intellect of a perfect man, whose end we can indeed know, because it is a being of reason. We can also, as we have said, know his good and evil, which are only modes of thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Appended to the second half of this passage is a note which may or may not have come from Spinoza: "For one cannot have an idea that is perfect from any particular creature; for the very perfection of this Idea, whether it is perfect or not, must be deduced from a perfect universal Idea, or *Being of Reason*."

This passage complicates our discussion because it introduces the notion of a "being of reason." Calling the perfect human a "being of reason" is not to say that the perfect human is guided entirely by reason, though that is true as well. It is instead to contrast the perfect human—a being created out of our reasoning ability, an abstract object—with a real being, i.e., a non-abstract being. We can understand this distinction better by examining Spinoza's discussion of it at the beginning of the *Metaphysical Thoughts*.

Spinoza begins the *Metaphysical Thoughts* with the claim that reality is "divided badly" (i.e., not exhaustively) when divided into being and non-being, since there are intermediate cases. According to Spinoza, there are in fact four divisions among beings. First, there are real beings. Second, there are chimeras, such as the round square, which cannot themselves be thought without contradiction. Third, there are fictitious beings,

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<sup>4</sup>*Short Treatise*, book 2, chapter 4, in *Collected Works*, pp. 103–4.

like elves, which are meant to be fictitious or mythological. Finally, there are beings of reason, which are not exactly real or unreal, but are products of thought meant to serve as aids in our reasoning. They “help us to more easily retain, explain, and imagine the things we have understood.”<sup>5</sup> They are abstract, perfect, and universal. Examples include mathematical entities like triangles and, as we have seen, the perfect human. We might gloss beings of reason as abstract, ideal constructs, whose function is to aid in our reasoning, and which may or may not exist in reality. They are useful to us whether or not they really exist.

In the passage from the *Short Treatise* Spinoza invokes the perfect human in order to aid us in our reasoning about good and evil. Judgments about the general nature of good and evil cannot be made with respect to an individual human, like Adam, because if we focus on just Adam then all we shall be able to determine are Adam’s particular likes and dislikes, which are not what we are after when we are trying to determine what is good and evil in general. Instead, in distinguishing good from evil, we need to conceive an ideal, abstract figure—a being of reason—and determine what is good and evil for that general figure. That is the role of the perfect human. It is the same, we can see, when proving truths about geometrical figures like triangles. The proof must hold of any triangle, whether acute, equilateral, or obtuse. And so the notion of a perfect human serves as an aid in our reasoning about good and evil.<sup>6</sup>

So this passage helps us to make precise the instrumental role played by the notion of a free or perfect human. It supplements the passage from the *TEI* since, as we saw there, the notion of a perfect human gives us something to strive

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<sup>5</sup>*Metaphysical Thoughts*, part 1, chapter 1, in *Collected Works*, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup>This theme is repeated in the preface to part IV of the *Ethics*.

toward, and the passage from the *Short Treatise* tells us that the notion of a perfect human gives us a yardstick by which to measure the goodness of a particular thing: a thing is good insofar as it leads us toward being a perfect human, or is somehow part of being a perfect human. Hence we may have a model to strive toward, and we can judge things to be good insofar as they help us toward becoming that model.

It is in the *Ethics* that the notion of a free or perfect human receives its most thorough treatment. IVPP67-72 intimate the following features of the free man:

- P67: A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.
- P68: If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free.
- P69: The virtue of a free man is seen to be as great in avoiding dangers as in overcoming them.
- P70: A free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors.
- P71: Only free men are very thankful to one another.
- P72: A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.

There is little to be said about these claims in the context of our investigation except to note, as we did above, that Spinoza clearly regards these traits as exemplary, and thinks that we will emulate them insofar as we are free. An important qualification must be added to this note, however. As Don Garrett has pointed out, Spinoza cannot be setting the free man as a model in such a way that we are supposed to see what the free man would be like and then simply graft his characteristics onto ourselves.<sup>7</sup> That would be bad advice. For example, a free man would never act deceptively; but were we to take that upon ourselves, situations could easily arise that would severely hinder our efforts to be free. We might be put in chains, or worse. Instead, suggests Garrett on Spinoza's behalf, we should strive not necessarily to act just as the free man would, but toward acquiring the general self-determination the free man enjoys. This may sometimes require acting deceptively.

