Steven Nadler. *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 234. Hardback. $ 39.95.

Think Least of Death is not just an interpretation of Spinoza, but a defense of his philosophy. Nadler develops Spinoza's arguments in ways that are intended both to reflect Spinoza's views and to persuade us that the views in question are true. He uses success language throughout to describe Spinoza's ideas ("What Spinoza discovered, and what he wants us to know, is that . . . " [11]) and arguments ("Spinoza . . . has demonstrated, rigorously and a priori, that . . . " [188]). Nadler is not just a Spinoza scholar, here; he also thinks that Spinoza basically got it right. It would be a mistake, then, to evaluate *Think Least of Death* solely on its interpretive merits as a reading of Spinoza's *Ethics*. It's more fruitful to look at the places where Nadler not only describes, but apparently *endorses*, Spinoza's views.

Following Nadler, I'll focus here on the practical philosophy. Briefly put, Spinoza takes the right way of living to consist in adherence to the dictates of reason, which prescribe "that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage . . . and 'absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can'" (191). These general principles issue in more specific directives based on facts about human nature. For instance, since the nature of the human mind is such that it always benefits from further understanding, reason directs us to strive for further understanding. To the extent that a human being lives in accordance with such dictates of reason, they will feel joyful, be free, and act virtuously. Conversely, when they are driven by their passions rather than reason, they will often feel sorrow, lack autonomy, and do things that are harmful to themselves and others. This is the source of whatever motivating power these directives have: necessarily, following them conduces to our self-interest.

A crucial point for Nadler is that these facts about human nature are the same for each human being. This implies that "there is in fact an objective, non-arbitrary determination of what constitutes a more perfect or ideal human being" (28), the ideal that Spinoza variously refers to as the model of human nature or the free man. On Nadler's reading, Spinoza's notion of the free

man (which he treats as equivalent to the model of human nature) is not "some creature of the imagination or reflection of personal taste" (29), but a representation of "the ideal state toward which every individual [human] naturally and necessarily . . . strives" (29).

A signal contribution of the book is to show that the free person's life is a realizable goal rather than an unattainable ideal. The free person is determined to act by reason alone, yes—but this is compatible with her also having passions, so long as those passions do not determine her behavior. A free person might feel fear at the prospect of death or suffering, but that fear will not determine what they do. Instead, their actions will be determined by the guidance of reason and the positive affects (joy, love, self-esteem, and the like).

Since the life of the free person is in principle attainable, Nadler proposes that we take the free person's life as a model for how we ourselves should live. For instance, when Spinoza writes that "A free man always acts honestly" (E4p72), the implication is that we ourselves should always act honestly. Now, there is an apparent inconsistency in this position, nicely articulated by Don Garrett ("'A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively': Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's *Ethics,*" in Don Garrett, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 441–61). The free man—living entirely according to the guidance of reason—always acts honestly. Yet reason also guides us to seek our own advantage, and sometimes the best way to do this will be to lie or cheat. Garrett's solution is that Spinoza does not think we ought always to act as the free man would act if he were in our shoes. Nadler rejects this: "if reason recommends something, it recommends it universally, to all people, regardless of their circumstances" (129). If it would be irrational (hence bad) for a free person to be dishonest, it would be irrational (bad) for us to do it too. Nadler is willing to concede that dishonesty may be "good" in scare quotes, but "to the extent that what is really good is what moves one closer to the ideal . . . such behavior is not truly good" (129).

I fear that the narrow focus on the case of honesty has obscured deeper metaethical problems. If Nadler is right, then Spinoza's practical philosophy is a kind of ideal observer theory of practical reason: what you *should* do is what an idealized, perfectly autonomous

version of you *would* do. Yet I have many interests that my idealized, perfectly autonomous counterpart would not, and these interests apparently rationalize behavior for me that would not be rational for my ideal counterpart. Examples are easy to find. Though it is a nuisance, I place the chocolate on a high shelf, out of sight, to minimize the temptation to glut myself. The nuisance this involves is, for me, the lesser of two evils. Now, my free counterpart surely need not concern himself with minimizing temptation, for by hypothesis he cannot give in to it. (Does he even know what temptation is?) So, for him, placing the chocolate on a high shelf is not the lesser of two evils. However, if I acted as my free counterpart would act, I would undoubtedly become *less* free in consequence—succumbing inevitably to my passions.

It cannot be replied that, when I hide the chocolate, I am moved by passion rather than reason. It is my very striving for freedom that leads me to deliver myself from temptation: I am joyfully anticipating the healthier version of myself that my present actions will help to bring about. What is going on, then? I invite the conclusion that becoming more like the ideally free version of ourselves often requires us to acknowledge and redress our present lack of perfect autonomy. It is the fact that we are not perfectly free that makes such actions rational. Thus, even if Nadler is right that the life of the free person is in principle attainable, it does not follow that we ought always to act as the free person would act in our place.

This criticism does not undermine the general strength and interest of the book. Nadler has managed to articulate Spinoza's system as a living, breathing philosophy, viable for us still today. I can think of few other books that manage this difficult but important feat. The resurgence of interest in Spinoza in the previous century was driven by the recognition that many of his views are not only historically interesting, but also plausibly true. That tendency is no longer reflected in many of the books and articles published on Spinoza. This seems to me quite a loss, and I hope that more scholars will follow Nadler's lead: not only proposing interpretations of Spinoza's texts, but also making a case for the philosophical ideas and arguments those texts express.

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