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## *Spinoza's Normative Ethics*

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### **I Introduction**

Spinoza presents his ethics using a variety of terminologies. Propositions that are, or at least might be taken for, normative include only very few explicit guidelines for action. I will take this claim from Vp10s to be one such guideline:

Vp10s: So that we may always have this rule of reason ready when it is needed, we should think and meditate often about common human wrongs and how and in what way they may best be driven away by nobility.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Because there is a question about whether Spinoza's language conveys norms, I provide the Latin for this and the examples that follow. Here, I think, Spinoza uses the gerundive to express obligation: 'Ut autem hoc rationis praescriptum semper in promptu habeamus, ubi usus erit, cogitandae, & saepe meditandae sunt communes hominum injuriae, & quomodo, & qua via Generositate optime propulsentur.' One might take the sentence to express a hypothetical imperative, under which thinking and meditating are what one should do only if one wants to have this rule of reason ready. Even on this reading, however, Spinoza's recommendation of the final end seems unqualified: it is a good thing for everyone to have this rule of reason ready. Other claims in the *Ethics* that are more easily read as hypothetical imperatives, such as IVp26, which I quote below, apply only to a particular group of people: those guided by reason. For Spinoza's works, I use Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1925). References to the *Ethics* follow the standard form: e.g., Vp10s is Part V, Proposition 10, Scholium.

There are, however, several different kinds of claims, which are also much more numerous, that might be thought to imply such guidelines. These include a number of descriptions of what is useful to us, for example, IVp40, or what is good, for example, IVp39:

IVp40: Things that lead to the general association of men, or that cause men to live harmoniously, are useful.<sup>2</sup>

IVp39: Things that cause the conservation of the ratio of motion and rest that the human body's parts have to one another are good.<sup>3</sup>

Another group of propositions, which includes IVp26, describes the demands of reason or what we do, strive to do, or ought to do if we are guided by reason. Sometimes, as at IVp53, Spinoza presents these claims as equivalent to claims about virtue:

IVp26: What we strive for from reason is nothing other than to understand; nor does the mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything to be useful to it other than what leads to understanding.<sup>4</sup>

IVp53: Humility is not a virtue, or, it does not arise from reason.<sup>5</sup>

Spinoza, though, in some places offers different advice for those who are not virtuous and are not guided by reason. Indeed in a scholium to the very next proposition he offers a qualified recommendation of the same affect that he has just argued is not a part of virtue:

IVp54s: Because men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects, that is, humility and repentance, and also hope and fear, bring more profit than loss; and so, since men must sin, it is better for them to sin in this direction.<sup>6</sup>

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2 The proposition is quoted only in part, 'quae ad hominum communem Societem conducunt, sive quae efficiunt, ut homines concorditer vivant, utilia sunt.'

3 Again, the proposition is quoted only in part: 'Quae efficiunt, ut motus, & quietis ratio, quam Corporis humani partes ad invicem habent, conservetur, bona sunt.'

4 'Quicquid ex ratione conamur, nihil aliud est, quam intelligere; nec Mens, quatenus ratione utitur, aliud sibi utile esse judicat, nisi id, quod ad intelligendum conducit.'

5 'Humilitas virtus non est, sive ex ratione non oritur.'

6 'Quia homines raro ex dictamine rationis vivunt, ideo hi duo affectus, nempe Humilitas, & poenitentia, & praeter hos Spes, & Metus plus utilitatis, quam damni afferunt; atque adeo, quandoquidem peccandum est, in istam partem potius peccandum.'

Finally, Spinoza includes near the end of Part IV of the *Ethics* several propositions about the free man, his character, and his actions. IVp72 is one of these propositions that has attracted attention:

IVp72: A free man never acts deceitfully, but always honestly.<sup>7</sup>

My purpose here is to outline a general way of understanding these different kinds of claims. I shall first present, briefly, two points about Spinoza's moral psychology that affect his understanding of the human condition and how it may be improved. Then I shall argue, on the basis of these points, that Spinoza's many different propositions offer, effectively, three different kinds of guidelines for action:

1. **Universal Prescriptions for Resisting Passion.** These include the only explicit universal prescriptions that Spinoza offers, which are techniques for mastering passion, such as those occurring at Vp10s.
2. **Norms for Agents Insofar as They Are Rational.** These norms include all of those described in the Appendix to Part IV as making up the 'right way of living': Spinoza's accounts of the good, the useful, virtue, and the demands of reason.
3. **Norms for Agents Insofar as They Are Irrational.** These norms include Spinoza's remarks about what is better for people insofar as they are not rational.<sup>8</sup>

The most important general point of this typology will be that many of Spinoza's normative claims are not the direct guidelines for action that they may appear to be. Some claims about what is good, and all of Spinoza's claims about what is better for people who are irrational, are not equivalent to unqualified prescriptions requiring the pursuit of the concerned end because the ends described in these claims do not

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7 'Homo liber nunquam dolo malo, sed semper cum fide agit.' Don Garrett's article on this proposition informs my accounts here and below. Don Garrett, "'A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively': Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in Edwin Curley and Pierre-Francois Moreau, eds., *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden: Brill 1990).

