BOOK REVIEWS

Olli Koistinen (ed.): The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s ‘Ethics’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 323, £18.99 (pb.). ISBN 978-0-521-61860-1

Olli Koistinen’s ‘companion’ to Spinoza’s Ethics is exactly what it claims to be. A philosophy companion should aim at giving students and scholars a broad vista of the current, global state of research on a given philosopher or work. Koistinen’s volume fully lives up to this task by presenting a set of thirteen articles with both methodological and thematic breadth, written by some of the best specialists in the field, picked from among both senior scholars and younger researchers. It will undoubtedly and deservedly become a standard reference in the future, and be used widely by students and teachers alike as an excellent introduction to Spinoza’s masterpiece and to the philosophical issues it raises. However, since the volume is conceived as a companion, and the editor consequently has been less concerned with the global unity of argumentation than with thematic breadth, it is difficult to assess its content as a single unified account of Spinoza’s metaphysics. It is preferable to present the contributions separately.

The volume opens with two contributions by Piet Steenbakkers. The first is a ‘textual history of the Ethics’, retracing point by point the genesis of the book, from the first mention by Spinoza of a theory of substance presented more geometrico in a letter to Henry Oldenburg from August 1661 (Letter 1) to the simultaneous publication of the Latin Opera posthuma and the Dutch translation, the Nagelate Schriften, in late 1677, less than a year after Spinoza’s death in February 1677. Steenbakkers’s condensed account should be compulsory reading for any aspiring Spinozist in order to avoid a number of textual pitfalls that commentators with less (or no) philological sensibility fairly frequently fall into, such as following Carl Gebhardt in taking translator’s gloss in the Nagelate Schriften for authentic Spinozistic doctrine.

Steenbakkers’s second contribution discusses Spinoza’s mos geometrico, more precisely whether we should interpret the ‘geometrical order’ as a mere external form of exposition or as an internal method of deduction. As Steenbakkers notes, the reply to this question depends partly on how we understand the relation between the Ethics and the earlier Treatise on the Emendation of Intellect (TIE). There is, however, nothing about the methodological recommendations of the TIE that prescribes the adoption of geometrical criteria for rule-bound investigation. This points to the conclusion that the more geometrica is primarily form. However, when considering Spinoza’s use of the key term ‘order’ (ordo) in the Ethics, it
becomes clear that there exists what Steenbakkers calls ‘interferences’ between form and method in Spinoza.

Valterri Viljanen develops a careful analysis of Spinoza’s basic ontology. This is no easy task. The terminological framework of Spinoza’s philosophy is notoriously difficult to grasp, leaving open the possibility for a wide range of different interpretations, depending on the context in which one situates Spinoza’s argument. Viljanen claims that Spinoza ‘does not pack anything particularly controversial into his definitions’ (57) and that they are ‘relatively uncontentious – or at least not easily rejectable’ (78). Hence, Spinoza’s initial definitions in the *Ethics* do not really diverge from the traditional understanding of the terms in question (*causa sui*, finite thing, substance, attribute, mode, God, etc.), and his basic ontological categories can be understood along well-known Cartesian and late Scholastic lines. This reviewer happens to disagree with that claim. If, however, one accepts Viljanen’s way of delineating the context for Spinoza’s thought, his introduction to these issues is about as good and concise as it gets.

Andreas Schmidt reinterprets Spinoza’s substance monism in light of the notion of ‘formal distinction’ as found in Duns Scotus’s *Tractatus de primo principio*. Schmidt’s argument is extremely sophisticated and engages with an impressive amount of secondary literature. However, as the author himself notes, it is not a new interpretative strategy to associate Spinoza and Duns Scotus. In his 1968 *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, Gilles Deleuze already advanced similar views. Critical readers of Deleuze have often complained that there is absolutely no textual proof that Spinoza had the least knowledge of the philosophy of Duns Scotus. The same complaint is no less valid for Schmidt’s analysis.