We might be surprised by P68, since we just learned from the *Short Treatise* that it is the notion of a perfect human which defines good and evil for us. But we learn from Spinoza's demonstration that a free man would be led by reason alone; being led by reason alone, the free man would experience no sadness; experiencing no sadness means experiencing no evil; and since evil and good are complementary, and one cannot have the concept of one without the other, the free man would have no conception of the good. Presumably a free or perfect human would recognize and obtain only that which yields the greatest benefit, while "good" and "evil" make sense only for those of us who are still struggling to recognize and obtain what yields the greatest benefit (see IVP66S).

So it is clear from Spinoza's discussions in these passages, and from the preface to part IV of the *Ethics*, that he

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<sup>7</sup>See Don Garrett, "A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, edited by E. M. Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 221–38.

takes the free human to serve as an ethical model for us. We should strive to be free, and insofar as we are successful, we will reap the goods a free human enjoys. This is the center of support for the view that the free man is an impossible goal, but one well worth striving for anyway because of the residual benefits of the striving. But as we shall see, Spinoza's views about human freedom are more complex than this. There is another aspect to freedom according to which freedom is within our reach.

#### FREEDOM AS RESIGNATION TO BONDAGE

We saw in the last section that even though human perfection—as total independence from the affects—is impossible, the notion of a free or perfect man, as a being of reason, still has significant heuristic value. In this section I wish to point out some passages that present a different view, according to which some kind of perfection is attainable. In the next section I will reconcile these two apparently dissimilar views in providing a deeper account of the status of Spinoza's free man.

Consider first Spinoza's claims in the *Short Treatise*. The main argument throughout the work is that the soul begins with an intimate bond, or love, with the body. But we are able to consciously redirect this love toward God. And when we do so, we obtain an eternal blessedness for our souls and a freedom from the bodily passions. This redirection is portrayed dramatically early in the *Short Treatise* in Spinoza's dialogue among Reason, Intellect, Lust, and Love. As I understand this admittedly bizarre dialogue, Reason (discursive knowledge) and Intellect (intuitive knowledge) compete against Lust (bondage to the body, or knowledge based too heavily upon the senses) for Love's affection. Reason and Intellect must win, the drama makes clear, if Love is ever to be free. Setting the drama aside, the central philosophical argument for the possibility of freedom is made in chapters 19 and 26 of book 2. In chapter 26, Spinoza

claims that by bringing my mind to an intuitive knowledge of God, a knowledge that lies beyond mere reasoning, my mind comes to be united with the object of its knowledge, i.e., God, and I attain salvation and blessedness as a result:

We see also that reasoning is not the principal thing in us, but only like a stairway, by which we can climb up to the desired place, or like a good spirit which without any falsity or deception brings tidings of the greatest good, to spur us thereby to seek it, and to unite with it in a union which is our greatest salvation and blessedness.<sup>8</sup>

This greatest good with which we strive to unite ourselves is God, as Spinoza makes clear. and, as he also demonstrates, the union with this greatest good not only bestows upon us the greatest happiness in this life, but also, since God is eternal, our union with God extends God's eternity to us.

This union is supposed to be achieved through an intuitive understanding of God. Intuitive knowledge, in contrast to mere reasoning, transfers our soul's bondage to the body to a bondage to God, or an intellectual love of God. As Spinoza writes in chapter 19 of book 2, once this union is achieved, "it will then be impossible for any of these passions to produce the least disturbance in [the soul]."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in apparent contradiction to IVP4C's claim that nothing finite can ever be free, the *Short Treatise* claims that the soul can be freed from all forces impinging upon the body.

