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Spinoza and the Cunning of Imagination by Eugene Garver
(review)

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A question that *Plato's Persona* by-passes (wisely, this reviewer feels) is the consequences that Ficino's Pythagoreanism has for his outlook on magic. This could be the topic for another book. Moreover, Ficino emphasizes the visual component of such impersonations, that is, the visual aspect of the Greek *prosopon*, different from the Latin etymology of *persona*, which refers to the sense of hearing (55). It is to be hoped that *Plato's Persona* will find a readership beyond the group of Ficino specialists, because Robichaud's findings should be considered with an eye on the many specific forms of theatricality that underpin Renaissance culture. The stage, the pulpit, the court, and the spaces in which learned magicians practiced their arts were all environments upon which Ficino's ideas had a tremendous and lasting impact.

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Eugene Garver. *Spinoza and the Cunning of Imagination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. viii + 307. Cloth, \$55.00.

How the arguments of Spinoza's *Ethics* work might seem obvious. Even if Spinoza's exposition is not perfect, and some suppressed premises might have to be recovered, it seems clear enough that the demonstrations are supposed to show, in Euclidian fashion, how truths about the basic structure of nature—as well as truths about how to live—follow from axioms and uncontroversial definitions. If readers keep their imagination and emotions from sullyng their reasoning, they will see the force of the demonstrations and be convinced.

In his engaging, highly original book, Garver argues that the *Ethics* is not a linear march through timeless truths, but rather a complicated drama that works precisely because its “characters,” the human beings described in the *Ethics*, as well as the people reading the *Ethics*, have the imaginations they do. We readers may approach this drama with scholarly detachment, but we may also find ourselves provoked by the same difficulties we see the characters encounter, which in turn may transform us in just the ways we see the characters transformed.

Understanding the *Ethics* means following a story of how human beings can go from desiring self-preservation (as all people, by nature, do) to also desiring to live rational, ethical lives. The plot is complex, since, according to Garver, the latter desire cannot arise from the former. For self-preservation, inadequate ideas—various predilections, coping mechanisms, and tendencies to form social attachments—suffice; the desire to have adequate ideas and *know* things is not a desire following from an inborn striving to persevere in being. Yet human imagination can, with its characteristic deflections, get people to adequate ideas without those people ever aiming to get to them. This is what Garver calls, in a nod to Hegel's cunning of reason, the “cunning of the imagination.”

Garver's book consists of two parts. In the first part, Garver describes the stage set in *Ethics* Parts I–III. Spinoza presents what look like incommensurable systems. First, there is a system of God, infinite modes, and adequate ideas—where adequate ideas are, on Garver's view, infinite modes. Second, there is a system of inadequate ideas and finite things striving to persevere in their being. The presence of this deep divide raises hard questions. Given the finitude of our minds, how could we even have adequate ideas (including the adequate idea of God), if adequate ideas are infinite? And why would we even want adequate ideas? Adequate ideas are universal, non-perspectival truths, and there seem to be no schemata to tether those truths to our experiences as particular finite beings who care about particular finite beings.

In the second part, Garver explains how these systems can be unified and how beings like us can come to desire adequate ideas. Importantly, the ascent to adequate ideas “can only be affective and must be social” (211). In infancy, we track the sources of pleasures and pains and begin, by imagination and emotion, to construct an objective social world. The

construction of this world opens us up to frustration and heartbreak, but it also prepares the mind to have adequate ideas of a truly objective, mind-independent world. Collaborative sociability also prepares the mind, prefiguring “the relation within a person between reason and passion, in which reason acting on the passions makes them more rather than less powerful as it makes them more rational” (101). As the imagination leads us into new ways of interacting, we think about ourselves and the world in increasingly nuanced ways.

As the story goes, we might recognize that despite *Ethics* I–III, there is concourse between the infinite and finite. In human bondage, the topic of *Ethics* IV, the finite constrains the infinite. In human freedom, the topic of *Ethics* V, the infinite acts on the finite and the finite becomes infinite. Adequate ideas may eventually cease to feel like an alien presence in the human mind and instead be seen as one’s own, as “completions of inadequate ideas, a dynamic form of the commensurability of finite and infinite” (240). And we may recognize that self-knowledge is the one place in our practical and ethical lives where imagination must be left behind completely. The self “finally becomes an agent acting on its own passions,” but this is not the old self in a new dress: “one becomes an agent as one loses one’s personal identity and loses concern for one’s uniqueness” (235).

Scholars will likely find much to dispute here. I, for one, found myself objecting quite often. But I also found myself asking questions that had not occurred to me before and rethinking propositions I was certain I understood. Garver’s outstanding book has the potential to reorient and extend scholarly conversations in really fascinating ways; I encourage everyone to read it.

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Justin Steinberg. *Spinoza’s Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 235. Cloth, \$105.00.

In this ambitious and important book, Justin Steinberg attempts to explain the significance of the project for both contemporary political philosophy and the history of political thought. He argues that Spinoza offers a much-needed antidote against “ideal theory” in political philosophy. He also wants to expand our horizons concerning the context of Spinoza’s political thought, primarily by noting the influence of Renaissance Civic Humanism. He argues for two main theses: the political works are continuous with the *Ethics*; and the role of the state is to help perfect the individual.

The first chapter, “Metaphysical Psychology and *Ingenia* Formation,” argues that (i) there is a human essence, which is nonetheless plastic, that is, can be formed within a range of possibilities depending on the circumstances in which this essence is instantiated; (ii) that this plastic essence constitutes the unique *ingenium* or genius of an individual or people; and (iii) that the state has a duty and interest to form this *ingenium*.

In the second chapter, “Eliminating Juridical Constraints and Naturalizing Rights,” Steinberg builds on earlier interpretations of Spinoza’s political theory as republican and argues against John G. A. Pocock’s view that Spinoza is essentially a natural law theorist. Steinberg’s central claim in this chapter is that Spinoza adopts natural law only to undermine it.

The main claim of the third chapter, “The Continuity Thesis and the Aim of Government,” is that the aim of the state is to liberate or empower its citizens, not only physically but also intellectually and emotionally.

In chapter four, “The Politics of Hope and Fear,” the author convincingly shows how fear can be overcome through hope in Spinoza’s politics. Steinberg raises several difficulties for his reading: the “inseparable counterparts challenge,” the “equal constraints challenge,” and the “equal willingness challenge.” After discussing the nature of fear and hope, he shows how it is possible to respond to each of these challenges. The main point emphasized in conclusion is that “affective welfare is a very important dimension along which to measure civic success” (98).