8 For discussions of Spinoza's advice to people insofar as they are not rational, see Henry Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1987), 154; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988), 170-1; Garrett, 232; and Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and The Ethics* (London: Routledge 1996), 98-9.

benefit any agent in any circumstances. Many other norms for the rational, which, like IVp39 and IVp40, do describe ends that would benefit any agent in any circumstance, may not be equivalent to unqualified prescriptions for either of two reasons. It may be that there are some sets of circumstances in which it would be best to pursue a different, better end rather than a given good, or, it may be that in some sets of circumstances it is not possible for some agents to pursue a good that nevertheless would benefit them. In order to use norms for the rational and norms for the irrational as guidelines for action, then, agents must understand a number of facts about themselves and their circumstances that can be difficult to discover. Notably, agents must know, in a particular circumstance, whether or not they are acting rationally.

The free man propositions, I shall argue, address just this problem. Together with many other propositions of Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's account of the free man is primarily diagnostic rather than normative. That is, rather than standing itself as a guideline for action, it helps agents to understand when they are not free and so to know also which norms to follow. The fact that the actions that are good for the rational may differ from the actions that are good for the person under the influence of passion, together with the fact that it may not always be clear to a particular human mind whether it is rational in a particular instance, makes such propositions important. The free man propositions describe some particular kinds of action, lying, in the case of IVp72, that only occur in situations in which we are not fully the causes of what we do, so they help us to understand, perhaps even despite the good results of our imperfect actions, that we are, when we lie or accept favors from the ignorant or survive a serious danger, less free than we might otherwise believe.

## II Moral Psychology

In this section I shall introduce two points about Spinoza's moral psychology that affect his understanding of the human condition. Both points emphasize the importance to Spinoza's psychology of his account of conscious awareness, which makes the attribution of them to Spinoza controversial.<sup>9</sup> Although I shall discuss the main textual evidence here,

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9 Notably, some critics have argued that consciousness is unimportant to Spinoza's account of desire. Bennett asserts that consciousness is of no substantive import to Spinoza's account of desire. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1984), 259. Michael Della Rocca argues that Spinoza's account of desire does not turn on the distinction between conscious and unconscious de-

I will not present all of the reasons one might have for reading Spinoza in this way. However, later sections of the paper will demonstrate the usefulness of the points as a tool for understanding Spinoza's normative ethics, and this explanatory power is at least some evidence of their plausibility as interpretations of Spinoza's psychology.

The first point about the importance of Spinoza's psychology to his ethics concerns agents' conscious aims: *while human beings always strive for perseverance in being, they do not in every case aim consciously for perseverance*. Spinoza presents his account of the human striving for perseverance in being at IIIp9. It is an account of what human beings do as causal forces in the world and not, explicitly anyway, an account of conscious desire:

The mind, both insofar as it has clear and distinct ideas and also insofar as it has confused ideas, strives to persevere in being; it does so for an indefinite duration; and it is conscious of this, its striving.

Spinoza does claim at the end of this proposition that human minds are conscious of their striving for perseverance. He does nothing to suggest, however, that this consciousness is equivalent to a conscious desire to persevere. My consciousness of my striving to persevere in being need be neither an awareness of my metaphysical striving for perseverance as such a striving nor a conscious desire to persevere that corresponds to my metaphysical striving for the same end. Indeed human beings, all of whom strive only for perseverance in the metaphysical sense of IIIp9 (which is that, where they are complete causes of some effect, that effect is their perseverance) consciously seek in Spinoza's accounts, a great variety of ends: wealth, sex, revenge, even their own death. Where Spinoza does give an account of the ends we desire consciously (IIIp28), he argues that a mind might consciously seek any end in which it anticipates *laetitia* or the avoidance of *tristitia* (IIIp28). The rest of the argument of *Ethics* III suggests that minds might associate these affects with a great variety of ends.<sup>10</sup>

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sires. Michael Della Rocca, 'Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology,' in Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 216.

- 10 *Laetitia* is the most general form of a passion in which the body, or one of its parts, increases the power with which it strives to persevere. *Tristitia* is its opposite, a decrease. The terms are sometimes translated as 'happiness' and 'sadness.' IIIp28 reads, 'We strive to promote the occurrence of anything which we imagine to be conducive to *laetitia*; but we strive to avert or destroy whatever we imagine to be incompatible with this thing or whatever is conducive to *tristitia*.' At IIIp14 and IIIp15, Spinoza argues that anything can be the accidental cause of *laetitia*, *tristitia*

This gap between conscious and metaphysical ends explains the importance of passions to Spinoza's ethical theory. A virtuous or rational mind will be characterized by self-knowledge. Spinoza makes this point negatively in the demonstration to IVp56: 'He who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of the foundation, and consequently of all, virtues ... such a person does not act from virtue at all.' A virtuous mind, on the other hand, will know its own nature and, therefore, on Spinoza's reasoning, will consciously seek to persevere in being. IVp24, the basis for the demonstration at IVp56, is the most explicit textual evidence for this aspect of Spinoza's view. This passage is from its demonstration: 'To act from virtue, therefore, is nothing in us but to act from the guidance of reason, to live, and to preserve one's own being, and to do these things (by p22c) from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage.' Only those desires that we possess insofar as we are not rational, then, can be desires concerned with things other than our own perseverance in being. Spinoza's identification of virtue with action from reason (at IVp24, for example) suggests that such desires are always those that we have insofar as we are influenced by external objects; that is, they are passions.<sup>11</sup> So if we are to seek for its own sake the end that, rationally, we ought to, on Spinoza's view, we shall have to overcome the influence of passion.<sup>12</sup>

The second point about the relationship between Spinoza's moral psychology and his ethics concerns Spinoza's view about the particular way in which passions influence our conscious aims. Briefly put, for Spinoza, *passions are similar in kind to ideas we get from sensation, such as visual perceptions, and so affect us in similar ways*. At IIp40s2, where Spinoza introduces the three types of cognition, he describes the first type as including confused ideas that we obtain by means of the senses, and

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or *cupiditas* (desire). He goes on at IIIp16 and IIIp17 to argue that experiencing some affect in a certain object in the past influences our desires for future objects perceived as similar to the past object. The implication is that, because of the variety of experience of *laetitia* there will be a variety of objects of human desire. IIIp56 emphasizes this variety.