What is this intuitive knowledge of God? Later, in the *Ethics* (IIP40S2), Spinoza characterizes it as proceeding "from

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<sup>8</sup>*Short Treatise*, book 2, chapter 26, in *Collected Works*, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, book 2, chapter 19, in *Collected Works*, p. 134.

an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things." Here in the *Short Treatise*, however, intuitive knowledge is characterized as an immediate apprehension of the ways in which each thing is united in God, with a consequent realization that, since God's nature is wholly necessary, nothing can be other than it is.<sup>10</sup> In chapter 18 of book 2, Spinoza claims that the greatest human perfection—this intuitive knowledge of God—is a matter of understanding ourselves to be God's slaves, "for the only perfection and end of a slave and an instrument is to fulfill properly the task imposed on them."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Spinoza writes later that "To be free is to be and to remain bound by the lovely chains of the love of God."<sup>12</sup> And so in this work our union with God is a specific brand of *amor fati*: we love our roles in a necessary, unified scheme that could in no way be otherwise.

It is significant that the human freedom celebrated in these passages has an emphasis that is quite different from the freedom of the free man. The free man, as we saw in the last section, is free solely in virtue of his total independence from all affects. But the freedom described here is due to being resigned to the fact that mastery over one's life is out of reach. To attain salvation and blessedness, I must recognize my own inability to be free and resign myself to bondage. This recognition, leading as it does to the knowledge and love of God, or the greater

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<sup>10</sup>See *ibid.*, book 2, chapter 22, in *Collected Works*, pp. 138–40. This is not to say that the definitions of intuitive knowledge found in the *Ethics* and the *Short Treatise* are incompatible or even that they are not identical. But showing the relation between the two definitions falls outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, book 2, chapter 18, in *Collected Works*, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, book 2, chapter 26, in *Collected Works*, p. 147.

nature which binds me to itself, will lead ultimately to an independence from the passions—just what I had given up on!

How should we make sense of these paradoxical claims? One wants to demand of Spinoza, “Come clean! Can we be free or not? How can the recognition that I am not free in turn make me free?” And it is tempting to excuse these passages as being in some way ironic, or perhaps merely over-enthusiastic, occurring only in an immature work. But the same thoughts are expressed again at the very end of the appendix to part IV of the *Ethics*, albeit in a slightly weaker form, and it is clear that Spinoza takes them to heart:

But human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, i.e., the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction. For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied with anything except what is true. Hence, insofar as we understand these things rightly, the striving of the better part of us agrees with the order of the whole of nature.



Here Spinoza does not explicitly claim that a resignation to human bondage yields human freedom. In fact, he begins by acknowledging the external forces that surpass our power. but he does claim that we can calmly endure whatever happens to us when we resign ourselves to the order of the whole of nature. This clam endurance through everything does connote complete mastery over the passions, which he explicitly rejected at IVP4C. Furthermore, in this passage Spinoza says that the better part of us will be satisfied with its understanding of our role in the scheme of things, and will endeavor to persevere in that satisfaction. That satisfaction connotes liberation from the passions, which in turn implies a dominance over them (see IIIP3).

Perhaps it will be suggested that this passage at the end of part IV does not suggest a total liberation from the passions, but only a limited blessedness insofar as we can be free from some of the passions some of the time. But later, in part V, Spinoza seems committed to the claim that we can be totally free—or at least that some part of us can. One of the last conclusions of the *Ethics* is that our intellectual love of God, that is, our intuitive knowledge, is the same love with which God loves himself (VP36). It is in this love that “our salvation, or blessedness, or Freedom, consists” (VP36S; the *ors* are meant to be inclusive). Since this love is actual, so should our salvation, blessedness, or freedom be actual. So at least part of the mind is free: the part of the mind consisting of intuitive knowledge—the love with which God loves himself.

At the very least, the above discussion should show that Spinoza's remarks about the free man do not exhaust his ideas about human freedom. There is another sense to being free, in addition to independence from the affects, which involves intuitive knowledge of nature's order, and resignation to that order. But in the end these views can be reconciled in a cohesive account of human perfection, as the next section is meant to show.