In ‘Spinoza and the Stoics on Substance Monism’, Jon Miller continues the discussion concerning the background and context for Spinoza’s monist philosophy, taking his point of departure in Bayle’s and Leibniz’s original descriptions of Spinozism as a ‘new Stoicism’. According to Miller, Bayle and Leibniz were not wrong on this point; indeed, ‘the similarities between Stoicism and Spinozism are impressive’ (99). Nonetheless, with regard to the specific problem of monism, these doctrines are both incomparable and incompatible, since the Stoic doctrine is ‘deeply teleological’ while Spinoza’s arguments are ‘utterly devoid of teleology’ (117). Miller does give some justification for his assessment of Spinoza with regard to this crucial issue. Scholars familiar with recent work on Spinoza and teleology by commentators such as Martin Lin and Don Garrett could, however, wish for a more nuanced interpretation of Spinoza on this point.

Charles Jarrett’s contribution on Spinoza’s modal philosophy, which, to my mind, figures among the best of the volume, provides a sophisticated, clear and completely convincing argument for the univocity of the term ‘necessity’ in Spinoza against the influential interpretation presented by E. Curley and G. Walski in ‘Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered’ from 1999, according to which there several ways in which things are qualified as
‘necessary’ in Spinoza. Inexplicably, the article also includes a short and largely irrelevant discussion of Spinoza in relation to Kurt Gödel.

Diane Steinberg and Olli Koistinen’s contributions deal with topics which at first sight seem very different, namely Spinoza’s theory of knowledge and mind and Spinoza’s theory of action. In Spinoza’s rationalist universe, however, agency and knowledge are intimately related, since action (of the mind) for Spinoza is nothing but the formation of adequate ideas and clear concepts. It therefore comes as no surprise that these two contributions largely complement each other, and that the account of Spinoza’s ‘theory of justification’ which concludes Steinberg’s study, fits marvellously with Koistinen’s interpretation of Spinoza’s ‘revisionary’ theory of human action.

Michael LeBuffe takes on the Herculean task of providing a systematic catalogue of the passions and the relations that obtain between them, as presented by Spinoza in Ethics, part III. What kind of relations obtain between the passions? One could for example follow Michael Della Rocca in thinking that they are basically conceptual relations, since Spinoza develops his theory by way of combining in different ways the concepts of three basic passions, namely joy, sadness and desire. One could also suggest that they are mathematical or geometrical relations, since Spinoza himself says that he will treat the passions ‘as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies’ (Ethics III, Preface). Other viable options are causal relations, or power relations. LeBuffe, for his part, remains surprisingly silent on the question – that is, unless we take the title of his paper to implicitly provide a suggestive and potentially very interesting answer: ‘Spinoza’s Anatomy of the Passions’.

In an original contribution, Susan James approaches part IV of the Ethics, which bears on man’s servitude and possible liberation from the passions, from the point of view of Spinoza’s political writings. She argues that Spinoza’s conception of political freedom as developed in the Tractatus theologico-politicus provides the model for the comprehensive, general theory of freedom developed in the Ethics, which then is ‘guided by a sensitivity to the peculiar blend of dependence and independence that characterizes political liberty’ (232). Hence, in the Ethics, Spinoza ‘produces a theory that mirrors the central features of a more limited conception of political liberty’ (240–1). There are, however, some potential textual concerns that should have been addressed. Thus, many of the fundamental elements of Spinoza’s theory of the passions and our possible liberation from them are already sketched in the TIE, the Korte Verhandeling, and quite probably also in the early, tripartite version of the Ethics, all of which were written before the political texts. Taking this into consideration would certainly not refute James’s thesis, but would help clarifying how, and in what respects precisely, the political texts provide a ‘model’ for Spinoza’s mature theory of human freedom.

The opening lines of the TIE, where Spinoza explains how he ‘resolved at last to try and find out whether there would be anything that would be the
true good’, constitute one of the most famous declarations of an ethical
programme in the history of philosophy. Spinoza is, however, equally
famous for defending a thoroughly relativistic account of the ‘good’ as
‘what we certainly know to be useful to us’ (Ethics IV, def. 1). Nonetheless,
in the fifth part of the Ethics, Spinoza outlines a notoriously difficult theory
of the highest good as beatitude, liberty and eternity of the mind, none of
which seems to have anything relative about them. Andrew Youpa’s
collection attempts to reconcile these apparently contradictory strands in
Spinoza’s theory of the good by reconstructing his ethics as a thoroughly
intellectualist programme where ‘to know is to be’ and where to be (eternal)
is, as Youpa puts it in a concluding phrase which rings perhaps a little bit
too finalistic in a Spinozist’s ears, ‘the ultimate end’ (357).