- 11 III d2 and d3 suggest that passions are the product of the causal influence of external objects on us. III d2 suggests that we are acted on when we are not adequate but mere partial causes of what happens in us or outside of us. III d3 defines passion as one of our affects (that is, in the language of III d2, something that happens in us) of which are not an adequate cause. I shall give, however, a more detailed account of the ways in which passions arise immediately below.
- 12 I argue for this interpretation more thoroughly in Michael LeBuffe, 'Why Spinoza Tells People to Try to Preserve Their Being,' *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* v. 86 (2004) 119-45.

he calls all cognition of this sort 'imagination.' At IIp41, he writes that all confused ideas are cognition of the first kind. Then, later, in his General Definition of the Affects, Spinoza defines a passion as a confused idea. So, like ideas of sensation, passions are cognition of the first kind, imagination.

Ideas of imagination, as Spinoza describes them at IIp35s, are, paradigmatically, sensory ideas. Such ideas do have phenomenal components: ideas of imagination represent external objects as present to the perceiving mind. However, what is represented as present to my mind need not resemble the object of my idea of imagination, the external cause of the mode of my body that corresponds to the idea. For example, my idea of the sun may represent as present to me something that is 200 feet away (IIp35s), or in a reflecting body of water (IVp1s), but that idea need not resemble the causal source (in part) of the mode of my body to which it corresponds, namely, the sun, which is neither 200 feet away nor in the water. When Spinoza makes passions, likewise, ideas of imagination, he asserts, in effect, that all of these features of sensory ideas are also features of passions: passions also represent external objects as present to the mind; external objects are also partial causes of the modes of the human body that correspond to passions; and, what is most important, passions also can misrepresent objects to the perceiving mind.

The similarity in kind between passions and sensory ideas suggests that they will present similar challenges to human minds. That is the implicit ethical point of the discussion of sensory ideas in the second half of Part II of the *Ethics*.<sup>13</sup> Spinoza makes the point explicit by reintroducing the sun example at the beginning of Part IV, his account of human bondage to passion. There he argues that his account of ideas of imagination and the error to which they give rise applies as much to passions as to sensory ideas (my brackets): 'So it is with the rest of the imaginations by which the mind is lead into error, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the body [sensory ideas] or that its power of acting is increased or diminished [passions].' Whether a tendency to err arises from misleading passions or from misleading sensory ideas, the tendency should present the same sorts of problems, and overcoming it should require the same sorts of techniques. In both cases alike, the problem is that an external idea influences a mind in such a way that the mind is not the total efficient cause of what it does. And, again

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13 The purpose of Part II, as stated in its Preface, is to explain the implications of Part I's account of God for our knowledge of the human mind and its blessedness. So it should not be surprising that there is an ethical point to the discussion of sensory ideas.

for both cases alike, because the idea's object is the external cause of the mode of body to which it corresponds, a technique for overcoming the tendency to err that the idea gives a mind will require, somehow, changing or overcoming an external causal influence.

### III Universal Prescriptions for Resisting Passion

All human minds, Spinoza insists repeatedly, are always subject to the influence of external objects. At the end of Part III, his account of the affects, he writes, 'it is plain from these accounts that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that just like the ocean waves, driven by shifting winds, we are tossed about, ignorant of the result and our fate.'<sup>14</sup> As external objects may lead the mind into cognitive error whenever they are the partial causes of changes to the constitution of the body, so they may lead the mind into moral error when they are causes, in particular, of changes in the body's power of acting. Thus even minds who for the moment rationally seek to persevere in being are subject both to passions that they currently have under control and also to the continual onrush of new passions. Spinoza's prescriptions for resisting passion, then, apply to all minds alike and at all times. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes only very few such unqualified prescriptions. At Vp4s, he argues that we should seek an adequate understanding of our affects. At Vp10s he argues that we should, lacking perfect knowledge of our affects, memorize and constantly apply reliable rules for living. He then writes that we should overwhelm the force of stubborn or sudden passions by means of nobility and tenacity, opposed affects that are not themselves passions. These prescriptions occur in Part V of the *Ethics*, which Spinoza describes as his account of the way to freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Vp2 and Vp3 are the basis for the view that each mind ought to seek an adequate understanding of its own passions. Vp3 reads, 'An affect that is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.' It is a dictum of Cartesian theories of sense perception that a clear and distinct understanding of a misleading sensory idea will allow me to resist or change the impulse it might otherwise

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14 This passage is from the long scholium to IIIp59, at Gebhardt II 189 4-7. Spinoza's argument, at V Preface, against Stoic and Cartesian views that the passions can be completely mastered is another emphatic statement of this view. A formal argument for it can be found at IVp4. IVp4c, like V Preface, makes the point explicitly about passion.