## HUMAN PERFECTION AS OUR ESSENCE

In this section I will first provide an account of the status of the free man, which will then be used to unify the different attitudes toward human freedom described in parts I and II above.

In the preface to part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza cautions us against treating perfection as something independent of our own appetites. When we build a house, for example, we call it perfect only when it accords with the architect's plan. Someone with no knowledge of the plans could not determine whether the house was perfect or not, since the plans might involve many additions to what seems a perfectly livable dwelling. Nevertheless, since it is natural for us to form general ideas of things like houses, we might have a general idea of how a house is supposed to be, and we might casually call a house perfect if it accords with that general idea, even if we were ignorant of the plans for that particular house. This ability to form general ideas is sometimes quite useful, and saves a lot of time. Without general ideas we would never be able to separate the goats from the sheep, nor wheat from the chaff.

But Spinoza thinks that big problems can sometimes arise from this propensity to generalize. When we form general ideas of natural things, we are sometimes led to call natural things "perfect" or "imperfect." And so we rejoice in the glimpse of a perfect canyon and deplore a lame mule. But to make such judgments is to ignore the fact that nature has no plan. There is no way natural things are supposed to be other than the way they in fact are. And so long as we are ignorant of this we will be prone to think many false things about nature and about God.

This, of course, is Spinoza's denial of final causes. Things are not caused by an end to strive toward that end. Instead, a thing—a human, in particular—might have an inner appetite for change, and may form an idea of the expected end state, and may strive toward that ideal end, but the thing is not pulled by the end; the thing is pushed by the appetite that occasions the change. As Spinoza writes in the preface to part

IV, "What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing." So, for example, the final cause of a house is nothing more than a human's appetite for a house, insofar as that appetite causes the construction of the house.

We may apply this lesson about final causes to what we know of the perfect man. We have seen that the perfect man is meant to be a final cause for us, more or less, in that we strive to become like him and enjoy his freedom. We are now told that this final cause can be nothing more than a human appetite. More specifically, the perfect man can be nothing more than the human appetite for freedom, insofar as that appetite causes us to strive for freedom. Now the human appetite for freedom is not just an appetite among many. According to Spinoza it is our essence. Recall that an individual's form is the arrangement (*ratio*) of motion and rest among its parts. An individual's essence is defined as its striving (*conatus*) to maintain that *ratio*. Insofar as an individual succeeds in maintaining its *ratio*, it is free, since the opposite of freedom, compulsion, is simply an interference with the individual's maintenance of its *ratio*.

In other words, the perfect man, as our final cause understood Spinozistically, is the same as our *conatus* to preserve ourselves. That is, the free man is our essence insofar as our essence is a cause of our freedom. Schematically we can represent the matter thus:

Free man	=	the final cause of our striving after freedom
The final cause of our striving after freedom	=	the appetite for freedom
The appetite for freedom	=	our <i>conatus</i>

Our *conatus* = our essence

And hence,

Free man = our essence.

And so our essence is fundamentally identical with the free or perfect man. The free man is the *conatus* writ large.

Indeed, Spinoza says as much. Compare the first definition of the affects following IIP59S—“Desire is man’s very essence”—with the general definitions of the affects at the very end of part III: “We understand by perfection the very essence of the thing.” From these we can infer that the *conatus* is our perfection. And at the end of the preface to part IV we find:

By perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, i.e., the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no regard to its duration.

This passage implies that my perfection is something I already possess: it is the power of my essence, i.e., the existence and activity of my *conatus*.

