

SPINOZA AND STOICISM

Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ISBN: 978-1107000704; 250pp.

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It is only recently that modern day scholarship has begun to appreciate and investigate Spinoza's affinities with the Stoics. Jon Miller's *Spinoza and the Stoics* is a welcomed contribution to philosophical literature as the first book-length study to undertake a full comparison between the two schools of thought. Although his is not the first monograph—Firmin DeBrabander's *Spinoza and the Stoics: Power, Politics and the Passions* (Continuum, 2008) is worth recognizing—it is the first to step outside of practical philosophy to include metaphysics, epistemology, and meta-ethics as part of its investigation.

Miller divides his book into five chapters, each corresponding with one of the five parts of Spinoza's *Ethics*: metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, meta-ethics, and normative ethics. He takes up monism in the first chapter, the metaphysical position that there is only one substance. Although Miller admits that the term is anachronistic to describe Stoic metaphysics, it is a suitable conceptual category to allow for comparison with Spinoza's view. In short, monism understood here—what Miller titles “holistic monism”—is the thesis that the world has an essential unity that can be understood as a whole, and that, furthermore, any apparent tokens within the world are parts of this world-system (p. 26).

In the second chapter, Miller takes on ideas, focusing on their origin and nature. Concerning the first, Spinoza is a strict internalist, meaning a person's ideas are formed entirely by a subject with no direct influence from external bodies. The Stoics are what Miller describes as ‘moderate’ externalists; that is, they are externalists in so far as they believe external objects are the direct physical cause of impressions; but, their position is moderate in so far as that they believe the subject who is receiving impressions causes some variation in their reception depending on internal factors. Miller's discussion makes space for comparison, not only of whether these theories can be compatible, but also the nature of ideas under each philosophical tradition. He thus considers this at length in the Stoic system, asking whether they allow for actions that are both action-orientated and self-evidently true as they are in Spinoza.

The third chapter compares Spinoza's *conatus* with Stoic teachings on impulse and self-preservation. Although traditionally *conatus* is identified with the Stoic *horme*, Miller objects that *horme* better describes those impulses regulated to a specific event: the impulse to pursue a particular external object stimulated by the agent's senses (p. 102). He believes that *conatus* is closer to the Stoic *oikeiosis*—although the doctrine of

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oikeiosis is broad and often opaque, he suggests that it contains an articulation of self-preservation that is analogous to Spinoza's *conatus*.

In the fourth chapter, Miller moves his discussion towards meta-ethics, comparing the value theories of each philosophy. Contrary to the Stoics, Spinoza seems to believe that *good* and *evil* are subjectively relative (though not without seeming to contradict himself to present a more normative account elsewhere) (p. 156). Miller concludes that Spinoza's relativism is a non-circumstantially variable relativism, meaning that though Spinoza allows for subjective interpretations of the *good* in many cases, he still maintains some absolute goods, such as knowledge of God (pp. 156-162). If this is true, then both philosophies agree that moral facts exist, and in both systems these facts reduce to virtue, which is the only good (that which is in agreement with nature).

This is a natural place for Miller to transition into his fifth chapter, where he moves his discussion to normative ethics—or, more specifically, happiness. Though Spinoza and the Stoics seem to be in agreement concerning this as their end, Miller explores why it is that Spinoza opts to describe the end of human virtue as *beatitudo* over the Stoic terms, *felicitas* and *beatus*. Nonetheless, Miller maintains that on a macro-analysis, both schools of thought agree that happiness is living a life in accordance to nature. Finally, the author offers a brief conclusion to the book. He explores some of the implications for his study, and emphasizes that he does not believe that Spinoza was a Stoic—there are too many divergences in their thought that separate the two schools—but he does not believe that should hinder constructive comparison of their similarities (pp. 207ff).

Miller's book is an important contribution to the literature. Its greatest significance is in the conversations he begins and pushes forward. As the first book-length study on the general correlations between Spinoza and the Stoics, he is successful in stirring up comparisons that had previously been neglected in contemporary treatments—theories of substance, for instance. The project is ambitious: each chapter could be its own monograph, which is more of a feature than a flaw. Still, as a result, the analysis can come across as rushed. With limited space dictated by the project's scope, sometimes the author's choices of topics are also a bit unexpected. It would be helpful to see a more extensive analysis of teleology, for instance, especially since the author makes space for other sections that he labels as digressive (section 1.2.4, chapter 3's appendix).

I also believe that it would strengthen Miller's overall thesis if he defined Stoicism at some point. As it is, the reader is left comparing ancient authors with Spinoza, but never with a clear understanding of the terms of the discussion, what the necessary and sufficient conditions of being Stoic actually are. So when Miller asserts that Spinoza is not a Stoic in the conclusion, it is not entirely clear what he means by this, especially since many of Spinoza's contemporaries accused him of Stoicism. There are a number of 16th and 17th century Neostoics who embrace Stoic themes with different degrees of faithfulness in order to appropriate the Stoic philosophy into their other philosophical and theological commitments—Justus Lipsius, for instance, weds Seneca with Christianity while Guillaume Du Vair offers a Christianized Epictetus, and Pierre Charron fuses Pyrrhonism with his Christian Stoicism. Given

these varieties of Stoicism, if *Stoic* is more of a Wittgensteinian family resemblance or a set of actor's categories, then it is difficult to see why Spinoza would not be a Stoic under the analysis he offers in his book. It very well could be that Miller has something else in mind, but it would help his reader to make that explicit.

Nonetheless, the question of whether Spinoza was himself a Stoic or merely influenced (directly or tacitly) by Stoic themes is less important than seeing what we can learn by analyzing the two philosophies beside one another, and this is the intention of Miller's book. That his intentions (and expressed limits) are made explicit is an additional strength. He is clear to demarcate which topics are and are not under the scope of his investigation, and given the magnitude of the project this is not only expected, but also welcomed. So for instance, it is clear from the introduction that his focus is neither *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (a history of reception) nor *Quellenforschung* (a study of sources). Instead, he aims to draw out conceptual affinities between the Hellenistic and Spinozistic schools, and this remains his focus. I believe Miller's intention of *Spinoza and the Stoics* is to begin conversations and encourage further dialogue on Spinoza's Stoicism beyond its previous realm of moral theory; and in this, it is an important contribution to scholarship in early modern philosophy.