15 See V Preface, especially the opening, Gebhardt II 277 1-14.

give me to err.<sup>16</sup> The argument of Vp3 in particular borrows this idea from Descartes. Spinoza refers in that argument to confused ideas. In the argument of the *Ethics*, these are all of those ideas of imagination that lead to error (IIp41). Then he argues that, in general, such ideas, when they come to be understood clearly, are only distinguished by reason from that understanding; that is, they are no longer confused but adequate ideas. Outside the difficult terminology of the *Ethics*, the argument is, roughly, that an understanding of the science of perception delivered by, for example, optics, can help me to know why external objects, for example, the sun, seem to me the way they do. When I come to understand what my visual idea of the sun truly suggests about the sun's size, distance, and so on, my idea loses its tendency to lead me to err.

The case of the passions is just a special case of the interaction of the mind with external objects, for Spinoza. So, similarly, if I understand the causes of an idea that involves hate, I will no longer have the tendency to err on the basis of that idea; that is, it will cease to be a passion and my hatred will be destroyed (Vp2 and Vp4c). Here is Spinoza's clearest statement of the prescription, from Vp4s:

We should work especially hard, in order to know each affect clearly and distinctly, insofar as it can be done, so that thereby the mind may be determined from an affect to thinking those things that it perceives clearly and distinctly and in which it may be completely content; and also so that the affect may be separated from the thought of an external cause and joined to true thoughts.<sup>17</sup>

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16 For Descartes's works, I use Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 volumes (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin 1996). From his general epistemological thesis that it is impossible to err whenever I extend the will only to whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive (*Meditation 4*, AT VII 62, for example), Descartes develops accounts of what can and cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived in sense perception. For example, at *Principles I 68* (AT VIII 33) he writes, 'So that we may distinguish what is clear [in our sensations] from what is obscure, it must be most carefully noted that pain and color and the like are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are considered as nothing more than sensations or thoughts...'

17 I include the Latin here, as in the introduction, because my claim that the statement should be understood as an explicit prescription depends importantly on Spinoza's precise words. The passage reads, 'Huic igitur rei praecipue danda est opera, ut unumquemque affectum, quantum fieri potest, clare, & distincte cognoscamus, ut sic Mens ex affectu ad illa cogitandum determinetur, quae clare, & distincte percipit, & in quibus plane acquiescit; atque adeo, ut ipse affectus a cogitatione causae externae separetur, & veris jungatur cogitationibus.'

The universal prescriptions of Vp10s, on which minds should resist the error that passion causes by means of opposed affects, also have a source in the Cartesian epistemology of sense perception, although this source is not so easily recognized. In his own treatment of the sun example in Meditation 3 (AT VII 39), Descartes writes that, despite his idea of the sun as large, which is based upon astronomical reasoning, he has another, sensory idea of the sun under which it continues to seem small. In this case, he is able to judge the sun large, despite his deceptive sensory idea of the sun, because his own reasoning convinces him, despite the natural impulse that his sensory idea gives him, that his sensory idea does not resemble the sun.

Spinoza offers similar accounts of the sun example at IIp35s and IVp1s. At IVp1s, however, Spinoza notices a possibility that Descartes arguably overlooks in his own account. A causal tendency that opposes a tendency to err need not necessarily accompany the truth:

It certainly happens, when, mistakenly, we fear some evil, that our fear disappears when the truth is revealed; but the contrary happens also: when we fear an evil that is certain to come, our fear disappears upon a false revelation.

IVp7 is Spinoza's general account of how opposed affects may help to restrain passion: 'An affect cannot be restrained or cancelled except by an affect opposed to and stronger than the affect to be restrained.' Because, however, the use of opposed affects may, as IVp1s suggests, be a two edged sword, Spinoza's universal prescriptions at Vp10s concern only affects, nobility and tenacity, that a mind has insofar as it acts as a total cause. I have already quoted, in the introduction, his claim about nobility. Here is what Spinoza writes about tenacity:

We should think about tenacity in the same way in order to set aside fear; that is, we should recount in detail and frequently imagine the common dangers of life, and how, by presence of mind and by strength of character they may best be avoided and overcome.

For these affects, the fact that one tendency can oppose another does not introduce a risk of harm because they are not passions and cannot have any bad consequences.<sup>18</sup>

These rules, then, on Spinoza's view, ought to guide all of us continually. All of us are susceptible to passion at all times, so, as Vp4s requires, we should try to understand them in order to resist their influence as

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18 At IIP59s Spinoza defines tenacity and nobility as the affects that produce a mind's action when it is an adequate cause.

much as possible. We should also, however, continually apply the rules Spinoza describes at Vp10s concerning nobility and tenacity, those affective states that are not themselves passionate. In effect, doing so, he goes on to argue at Vp10s, helps to keep these affects occurrent and so helps to diminish the influence even of those passions that arise suddenly or that we cannot master by understanding.<sup>19</sup>

The surprising result of IVp1s — that a tendency to err may be overwhelmed by an opposed passionate tendency — does have implications, which I shall discuss in Section IV, for Spinoza's account of what agents who are susceptible to the influence of the most harmful passions should do. Such agents will benefit from the opposing influence of a less harmful passion. Keeping occurrent an affect that might itself influence us badly cannot be universally recommended, however, since doing so cannot serve agents who are not afflicted by worse passions. So it is only active affects that everybody alike ought to cultivate.