But now what can it mean to say that, on the one hand, we are forever constrained by the forces more powerful than us (IVP4), and, on the other hand, perfection (and hence freedom) is our very essence? Obviously it makes no sense unless we distinguish two sense of “self.” And this is precisely how the two sense of freedom described in the last two sections should be reconciled. When we conceive of ourselves essentially, that is, when we conceive of God insofar as God is our cause, and ignore the inessential part of us, we recognize that indeed we are free. For essentially we are nothing but our *conatus*, our striving for self-preservation, and that striving (by itself) can be nothing other than free, just as an inertial body can be nothing other than unimpeded. But that is not all there is to us. We are also

changeable things, impeded by various bodies around us. When we conceive of ourselves in this way—that is, inessentially—we recognize that we never could be free, just as there could never be an unimpeded body in the physical universe envisaged by Descartes and Spinoza. Hence we are both free and not free, depending upon which part of ourselves we are considering.<sup>13</sup>

But is this distinction—between the essential “me” and the inessential “me”—drawn only in a desperate attempt to avoid inconsistency? I think not. We may note that in this respect each of us is a microcosm of the macrocosm in Spinoza’s philosophy. The universe itself, according to Spinoza, is divided into its essential and inessential parts. Its essential part, God, is eternally and immutably active (*natura naturans*) while its inessential part (*natura naturata*) is forever doomed to creation and destruction, due to the confluence of its parts. The universe is free insofar as we consider its essential part, God, and it is constrained, insofar as we consider its inessential part. Likewise, each part of nature, including ourselves, consists of these parts, and so the same things can be said of us that are said of the universe.

When I recognize what I am essentially, and am convinced (by VP23D) that something pertains to the essence of the human mind that is eternal, I see that I should no longer fear life’s tribulations or even death. For they do not affect my essence. Spinoza writes, “The part of the Mind which we have shown perishes with the body (see P21) is of no moment to what remains” (VP38S). And so I can resign my inessential part to nature’s immutable and deadly order without regret. I can even come to love this order, insofar as the essence of my mind is united with that single being, God, which necessitates this order. And so I can be free—or at least part of me can—while knowing

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<sup>13</sup>On this distinction between the essential and inessential parts of us, see appendix 32 to part IV (quoted above), “the better part of us”; also VP29S, “we conceive of things as actual in two ways”; also VP33S, “the Mind is endowed with perfection itself.”

full well that another part of me is necessarily bound by the forces of nature.

#### SOME NOTES REGARDING THE ETERNITY OF THE MIND

Let me begin this section with the admission that there is much in Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind that puzzles me. But I think that the doctrine of immortality found in Stoic and Neoplatonic writing is intelligible, broadly speaking, and I think there are significant points of contact between what these ancient thinkers say and what Spinoza says. Consequently, I think that by understanding the general outline of Stoic and Neoplatonic thought, we can approximate an understanding of Spinoza's thought. In this section I will point out the similarities among these thinkers, and thereby shed some light on Spinoza's account of the freedom and eternity of the mind.

In Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, Scipio Africanus, the renowned Roman general and statesman, meets his dead father in a dream. His father shows him all the wonders of the heavens and Scipio learns that true reward cannot be extricated from humans, nor from any earthly thing, since all mortal things fade in the cool light of eternity. Instead, Scipio is urged to contemplate the eternal place whence came his soul:

Therefore see from on high, if you will, your resting spot and eternal home, and you will neither surrender to vulgar speeches, nor hope for mortal prizes for the things you have done. Virtue herself shall draw you by her own charms.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>*Somnium Scipionis* XXIII; my translation.

From such contemplation we will consequently strive toward greater public service, and we will secure our place in eternity even as we help to secure a place for others:

Strive on! And in this way be sure not that you are mortal, but that only your body is. For you are not revealed by the shape of your body, but the mind of each person is the person, and that shape cannot be traced by any finger. You know yourself to be a god (if indeed a god can thrive, feel, remember, and plan), who rules, moderates, and governs your body just as God does this world.<sup>15</sup>

With this knowledge, Scipio is awoken from his (mortal) dream.

Such accounts are commonplace among the Stoics. It is typical Stoic doctrine that the universe is composed of two parts: an active part (Greek *poioun*, or *theos*, according to some Stoics) and a passive part (Greek *paschon*). Each thing shares both natures. A human, in particular, is composed of an earthly, static element, and a godly, active element. In the course of a life, insofar as one comes to identify the self with the active part of the self (the soul, or Greek *pneuma*), one will be able to resist the draw of the passions, and one will be led to virtue for its own sake. When the body dies, our *pneuma*—strengthened by our mortal struggles and by our philosophical reflection—will launch toward heaven to join God, the source of all action.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, as we can see from Cicero, the Stoics compare the universe to a big living body, with God as its soul. All its parts are harmoniously interconnected, as are the parts of

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., XXIV.

