"MORAL REALISM IN SPINOZA'S ETHICS"


Many of Spinoza’s readers have taken him to be an anti-realist about morality. This reading is largely inspired by the way Spinoza revises some moral notions and rejects others. In this chapter, I argue that Spinoza was a moral realist. Part of my aim in doing so is to show that contemporary metaethicists and Spinoza scholars stand to benefit from closer attention to one another. I begin by distinguishing three ways the moral realism/anti-realism distinction has been defined: via paradigm figures, via the literal truth of moral claims, and via certain defining features such as non-relativity and mind-independence. I then survey several elements of the Ethics that have inspired anti-realist readings. These anti-realist elements, I argue, are outweighed by realist elements, including a contrast between Spinoza and Kant on reason, the connection Spinoza draws between virtue and reality, and the deep similarities between Spinoza’s God and Plato’s Form of the Good. Both Spinoza’s and Plato’s moral realism, I claim, are compatible with their rejecting and revising much of commonsense morality.

People Involved: Colin Marshall
Status of Research or Work: Completed/published
Research Type: Essays, Articles, and Book Chapters
Related Fields: 17th Century, Metaethics, Modern Philosophy, Moral Philosophy