#### IV Norms for Agents Insofar as They Are Rational

To be rational, for Spinoza, is, first, to understand what sort of being one is, a being that strives to persevere and that thrives when its power of striving increases, and, next, to aim consciously for these ends. Unless I know these things about myself, my search for *laetitia* will be haphazard. I may from the satisfaction gained from an object in a particular instance seek objects of the type later, for example, as IIIp16 warns. What increases a person's power to persevere in one situation, however, may not in another. For Spinoza, proceeding by trial and error is fraught with risks.<sup>20</sup>

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19 The scholium following Vp20, which completes Spinoza's account concerning the present life, summarizes Spinoza's account of how we resist the passions. Vp20s offers a five point account of the remedies for the influence of affects, that can be restated as straightforward prescriptions without much harm to Spinoza's meaning: 1. Know your affects; 2. Separate affects from the thought of an external cause; 3. Over time, relate affects to things you understand so that they will be more powerful than affects referred to what we conceive confusedly; 4. Relate affects to God or to many causes; 5. Order your affects and connect them to one another. These remedies, as I understand them, summarize the accounts of the mind's power that Spinoza offers at Vp1-Vp20.

20 There is reason to think — given Spinoza's view that some ends always help us to persevere and that other ends regularly do — that one might, on the basis for example of the past experience of *laetitia* alone, have some success in attaining *laetitia* regularly even without knowledge of what that feeling is a feeling of. Such

Even an agent who is rational in this limited sense may, however, despite consciously aiming at perseverance be ignorant of the means to it. Spinoza's various accounts of how to live rationally, collected together in an appendix to Part IV of the *Ethics* under the label, 'the right way of living,' describe these means. They include descriptions of what reason demands; of what agents desire to do from reason; of the good; of the useful; and of the affects that the virtuous cultivate.<sup>21</sup>

One might be tempted to understand these propositions as equivalent to straightforward prescriptions requiring the pursuit of the ends to which they attribute value; for example IVp39's account of the good, which clearly describes something good for the rational as well as the irrational, might be rephrased, 'You should aim for whatever preserves the proportion of motion and rest the human body's parts have to one another.' Such a reading suggests that Spinoza's use of explicit prescriptive language in providing an account of how we should resist the passions in Part V does not mark a significant difference between the meaning of those claims and the meaning of his claims about the right way of living. The kinds of claim would differ in subject matter — the right way of living concerns perseverance broadly and the prescriptions of Part V concern an area of specific and special concern — but, on this reading, Spinoza does not, in calling something good or a part

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a procedure, seeking *laetitia* where it has been found before with regularity seems rational if imperfectly reliable. It may even be preferable to seeking ends wholly on the basis of knowledge if that sort of knowledge is too rare or too difficult to come by, a concern I emphasize in Section IV below. Spinoza typically appeals to experience in the *Ethics* in order to reinforce conclusions derived from other sources. See I Appendix (II/79) and IIIp2s for important examples. In the Appendix to Part IV, however, he does note that experience is an advantage to be gained from our interactions with things outside us. Spinoza gives experience a more substantial role in his political works. See, for example, the importance given to the history of Amsterdam in the *Theological Political Treatise*, Chapter 20, and to other historical examples in the *Political Treatise* vii, 14, 17, and 24. Both works are in Gebhardt III.

- 21 I will not argue in detail here that these terms are closely associated in the *Ethics* because I think that the point is not controversial. Some important evidence for the view that the claims in which Spinoza uses these terms may be reduced includes IVp26, where Spinoza equates the end of action from reason with what the useful produces, understanding; IVd1, where he defines the good in terms of the useful; and IVp24, where Spinoza identifies actions from virtue with action from the guidance of reason. Don Garrett notices this close association and offers an explanation of what must otherwise be an unnecessarily confusing multiplication of terminology. Garrett suggests, reasonably I think, that the variety of Spinoza's terminology is the product of an attempt to address several different traditions at once, in their own terms. Don Garrett, 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory,' in Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1996), 288.

of virtue, give the thing a different status than he would have by saying that we ought to pursue or attain it.

I think that this temptation ought to be resisted. Several differences between the right way of living and Spinoza's explicit prescriptions justify reserving prescriptive language, in the way Spinoza does, for norms concerned with resisting passion. First, what a person who desires from reason to persevere ought to do in order to increase his power of perseverance may be different from what anybody at all ought to do because there are many things that, on Spinoza's account, may benefit a person who desires them in the right way but will not benefit a person who does not. Drink and food (IVp45s), for example, are means to perseverance and so in many circumstances, goods, in Spinoza's sense of the term. If one seeks to persevere, drink and food are part of the means to that end. For a person overwhelmed by alcoholism or gluttony, however, they may, as means to other ends in other circumstances, also do harm (IIIp56s). Calling food and drink good does not amount to a unqualified prescription to pursue them, then, because people with the wrong sorts of desires or in the wrong sets of circumstances will not benefit from them and so should not pursue them.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, every person in every circumstance should follow the prescriptions of Part V.

The class of goods the benefit of which is dependent on agents' particular psychological conditions and external circumstances is quite broad in the *Ethics* because Spinoza takes the manner in which an end is sought to contribute to its value. Arguably the class extends, for example, even to a healthy diet, which, Spinoza writes, benefits a person who seeks it in order to live more than it benefits another who seeks it in order to avoid death (IVp63s).<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless there are goods, such as the good of society and the preservation of the proportion of motion and rest among the body's parts, which seem, on Spinoza's accounts of them, to benefit any person, regardless of his conative states or beliefs.

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22 *Ethics* IV Appendix 29, which offers a discussion of money, is also a very clear illustration of this point.

23 The conception of Spinoza's right way of living as a list of ends that are beneficial only if they are pursued in the right way, if it is correct, may help to explain Spinoza's circumspect introduction of his normative ethics in Part IV. Spinoza recognizes this feature of the presentation, as his insertion of a clarificatory Appendix shows. If, however, a mind's understanding of how an end relates to the benefit it provides is a necessary condition for that benefit, then a bare list of goods, such as that the Appendix provides, will, by itself, be unhelpful. Spinoza requires the demonstrations of Part IV, laborious though they may be, so that recommended ends may be sought from understanding, the only attitude in which their acquisition would certainly benefit an agent.