<sup>16</sup>For more on Stoic cosmology, see Michael Lapidge, "Stoic Cosmology," in *The Stoics*, edited by John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 161–85.

the human body. Consider the poem of the Stoic astronomer, Manilius:

[I shall sing] that the entire universe  
Through its alternating sympathy is alive,  
And is driven by the movement of reason,  
Since one *pneuma* inhabits all its parts,  
And, pervading all things, strengthens the spherical world  
And assumes the likeness of an animate body.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the Stoic views the universe as similar to a big, living organism (just as Plato suggests in the *Timaeus*), in which life extends down to the smaller parts. The energy driving this organic whole is reason. Through our reason—the connection between one’s self and the godly force of the universe—we can obtain the fruits for which Stoicism is commonly known: recognition of our place in the grand scheme of things, resignation to this place, control over the passions, and a life of service to other living beings.

This connection of reason to the broader living force is also noted by Marcus Aurelius:

He dwells with the gods who at all times exhibits to them a soul satisfied with its apportioned lot, a soul which in its actions follows the command of the inner spirit, that fragment of himself which Zeus has given to every man as a champion and guide. And this is the intelligence and reason of every man.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Astronomica* 2.60–66, translated by Lapidge, in *The Stoics*, edited by John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>18</sup>*The Meditations*, 5.27, translated by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).



And,

if you esteem and revere the mind within you,  
you will be at peace with yourself, in tune with  
your fellows, and in harmony with the gods.<sup>19</sup>

According to Aurelius, it is through reason that we are able to relate to God, to others, and to our lots in life. Our reason is a fragment of God, and it ought to be our directing force in life.

All of these themes resound in Spinoza, of course. As we noted above, Spinoza also divides the universe into active and passive parts. God is *natura naturans*, the directing force of nature, and each thing shares in God's nature insofar as God is the cause of that thing's existence and perseverance. Each thing in God is also passive, *natura naturata*, insofar as each thing is liable to corruption. Secondly, Spinoza likens the universe to an animate body in his famous "Worm in the Blood" analogy in Letter 32. Thirdly, like the Stoics, Spinoza also thinks we attain perfection and freedom insofar as we are active and insofar as we employ reason (see IIP3 and VP40C). Fourthly, it is only a portion of the mind—the portion that is part of God's intellect (the fragment of God's intellect in us)—that remains in eternity upon the death of the body. Finally, even if no part of us were eternal, Spinoza and the Stoics agree that we would still find virtue attractive for its own sake (VP42).<sup>20</sup>

Spinoza's views can also be illuminated, I think, by comparison with those of Plotinus. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus claims that there are two parts to our soul, a higher part and a lower part. As Armstrong explains:

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 6.16.

<sup>20</sup>For more on the relations between Spinoza and the Stoics, see P. O. Kristeller, "Stoic and Neoplatonic Sources of Spinoza's *Ethics*," *History of European Ideas* 5 (1984): 1–15.

Our higher soul, our true self, is in fact entirely unaffected by the sensations and the passions of bodily life; these belong to the compound of the lower soul, a sort of emanation from the higher soul, and body; reason, on the other hand, is an activity of our true self.<sup>21</sup>

Each of these parts could be called the self, depending upon the context: “‘We’ is used in two senses, either including the beast [body] or referring to that which even in our present life transcends it.”<sup>22</sup> It is the task of the sage to distinguish these parts, and to strive toward identifying the self with the true self:

[The soul] will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions [as when it was mixed with the body] but acts alone—this is intelligence and wisdom—and does not share the body’s experiences—this is self-control—and is not afraid of departing from the body—this is courage—and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition—this is justice. One would not be wrong in calling this state of the soul likeness to God, in which its activity is intellectual, and is free in this way from the bodily affections.<sup>23</sup>

And so it is fundamental to Plotinus’s thought that the true self can transcend the passions of the lower self. Now it might seem

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<sup>21</sup>Synopsis of *Enneads* I.1 in *Enneads*, volume 1, translated by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 92–93.

