

Meaning in Spinoza's Method

AARON V. GARRETT

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For many first-time readers of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the form in which it is presented is its most immediately striking feature. Beginning with definitions and axioms, it proceeds to deduce numbered propositions, corollaries, and lemmas about all matters of metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and ethics. Quite apart from the content of the ideas being demonstrated, it is an awesome display of scrupulous philosophical argumentation. It is also extremely perplexing. Why did Spinoza choose this mode of presentation? Did he really think it would be the most perspicacious way to present his philosophy? Is there any connection between the form and content? How does the geometrical method of the *Ethics* relate to Spinoza's overall philosophical method? What can a proper understanding of his method teach us about his broader philosophy? Above all, what does Spinoza's method mean?

In *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, Aaron V. Garrett attempts to answer these and related questions. Wisely situating his answers in the context provided by earlier commentators, Garrett provides an interpretation that is both continuous and novel. While some parts of the discussion may be unsatisfying, his impressive ability to combine thorough scholarly research with acute sensitivity to the underlying philosophical issues allows him to advance significantly our understanding of Spinoza, early modern philosophy generally, and epistemology itself.

As Garrett notes, two views of Spinoza's method have historically predominated. According to one, "the *mos geometricus* [is] primarily a teaching method used to dress up ideas acquired in some way independent of their geometrical presentation" (p. 99). This didactic interpretation insists that (in the words of H. A. Wolfson) "there is no logical connection between the substance of Spinoza's philosophy and the form in which it is written" (quoted on p. 17). By these lights, it is entirely possible that Spinoza could have chosen a different means of presenting his ideas, if he thought it would be more pedagogically efficacious. The rationale behind the geometrical method, and the sole basis by which it can be judged a success or failure, is that it is supposed to help others understand Spinoza's ideas.

By contrast, the second interpretation views Spinoza's method "as a rigorous (or at least an attempt at a rigorous) deductive system, moving from ground to consequence in a logically necessary manner, and thus the only form for Spinoza's subject matter" (p. 100). While the didactic reading takes the method to be "an external structure applied to a content independent of said structure," the logical holds that "Spinoza's *Ethics* is intended to exhibit the structure of nature" and the geometrical method is a system of "deduction mirroring the immanent necessity of nature" (pp. 100-101). Here, content dictates form: just as "the internal efficient, causal structure of nature" begins with God and proceeds to modes, so the *Ethics* "begins with first principles and moves to the human mind and affects" (p. 101).

Garrett rightly says that both of these interpretations have much going for them: there is "obviously" an instructive aspect to geometrical method, just as it is obvious that Spinoza thought nature itself necessitated the use of the method (p. 102). Yet, neither can fully explain the method by itself. One problem with the didactic is that it does not account for how Spinoza obtained the definitions and axioms

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which lie at the beginning of the *Ethics* and the base of his philosophy. The numerous scholia, alternate proofs, asides, and unused axioms constitute a problem for the logical: if content fully determines form, then it would seem impossible for Spinoza to present his ideas in so many different ways.

As an alternative to these two interpretations, Garrett offers his own view. It can be best exhibited by reference to the practical goal of Spinoza's philosophy. As the very title *Ethics* suggests, Spinoza's paramount concern in his writings is normative: he wants to help those who are capable of being helped find true happiness. By studying his works, Spinoza thought his readers could better understand themselves and the world around them. The act of clarifying their ideas would rid them of harmful notions about what is natural and unnatural, what is possible and impossible, what is good and bad. If they carry on this process long enough, they might eventually come to set aside false ideas and aims. By turning away from the false and toward the true, they will reduce the frustrations that are a consequence of ignorance and eventually, perhaps, become happy.

Now, Garrett sees Spinoza's method as contributing essentially to this therapeutic project. He writes, "the most important function of the *mos geometricus* is tied up with what Spinoza calls 'emendation' in the [*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*], ridding oneself of inadequate ideas so that those adequate ideas that already make up our minds can better be expressed" (p. 17). Spinoza thought we already possess the necessary ingredients for happiness; innate within us are the ideas which can make us happy. His method will help us render our current stock of ideas, which are confused and mutilated, clear and distinct. Garrett's interpretation—which he calls "emendative"—agrees with the didactic that Spinoza's method is enlightening by design: "philosophical method is a set of intellectual tools or instruments fashioned by the mind to clarify and empower it" (p. 74). However, it rejects the instrumentalism of the didactic in favour of the realism of the logical: "[f]or Spinoza, the *mos geometricus* is a process that gets at things and ideas, and in so doing provides us access to the logical and metaphysical structure of the world we inhabit" (p. 144).

To develop this interpretation, Garrett takes an introduction plus seven chapters. The first two chapters cover some background. They are probably the least satisfying of the book. While extended discussion of remedial matters may be beneficial to neophytes, it seems unlikely that many of them will be reading this volume, which is inevitably geared to specialists, and the latter will find it occasionally tedious. The pace picks up quickly, however, in Chapter 3, which expounds on the basic character of emendation. Chapter 4 deals with the technical notions of analysis and synthesis. This is one of many places where Garrett makes effective use of his extensive knowledge of other early modern philosophers, in this case using Hobbes, Zabarella, and Descartes as foils for Spinoza. Chapter 5 is also good on history; it shows how Spinoza's readings of Maimonides and Gersonides may have influenced his views on the transmission of philosophical ideas. The nucleus of the book is Chapter 6, where Garrett addresses the origins and purpose of the definitions which appear at the beginning of each part in the *Ethics*. The final chapter is a case study of sorts, applying the account of method which Garrett has just finished articulating to the vexed concept of "intuitive knowledge."

While one might quibble over the niceties of Garrett's interpretation, and wonder about the need for some of his exposition, there is no doubting the overall

value of his book. His interpretation of Spinoza's method will unquestionably become the standard to which all others will be compared. Anyone who wants to know what Spinoza may have been thinking when he decided to demonstrate his philosophy *in more geometrico* must read Garrett.

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JON MILLER *Queen's University*