A second reason for resisting the reduction of Spinoza's right way of living to a list of prescriptions requiring the pursuit of the named ends applies to these goods as well as to those that are sometimes harmful: although it is always true for Spinoza, that one ought to follow the prescriptions of Part V, it is not always true that one should pursue a known good. To call a thing 'good' for Spinoza is to say that it is a means to perseverance.<sup>24</sup> Such a thing may not however be what even a person guided by reason ought to pursue if there are other, better means available in a given situation. In such a situation, a person ought to pursue, not just a means to perseverance, but the best means. Spinoza makes something very similar to this claim at IVp65: 'Under the guidance of reason, of two goods, we should pursue the greater and, of two evils, we should pursue the lesser.'

Although some goods may indeed be beneficial to all people in all circumstances, IVp65 suggests that one should not always pursue any given good. It is a notable characteristic, however, of the prescriptions of Part V that Spinoza emphasizes the fact that we should follow them at all times. At Vp10s, parts of which are quoted above, he emphasizes having the remedies to the passions always at hand, applying them constantly, meditating upon them, and practicing them. The prescriptions, then, that we should seek to understand our passions and cultivate active affects, are demands that we always do so and in every situation. Spinoza does not suggest that doing so excludes other projects: we can cultivate active affects and pursue useful ends at the same time. He does suggest, however, that there is never a time at which it would be better not to follow the prescriptions of Part V. His accounts of the good are different in that he explicitly allows that there are greater and lesser goods and explicitly argues that, in some circumstances, one should not pursue some goods.

To this point, I have argued that two kinds of ends — ends that are beneficial only in some circumstances and ends that, although they may be beneficial in all circumstances, are not the most beneficial end in any given circumstance — are among the ends that Spinoza recommends in his right way of living but are not among those ends that, like the cultivation of nobility and tenacity, everyone, always should pursue. There is one good, however, the knowledge of God, which is Spinoza's *summum bonum*, that is certainly always beneficial and that is also greater than any other good. Several other ends, including understanding

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24 Spinoza offers a number of different definitions and descriptions of the good, and I do not intend this brief characterization to be a complete account. The most direct evidence for my claim here is the demonstration to IVp8.

generally, self-knowledge, the knowledge of things in the world, and blessedness, because of their close association with the knowledge of God, may have a similar status.

A third difference between the claims that make up Spinoza's account of the right way of living and the prescriptions of Part V may show why Spinoza does not include among his prescriptions a command to seek the knowledge of God and these other ends: Spinoza's prescriptions are, on his account, easy to follow and benefit from whereas there is no guarantee that any given person in any circumstance can attain many of the other ends described in the right way of living, including the knowledge of God.

At the end of Vp10s, Spinoza writes of his prescriptions, 'one who will observe these rules diligently, nor indeed are they troublesome, and practice them, will in a brief time be able to direct most of his actions according to the command of reason.' By contrast, Spinoza writes in the scholium that ends the *Ethics* (Vp42s) that the knowledge of God, self-knowledge, and the knowledge of things in the world, although they are the very most important ends described in the *Ethics* are difficult and to attain and require great effort:

Even if the way that I have shown to lead to this [blessedness] seems very hard now, still it can be found. And, of course, what is so rarely obtained is bound to be hard. Indeed, if salvation were at hand and it could be obtained without great effort, how could it be that nearly everyone neglects it? But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.

Clearly, even lesser goods, such as cheerfulness, may be difficult for a person overwhelmed by passion to cultivate, and the knowledge of God, or knowledge to the extent of attaining what Spinoza calls salvation, may simply be out of reach for many people. Spinoza does not write that it is impossible for some people to attain these ends. The contrast between his accounts of his own prescriptions and his accounts of the best goods suggests however, that Spinoza does subscribe to a version of the view that it does not make sense to say that someone ought to do or pursue something in circumstances in which he cannot.

An alternative account of the relation between the *summum bonum* and Spinoza's prescriptions for overcoming bondage to the passions might be one that takes the prescriptions to require the sorts of actions that contribute most directly to the attainment of that good. Propositions 14-20 of Part V contain an account of the relation between overcoming passion and the knowledge of God under which to understand a passion is to relate it to God (Vp14); the affect that arises from such knowledge is one that is equivalent to the love of God and which is resistant to passion (Vp15); and such understanding just is part of the knowledge of God (Vp20s, Gebhardt II/294, 5-10). These claims sug-

gest that Spinoza does indeed require the pursuit of the knowledge of God in a straightforward sense, but that the prescriptions of Part V state explicitly how that pursuit is to take place.

Probably both of these accounts of Spinoza's understanding of the knowledge of God are correct. A high degree of knowledge of God is difficult to obtain and, for many, out of reach. That makes a prescription requiring pursuit of the knowledge of God less apt than what Spinoza offers, an argument that it is the highest good (IVp28). Nevertheless, knowledge of God is something that can be acquired in degrees by everybody through the application of a single method, and the prescriptions of Part V recommend following that method.