<sup>22</sup>Plotinus, *Enneads* I.1.10; trans. Armstrong.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, I.2.3; trans. Armstrong.

from the first line of this passage that one must bring about this higher soul through the reform of the opinions of the lower soul. But I think it is rather the case that the higher soul has existed all along and that the process of discarding old opinions is a process of discovering the higher soul. I say this for two reasons: first, the reference to "that which even in our present life transcends" the body; and, second, the claim that the lower soul is at least in part an emanation of the higher soul.

I wish to draw two themes from these views of Plotinus. The first is his distinction between a higher and lower soul, each distinguished from the body. The higher soul has no connection with the passions of the body, while the lower soul is in a mixed state. Similarly, as seen in the last section, Spinoza distinguishes a higher, purely active part of the mind, its essence, from a lower part which is passive with respect to influences upon the body. Unlike Plotinus, however, Spinoza does not completely divorce the higher part of the mind from the body: the higher part is the idea of the essence of the body, as suggested in VP23. But by connecting the higher part of the mind with the essence of the body rather than with the part of the body that undergoes incessant change, Spinoza provides a rather thick insulation around the higher part of the mind. Each higher part of each mind—each essence—is a pure striving, and is therefore pure activity, and is related to God. The second theme to draw from Plotinus is his advice to strive to identify one's self with the higher soul. I think Spinoza gives the same advice, in effect, in VP38, where he claims that coming to understand things by reason and through intuitive knowledge lessons the effects of the affects and helps to remove the fear of death. Since intuitive knowledge is gained through the eternal portion of the mind alone (VP31D), I think it takes an identification of one's self with this higher part of the mind in order to reap the benefits of intuitive knowledge.

Thus there are obvious similarities among the Stoics, the Neoplatonists, and Spinoza. Of course, pointing out the similarities between Stoic doctrines and the account Spinoza

gives of the passions and the remedies he offers for them is nothing new; Spinoza is obviously a Stoic in this regard. But few have noted the similarities between what the Stoics and Neoplatonists say about the eternity of the mind and what Spinoza says. In the remainder of this essay I would like to sketch how the similarities sketched above can help us begin to understand Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind.

It is in VP23 that Spinoza claims, "The human Mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the Body, but something of it remains which is eternal." His argument is as follows. There must be an idea in God's intellect of the essence of the body. This idea will have some connection to the essence of the mind, since the mind is, according to Spinoza, the idea of the body. Now we do not attribute duration to the mind except insofar as it expresses the actual existence of the body, that is, except insofar as mental events are related to specific changes in the body. But here we are considering not the actual existence of the body, but its essence which remains the same whether or not the body actually exists. So we are not attributing duration to the mind in this case. Nevertheless, we are considering something. So whatever it is in the essence of the mind that is connected with the idea in God's intellect of the essence of the body will not be defined by duration, but is instead atemporal, i.e., eternal.

Here again in this argument we see the separation between the parts of the mind, evident in both Stoic philosophy and Plotinus's thought. The part of the mind bound up with the temporal existence of the body is not free, and is hence not eternal. But some portion of the mind, reflecting as it does the essence of the body *sub specie aeternitatis*, is not defined by time. It is instead eternal, and free insofar as it is unaffected by the ideas or temporal affects of the body. As Spinoza points out, this is not a portion of the mind that carries with it memory and sensory experience; those features die with the body. So we might reasonably ask what this eternal existence means to us. I think this question can be asked of the ancient Stoics and

Neoplatonists as well, and I do not know what the answer is. The barest outline of an answer would presumably be: the immortality of the mind is something less than personal immortality, yet something more than nothing. Perhaps it is the same as the immortality God is supposed to enjoy.

In the scholium to VP23, Spinoza writes:

Our mind, therefore, can be said to endure, and its existence can be defined by a certain time, only insofar as it involves the actual existence of the body, and to that extent only does it have the power of determining the existence of things by time, and of conceiving them under duration.