Martin Lin’s contribution critically analyses Spinoza’s account of how the
mind can obtain ‘dominion over the affects’ (Ethics V, Preface). Lin works
through a series of ‘techniques’ proposed by Spinoza for obtaining such
dominion, only to conclude on oddly common sense grounds that they ‘are
not impressive’ and that all of them, except one, ‘rest on dubious assump-
tions’ (282). Lin’s argument is strongly informed by the work of Don Garrett.
It is very rigorous and, in spite of the final evaluation, does good justice to
Spinoza’s position. The article, however, also contains some unfortunate bits
of jargon. For example, according to Lin, ‘modes can approximate self-
causation’ and ‘the less a finite mode’s existence and activity are conditioned
by external causes, the more it inheres in itself’ (262). Such statements are not
rare in recent literature. Indeed, they are symptomatic of a certain kind of
Spinoza commentary much in vogue. Nonetheless, and putting to one side
the fact that such expressions are nowhere to be found in Spinoza’s texts, I
have grave difficulties in grasping how self-causation can be approximated
and how anything can possibly ‘inhere in itself’.

In the final article of the volume, Don Garrett explores one of the most
obscure corners of Spinoza’s doctrine, namely the relations between
Spinoza’s notions of formal essence, non-existing modes and the eternity
of the mind. These notions pose serious problems for key doctrines such as
Spinoza’s parallelism and necessitarianism, but are nonetheless crucial for
understanding his conception of beatitude, and consequently his entire
ethical project. In an attempt to resolve some of these problems, Garrett
develops an interpretation of formal essence as ‘infinite modes’ comprised
as a ‘general capacity’ (301) in the attribute which contains them. Garrett’s
reconstruction is intriguing and goes a long way towards solving some of the
systemic problems posed by these notions. One might object that the
conception of formal essence as grounded in a ‘capacity’ introduces a
conception of the attributes which sits uneasily with Spinoza’s explicit
rejection of potentiality and faculty explanations in general. The question,
however, is whether any other interpretation will fare better.

The contributions cover almost the entire range of core issues in the study
of the Ethics, from the publication history of the book to the basic ontology
it outlines; from the philosophy of mind to the conception of freedom and beatitude. The methodological breadth of the contributions is impressive. They include philological analysis, historical and contextual interpretation, and completely a-historical rational reconstruction. I did, however, miss two contributions engaging with the intellectual history surrounding Spinoza’s philosophy, namely one article dedicated to the impact of the *Ethics* in Spinoza’s own time, and another article dedicated to the reception history of the *Ethics* in the following centuries. After all, how a book is read is an integral part of what it is about. If the volume had contained these two supplementary articles, the adverb ‘almost’ in the first sentence of this concluding paragraph could have been omitted.

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Michael Hunter: *Boyle: Between God and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. xiii + 366, $55.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-0-300-12381-4

‘One could not say so much in praise of this wise and virtuous gentleman that he would not merit much more’, said Lorenzo Magalotti of Boyle.¹ Much the same may be said of Michael Hunter’s new biography, *Boyle: Between God and Science*. Hunter has done an exceptional job. His biography of Boyle is detailed and extensive, while remaining clear, readable, and full of interest. We needed a good, contemporary, biography of Boyle – and Hunter has given us not merely a good, but an excellent, one.

Researchers on Boyle’s philosophy and scientific work already owe Hunter a considerable debt and this new work, drawing together and enlarging his previous discussions of Boyle’s life, character and achievements, simply adds to that debt. The work is as substantial as it is highly readable. Hunter’s previous work, *Robert Boyle by Himself and His Friends*,² provided a wealth of primary sources alongside extensive commentary and, as Hunter points out, is ‘a fundamental companion’ (258) to the present volume.

Boyle’s interests were wide ranging. As a natural philosopher he was interested in all branches of physics, in alchemy and anatomy, in botany and biology, in medicine and mathematics (in which subject, however, he was, he tells us, not as competent as he would have wished). As a philosopher in our sense, he wrote on epistemology and ethics, on the philosophy of religion,

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¹Lorenzo Magalotti’s assessment of Boyle may be found in *Lorenzo Magalotti at the Court of Charles II*, edited and translated by W. E. Knowles Middleton (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980).
²M. Hunter (ed.), *Robert Boyle by Himself and his Friends* (London: W. Pickering, 1994).