The account of the human condition that I have offered in Part II above helps to explain the relation between Spinoza's prescriptions and his account of the right way of living. If everybody, as a matter of course and without exception, consciously aimed at perseverance, Spinoza's account of the right way of living would amount to something much closer to a set of prescriptions. Because people are afflicted by passion, however, they do not or cannot reliably act on desires to persevere. So a prescription requiring them to attain the means to perseverance might require them to pursue ends that, given their circumstances, may not benefit them or that they simply cannot attain. By contrast, the prescriptions Spinoza offers require the actions that bring people to overcome and resist passion and so to desire perseverance with greater constancy. Following the prescriptions that Spinoza does offer will, on his account, benefit anybody. It will also be something that, again on Spinoza's own account, anybody can do.

## V Norms for Irrational Agents

Although it is difficult to draw specific guidelines for action out of Spinoza's right way of living, he does offer clear remarks about how irrational agents, or agents insofar as they are irrational, should act. Moreover, although a much greater part of his argument concerns the right of way living for the virtuous, Spinoza consistently holds the view of the final paragraph of the *Ethics*, that most of us, most of the time, fall short of virtue.<sup>25</sup> So if an effort to give a complete account of Spinoza's normative ethics were to omit Spinoza's account of what people should

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25 Other passages that suggest that most people most of the time are irrational include IVp54, which I quote below, IVp35s, and the Appendix entry that corresponds to it, IV Appendix 14.

do insofar as they are irrational, it would omit the widest ranging of Spinoza's advice. All human minds are always susceptible to passion, on his view, and most are routinely motivated by it.

IVp7, the argument that one affect may be cancelled by another, forms a basis for Spinoza's advice to the irrational. The universal prescriptions deriving from this doctrine that I have already mentioned, from Vp10s, concern only affects, nobility and tenacity, that agents have insofar as they are active, presumably because agents acting from reason put themselves at risk by using passions to combat other passions. Irrational agents, however, stand to gain by warding off worse passions by means of better ones, so, for them, IVp7 has more general implications: you should not only keep nobility and tenacity ready to mind; you may also benefit by keeping present to mind those passions that prevent the worst sorts of behavior or that make possible better future states. Spinoza states this position most clearly at the scholium to IVp54, where he also lists the sorts of passions that will be likely to help some of those who are worst off to become able to follow the guidance of reason and pursue the right way of living:

Because men rarely live from the dictates of reason, these two affects, humility and repentance, and also hope and fear, bring more advantage than harm. Since men will sin, it is better to sin in that direction. For, if weak-minded men were all uniformly arrogant, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, what bonds could bring them together or control them? The mob is terrifying unless it is afraid. No wonder, then, that the prophets, who cared about the common good and not that of the select few, commended humility, repentance, and reverence so much. Really, those who are subject to these affects can be led much more easily than others, so that, in the end, they can live under the guidance of reason, that is, they can be free and enjoy the life of the blessed.<sup>26</sup>

The difference, in the *Ethics*, between what the rational should do and what the passionate should do is made clearest in this and other discussions of the traditional virtues. Humility and repentance are among the virtues that Spinoza declares, in the propositions leading up to IVp54s, evil or useless. 'Evil' is, in Spinoza's use, a label referring to whatever prevents rational agents from increasing the power with which they strive to persevere in being.<sup>27</sup> This scholium, however, is a qualified

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26 This passage may be compared to a passage from the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 14 (Gebhardt III 176 18-22) in which Spinoza similarly holds that the value of religious doctrine lies not in its truthfulness but in the actions it inspires.

27 As I have mentioned at Note 24, Spinoza's account of value terms is complex. This is not meant to be a complete account of evil. The demonstration to IVp8 is its strongest textual basis.

recommendation of these same passions, under which a typical person, who is not often guided by reason, may benefit from particular kinds of loss of power, by means of which he can, in accordance with IVp65, avoid worse passions and make it easier to become rational in the future. Irrational agents, then, ought, at least in many circumstances, to cultivate humility and repentance. Agents who are more rational and therefore free of the very worst passions ought to work to rid themselves of humility and repentance.

## VI Diagnosis in the *Ethics*

No human mind, however, is completely rational, in Spinoza's account, and very few are completely irrational.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the fact that we perceive our own selves only imperfectly, in the same way that we perceive external objects, suggests that often we will not be able to distinguish among rational and irrational possible actions.<sup>29</sup> The fact that we should seek certain ends insofar as we are rational and capable of attaining them and different, even opposed, ends insofar as we are irrational or incapable puts us in a difficult position. Even if we have substantial knowledge about what agents should do in a variety of circumstances, we often cannot know what we should do because we do not understand our own states well enough. Many of Spinoza's propositions that might appear to be action-guiding, notably the free man propositions, address this problem. They do not recommend particular kinds of action but, rather, describe circumstances, actions, or affective states that are associated with either rationality or passion and by that means help us to understand when we are not free.

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28 IV Appendix 7 and 32, IVp68, and, especially, V Preface are passages that suggest that no one is completely rational. For Spinoza, the wholly irrational are primarily monomaniacs, those overridden by one particular passion (IVp44s). Those suicides who are driven to the act by the influence of external causes on their imagination (IVp20s) may also be wholly irrational.

29 IIp43 might be thought to present a special difficulty for this claim: if whoever has a true idea knows that he has a true idea, then those who are acting rationally will know that they are acting rationally. It is unclear, though, how this kind of certainty will help an ordinary agent. Supposing that I am convinced that I am about to do what is rational, I would be foolish to rely on IIp43 as a guarantee that I am; just because whoever has an adequate idea is convinced he does, it does not follow that whoever is convinced he has an adequate idea does have one. I think IIp43 does guarantee that a mind with wholly adequate ideas would know itself to be acting rationally. If our ideas have degrees of adequacy, though, even a person with a good reason for acting might not know it to be a good reason.