Here we see a reversal in priority between the higher and lower parts of the self that is reminiscent of Plotinus's account. Spinoza does not claim that the eternal part of the mind in any way stems from the activities of the temporal part of the mind. Instead, it is clear that the order is reversed. The temporal part of the mind is derivative upon the eternal portion of the mind through its relation with the body's duration. That is, we are temporal only insofar as our eternal mind is related to the body's duration. It is the eternal part that is fundamental, and the temporal portion is derived (or emanates) from it, in part.

This reading of the passage is borne out by Spinoza's remarks in VP33S. There Spinoza writes that the mind has always had all the perfections that (in our fiction, set forth in VP31S) it supposedly "gains" through intuitive knowledge, and he claims that "the Mind is endowed with perfection itself." I take Spinoza's point to be that some portion of the mind enjoys eternity—and enjoys it atemporally, of course, though we might loosely speak of it "having been" eternal "all along"—and it is only now, in time, that we are discovering this fact. Again, the similarities with Plotinus are clear: recall his reference to "that which even in our present life transcends" the body.

In VP36 Spinoza identifies intuitive knowledge with the love with which God loves himself. The higher self—the eternal portion of the mind—is a product of God’s self-love:

Because the essence of our mind consists only in knowledge, of which God is the beginning and foundation (by IP15 and IIP47S), it is clear to us how our Mind, with respect both to its essence and existence, follows from the divine nature, and continually depends on God.

And so the most fundamental or essential part of our mind has an immediate relation to God. This part of us shares in God’s freedom and eternity. But another part of us is also defined through the relations obtaining among things dependent upon God, such as the actual existence of the body. And so we are in part bound by time and nature’s immutable order.

Again, the Stoics have similar views. We saw above that Scipio was to regard the eternal place as his home, and to regard the things of mortals as merely transitory. Spinoza, I think, offers the same conclusions in part V of the *Ethics*. The most fundamental level of reality is, of course, God. God by nature loves himself and this self-love brings about the essence of the mind—intuitive knowledge. Other kinds of knowledge, and finite things in time, are subsequently derived. As finite objects in time, we can come to know our own perfection only through intuitive knowledge. As we do, temporal tribulations no longer have the sway over us they once did. As a consequence, we gain some measure of the freedom described as independence from the affects.

Marcus Aurelius as well advises us to follow the commandments of that fragment of Zeus within us. Such obedience brings about a satisfaction with this present life, peace with others, and a harmony with God. Similarly, Spinoza claims that intuitive knowledge, the very love with which God loves

himself, is that “wherein our salvation, or blessedness, or Freedom consists” (VP36S).

I do not pretend to have explained the details of Spinoza’s account of the eternity of the mind. He faces serious trouble when it comes to explaining how the properties of an eternal God can produce any temporality whatsoever, and it is not clear what implications his doctrine of the eternity of the mind has for the eternity of some portion of the body, given his thesis that the mind and the body are one and the same thing, considered in different ways. But my aim has not been to provide a complete exposition of this, perhaps the most difficult aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy. Instead, my aim has been to better understand the status of Spinoza’s free man, and to use that understanding, along with some ancient philosophy, to shed some light on the doctrine of the eternity of the mind. Like anyone else striving to be free, I will require the aid of others in order to get the whole story straight.

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Charlie Huenemann, “Spinoza’s Free Man,” in: *Journal of Neoplatonic Studies*, Vol VI, #1, Fall 1997, pp. 105 – 135

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**Contents**

**Articles**

The Aspects of Infinity in Clement of Alexandria . . . . .	3
<i>Arkadi Choufrine</i>	
The Metaphysics of Love in Dionysius the Areopagite . . . . .	45
<i>Eric D. Perl</i>	
Thales and the Origins of Rational Theology . . . . .	75
<i>Peter A. Kwasniewski</i>	
Spinoza's Free Man . . . . .	105
<i>Charles Huenemann</i>	