The ideal of the free man forms the basis for Spinoza's formal definitions of good and evil as well as the free man propositions. Spinoza's introduction of the idea of a model of human nature in the Preface to Part IV anticipates both uses. After writing that the terms 'good' and 'evil' are misleading insofar as they seem to describe properties of things considered in themselves, he writes that he will nonetheless retain them:

For, because we desire to form an idea of man as a model of human nature, which we may consider, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the sense I have given them. By "good" therefore in what follows I shall understand this: what we certainly know to be a means by which we may move closer and closer to the model of human nature that we set before us. By "evil", though, this: what we certainly know impedes us, so that we are less like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect, or less perfect, to the extent that they move closer to or further from this model.

'Good' and 'evil,' here, are normative words in a familiar sense. To say that something is good for a particular person in a particular circumstance is to recommend that thing. Spinoza defines the good here and, arguably, in the definition that immediately follows IV Preface, in terms of the free man. An end is good, or worth pursuing, if it brings one closer to the model of the free man. In the last sentence here, however, Spinoza introduces another function of the model. It is useful for diagnosing the condition of particular men. A comparison of what the model of human nature does against what an actual person does, which is what the free man propositions make possible, will show how perfect, or imperfect, the actual person is.

There is some direct evidence for this interpretation of the free man propositions in the passage that introduces them. At the scholium to IVp66, Spinoza writes that consideration of what he has said concerning the guidance of reason will help people to understand,

what the difference is between a man who is led only by affect, or opinion, and a man who is led by reason. For the former, whether he wants to or not, does things he does not understand anything about; the latter, however, complies with no one's wishes but his own and does only those things that he knows to be of the greatest importance in life and therefore desires the most. So I call the former a slave but the latter, a free man...

Diagnosis, understanding whether and to what extent a particular person in a particular instance is led by passion or by reason, then, is at least a benefit of the account of Part IV up to the point in the *Ethics* where the free man propositions begin. When we attempt to distinguish between a person who is led by passion and another who is led by reason, moreover, Spinoza offers the terms 'slave' for the one and

'free man' for the other. So the idea of the free man is introduced in the context of the project of diagnosis. He concludes the scholium, '...about whose character and method for living I wish now to note a few more things.' Because the project that gives rise to Spinoza's use of the term is that of diagnosis, it seems plausible to conclude that what Spinoza goes on to write about the free man also contributes to that purpose.

To take IVp72 as an example, then, Spinoza's assertion that the free man always acts honestly, not deceptively does not recommend any particular kind of action directly. Rather it suggests that, whenever I find myself in a circumstance where I have lied or am contemplating dishonesty, I lack power and virtue in that circumstance. What I ought to do is a very complex question requiring me to understand what passion is influencing me and how, given my particular circumstances, I can best resist it and increase my power to persevere. If, however, I had thought that dishonesty was an instance of my mastery of my circumstances, IVp72 will show me that I am wrong.

The problem of understanding when we are under the influence of passion is generated, in large part, by the facts that we can desire particular external ends, in most cases, either from reason, as a means to perseverance, or from passion and that desires from reason or passion, again in most cases, differ only in their causal sources and the names Spinoza uses for them, not in their phenomenal characteristics.<sup>30</sup> The free man propositions indicate particular kinds of actions, such as honesty and thankfulness, that are rare, reliable marks of virtue and help us to understand ourselves. Those propositions in Part IV that characterize particular affects in universal terms are also useful in this way. Their importance to Spinoza's ethics is similar. Where Spinoza holds that cheerfulness can never be excessive and is always good (IVp42) and that hate can never be good (IVp45), for example, he argues something more than the point that cheerfulness is always and hatred never a means to perseverance (although this is true, on the account of the *Ethics*). The universality of these claims also indicates the relationship between these affects and rationality: a person, insofar as he is irrational cannot be cheerful, and a person, insofar as he is hateful, cannot be rational. So, as in the case of dishonesty, when I have acted from or am

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30 IVp59 is an argument that any action produced by passion can also be produced by reason. It leaves open the question of whether every action that can be produced by reason can also be produced by passion, which is why I conservatively claim that this is true of most cases. However, Spinoza does at least think that many such actions may produced as easily by passion, as IVp63 and its second scholium show.

contemplating action from hatred, I can know that, in that case, I am under the influence of passion.

## VII Conclusion: Consciousness and the Ethics

Central features of Spinoza's understanding of the human condition — the relationship between a mind's conscious aims and its striving to persevere in being; and the similarity between sensation and passion — explain the normative language of the *Ethics*. One class of claims, the explicit prescriptions Spinoza offers in Part V, relies upon the similarity between sensation and passion in developing means of overcoming and continuously resisting those desires we have that arise from our lack self-knowledge and so makes possible the rational pursuit of perseverance. A second class of propositions, the right way of living, describes what we should do as part of the rational pursuit. Finally, for those of us who cannot reliably master our passions by rational means, and Spinoza argues that this class includes most of us, most of the time, a third class of propositions recommends the cultivation of traditional virtues. The differences between the genuine causal forces at work in desire and sensation, on the one hand, and our conscious apprehension of those forces in passion and imagination, on the other, also make clear the importance of propositions, such as the free man propositions, that help us to diagnose our own states. For those differences suggest that even the few of us who do possess some substantial self-knowledge are often unable to tell, by introspection, whether we are acting under the influence of passion.<sup>31</sup>

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